The Other Side of Realism
David Foster Wallace & The Hysteric’s Discourse

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Abstract

“Hysterical Realism” was coined by James Wood in 2000 to pejoratively name the intermillennial “inhuman” maximalist turn in American and British fiction. I recuperate the term as a critical category, redefining it at the intersection of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Lukácsian realism. David Foster Wallace’s fiction is a thoroughgoing aesthetic deployment of the hysteric’s discourse: it inhabits and intervenes in discourses presumed to be legitimate, staging an immanent critique of the mechanisms of the emerging Deleuzian “society of control”. Wallace’s hysterical realism is the “other side” of realism; neither “narration” nor “description”, it is both a polyphonic, mimetic torrent of language that must be read with careful discrimination, and the internal, “symptomatic” undermining of the Lacanian master’s and university discourses. It is a realism capable of legitimately resisting the 21st century intensification of capitalism’s capture of the symbolic order.
## Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... iv

1. Reevaluating Hysterical Realism ................................................................. 1
   RECHERCHÉ POSTMODERNISM OR HYSTERICAL REALISM ............................... 1
   HYSTERIA/HYSTÉRICAL .................................................................................. 6
   REALISM/REALITY ......................................................................................... 12
   DAVID FOSTER WALLACE ........................................................................... 15

2. Generalised Hysteria & Wallace’s Contracted Realism ................................. 18
   LITERARY REALISM ..................................................................................... 19

3. The Irruption of the Hysterical Symptom ....................................................... 34
   DATA, FANTASY, LIVING DEATH, ENJOYMENT ......................................... 34
   THE OTHER SIDE OF REALISM .................................................................... 47
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true reality being discoverable only by the mind, being the object of a mental process, we acquire a true knowledge only of things that we are obliged to recreate by thought, things that are hidden from us in everyday life...

—Marcel Proust
I wanted to mark him, to show my resentment at how his words had shaped me.

—Kim Scott
1. Reevaluating “Hysterical Realism”

RECHERCHÉ POSTMODERNISM OR HYPERTHERICAL REALISM: 
NOTES FROM THE COMPLAINTS DEPARTMENT
Two popular critics, Dale Peck and James Wood, were the first to articulate
the maximalist turn in intermillenial postmodern fiction as a pathology.
Converging around word count, formal complexity, narrative and linguistic
eccentricity, conceptual interconnection, and a shift in emphasis from
“humans” to ideas and information, “recherché postmodernism” (Peck
220) and “hysterical realism” (Wood, Self 168) became interchangeable
watchwords for a loose literary movement and mode defined and united by
its vices. Condemned both for what it is and for what it omits to be,
hysterical realism connotes an absolute negative value, irredeemable by
skilful execution. “Hysterical realism” names the twenty-first century’s first
literary crisis.

Stigma and Hatchet Jobs
2004 brought a collection of criticism each from Peck and Wood. Early in
each, the authors pay tribute to the “possibilities of exegesis” (Wood Self 1):
the ability to “enter and extend the context of a work of art” (Peck 7). The
critic’s exegesis is performative: it changes the way in which the work is read
and evaluated by others. It sets the terms by which the work is to be
considered, and frames aesthetic debates. What does it mean, then, for the
exegete to turn prosecutor, not to criticise but to attack a work, author, or
genre? Does a hit-piece—a “hatchet job”, to adopt the name of Peck’s
collection—wield the same power as a measured exegesis?
Wood claims that “serious critique”, such as his review of Zadie Smith’s debut *White Teeth* (“Human, All Too Inhuman”) in which he first presented his argument against hysterical realism, “takes nothing down; it takes something seriously” (“Reply” 131). His negative reviews, which “[negate] in the name of an ideal” (“Reply” 132), construct the ideal—the “autonomous novel” (“Reply” 132)—on the premise that “human relations and human motive” can and ought to be rigorously dissociated from “the theoretical, the analytical, the cultural”, the field of thought that attempts to articulate “how we live now” (“Reply” 133). The proper domain for fiction, then, is the Jamesean “present palpable-intimate” study of “ordinary human beings” (“Reply” 135); cultural and political matters are for the autonomous novelist little more than props and sets of the “credible imagination” (“Reply” 134). Ultimately, while Wood insists that his ideal need not “harden into a narrow aesthetic” (“Reply” 134), any work that does not follow his human–cultural distinction—that, for example, conceives of the human as a culturally determined concept rather than an autonomous *a priori* condition of culture—he cannot but reject. This leads his reading of hysterical realism into something of an impasse.

The work’s actual properties; its aesthetic design, its execution, its failures and successes on its own terms, are all subordinated to its failure to correspond to Wood’s (or Peck’s) non-negotiable aesthetic ideal. The particular work loses its singularity and becomes just another example of hysterical realism, recherché postmodernism—better or worse, more or less so, but bearing the delegitimising mark nonetheless.

*Ego realism & bourgeois realism*

The characters of an “autonomous” novel must be adequately “deep” and “rounded”, plausibly and humanely motivated: sufficiently “human”. Peck calls this quality, when he finds its traces in the work of Rick Moody, Jeffrey Eugenides, Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace, “a true empathetic undercurrent” (184). In its full development, he calls it “the quasi-mythical animating aspect of literature” (185). Wood insists simply on “the human” (*Self* 171), and it is for him the difference between “character” and “caricature” (4 (Self 173). This deeply ideological (if not immediately
objectionable) commitment to the “full” novelistic representation of “the human” is at the core of both critics’ objections to hysterical realism. It is around this premise that my strongest challenge to Wood and Peck is to be registered.

To elucidate how this emphasis on the human—or as the title of a Blake Butler essay on David Foster Wallace more precisely puts it, “the myth of the human” (139)—ideologically elides the constellation of constraining and anxiety-producing symbolic interpellations, obfuscatory discourses and capitalist mythologies with which most works of hysterical realism are formally, characterologically and narratively engaged, one need only consider the intersection of Wood’s and Peck’s terms at the adjective “hysterical”.

For Peck, recherché postmodernism is characterised by a “hysterical desire to be heard”—to which there is or is not, between different authors and works, “something more than the antics of a child needing attention” (184). For Wood, “evasi[on] of reality while borrowing from realism itself” differentiates magical realism’s deliberate departures from verisimilitude (Aristotelian “convincing impossibility”) from the “wacky” networked convergences of hysterical realism (“unconvincing possibility”). The former legitimately transgresses the boundary of (what Wood calls) realism for effect, where the latter puts realism under stress from within—and like a magician, directs one’s attention away from the sleight with flashy distractions:

The big contemporary novel is a perpetual motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, and these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion. Inseparable from this culture of permanent storytelling is the pursuit of vitality at all costs. Indeed, vitality is storytelling, as far as these books are concerned. (Self 167)

Evasive, hollow, dissimulating dynamism gives Wood the adjective “hysterical”. If for Peck these kinds of works demand attention as such, for Wood they demand a particular, (mis)directed attention. For Peck, the hysteric is simple, childlike, not beholden to the reality principle (wanting in temperance—hence “mother hen” (219) with his chastening ad hominem
pecks). Wood’s hysteric needs to hide something (from the reader—but is this all?) and knows just how to engineer dazzling Potemkin plotlines from the most disparate elements.

What constitutes Peck’s “true empathetic undercurrent” (184) and Wood’s rarefied moments of “the representation of consciousness” (Self 174) is a historically conditioned view of human subjectivity and a congruent theory of literary representation. It is derived from bourgeois realism and sustains the libidinal and moral autonomy of liberal humanism.

The nineteenth century tradition of literary realism, in the “critical” mode championed by Georg Lukács, held the individual and the social in a sustained dialectic. But as Julian Murphet reminds us in his excellent survey of the One and multiple in fictional representation from Chaucer to postmodernism, the individual protagonist of the bourgeois realist novel is a “hangover from a romance past” (262); the “distributional matrix” of the social field he confronts already contains a “democratic” multiplicity that threatens to absorb his singularity into the many. The realist novel “sets the stage for its own subsequent demolition, under the motive force of this unconstrainable numerical excess” (262). As this external, numerical threat to the One reaches its apotheosis in the “permanent storytelling” and focal metastasis of hysterical realism, it is matched by the characterological radicalisation of the internal division that emerged through modernism and psychoanalysis.

Wood acknowledges that “the forms and languages of fiction are always changing”, and somewhat reluctantly concedes that “the self may well be changing, too” (“Reply” 135)—but he strongly resists the posthumanist premise that the contemporary subject is “more mediated, more fractured, more self-conscious” than the 19th century subjects depicted in “Hamsun and Dostoevsky”—if we were really so different, “we would be unable to read the fiction produced by those predecessors” (“Reply” 135). The Woodsian human self is ultimately transhistorical. The property that allows a 21st century reader to understand and enjoy Plato, Shakespeare and Alice Munro is the depiction of fundamentally stable human consciousness—differently articulated and situated, but recognisable and universal: a patterned integrity.
Perhaps an appropriate name for the kind of representation of the subject that both Peck and Wood are gesturing towards (both are more forthcoming with censure than endorsement) is “ego realism”. By this I mean to indicate first the genealogical link with bourgeois realism and romanticism; second to designate the register that the transhistorical maintenance of the characterological One must be understood in the 21st century context.

Both Peck and Wood are post-Freudian, in the sense of psychoanalysis having risen and receded prior to them, and deposited a cultural residue—but its legacy is a historical one: a vocabulary, a set of variably compelling insights. The psychoanalytic theory of the divided subject, and the status of the ego with respect to it, is alien to the bourgeois-inflected realism from which hysterical realism/recherché postmodernism defects. The deep and rounded “human” character that Wood advocates is, we should remember, nonetheless a literary function—a proper name that, as Murphet (following Barthes) puts it, brings about the “alchemical transubstantiation of compositeness into unity”, “suture[ing] us into identification via its unique supplement to the sheer accretion of semes” (256). Further, as Catherine Gallagher illustrates in “The Rise of Fictionality”, this alchemical potential was long in development; the “non-referentiality” essential for novelistic character as such to emerge was long in development, and only possible against the background of “secularism, scientific enlightenment, empiricism, capitalism, materialism, national consolidation, and the rise of the middle class” (345). The psychoanalytic distinction between the subject and the ego qua “I function” (Lacan, Écrits 75–81) problematises the authenticity and unity that the proper name inaugurates. And, as Murphet argues, the modernist novel represents the homologous crisis of the unitary realist character; it is the formal product of a tarrying with this multiple [the latent social multiplicity of bourgeois realism] to the point that character undergoes a critical demotion within the internal architecture of the form—pushed to some reflexive encounter with its own instability and even impossibility as a guarantor of unity in a space of semiotic turbulence occasioned by the principle of infinity. (263)
Psychoanalysis does for the bourgeois subject what modernism does for the bourgeois realist character: responds to its internal tensions and contradictions (most visibly expressed in the form of the symptom) not by shoring up the image of unity, but precisely by pushing it to a “reflexive encounter with its own instability”. The tripartite Freudian subject and the Lacanian radically formalise the contradictions inherent to the category of the human.

Thus while Wood can rightly dismiss the accusation that he wants “novelists to be merely writing in the 21st century with the same forms they used in the 19th century” (“Reply” 135), this says nothing about his exclusive desire for the anachronistic depiction of wholly human 19th century characters in 21st century fiction. My purpose is certainly not to denigrate this kind of character. I am not aiming to champion precisely the opposite forms of fictional character and representation to those which Wood and Peck endorse. Rather, I am locating the properties of the gap that both critics would like to see open in current literary practice (through the abolition of hysterical realism/recherché postmodernism), and identifying how, as a form of realism, this literary approach uniquely contributes to and intervenes in the social construction and interpretation of reality. As we will see, Wood finds himself in a performative contradiction: by insisting on the unified Lukácsian realist character in 21st century control-capitalist totality, he speaks from a foreclosed subject-position—and thereby becomes the hysteric he decries.11

Before I proceed to a detailed study of the paradigmatic hysterical realist, David Foster Wallace, and demonstrate how a reading of him as such helps to clarify the links between the many stylistic, narrative, characterological and formal elements of his work that other critics have discussed, I will briefly discuss the theoretical, philosophical and methodological foundations of my re-interpretation of hysterical realism.

HYSTERIA/HYSTERICAL

Hysteria has a history roughly coextensive with medicine itself. Its range of symptoms and ostensible aetiologies is so extensive as to exclude basically no
physical or psychical disturbance. The use of the word is therefore particularly historically, geographically and institutionally specific. After Freud’s radical innovations in understanding human psychopathology, one cannot speak of hysteria in any context without the weight of its psychoanalytic dimension being present. But Freud himself continually revised his thinking on hysteria, and subsequent generations of psychoanalysts have continued this constant revision.

There is no one common, canonical definition of hysteria; its use in popular culture is cherry-picked from divergent strands of expert thought admixed with parodic figures from cultural history (Mrs. Bennet and her poor nerves), and thus thoroughly inconsistent. This inconsistency is not contingent. As Gérard Wajeman argues, hysteria is precisely the demand (sometimes a silent demand\textsuperscript{12}) for knowledge (what do my symptoms mean?—what causes them?—how am I to be cured?: tell me!) that posits an other whose authority rests on presumed knowledge (the physician), but whose knowledge when proffered is always refuted or demonstrated to be incomplete (78–9). Hysteria always outstrips medicine’s theorisation of it:

> throughout history there are writers telling us about hysteria, from the miraculous healing at the temple of Asclepios to the treatment of anorexia in a modern hospital; from the witch and her dealings with the devil to the high society lady and her fainting spills. Over time any concept of hysteria has been outdated by hysteria itself. (77)

Knowledge about hysteria is “a set of opposing and even contradictory statements” (Wajeman 78). This is, as will become clear, a necessary consequence of hysteria’s inherent resistance to knowledge.

Wood’s use of the word is clearly not intended to invoke the entire historical constellation surrounding hysteria, nor to capture its enigmatic exceptionality. There appear to be at least two layers of meaning embedded in it.

The first is the semi-Freudian one identified above—the “exhaust[ion] and overwork[ing]” of “the conventions of realism” (Self 168), “inhuman” stories and characters (Self 169), the “excessively centripetal” networking and interlinking of plots and subplots (Self 170); these converge in a distracting performance designed to cover over the “lack [of] the human” (Self 171). The Freudian hysteric exhibits a barrage of irrational, mutable,
metastasizing, overdetermined symptoms (Freud 34–9); the hysterical realist novel constantly generates quirky characters, improbable networks of causal and thematic links and discursive sub-plots. But where the symptoms of Freudian hysteria are always significant, pointing to a set of unconscious questions, truths and desires, Wood’s hysterical realism is constituted by self-perpetuating symptoms. That is, the raison d’être of hysterical realism seems to be for Wood precisely to mask the lack at its core. All of its aesthetic qualities are directed at maintaining the illusion, the semblance of “life” (Self 171): its symptoms are coterminous with its hysteria, and exist only to support the frenzy of distraction that covers over the void where “human stories” ought to be.

The second semantic layer is that of “funny business”. In addition to the symptomatic cover-up, there are the “puerile” jokes: silly acronyms, talking cheeses, wheelchair assassins (Self 168) and merkinesque Van Dykes (“Digressionist”). Wood is not amused by this kind of humour—this in itself would be utterly unremarkable if it did not render him incapable of reading the deeper resonance of some jokes with real world tragi-comic ironies.

Consider Slavoj Žižek’s example of the giant 1930s Soviet New Man statues mounted on attenuated buildings; “living people [...] reduced to instruments, sacrificed as the pedestal for [...] an ideological monster which crushes [them] under his feet” (Plague 2). With really existing farces like this, Infinite Jest (1996)’s Organization of North American Nations—“O.N.A.N.” (4)—one example of countless many—as puerile as that joke indeed is, does not seem necessarily impossible. But regardless of whether or not one accepts any particular silly acronym or improbable organization as an acceptable potentiality, the idea that “the truth is out there” (Plague 1)—that ideology continually finds expression in unusual ways—is what is really at stake.

Wood’s charge that hysterical realism lacks humanity and his use of the adjective “hysterical” to describe it seem incompatible. Of course, Wood is being deliberately oxymoronic with the formulation “inhuman stories” (Self 169). But describing hysterical realism as “inhuman” is just as contradictory; far from inhuman, hysteria is uniquely human. Just like fiction, hysteria is specifically a product of human consciousness13. Its
fundamental irrationality is certainly at odds with the Aristotelian alignment of rationality and humanity as such\(^4\), and perhaps a trace of this view inflects Wood’s assessment, fond as he is of classical philosophy. It is nonetheless impossible to maintain a distinction between the hysterical on one hand, the human on the other. If Wood is to be consistent, he would fare better making an explicitly Aristotelian ethical argument against the hysterical instead of attempting to align it with inhumanity (substitute “inhumane” for “inhuman” in the “Hysterical Realism” essay, and the outline of such an argument would already be in place). My approach, however, will emphasise the constant overlap of the rational and the hysterical. Where Wood wants to disparage the pathological as inhuman, I will follow the Lacanian view of subjectivity as inherently split, (im)balanced between language and *jouissance*\(^5\). I substitute the historically specific subject for the transhistorical human.

Lacanian psychoanalysis conceives of hysteria as an ambiguous reaction against and attempt to undermine the master (the figure or agency supposed to be “in charge”). It manifests as a rejection in the form of a demand that is itself made to be rejected: “I’m demanding this of you, but what I’m really demanding of you is to refute my demand because this is not it!” (Žižek, *Sublime* 124). The hysteric’s desire is mediated by—or, more radically, situated in—a “third person by means of whom the subject enjoys the object who incarnates her question [who/what am I; what do I want?]” (Lacan, *Écrits* 250). In an interview with David Lipsky, David Foster Wallace identifies the core questions at stake in his writing as being “who do I live for? What do I believe in, what do I want?” (Cohen and Konstantinou 116). Lacan emphasises that it is “always in the relation between the subject’s ego and his discourse’s I that you must understand the meaning of the discourse” (*Écrits* 250). The hysteric’s speech (her “I”) does not correspond one-to-one with her ego—it samples the master’s speech, picks it up, meddles with it. It appeals to the master’s authority in order to show that authority’s illegitimacy.\(^6\)

Lacan’s *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (1969–70) [2007], develops and teases out the relations between what he calls the “four
discourses” (master’s, hysteric’s, analyst’s and university). These four are represented in four permuted formulae that I will reproduce here:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
U & S_2 \rightarrow a & S_1 \rightarrow S_2 & a \\
M & S \rightarrow S_2 & a \rightarrow S_2 & S \\
H & S \rightarrow S_1 & a \rightarrow S_1 & S \\
A & a \rightarrow S_1 & S \rightarrow S_1 & a \\
\end{array}
\]

The mathemes from which each formula is constructed $S_1, S_2, -$ and $a$ are familiar from Lacan’s earlier work (though, of course, the meaning of each symbol continually mutated throughout his career); they are respectively the master signifier, knowledge, the divided subject and objet $a$/surplus jouissance. Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg provide a key to the structure of the discourses:

The places are:

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
\frac{\text{agent}}{\text{truth}} & \rightarrow & \frac{\text{other}}{\text{product}}
\end{array}
\]

This structure is the same in all four discourses, but the mathemes’ positions are rotated a clockwise quarter-turn to yield each discourse: master’s, hysteric’s, analyst’s, university.

The hysteric’s discourse places the divided subject in the dominant/agential position, and the master is the other to whom it is addressed. The truth of the hysteric’s discourse is surplus jouissance—that is, enjoyment lost by the hysteric and recuperated by the Other, just as Marx’s surplus value is appropriated from the worker by the capitalist (Lacan, Seminar XVII 20). The hysteric’s discourse produces knowledge (a particular kind of knowledge, as we shall see).

Particularly important to my reinterpretation of hysterical realism is the challenge that the hysteric’s discourse poses to the master’s and university discourses. Bruce Fink summarizes this threat as follows:

Whereas the university discourse takes its cue from the master signifier, glossing over it with some sort of trumped-up system, the hysteric goes at the master and demands that he or she show his or her stuff, prove his or her mettle by producing something serious by way of knowledge. The hysteric’s discourse is the exact opposite of the university discourse, all the positions being reversed. The hysteric maintains the primacy of subjective division, the
contradiction between conscious and unconscious, and thus the
conflictual, or self-contradictory, nature of desire itself. (133)

As my analyses in the subsequent chapters make clear, the very positional
ambiguity of the hysteric’s discourse—its rather Socratic way of insinuating
itself in the master’s knowledge only to explode it on its own terms—finds a
particularly apt venue in postmodern literature, where the aporias of reading
and writing inherited from ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s (post)structuralism and
deconstruction present an *a priori* unstable set of author-narrator-work-text-
reader relations, a contested ontology and epistemology of reading and
writing.

If imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, it can also be the most
deadly form of critique. It would be reductive to call the kind of immanent
critique that hysterical realism stages through the hysteric’s discourse
*parody*, though the formal similarity is undeniable.

The legacy of Theory provides a literary context in which discourse is
*never* simply that of an author, character, narrator, person, institution; like
Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in particle physics, Theory ripped an
irreparable hole in what about a/the Text is knowable. Theory is in effect the
doxa of hysterical realism. In this context, the hysterical inhabitation of the
master’s and university discourses transcends parody—where the latter
ridicules through exaggerated imitation, hysterical realism makes use of the
the author function’s authority, the narrator’s many masks, metatextual and
intertextual diversions in the manner of a multivariate equation, wherein
the precise magnitude of each element cannot be grasped from a single
result. This instability and uncertainty is played up in hysterical realism
analogously to how the hysteric bears his subjective division ($) openly. In
this sense, hysterical realism is similar to but distinguishable from the wider
genre in which it is more or less subsumed, postmodern metafiction. As
will become clear in the following chapter, while metafiction in general may
point out its own fictionality, its having been written by a limited human
author, may comment on itself ironically, etc.—i.e. pointing out the
instability of its own discourse—, hysterical realism is more inclined to
make use of its inherent instability to pick up and bring out the gaps,
incoherences, contradictions and disavowed repressions of discourses presumed to be legitimate.

REALISM/REALITY

When James Wood writes of realism, two core criteria dominate: “persuasion” (*Self* 170) and “verisimilitude” (*Self* 168). Following Aristotle’s preference for “convincing impossibility” over “unconvincing possibility” (*Self* 170), Wood considers persuasion necessary for realism; verisimilitude, he argues, is formally achieved in most hysterical realist novels—their failure to persuade is also their failure “at the level of morality” (*Self* 168). Insofar as Wood’s approach to realism does not demand representation of external reality—instead using the affective and persuasive power of fiction to intervene between the reader and her reality—I will follow him. Beyond this basic agreement, however, my view of realism is quite different.

At the core of my conception of realism is its dialectical intervention into modes of understanding, representing, seeing, producing and doing. In this fundamental view, I am explicitly following Jacques Rancière, Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. This view also allows me to position hysterical realism as a distant revision of Georg Lukács’s “critical realism”.

Realism need not necessarily coincide with fictive representation of familiar objects, personalities and relationships. It is not strictly empirical. It is not a stance of passive mimetic reception; it produces observer-effects. Realism is an intervention at the limits of the symbolic order. Things-in-the-world (reality) only have *meaning* insofar as they can be represented fictively-aesthetically-symbolically. Realist representation is therefore not to be considered solely in terms of its correlation to perceptible reality, since reality (as phenomenal-subjective experience) is dialectically altered in the disjunctive recognition of non-identity between the truth-effect of aesthetic experience and an abiding reality. Art (at least art that is perceived to be in some way “challenging”, “resistant”, “difficult”, “singular”) chips away at the Real (the Lacanian category of the unsymbolised-immanent) and adds to reality (the set of meaningful objects, symbols, gestures and codes) by
symbolising what was previously inarticulable. It also intervenes in the
relations between signifiers, promoting and demoting the importance of
links, redefining potentialities and reshaping narrative expectations. Jacques
Rancière expresses this in terms of *visibility* and *sensibility*:

> literary locutions produce effects in reality. They define models of
speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft
maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable,
relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes
of doing and making. They define variations of sensible intensities,
perceptions, and the abilities of bodies. They thereby take hold of
unspecified groups of people, they widen gaps, open up space for
deviations, modify the speeds, the trajectories, and the ways in
which groups of people adhere to a condition, react to situations,
recognize their images. They reconfigure the map of the sensible by
interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to
the natural cycles of production, reproduction, and submission. (39)

Aesthetic practice alters the subject’s relation to the phenomenal-conscious
and the unconscious. Its extensive power is not inherently emancipatory or
repressive: actual effects depend upon the kind of intervention the work
(received in its context, including criticism) stages.

Realism, as a complex of aesthetic and fictional practices, is inherently
ethical and political: James Wood is well aware of this. His rejection of what
he calls “inhuman stories” thus obfuscates, and dismisses as politically
irrelevant, any form of subjectivity emptied of recognisably individual,
traditionally “emotionally complex”, complexly desirous personality (in
Marxian terms, “reified subjectivity”). Sustaining the term “hysterical
realism”, but substituting psychoanalytic *hysteria* and dialectical *realism* in
place of Wood’s original definition, provides a powerful critical category
through which to read what Wood wishes merely to dismiss. Hysterical
realism brings into focus and symbolises diffuse methods of institutional
and social control, but does so in part through fictional representation of the
affective and intellectual vicissitudes that reification brings about. Wood’s
charge that hysterical realism’s supposed cold intellectualism supplants the
humanistic representation of complex “warm”, “rounded” and “believable”
characters effectively de-historicises human subjectivity, making particular
recognisable forms of desire and personality a priori conditions of being human rather than acknowledging their profoundly social-aesthetic development. The increasing impossibility of the modes of sociality and personhood that Wood demands be represented in fiction, however, demonstrates exactly how mutable and historically particular these notions of “real humanity” are, as I will show below.

Wood, as I suggested earlier, is in effect an anachronistic Lukácsian. Lukács’s literary criticism focused on a very specific form of realism, which—much like Wood’s preferred aesthetic—was largely to be found in the great social novels by the likes of Fielding, Tolstoy and Balzac. Lukács was disturbed by the majority of modernist fiction, exemplified for him by Joyce and Kafka. He saw both the psycho-pathologised characters and formal experiments of modernism (and the socio-biological determinism of naturalism) as uncritically reflecting reified consciousness and too easily capitulating to the social ravages of modernisation. His emphasis was explicitly Marxist, but he admired the depth to which the great bourgeois novels—collected under his blanket term “critical realism”—represented and narrated the actions and environments of characters selectively with respect to the life-worlds of the characters themselves. Through the “selective” method of narration, social relations in these novels were depicted as “objectively” as possible (Lukács, “Narrate” 128–9). The “distorted” phenomenological narration of many modernists, by contrast, obscured any recognition of class struggle (Lukács, Realism 28–9). While he acknowledged that modernisation really did result in the emergence of pathologised and reified forms of subjectivity, he rejected any proposition that fictional depiction of reified consciousness—particularly the immersive depiction of the Joycean stream-of-consciousness or the inescapable nightmare world third-person style of Kafka—could do anything but propagate and perpetuate the tyranny of subjective distortion (Lukács, Realism 32–3).

One can locate an aesthetic maxim common to Wood and Lukács: fiction ought to maintain an “objectivity” with respect to subjective experience—it ought not to immerse the reader in the corrupt or the pathological. Part of my overriding argument in this thesis will be the
assertion that the most politically and ethically effective form of social critique available now is immanent critique. Modernity and postmodernity, taken as the social-political-technological-ideological complexes of industrial and consumer capitalism respectively, are contexts in which a critical “outside” has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible to inhabit.

Understanding existing social conditions not only involves seeing the interrelations of production, reproduction and structures of power, but locating the internal inconsistencies of social positions and discourses themselves. Since—as Slavoj Žižek has persuasively argued—ideological obfuscation no longer necessarily involves true “belief” or real libidinal investment, but is adequately sustained by mere formal compliance, one domain that realism ought to approach is the co-option of individuals into actions and symbolic positions contrary to their actual ethical and political beliefs. The hysteric’s discourse is uniquely placed to interrogate the premises of late capitalism even while formally dominated by them.

hysterical realism presents as fundamentally problematic, symptomatic; its implicit challenge to the critic is analogous to that of the hysteric to the physician. The critic cannot simply say “no” to hysterical realism, on the basis that she knows best—the works demand an explanation. Nor can the critic too completely inhabit the university discourse, confronting hysterical realism with a supposedly authoritative, systematic knowledge of how fiction works (and how hysterical realism fails)—any such system will be readily undermined. Rather, the critical task is to “let the symptom speak” (Wajeman 89).

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE: PARADIGMATIC HYPERTERICAL REALIST

Through its narrative, linguistic, conceptual and characterological density, wilful prolixity, structural ambiguities and ellipses, chronological fragmentation, profusely digressive commentary and meta-commentary, (quasi-)metafictional reflexion and frequently metastasizing, often unidentifiable narrating subjects, David Foster Wallace’s fiction demands the complete attention of its reader. At a basic structural and stylistic level, the contours of hysteria already appear. At the level of Wallace’s fictional
content, several crucial themes recur: addiction, depression, obsession, suicide, boredom, bureaucracy, technocracy, management, work and leisure, somatic distortion, disparity between one’s social role and one’s sense of self.

I aim to demonstrate not only that Wallace’s fiction partakes of hysterical discourse, nor simply that it is “realistic”\(^\text{27}\): his writing, I will argue, is an elaborate fictional staging of really-existing structures of domination and alienation; but beyond verisimilitude, Wallace’s work inhabits and intervenes in these very discourses. It introduces a perspectival and affective shift that interrupts the smooth working of systems of domination and control. Through its immanent-hysterical interrogation of established knowledge and authority, it destabilises the modes through which institutions and technologies insidiously shape desire, subjective experience and activity. The hysterical position, of course, is limited in political effectiveness\(^\text{28}\). Since it is always a reaction against the master, hysterical realism implies that the master is in some sense indomitable, and that it is impossible or undesirable to simply abolish the master’s dominance.

Nowhere in Wallace’s fiction can we find a clear path out of alienation and domination. But in the relationship of work to reader, shared alienation, shared domination, shared misery and shared hysteria—states that, in actual interpersonal relationships, are extremely difficult if not impossible to communicate and share—become virtual foundations for mitigating and possibly, eventually, overcoming those very states. This problem is one of Wallace’s most pervasive themes: his writing may be widely noted for its garrulousness, silliness and grotesqueness, but its pervasive (sometimes inhospitable) bleakness is the index by which to adjudge its moral seriousness. It is crucial not to mistake bleakness for depressive nihilism. Likewise, one must avoid conflating Wallace’s thorough disgust for institutional and cultural stupidity with misanthropy. As ruthless as a text like *Oblivion* (2004) may be, it is also acutely attuned to suffering. Wallace’s characters are thoroughly unheroic, sometimes difficult to like. Eliciting empathy, disgust, confusion, annoyance—often in combination—as affective grounds, he places his characters in social positions that are
intractable and inescapable, subjecting them to hostile external and internal forces. But there is frequently a heroic point of resistance within them: the divided subject as such—overridden by an alien language, impelled by imposed desires, but nonetheless emerging at critical moments to stall the machine.

The following two chapters will examine in detail a selection of Wallace’s writing published 1993–2011, demonstrating how—from the level of individual words, to sentences, to works, to that of his entire oeuvre—reading through the lens of hysterical realism establishes both a significant reevaluation of the genre and a means for understanding his overarching approach in all of its complexity and integrated miscellany.

I first establish Wallace’s position with respect to postmodernism, outlining the ways in which his work finds new ways beyond the impasses of both metafiction and realism. I then consider Wallace’s late work as a hysterical genealogy of the transition from Foucauldian discipline to Deleuzian control. Both chapters engage directly with selected recent Wallace criticism, demonstrating how my re-evaluation of hysterical realism challenges and establishes connections between existing evaluations of his work.
2. Generalised Hysteरia & Wallace’s Contracted Realism

Form, narration, epistemology and authenticity

To call David Foster Wallace’s writing “metafiction” is both accurate and potentially misleading.

The author-character-narrator-reader complex is always problematised in his work; it always requires scrupulous attention. Permutations of the positions of this system (and introduction of new elements into it) almost invariably occur between chapters in his novels, and between different stories in the collections. But these slippages are also propagated within the discrete textual divisions, establishing different epistemological and rhetorical positions that must be divined from an often disorienting, “blind” induction, readings constantly re-calibrated in light of new positions and information. The metaphor of sight is more than incidental: *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* (2011) are novels overtly concerned with visibility30. As Stephen J. Burn notes, eyes are mentioned more than 100 times in *The Pale King* (Boswell and Burn 82n9). Refractions, diffractions, diffusions and reflections are introduced into the system of narration after—often long after—the reader finds her initial orientation, demanding that the text be re-read through, against or with other texts, or in light of a deferred but critical narrative detail. Radical heterogeneity of style and content presupposes the reader’s familiarity with literary, philosophical, scientific, cinematic, artistic, mathematical, psychological and psychoanalytic theories, practices and premises31. As Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell note

[The intrinsic complexity of Wallace’s books demands close attention to their unique organization and verbal density; but at the same time, these works insistently reach outside themselves,
through layered allusions, metaleptic jumps, and a thematic obsession with connection. (xi)

Where “S.O.P. [standard operating procedure] metatext” (Wallace, BI 124) entails a surface-level, ironic self-awareness of fiction’s artificiality and reliance on a simulated credulity on the part of the reader, Wallace’s metafiction is (at times avowedly) concerned with not merely incorporating a representation of the formal reading relationship into itself, but in identifying the limits at which metafiction is able to appropriate or transcend this relationship towards the production of extra-textual truth.

But, preparatory to any going-beyond, there is a complexly structured discourse to attend to.

“THE VERY LAST THING THIS BOOK IS IS SOME KIND OF CLEVER METAFICTIONAL TITTY-PINCHER”32: LITERARY REALISM

The Real of Fiction/Dead Things
The term “literary realism” is, of course, highly polyvalent. “Literary realism”, to add yet another valence—or really to make explicit something already latent in the term—names an essential element of Wallace’s metafiction: its butting up against the inarticulable Real of fiction itself. If realism as such is the aesthetic practice of symbolising the real, of making-visible, articulating matrices of intelligibility and thus (re)constituting phenomenal reality, literary realism is, in the sense I wish to emphasise here, a practice of making-visible and symbolising fiction’s performative abilities, its potential for creating effects in the world. Literary criticism and aesthetic theory are part of this practice, but these are held in a dialectic with an immanent form of realism—art that reconfigures or reconstitutes the relationship between art and reality as such. Duchamp’s Fountain (1917) stands as the most obvious example: by troubling the distinction between “art” and “not art”, Fountain necessitated significant (and still incomplete) rethinking of the ontology of art and how it relates to the world of non-art objects and experiences33.

“S.O.P. metatext”, we might say, enacts the literary equivalent of Escher’s lithograph Drawing Hands (1948)—depicting its own production
within the product, and suggesting, perhaps, something of the tension between author, author-function and narrator. The cleverness and novelty of this kind of self-referentiality is exhaustible, and by the time Wallace began writing in the mid 1980s, it was jejune. Wallace’s “literary realism” has more in common with Fountain; its auto-critical reflexion gestures towards the Real of fiction. Knowingness and “cute” paradox (Wallace, PK 67) are transcended in a levelling gesture, an emptying out of stylistic privilege. It is precisely insofar as Wallace operates within the established metafictional paradigm that cuteness and knowingness become artefacts of a foreign, objectified discourse. This is not to claim that reflexive auto-critique is somehow outside of the standard operating procedure; advertising and reality television, for example, have been consistently using these ironic distancing techniques to appeal to self-aware, “post-ideological” markets for several decades. Wallace saw this clearly: “E Unibus Pluram” (1993) is unequivocal in condemning the repetition of “modes of literary protest” already subject to “commercialization” (Wallace, SFT 69).

So why, then, do Infinite Jest, Brief Interviews With Hideous Men, Oblivion and The Pale King—all published after “E Unibus Pluram”—persist with irony and postmodern tropes at all? The question for Wallace became one of making new use of postmodernism’s (no longer) subversive techniques. While I have some misgivings about Marshall Boswell’s characterisation of how Wallace goes about doing it, he is entirely correct in saying that his fiction “moves resolutely forward while hoisting the baggage of modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on its back” (Boswell, Understanding 1). The obvious question at this point is: how does the respectful hoisting of dead literary artefacts contribute to a progressive aesthetic project?

Irony & the recuperative rapacity of communicative capitalism

Marshall Boswell’s 2003 book-length study, Understanding David Foster Wallace, designates Wallace’s governing formal position as one of ironized irony (16–7), and several critics, including Mary K. Holland (108) and Samuel Cohen (72) have followed him. Lee Konstantinou (90–1) and Allard Den Dulk (336–7) expose the fundamental problem with this assessment:
ironized irony cannot but enter into an endless regress of iterated negation. Such ironic self-capture would entail a descent into cynicism and relativism, and Wallace’s fiction would then, as Dulk argues, necessarily be organized around the position of Kierkegaard’s “‘defeated aesthete’: he who has recognized the futility of his life-view and submitted his own ironic attitude to the viewpoint of irony” (337).

Konstantinou’s alternative reading, positing a postironic “stance of belief [not directed] toward some aspect of the world but rather the ethos of belief in and of itself” (90) is another pitfall, just as serious as that of ironized meta-irony. The tendency in Wallace criticism to affirm an underlying and always-operative “positive project”—an aesthetic programme for the resolution of social problems in his work—arises from an insufficiently critical mapping of Wallace’s own ethical and aesthetic statements to the core mechanics of his fiction. Konstantinou errs, as indeed do many other critics, not in so far as he identifies the presence or general values of Wallace’s positive project, but in his failure to recognise the ways in which such a project cannot be sustained within the cultural logic of neoliberalism, and is represented as such within the fiction. The positive project is liable to be recuperated, like postmodern irony was by television, as its own obverse. Jodi Dean defines the mechanism of this absorption—paradigmatic in the era of “communicative capitalism”—as the “morphing of message into contribution” (58). Whereas a message passes from sender to receiver, is primarily grounded in use value, and operates on the assumption of a response (or significant non-response), a contribution is primarily conceived as exchange value:

Uncoupled from contexts of action and application—as on the Web or in print and broadcast media—the message is simply part of a circulating data stream. Its particular content is irrelevant. Who sent it is irrelevant. Who receives it is irrelevant. That it need be responded to is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is circulation, the addition to the pool. (Dean 58)

Ultimately, the form of the contribution forecloses the political efficacy of any statement so expressed. What appears as unprecedented democratisation—more people than ever can express themselves via
networked technology—also flattens out all speech, whatever its content, be it political, personal or commercial, as a contribution: a single unit equivalent to any other (Dean 53–9). Since any positive political or social enunciation can easily be reduced to a freely-circulating contribution, a strong negation of the form of the contribution and a recommitment to the directed efficacy of the message is necessary to any progressive political project (Dean 70–1).

The problem of irony in Wallace’s work—the impossibility of either exiting irony or effectively turning it upon itself, and the aesthetic function of its persistence—is resolved in my reading of Wallace’s fiction as hysterical realism. As I established in the introduction, the hysteric’s discourse subverts the master’s discourse by demanding the legitimating knowledge the master does not possess, and subverts the university discourse by emphasising and openly bearing precisely what the university discourse disavows and represses. By de-fetishising the technology of fiction and reflexively subjecting the structure and process of reading to the same scrutiny that one would apply to political or commercial discourse, Wallace rejects both irony and belief as absolutes or overriding principles. It is in the work of reading carefully, not in any pre-given stance or technique, that one can discover truth.

Ambivalence of Style/Generalised Hysteria

At the end of history, protest, irony and cynicism have no meaningful outside position from which to operate. Mark Fisher goes so far as to posit that

the old struggle between detournement and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, seems to have been played out. What we are dealing with now [2009] is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their precorporation: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture. (9)

Under these conditions, hysteria is generalised: the interpretation of Lacan’s formula “le désir de l’homme est le désir de l’Autre” (Écrits 690) ought now to emphasise that one desires what the Other desires. This was always one of the phrase’s meanings, but only recently has the big Other’s desire been
fully circumscribed within, the horizon of meaning effectively totalised by, the logic and values of late capitalism.  

When the commercial insinuated itself in modes of protest, the counter-infiltration of the hysteric’s discourse became the only subversive force invulnerable to recuperation by the circuit of capital. The hysteric’s innermost desires may belong to the Other—but crucially, she knows this, and rebuffs it with the enigmatic demand of the symptom.

Wallace’s first process, then, is one of levelling—postmodern irony, and indeed all of fiction’s “technology” becomes yet another literary commonplace, a technique without a particular political valence: you will regard features like shifting p.o.v.s, structural fragmentation, willed incongruities, & c. as simply the modern literary analogs of “Once upon a time...” or “Far, far away there once dwelt...” or any of the other traditional devices that signalled to the reader that what was under way was fiction and should be processed accordingly.

(Wallace, PK 72)

This is a crucial aspect of Wallace’s approach to fiction, and has not been adequately addressed in existing criticism. It does fit, however, with attempts in some contemporary progressive political philosophy to avoid fetishising particular approaches beyond their usefulness. For Jodi Dean, technological fetishism obscures the real site of antagonism (i.e. the substance of a person’s speech and actions in the social realm) by imputing a political significance to technology as such (63). For Gilles Deleuze there is “no need to ask which is the toughest or most tolerable regime [of dominance], for it’s within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront one another” (4). Likewise, Wallace comes to “technologies” of fiction and its “regimes” of representation recognising their profound moral and political ambivalence. Stripped of any claim to an inherent liberating force, postmodern irony, self-reference, and other such devices can be redeployed qua devices. Hysterical realism represents a re-historicising torsion that explicitly represents “pastiche” and the “occultation of the present” (Jameson, Postmodernism 21), along with other “technological” fetishes as a symptom. The “multinational, high-rise, stagflated city of the newspapers and of our own everyday life” (Jameson, Postmodernism 22) is articulated not in ahistorical isolation but—as Fredric Jameson argues of
E.L. Doctorow’s writing—re- inscribed in a “new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history” (Postmodernism 25). Divested of fetish and teleology, Wallace collects the flotsam of literary modernity and postmodernity alongside the styles and vocabularies of commercial, scientific, political and administrative discourses, and subjects all to the same intensive scrutiny. This form of literary realism is active at both a formal and explicit level in the “Author’s Foreword” section of *The Pale King*. It is worth quoting the beginning of the chapter at some length:

Author here. Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona. Granted, there sometimes is such a persona in *The Pale King*, but that’s mainly a pro forma statutory construct, an entity that exists just for legal and commercial purposes, rather like a corporation; it has no direct, provable connection to me as a person. But this right here is me as a real person, David Wallace, age forty, SS no. 975-04-2012, addressing you from my Form 8829-deductible home office at 725 Indian Hill Blvd., Claremont 91711 CA, on this fifth day of spring, 2005, to inform you of the following:

All of this is true. This book is really true.

I obviously need to explain. First, please flip back and look at the book’s legal disclaimer, which is on the copyright page, verso side, four leaves in from the rather unfortunate and misleading front cover. This disclaimer is the unindented chunk that starts: “The characters and events in this book are fictitious.” I’m aware that ordinary citizens almost never read disclaimers like this, the same way we don’t bother to look at copyright claims or Library of Congress specs or any of the dull pro forma boilerplate on sales contracts and ads that everyone knows is just there for legal reasons. But I now need you to read it, the disclaimer, and to understand that its initial “The characters and events in this book...” includes this very Author’s Foreword. In other words, this Foreword is defined by the disclaimer as itself fictional, meaning it lies within the area of special legal protection established by that disclaimer. I need this legal protection in order to inform you that what follows is, in reality, not fiction at all, but substantially true and accurate. That *The Pale*
King is, in point of fact, more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story. (66–7)

It would be easy to read this—to write it off—as typical postmodern “play”, a riff on the liar’s paradox intended to poke fun at the reader’s credulity, a stock metafiction scenario in which “clever” David Foster Wallace gives the appearance of writing in honesty and candour as himself while in fact continuing the fiction. I want to point out some other aspects.

Co-opting Derrida’s “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (158) suggests three levels at which the Author’s Foreword might be considered:

**Dissolution.**

There is a sense in which fiction dissolves all within its grasp. Facts in fiction are *fictionalised*, regardless of the same facts’ truth value outside of fiction. The pages of fiction have no outside-text because even its most exorbitant statements are configured in advance to be met with a simultaneous belief (fiction ≠ lies) and disbelief (fiction ≠ truth). From the legal perspective, it is disbelief that matters—total formal disavowal of connection to the world. By pointing to the “dull pro forma boilerplate” of *The Pale King* that ordinary people “almost never read”, the diegetic “Author” invokes a general, standard fiction contract—one that *doesn’t need to be considered*. But intramurally, the Author insists on belief: “substantially true and accurate”. To whom is this insistence addressed? The most cursory of fact-checks would disabuse one of the idea that “David Wallace” is a direct factual analogue of the real David Foster Wallace: he was in fact 42 years old on the fifth day of the Californian spring, 2005. But does this non-coincidence of facts support the *pro forma* disclaimer’s assurance that “[a]ny similarity to real persons [...] is coincidental and not intended by the author” (iv)?

This claim is absurd, yet we typically give it no thought; we don’t even bother looking at it. Perhaps we also didn’t bother to read *Infinite Jest*’s somewhat less *pro forma* disclaimer:

> The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any apparent similarity to real persons is not intended by the author and is either a coincidence or the product of your own troubled imagination.
Where the names of real places, corporations, institutions, and public figures are projected onto made-up stuff, they are intended to denote only made-up stuff, not anything presently real. (Imprint page)

Here Wallace turns the ubiquitous formal disclaimer into a provocation. Simply by injecting his own diction into the standard assurances, he gives the lie to them. This is a curious effect: when certain common statements issue from an identifiable person they become ridiculous, but do not register as significant at all in pro forma, standard—de-subjectivised—wordings. Recall Bruce Fink’s characterisation of the hysterics discourse as demanding that the master “show his or her stuff, prove his or her mettle” (133). The Infinite Jest version of the disclaimer mocks what is, when one gives it a moment’s thought, a ridiculous lie—one that we tacitly accept under the insignia of the master signifier ($S_1$), made ridiculous when enunciated by an ordinary subject ($S$). The Pale King’s return to the disclaimer again stresses the importance of paying attention to what “rules” are (already) in place when we read fiction, and the complex relationship of fiction to factual truth; but in a larger sense, the lie of the legal disclaimer is not what is important—after all, it exists only to protect authors and publishers from litigation. What matters, what the imprint page boilerplate synecdochically stands in for, is the proliferation of authoritative codes and practices that have no basis in truth (the master’s discourse) or a blinding focus on empirical facts without regard for truth (the university discourse). Fiction’s legal position is ultimately at odds with its actual social position and its production of real effects—we know this and yet act as if we don’t. What the disclaimer simultaneously disavows, grounds and protects is fiction’s ability to do what the hysterics does: “tell the truth in the guise of a lie” (Žižek, “Desire” 148). “There is no outside-text” thus designates this necessary and subjectivised dissolution and dissimulation.

The Author’s Invisibility.
The question I left unanswered above—to whom is the insistence that The Pale King is “substantially true and accurate” addressed?—can only be answered alongside the question of the real author’s status on the page. As I
suggested in the previous chapter, Wallace inherited not just the legacy of literary history, but also the legacy of literary theory as an unavoidable *a priori* set of conditions for writing. He specifically engaged with Barthes’s “death of the author” in “Greatly Exaggerated” (1992), a review essay of H.L. Hix’s *Mort d’Author: An Autopsy*. In the conclusion to that essay, he remarks that “for those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question [of the death of the author] seems sort of arcane” (*SFT* 144). But the author’s presence on the page remained problematic for him. Far from arcane, the problem of communication rose insistently to the surface of much of his subsequent work. David Wallace qua character-Author does not appear as a contingent substitute for the “real” David Foster Wallace; the real author remains forever banished. Consider Pop Quiz 9 of “Octet” in which “[y]ou [ostensibly the reader] are, unfortunately, a fiction writer” (*BI* 123). The act of communicating “directly” through fiction “between one human being and another” is shown in PQ9 to be excruciatingly convoluted, “a serious (and hideously time-consuming) conundrum” (*BI* 125) that requires grammatical contortions and numerous digressions and qualifications (more on this below).

Returning to the Author’s Foreword: if the real author were the one claiming to appear and speak directly to the real reader, one would never be able to tell. If the concrete details were aligned with those of the real David Foster Wallace, we would still have to question whether the opinions he expressed were in fact his own, in turn opening the much larger problem of the ego, the unconscious and authenticity. Even if we could hypothetically be assured that the real author were expressing his real opinions, the physical position of the “Foreword” 66 pages into the text proper would nonetheless *formally* implicate it, dissolve it, in the suspension between belief and disbelief discussed above. For the author, there is no outside-text: the operative definition of Text for Derrida, Foucault, Barthes and other authors often grouped together as “post-structuralists” precludes an outside position; the Text is not contained within paginated ranges but in the entire, historically mutating field of the symbolic. Along with the loss of authorial privilege that this entails (the author’s reading of her own work is no longer
“authoritative”), the author’s name becomes just one signifier among others, one that signifies the “human holding the pencil” no more than an abstract phantasm that serves to “characterise the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (Foucault 1481).

As a result, the reader addressed by character-author David Wallace’s Foreword is herself a phantasm—a fictional reader. She belongs to the world of the novel. But in the same way that the character David Wallace and real David Foster Wallace are parallel but importantly connected, the character-reader is importantly connected to us, real readers. If we are to take *The Pale King* seriously, we must read it from at least two positions: as ourselves, in the epistemological position with sufficient distance to know that the Author’s Foreword is a fictional author addressing a fictional reader, and as that fictional reader, with the belief that indeed, the book is a memoir, “substantially true and accurate”. Why?

*Palpating the contract*

Our speech is by necessity mediated by the symbolic order; communication in language entails our interpellation into a particular symbolic subject position. Hysteria, as I established in the previous chapter, is fundamentally the subject’s rejection of the position she is interpellated into. *The Pale King*’s diegetic author is formally hystericised when a “GO TO subroutine” in the IRS Personnel computer system conflates his personal file with that of a much more senior transferee: “[i]n effect, David F. Wallace, GS-9, age twenty, of Philo IL, did not exist; his file had been deleted, or absorbed into, that of David F. Wallace, GS-13, age thirty-nine, of Rome NY’s Northeast REC” (411).

This error leads the junior Wallace to be inducted not as a new Service employee, but as the senior transfer:

David Wallace, meanwhile, was not enjoying any general orientation with slick slide show. Instead, he had been conducted (by someone who was not Ms. Neti-Neti)—with no opportunity to eat anything—to the REC Annex and a small room in which he and four other men, all GS-13s, listened to a presentation of the Minimum Tax on Preferences, which evidently had its origin in the Democratic administration of Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s. [...]

The presentation was dust-dry and appeared to be very high-level and was made by someone dressed in a black suit and black vest over what appeared to be either a white turtleneck—which would have been bizarre in such hot weather—or one of those detachable Victorian starched collars that men used to put on and fastened with studs as the very final part of the Victorian dressing process. He was very clipped and impersonal and all-business. He seemed very severe and austere, with great black hollows in his cheeks and under his eyes. He looked a little like a popular representation of death.

This mis-interpellation is not one that leads to hysterical dissatisfaction; it leads to hysterical terror. It is not that the master captures the subject in an inadequate position; the subject is inadequate for the position that he is captured in by the diffuse, acephalic network. This structure is precisely that which is active in Neal’s all-pervasive feeling of fraudulence in “Good Old Neon” and Pop Quiz 9 of “Octet” in which the “reader”, interpellated by the second person pronoun as the unfortunate fiction writer, ultimately finds herself

[f]undamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure about whether to trust even your most fundamental intuitions about urgency and sameness and whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do...more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a Writer, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ. (Bl 136)

When a technocratic system takes the place of the individual master and more traditional bureaucracy—the process that signals the transition from discipline to control—hysteria mutates and intensifies. In late capitalist control societies, traditional concentrations of authority (the monarch, the individual capitalist, etc.) having diffused into vast and impersonal systems of administration, the subject’s “objective desperation” (to adapt Adorno’s phrase), her sense that her role is inadequate and that she is inadequate for her role, is also consequently atomised: there is no clear “master” to whom the subject’s desperation can be addressed. The figure of the master for
such an “objectively desperate” subject thus takes on a synecdochic morphology: it is either inadequately—fetishistically—represented by one of capitalism’s particular organs (manager, organization, state), or else is perceived—paranoiacally—as permeating the entire social edifice. The “Minimum Tax on Preferences” presenter appears as a traditional figure of reserved paternal authority, as indeed do the rest of “the room’s GS-13 Immersive Exam transfers and CTO shelter specialists” (PK 337). But there is no one suitable to appeal to—the young Wallace is *supposed to know* what is going on; the senior staff in the room do not even “notice in anything more than a peripherally uncomfortable way” his “youth, corduroy suit (which was the IRS equivalent of a Speedo and floppy clown shoes), and absence of hat” (338). The technocratic organization has seniority, but not mastery. Its head is only an administrator of a higher order. The *impersonality* of the presenter reflects the fundamental impersonality of the organization, which is ultimately composed not of people, but positions, roles and functions. Worrying about David Wallace is not one of the functions of the GS-13 specialists.

What one’s position is need not be disclosed, for one ought to know it, and when it is known, it is liable to change without warning; as Deleuze points out, the corporate structure of control operates “in states of perpetual metastability” (4). The younger David Wallace, though “erroneously assigned through no fault of his own” is only advised of what happened “much later, after the whole administrative swivet was over and various outlandish charges had been retracted” (PK 411).

This leads me back to the discussion I began this chapter with. Wallace’s fiction is epistemologically metastable. The reader must develop a provisional reading from beginnings that, like David Wallace’s at the IRS, are overwhelming, technical and confusing. The information the reader is given is never enough to form a complete understanding of the situation, often to the extent that the narrator’s position with respect to the story or chapter remains enigmatic, or even internally contradictory. The position the reader is interpellated into by the structure of address is frequently reconfigured by the unexpected introduction of new—and in many cases indeterminately related—information or narrative tangents. The clearly
marked new elements—those that are formally separated by section or paragraph breaks, or introduced in foot- or endnotes—are paralleled by allusive elements that need to be recognised and identified before the reader can even begin to attempt to synthesise them in a coherent reading. Often, these allusions are to subsequent parts of the text—a full reading requires rereading. Two paradigmatic examples:

On page 17 of *Infinite Jest*: “I think of John N.R. Wayne, who would have won this year’s WhataBurger, standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father’s head”. Even after reading the subsequent 1062 pages, this crucial statement only sketches an outline of how the novel’s major narrative arcs and characters converge; even with >500 000 words of additional context, the details are not directly inferable. Reading *Infinite Jest* requires constant formation and reformulation of hypotheses, analysis of individual sections and speculative synthesis of its apparently disparate parts.

Page 80, Footnote 19 of *The Pale King*’s “Author’s Foreword” (§9) contains a second-order note (a meta-level not uncommon for Wallace in and after *Infinite Jest*) that refers forwards to “Item 951458221 of §14”, an absolutely crucial section of the novel in which an IRS employee with a distracting speech tic gives, in an attenuated transcript of a video produced as “part of an abortive IRS Personnel Division motivational and recruitment effort” (72), an outline of the premises and historical politico-economic conditions surrounding the IRS’s “Spackman Initiative” (109). The many levels of mediation and spiraling diachronic allusions make careful re-reading absolutely necessary; if one fails to grasp the Spackman Initiative as the metonymic quilting point of the novel, the whole (such as it is) will not cohere. There is simply no way that an ordinary reader would be able to keep track of all the information’s relative importance and retroactive effects through a single linear reading. This extraordinarily dense and complexly interwoven quality of Wallace’s writing is the primary challenge for criticism of it—one cannot summarize without ignoring or severing layers and layers of interconnections, but a criticism that dealt with the entire complexity would need to be far, far longer than the already-long works themselves.
Like *Ulysses*, Wallace’s books are filled with enigmas and puzzles that will no doubt “keep the professors busy”, as Joyce designed his second novel to do, for a very long time. Joyce claimed to be seeking literary immortality through the complexity of his work; Wallace’s complexity is certainly part of his fame, but it is more importantly an integral component of his aesthetic condensation of actual social conditions.

Andrew Warren, in his excellent paper on how several of Wallace’s different narrative approaches converge and compete with one another in “communities posited or contested in the novels”, argues that these narrational styles—“Contracted Realism”, “Jargony Argot”, “Free Indirect Wraith”, “Spontaneous Data Intrusion” and others (389)—serve as metaphorical or structural “models of reading and narration” (390). Warren argues that “Contracted Realism” is an attempt to “render reality’s fine print legible”,

directing our attention to the vast interdependence of the contemporary US’s modes of production and distribution (its economies, legal codes, social and political values, and so on), but also pointing to the tacit contract between novel and reader. (389)

Contracted Realism thus entangles and mediates between a realism concerning social and political reality and metafictional, reader-relational “literary realism”. I suggest that Warren, positing “contracted realism” as one style amongst others, fails to go far enough: contracted realism is the plastic but always detectable *sine qua non* of Wallace’s fiction, constantly operative within and behind all of the other modes. Wallace’s overall project models the manifold modes and styles by which the contemporary subject is interpellated, manipulated and controlled. It demands that we read from many positions within various complicated and convoluted plots, develop suitable modes of attention and sustain adequate critical distance to all discourse. By interpellating the reader as the “subject presumed to know”, but providing dizzying quantities of detailed information, only some of which is directly important to the narrative, and withholding apparently crucial aspects of the narrative entirely, the reader is, like *The Pale King’s* young David Wallace, forced to struggle towards coherent meaning that will never be fully realised. The “contract” of contracted realism is not the
idealised explicit and documented agreement between equals; it is the subject's position in the symbolic order, one that it determined without consent. Wallace's contracted realism is fundamentally hysterical: its question is always "why am I what you say I am?".
3. The Irruption of the Hysterical Symptom

Discipline, Control, Jouissance

This chapter will trace the hysterical irruption in Wallace’s writing through four key concepts: discipline, control, data and jouissance. While many critics seek to position Wallace as a treater of social ills, I want to insist on his negativity. This is not to say nihilism, hopelessness, resigned acquiescence, misanthropy or anything of the sort. Negativity, saying no!, is in his work an act of ground-clearing, shucking off social and intellectual impediments. Negativity is preparatory to anything else, to borrow Joyce’s phrase; affirmation comes later, to borrow his structure.

I do not claim that Wallace doesn’t have or doesn’t articulate a positive project. I do claim, however, that it is only through paying close attention to his dominant negativity that one can approach what he endorses without risking a severe misreading.

DATA, FANTASY, LIVING DEATH, ENJOYMENT

Perhaps the most striking feature of Wallace’s late fictional style, that of Oblivion and The Pale King, is its genealogical approach. While Infinite Jest and Brief Interviews With Hideous Men are certainly engaged with family history, intergenerational relations, political history and literary history as a context and foundation to the directly diegetic elements, the later collection and novel focus primarily on the interrelated genealogies of boredom, the role of the human in postindustrial capitalism, the shift from discipline to control society, and data. I want to begin this discussion of data not with one of the more obviously data-centric pieces, but with “The Soul Is Not a Smithy”—without a doubt one of Wallace’s finest and most austere stories.
Fantasy

“The Soul Is Not a Smithy” intertwines three primary “real” plot lines with a central fantasy narrative tableau in which the real elements recombine to express what is, to the narrator, too large and too close to fully comprehend. The first major plot arc involves the substitute 4th grade Civics substitute teacher Mr. Johnson, who suffers a breakdown mid-class, beginning to make violent interstitial insertions into quotations from the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights:

*The powers not delegated KILL to the United States THEM by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it KILL THEM to the States, at which time there was again, evidently, another long classroom silence, during which the pupils all began looking at one another while Mr. Johnson stood with his back to the room at the board with his hand with the yellow chalk hanging at his side and his head again cocked to the side as if he were having trouble hearing or understanding something, without turning around or saying anything, before picking up the board’s eraser once again and trying to continue the lesson on Amendments X and XIII as though nothing unusual had taken place.* (O:S 87)

The second primary theme focuses on the narrator’s father, whose stoic but existentially fraught relationship to his monotonous actuarial job’s “soul-level boredom” (105) is an unspoken trauma in his family’s life. The third real plot concerns the narrator’s “peripheral vision” (71)—his acute attention to stimuli, information and imaginative digressions outside of the strictly proscribed bounds of the 1960s classroom, and concomitant low performance according to standard learning metrics.

The comic- or filmic-style tableau is superimposed in the cells formed by “reticulate wire mesh built directly into the glass” of “[a]ll of the school buildings’ windows” (70), and develops a complex series of backstories leading up to a really-witnessed scene in the school grounds:

The two dogs entered the window’s upper right grid from a copse of trees to the northeast and proceeded diagonally down towards the northern goal area of the soccer fields. They then began moving in gradually diminishing circles around each other, apparently preparing to copulate. [...] Their actions appeared to be consistent
with those of mating. The larger of the two dogs mounted the other’s back from the rear and wrapped its forelegs around the brindle-colored dog’s body and began to thrust repeatedly, taking a series of tiny steps with its rear legs as the other dog attempted to escape. This occupied slightly more than one square of the window’s wire mesh. The visual impression was of one large, anatomically complex dog having a series of convulsions. It was not a pretty sight, but it was vivid and compelling. One of the animals was larger, and black with a dun chest element, possibly a rottweiler mix, though it lacked a purebred rottweiler’s breadth of head. The breed of the smaller dog beneath it was unidentifiable. (73)

Through the metonymic substitution of symbols and phrases in the ensuing fantasy—“long suffering” (74, 81, 99, 109), “highball” (90, 103)—, the smaller dog’s “unhappy but stoic expression” comes to represent the narrator’s father; the larger dog with “the same type of expression as on a human being’s face when he is doing something that he feels compulsively driven to do and yet does not understand just why he wants to do it” (74) clearly stands in for the father’s job. But despite the incredible obviousness of this symbolism, and notwithstanding the narrator’s sensitive and nuanced understanding of symbolism in The Exorcist (1973) (95–7), his comprehension of these unconscious substitutions (and those that clearly arise from Mr. Johnson’s breakdown) remains strangely muted: “in retrospect, I believe that the atmosphere of the classroom may have subconsciously influenced the unhappy events of the period’s window’s mesh’s narrative fantasy” (92, emphasis added).

Indeed, despite the acuity and clarity of expression throughout the story, its elements consistently do not quite associate as they apparently ought to. This operates often at a subtle grammatical level: “I do not recall noticing whether Mr. Johnson wore a wedding band or not, but the Dispatch articles later made no mention of his being survived by a wife after the authorities stormed the classroom” (76). The story’s details tend to accumulate into overdetermination: iterated explanations remain heterogeneous, apparently unable to resolve into a single coherent truth. The windows’ reticulate wire is ostensibly “to make the window harder to break with an errant dodgeball or vandal’s hurled stone” (70), but it is also
“designed in part to make the windows less diverting and to minimize the chances that a pupil could become distracted or lost in contemplation of the scene outside” (71); forty pages later, the narrator adds that the “wire mesh gave the windows an institutional quality and contributed to a sense of being encaged” (111). The fantasy is thus interposed in the gaps of the protective, disciplinary and enclosing design of the school. It is not that these explanations are directly contradictory; the pertinent point is that each explanation presents as sufficient in itself, yet proves to be partial. Paul Quinn notes that: “[t]he seemingly flat spaces of the commodified or synthetic spaces [Wallace] explores are shown to be nonetheless stratified, to contain hidden depths, and, subsequently, are sifted for traces of the real” (92); we might add that this is conceptually as well as materially true. This non-accretive piling of facts points to the Real as a limit to knowledge. The differential functioning of the symbolic inheres that “we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning insists, but that none of the chain’s elements consists in the signification it can provide at that very moment” (Lacan, Écrits 419).

More can always be said, full understanding is never attained. The big Other of the symbolic order is itself lacking. Alenka Zupančič, elaborating the hysteric’s position with respect to enjoyment, integrally links lack in the Other with the production of jouissance:

\[
\text{castration/lack [...] is constitutive of and inherent to the signifier,}
\text{and not something existing beside it, the truth is never “whole”. At the same time, this inherent lack is precisely the gap that enables the “deviations” in the direction of (surplus) jouissance [...] to take place; it is, as Lacan puts it, when something strikes on the walls of this lack, or gap, that enjoyment is created. (166)}
\]

It is, at least in part, the hysteric’s emphasis on the lack in the Other, his belief that “[t]he signifier always fails to account for the truth” (Zupančič 164), that prevents the narrator from making a strong conscious connection between the content of his fantasy and the correlative content of his real life.

At an unconscious level, however, even this disconnection itself is clearly symbolised by the blindness of the fantasy narrative’s protagonist Ruth Simmons (78) and the mechanical blinding of her father (91) with his own severed and disintegrated arm as the fantasy’s violence escalates in
parallel to the events in the classroom. The fantasy expresses one of the key problems of the hysteric’s discourse, both in the symbol of blindness and the spectacle of suffering it stages; as Zupančič explains, the hysteric “is satisfied with nothing, in both possible meanings of this expression. It is not only that nothing can satisfy him or her, but that the nothing itself can be an important source of satisfaction” (167). Lacan calls this “the jouissance of being deprived” (Seminar XVII 99). For the reader, however, the narrator’s apparent non-recognition of the symbolic obviousness of the fantasy cannot be wholly attributed to jouissance. The very facility of reconstructing the fantasy’s relations to the real story—after all, it is the fantasy of a smart nine year old—suggests that there still persists a truth that the fantasy fails to adequately capture. The point at which the real work of interpretation begins is, I suggest, at the intersection of the three main plot lines.

Living Death
The heterogeneous explanations of the window mesh’s purpose relate to what Quinn identifies as Wallace’s “aware[ness] that facts are never just facts” (97). Facts, the base material of the university discourse, are alchemically emphasised, repressed, reordered and subjected to hierarchy. Ideological obfuscation need not entail falsehood; it need only naturalise and reify a particular configuration of facts as the facts. As Zupančič puts it, the university discourse is pronounced from the place of supposedly neutral knowledge, the truth of which (hidden below the bar) is Power, that is, the master signifier. The constitutive lie of this discourse is that it disavows its performative dimension: it always presents, for example, that which leads to a political decision, founded on power, as a simple insight into the factual state of things (or public polls, objective reports, and so on). (168)

By presenting even minimally competing explanations of the window mesh’s purpose, Wallace’s narrator reminds us of the fundamentally interested dimension to factuality. The (rather inexorable) problem then becomes, as I established in the previous chapter, that of identifying whose interest47.
The story’s own interstitial small-capital insertions—resembling extremely discursive subheadings, contributing to the sense of undecidedness and lack of systematic cohesion—provide the narrator’s most consciously retrospective and insightful addenda and commentary. The eighth and tenth of these escalate the doubt that the established and official “factual state of things” surrounding the events in the classroom has a legitimate claim to truth at all. It is only by *petitio principii* that the decision to kill Mr. Johnson can be justified:


*STILL LATER, ANOTHER SHARED AND COHESIVE DISCOMFORT AMONG WE WHO CONSTITUTED THE UNWITTING 4 WOULD CONCERN THE INTENDED MEANING OF THE WORD THEM IN THE REPEATED IMPERATIVES THAT MR. JOHNSON HAD FIRST*
INSERTED AND THEN FINALLY EFFACED AND OBSCURED THE BOARD’S LESSON WITH. THROUGHOUT THE INCIDENT AND ITS AFTERMATH, EVERYONE CONCERNED HAD ASSUMED WITHOUT QUESTION THAT THE CHALKBOARD’S THEM REFERRED TO HIS SUBSTITUTE PUPILS, AND THAT THE INVOLUNTARY REPETITIONS WERE SOME DISTURBED PART OF MR. JOHNSON’S PSYCHE EXHORTING HIM TO KILL US EN MASSE. TO THE BEST OF MY RECOLLECTION, IT WAS MY OLDER BROTHER […] WHO FIRST SUGGESTED THAT THE IMPERATIVES’ THEM MAY NOT HAVE REFERRED TO US AT ALL, THAT IT MIGHT, RATHER, HAVE BEEN US WHO MR. JOHNSON’S DISTURBED PART WAS EXHORTING, AND THE THEM SOME OTHER TYPE OR GROUP OF PEOPLE ALTOGETHER. JUST WHO THIS THEM COULD HAVE BEEN MEANT TO BE WAS ANYONE’S GUESS—THE LATE SUB WAS HARDLY IN A POSITION TO ELABORATE, MY BROTHER’S LETTER OBSERVED. (110–1)

The radical ambiguity of Mr. Johnson’s exhortations is written over by the Board of Inquiry’s official ruling. His hysterical fit is re-encoded as psychosis, his despair as murderousness. The ostensibly neutral police investigation’s citation of factors that constitute a “perceived threat” is akin to (but simpler than) the involuted self-justifying machinations of Team ∆y in “Mister Squishy”:

Team ∆y’s real function was to present to Reesemeyer Shannon Belt test data that R.S.B. could then turn around and present to Client as confirming the soundness of the very OCC that R.S.B. had already billed Client in the millions for and couldn’t turn back from even if the actual test data turned out to be resoundingly grim or unpromising, which it was Team ∆y’s unspoken real job to make sure never happened, a job that Team ∆y accomplished simply by targeting so many different Focus Groups and foci and by varying the format and context of the tests so baroquely and by facilitating the different TFGs in so many different modalities that in the end it was child’s play to selectively weight and rearrange the data in pretty much whatever way R.S.B.’s MROP division wanted, and so in reality Team ∆y’s function was not to provide information or even a statistical approximation of information but rather its entropic
converse, a cascade of random noise meant to so befuddle the firm and its Client that no one would feel anything but relief at the decision to proceed. (O:S 44)

Coercive power and actions taken under the insignia of the master signifier are retroactively justified by complexity designed, naturalised organizations of facts. And of course, this is the primary mechanism through which the ruling ideology is reproduced in disciplinary education—in no subject more so than Civics. It is no coincidence that Mr. Johnson’s KILL THEMs are inserted into the Amendments limiting federal power and disallowing slavery: the very disciplinary institutions in which these constitutional protections are taught, as evidence of manifest freedom, rigorously organize reality—understood as the only acceptable reality⁴⁸—in order to produce precisely the circumscribed subjects who do not need to be enslaved or extensively overpowered. The reality disciplinary society produces, as Marx observes, requires and guarantees freedom for the citizen

in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realisation of his labour-power (272–3).

In the shift to postindustrial capitalism, the means of production become diffuse and amorphous, but the structure of freedom remains the same: the free, rational agent’s labour power becomes increasingly intellectual, but remains useful only insofar as it is put to use in the postindustrial disciplinary enclosure of production—the office.

The narrator’s childhood nightmare of office workers whose “colorless, empty-eyed, long suffering faces were the face of some death that awaited me long before I stopped walking around” (109) already unconsciously articulates this process of being produced as a postindustrial subject: at a certain point in the dream, the narrator is interpellated, formally transposed from external spectator to unwilling participant:

the lens of perspective pulls suddenly back, and I am one of them, one part of the mass of grey faced men stifling coughs and feeling at their teeth with their tongues and folding the edges of papers down into complex accordion creases and then smoothing them carefully
out once more before replacing them in their assigned file folders.

(109)
The equation of subjection to discipline with living death inaugurates a diurnal cycle of daytime death and nocturnal resurrection. But just as the school’s wire pores frame the narrator’s reverie, the boundaries of the mid-twentieth century disciplinary workplace admit of some interstitial life:

in mild weather [the narrator’s father] took his lunch down in the elevator and ate it sitting on a backless stone bench that faced a small square of grass with two trees and an abstract public sculpture, and [...] on many mornings he steered by these 30 minutes outdoors the way mariners out of sight of land use stars. (106)

While this is undeniably the “Free Time” Adorno describes in his essay of that name—a non-work time that remains partially annexed to capitalist consumption and exploitation (167–70)—it nonetheless provides a short duration of mental and physical semi-autonomy.

This semi-autonomy, its modulation between enclosure/escape and coalescence/separation, is formally replicated in the supplementary relationship between “The Soul Is Not a Smithy” and §23 of The Pale King, a three page dream interpretation sequence that continues the unnamed narrator’s attempts at understanding his childhood. Specific details of the two pieces link them unambiguously:

“Soul...”—

His arrival was always between 5:42 and 5:45[...]
I knew that he liked to have music or a lively radio program on and audible all of the time at home, or to hear my brother practicing while he read the Dispatch before dinner, but I am certain I did not then connect this with the overwhelming silence he sat in all day. (O:S 106)

§23—

I think my brother’s whole piano career was designed around this requirement that there be light and music at 5:42 for my father’s reentry, that in a way his life depended on it—every evening he made the opposite transition from that of the sun, death to life. (PK 254)

The continual oscillations between departure and arrival, between silence and sound, between public and private, and, most importantly, between
death and life, follow the extensive tradition of “[i]mages of a society of sleepers” (22) that Jonathan Crary identifies in 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep (2013):

Common to these evocations of mass somnambulance is the suggestion of impaired or diminished perceptual capabilities combined with routinized, habitual, or trance-like behavior. Most mainstream social theory prescribes that modern individuals live and act, at least intermittently, in states that are emphatically unsleeplike—states of self-awareness in which one has the ability to evaluate events and information as a rational and objective participant in public or civic life. Any positions that characterize people as bereft of agency, as passive automatons open to manipulation or behavioral management, are usually deemed reductive or irresponsible. (23)

By this characterisation, the narrator’s wandering daydream (and concomitant inattention to the class), his father’s strictly routinised work life and Mr. Johnson’s “COMPLETE OBLIVIOUSNESS” and “IN VOLUNTARY REPETITIONS” all belong to the state of oblivion and lack of self-mastery. And indeed this is to an extent true: all three present alternative reactions to discipline—respectively: physical compliance with mental “freedom”, stoic compliance, incendiary hysterical outburst. Each has its own blindness, and each entails a dimension of jouissance. Ultimately, only the second is sustainable—but only if its jouissance finds a “safe” outlet.

In the cyclic shifts between work and leisure, the subject under discipline lives two lives, one public and externally determined, the other relatively opaque and relatively free. The narrator’s father is tyrannised by the inevitable return to his “living death”, and appears to derive a hysterical surplus enjoyment from the exacting repetition of gestures—his highly choreographed homecoming (O:S 103–6), the “very precise double fold at the top of [his] brown bag lunch” (O:S 97). However subtle these gestures may be, they nonetheless successfully convey his unspoken suffering well enough to motivate both his son’s ongoing fascination and his wife’s going to “a great deal of trouble and expense at a difficult time” to move his “burial plot [to] somewhere where there were at least a few trees in view” (O:S 106).
While the nightmare recounted in “Soul...” articulates the horror of being enveloped in the “mass of grey faced men” and their tiny choreographed movements, §23 provides a crucial insight that directly links both it and “Soul...” to the specific existential impasse that arises in the transition from discipline to control: “I do not recall the things I worried about, but I remember the feeling, and it was an anxiety whose lack of a proper object is what made it horrible, free-floating” (PK 253–4). The attraction of the mechanisms of control society is precisely the flight that they offer from this objectless anxiety which, according to The Pale King’s David Wallace, “most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention” (85). The 24/7 control society redirects the subject’s flight from existential-institutional tedium into infinite opportunities for consumption; the fear of envelopment into the grey mass becomes endless commodified individuation. Likewise, the music that the narrator’s father needs to hear when he returns from work becomes ubiquitous “Muzak”, his “lively radio program” becomes “actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets’ checkouts, airports’ gates, SUVs’ backseats” (PK 85). The silence of the disciplinary office is replaced by the constant “mandatory communication” (Crary 72) of “BlackBerries[ and] cell phones that attach to your head” (PK 85). The diurnal transition from “death to life” and back again is abolished, as Crary argues:

By the end of the twentieth century it had become possible to see a broader and much fuller integration of the human subject with the “constant continuity” of a 24/7 capitalism that had always been inherently global. Today, the permanently operating domains of communication and of the production and circulation of information penetrate everywhere. A temporal alignment of the individual with the functioning of markets, two centuries in developing, has made irrelevant distinctions between work and non-work time, between public and private, between everyday life and organized institutional milieus. Under these conditions, the relentless financialization of previously autonomous spheres of social activity continues unchecked. (74)
“The Soul Is Not a Smithy”, when considered as a part of the wider Wallace oeuvre, thus provides a crucial genealogical link between the rise of postindustrial capitalism under the disciplinary regime and the transition to the diffuse mechanisms of control. The existential-hysterical position of the subject under discipline—the conviction, as Zućančić puts it, that “an injustice is being done to the subject” (164), combined with the transcorporeal atomisation of the master responsible for the injustice—is covered over by an immense profusion of stimulation and data. Boredom, daydream and other states in which the “ambient low-level” dissatisfaction “that is always there” (Wallace, PK 85) can rise to the surface of consciousness are avoided in the “depressive hedonia” (Fisher 21) of permanent distraction. Infinite Jest’s eponymous fatal “Entertainment” is the fulfilment of the escape trajectory that is traced through “Soul” and The Pale King, the obscene reductio ad absurdum of the hedonic exit from the social.

Monstrous Enjoyment

Mr. Johnson’s “SUSTAINED HIGH SOUND” gives audible form to the objectless “ambient” existential-hysterical anxiety described at the end of The Pale King’s Author’s Foreword. Elsewhere in Wallace’s writing, it takes on other forms. For Geoffrey Day in Infinite Jest, it is

a bit like a sail, or a small part of the wing of something far too large to be seen in totality. It was total psychic horror: death, decay, dissolution, cold empty black malevolent lonely voided space. (650)

Interestingly, this “shapeless” shape emerges only after Day’s violin practice resonates with the “odd high-pitched vibration” of a fan (649).

For Hal Incandenza, the anxiety first materialises in the night-terror vision of a “face in the floor there all the time but unfelt by all others and unseen by you until you knew just as you felt it didn’t belong and knew it was evil: Evil” (IJ 62).

For Wallace himself, the ocean is the limitless and threatening representative of death. He wishes to make his literature students studying Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat”

feel the same marrow-level dread of the oceanic I’ve always felt, the intuition of the sea as primordial nada, bottomless, depths inhabited
by cackling tooth-studded things rising toward you at the rate a feather falls. (SFT 262)

The ocean has a fascinating force; in the context of the luxury cruise of “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again”, its deadliness appears as an alternative to despair:

There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that’s unbearably sad. Like most unbearably sad things, it seems incredibly elusive and complex in its causes yet simple in its effect: on board the Nadir (especially at night, when all the ship’s structured fun and reassurances and gaiety ceased) I felt despair. The word “despair” is overused and banalized now, but it’s a serious word, and I’m using it seriously. It’s close to what people call dread or angst, but it’s not these things, quite. It’s more like wanting to die in order to escape the unbearable sadness of knowing I’m small and weak and selfish and going, without doubt, to die. It’s wanting to jump overboard. (SFT 261)

The narrator’s nightmares in “The Soul Is Not a Smithy” transpose oceanic expansiveness onto disciplinary order. His nightmares always opened with a wide angle view of a number of men at desks in rows in a large, brightly lit room or hall. The desks were arranged in precise rows and columns like the desks of an R. B. Hayes classroom, but these were all more like the large, grey steel desks that the teachers had at the front of the room, and there were many, many more of them, perhaps 100 or more, each occupied by a man in suit and tie. [...] The nightmare’s room was at least the size of a soccer or flag football field. (O:S 103)

I have collected these examples in order to bring out the common elements: in each, there is not just the traditional existential confrontation with meaninglessness, but a sense of disembodied, abstract malevolence. The Ding an sich of the horror is elusive, impossible; it remains in the Real. Each description is a contingent stand-in for It, a force able to be suggested but never adequately represented. I do not wish to suggest that It can be completely accounted for as an abstract representation of any particular social or political formation—clearly that would be reductive. But in the sense of the malicious enjoyment that It derives in each case—the “flapping” and “billowing” of the shapeless shape (IJ 650), the face in the
floor’s “horrid toothy smile leering right at your light” (IJ 62) the “cackling” of the sharks, the “blankly avid [...] mindless energy” (PK 253) of the office workers—it is obvious that Nothingness is not the object of the horror. “It” is an agency that enjoys at the subject’s expense.

CONCLUSION: THE OTHER SIDE OF REALISM

According to Marshall Boswell,

[As might be said of Madame Bovary, Oblivion can at times be critiqued as a beautifully stylised depiction of bourgeois boredom that is itself deadly dull. [...] The stories are not, as in Flaubert, mere “tableau”; they are a cascade of data and concrete detail that the reader must sift and sort. Although this task hardly alleviates the arduous work of reading the book itself—if anything, it increases the tedium—it does succeed in forcing the reader to experience what is being depicted. In this way, then, Wallace collapses Lukács [sic] dichotomy between the narrative impulse in the epic, in which readers “experience” the events, and the descriptive mode of [...] capitalist art such as Zola’s and Flaubert’s, with the difference that in Wallace’s art of the information age, the reader experiences what is being described. (“Constant” 165)]

The “information age”, the age of control, heralds the immuring of human perceptual capacity in excess stimulation beyond any historically respected limit. Wallace’s fiction replicates this at verbal and formal levels. The reader, like the IRS wigglers of The Pale King, turns “data processor” (PK 340). But while the rote examiners “separate the valuable, pertinent information from the pointless information” (340), there is no such clear division for the reader. The banal and boring are not merely the entropic waste of Wallace’s fictional project; they represent and embody the means by which the university discourse can naturalise ongoing increases in exploitation and disavow natural limits. Barthes’s analysis of description in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet evokes this paradigmatic difference perfectly:

Here I enjoy [Je goûte] an excess of precision, a kind of maniacal exactitude of language, a descriptive madness [...]. The exactitude in question is not the result of taking greater pains, it is not a rhetorical increment in value, as though things were increasingly well...
described—but of a change of code: the (remote) model of the
description is no longer oratorical discourse (nothing at all is being
“painted”), but a kind of lexicographical artifact. (26–7)

Precision of description in Wallace is not to be savoured, for one is stuffed
with it—one enjoys. This does not mean that the participatory learning-play
of reading his fiction reduces to a verbal simulation of the inundation to
which one is now daily exposed. The hysterical symptom breaks through the
stream of lexicographical artifacts and exposes its obscene enjoyment. It
reasserts truth not in circulation\(^5\), but articulated in the form of the
message\(^5\). Wallace’s excessiveness is not the admixture of entropic chaff, it
is a “[call] to account” (\(PK\) 233) for meaningful truth—as The Pale King’s
David Wallace asserts:

> What renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile, & c. is its relevance,
which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to
context, questions of value, and overall point—otherwise we might
as well all just be computers downloading raw data to one another.
(259)

Discernment is non-algorithmic, uncertain, provisional. And so must be
realism.

Consider the three developmental stages of the palæolithic savant child
of “Another Pioneer”. In the first, the child can answer any question put to
it, but will only answer the question as posed. In the second stage, the child
“understands his answers as part of a much larger network or system of
questions and answers and further questions instead of being merely
discrete self-contained units of information” (\(O:S\) 131) and answers
discursively, even beginning to include in his reply “frankly disturbing” (\(O:S\)
132) questions of his own. In the final stage

he begins to act increasingly irritable and captious with the villagers’
questions and now begins responding not with a sincere answer or a
further question or even a digressive chautauqua but now with what
often seems a rebuke or complaint, appearing almost to berate
them, […] asking rhetorically what the point of all this is, why must
he be consigned to life on a wickerwork platform if all he’s going to
be asked are […] dull, small, banal, quotidian, irrelevant questions
[…], asking what makes them think he can help them when they
haven’t the slightest idea what they even really need. (\(O:S\) 135)
The first two of these stages correspond respectively to Lukács’s categories of description and narration. If description is fundamentally a process of indifferent verisimilar cataloguing, its product is not understanding, but raw data. Narration’s selective principle and commitment to “concrete potentiality” produces an “objective” understanding of a character and her social life in their mutual determination and interrelation—but in doing so it posits itself (now illegitimately) as independent or outside of the reality it describes.

The third stage is hysterical realism. It is a realism that represents itself as incomplete—it is not a dispensary of prefabricated knowledge about the world. It is captious and often unpleasant, but it is so because there is no longer an external position from which one can make the contradictions of society sensible. Only in the immense work of critically inhabiting every discourse and articulating them in their nets of relations, jouissance and power structures can fiction sustain its “capacity to depict the dynamics of life, and thus its representation of capitalist reality” (Lukács, “Narrate” 147). It is realism turned inside out: the “other side” of realism—the legitimate 21st century heir to the Lukácsian tradition. It is a realism that can contend with the concrete and the abstract, the economic and the pathological. For this insight, we can only thank James Wood.
Notes

1 These properties are also collected by Mark McGurl’s more recent and value-neutral term “Technomodernism” (68).
2 Consider, for example, Wood’s description of Don DeLillo’s Underworld, one of the five named offenders in his White Teeth review, as having a “flawless carpet of fine prose on page after page” (Self 169)
3 The journal n+1’s first issue, also published in 2004, took up this question. What are these “designated haters”—specifically New Republic critics, including Wood and Peck—actually doing with their iterated literary take-downs?

The n+1 editors wryly support the popular consensus that Wood is a “talent”, noting his “narrow, aesthetcian’s interests and idiosyncratic tastes”, his desire “to be his own grandfather” (Gessen, et al. 5), carrying on the New York Intellectual tradition. They suggest that the only way Wood was able to make his antique charm seem other than “essentially parodic” was to remain in offence. Still, Wood “alone brought dignity” to the hatchet job; a “courtly eviscerator”, he stood above his peers in erudition and grace. But this approach ossified and became ubiquitous: “indiscriminately” negative, his reviews—along with those of his fellow New Republic critics—retreated behind the publication’s reputation and authority, which became substitutes for actual consideration of the works being reviewed. “Roman delight” gave way to “repetitive stress injury”. n+1 posit Dale Peck as the reductio ad absurdum of the New Republic’s hit-pieces:

the New Republic's supposed brief for dry, austere, high-literary value—manifesting itself for years in a baffled rage against everything new or confusing—led to Peck's auto-therapeutic wetness [... and hatred of classic modernism. (Gessen, et al. 6)

To the extent that n+1 cast Wood-in-attack-mode as occupying merely a higher position on the New Republic’s decline, descending towards the minimum defined by Peck, we might expect hysterical realism and recherché postmodernism to name better and worse formulations of the same kind of complaint. It is striking, when considered in this way, just how much this really is the case; and furthermore, how Peck’s obvious—in some cases admitted—failures make the more subtle flaws in Wood’s approach more apparent.

Peck’s unwillingness to intellectually engage in a detailed and thoroughgoing way with recherché postmodernism—which comprises, to put it crudely but not inaccurately, almost all books influenced by or in any way resembling Ulysses—
maps quite closely to Wood’s rigorous distaste for conceptually-driven plot. Wood seems in this regard to echo Georg Lukács, for whom “concrete potentiality”—the “dialectic between the individual’s subjectivity and objective reality” (Realism 24)—is the indispensable criteria by which narration is to be judged. Lukács’s insistence on concrete potentiality is ultimately political; Wood’s seems primarily a sternly held aesthetic preference. He does, however, make it clear that his objection is to be registered “not at the level of verisimilitude, but at the level of morality” (Self 168). Wood’s obvious and admirable reverence for the transcendent power of literature perhaps overruns him here. His proposition seems to entail that fictional characters have a kind of real moral standing with respect to their authors, and that this is violated when they are entangled in networks and plots outside the realm of their concrete potentialities. Peck’s explicit moral outrage and Wood’s moral indignation both trigger the same kind of intellectual withdrawal into more or less automatic hostility.

1 “My hatred of all this teenaged posing has reached such a fever pitch that I’m willing to be clownish in my denunciation of it—to spew obscenities in ostensibly literary contexts or pose with an ax on the cover of this book. The plain truth is that I am less and less capable of intellectual engagement with contemporary fiction because I feel like I’ve been had when I do so: the very process of literary analysis legitimises a body of work that I feel is simply unworthy of such attention” (Peck 222).

2 This covers a very large variety of texts and authors, certainly, but Peck emphasises several of the same authors as Wood: DeLillo, Pynchon, Wallace (Peck 222–3).

4 This distinction is not an exclusive binary, however. In Wood’s own example, “the human” passes through Dickens’s Mr Micawber, who, although he is essentially a caricature, “a simple, univocal essence”, is filled out momentarily in a “very passionate and simple sentence” (174).

5 And thus ought to be disciplinarily denied it.

6 All cited as examples of virtue by Wood.

7 Murphet uses the metaphor of Stephen Dedalus’s mole in Ulysses much as Erich Auerbach uses Odysseus’s scar in Mimesis: it is the point de capiton of the character’s identity. Odysseus’s scar is the signature and guarantee of his self-identity through time and physical change. Stephen’s mole, though composed of matter that is entirely replaced over time, it retains its identity: it catachrestically functions as the multiple’s quilting point: an entelechy situated in the flux, unmoved by it, even as the multiple
moves through it. Now not memory, but a “mole” is the figural guarantor of a persistence of character through a limitless multiplicity of becoming. (Murphet 258)

This is how Wood conceives of the human: the flux of history and language can move through it, but it retains its essence and is continually reincarnated in its romantic integrity.

8 Peck considers this a methodology of sorts, presumably on the assumption that panning “bad” literature will dialectically lead to the production and consumption of “good” literature: “[m]y feeling here is that the last thing readers need is a writer telling them what to read” (Peck 220). For Wood, there is an extensive list of proper nouns around which literary virtue radiates: Chekov, Flaubert, Tolstoy, etc.

9 I here take Lacanian psychoanalysis as the more developed form of its Freudian predecessor. Clearly this is not the venue to measure the relative merits of different psychoanalytic schools; nor would such a contest yield any useful results. I will therefore let Lacan’s theoretical insights stand undefended, and venture my own claims developed from them in understanding that—at least in part—the success or failure of my argument will depend on the reader’s sympathy or hostility to the Lacanian school of psychoanalysis.

10 That is, characters depicted in dialectical relation to their “concrete potentialities”, whose desires appear in relation to personal truth, tempered but not determined by social and environmental context.

11 Lukács’s critical realism was premised upon a progression towards socialism and the existence of a critical position outside of capitalism. Wood maintains a commitment to a fundamentally Lukácsian realism in the context of the total symbolic capture of “capitalist realism”.

12 “[W]hen the hysterical presents her riddled body to the physician, even though mute, she poses her question” (Wajeman 78).

13 Consciousness that arises out of and is mediated by necessarily incomplete signification. Wood’s slur, however, invokes the specifically bourgeois form of hysteria that gave rise to psychoanalysis. The hysteria of 21st century hysterical realism is, in my reading, specific to present political and cultural conditions, but it shares the same overall structure, summarized in Lacan’s mathemes below.

14 In Aristotle’s view, “rational animal” is the proper form of the human. This, according to Aristotelian ethics, makes rationality a virtue, irrationality a vice.

15 I borrow this formulation from the subtitle to Bruce Fink’s *The Lacanian Subject*. 
16 Slavoj Žižek identifies a paradigmatic example of the hysteric’s discourse’s double edge in Jenny Holzer’s *Protect Me From What I Want* text works: Holzer’s famous truism “Protect me from what I want” expresses very precisely the fundamental ambiguity involved in the fact that desire is always the desire of the Other. It can either be read as an ironic reference to the standard male chauvinist wisdom that a woman left to herself gets caught up in self-destructive fury—she needs to be protected from herself by benevolent male domination: “Protect me from the excessive self-destructive desire in me that I myself am not able to dominate”; or in a more radical way, as indicating the fact that in today’s patriarchal society, woman’s desire is radically alienated: she desires what men expect her to desire, desires to be desired by men. In this case, “Protect me from what I want” means: “Precisely when I seem to express my authentic innermost longing, “what I want” has already been imposed on me by the patriarchal socio-symbolic order that tells me what to desire, so the first condition of my liberation is that I break up the vicious cycle of my alienated desire and learn to formulate my desire in an autonomous way”. (Ticklish Subject 311n64)

17 I am unable to give a detailed general introduction to the four discourses, because this would entail first providing a summary of Lacanian psychoanalysis in general—a task better suited to 60 000 words than 600. Bruce Fink’s *The Lacanian Subject* and *Lacan to the Letter*, in combination with Lacan’s “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” and “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” from the *Écrits*, and *Seminar XVII* provide adequate theoretical background to cover all of the psychoanalytic content of this thesis.

18 See (Clemens and Grigg 3) and (Lacan, Seminar XVII 9–31).

19 Persuasion is almost a sufficient condition for Wood’s realism as well—but this is possible only because the contours of credibility are for Wood quite closely aligned with mimesis of the “real” (“Reply” 134). From a dialectical view of realism, this can be read as a *petitio principii*.

20 I am refraining from making too many claims regarding how this reality-for-the-subject relates to objects in themselves. However, I want to point out that while my discussion is limited to what might reasonably be called a kind of discourse-idealism (the generation of reality through language), it assumes metaphysical
realism. The generation of phenomenal reality relies on material things in
themselves, but things in themselves do not reciprocally require integration into
this reality in order to persist as things.
21 Aesthetic practice in general—visual art, literature, cinema, music, performing
arts etc.
22 A contentious claim, no doubt, but adequately substantiated in the following
chapters, I hope.
23 Wood makes a fleeting but implicitly approving reference to Lukácsian realism in
_How Fiction Works_ (1958). It is unclear whether or not Lukács is a direct influence
on Wood.
24 “Narrate or Describe” (1936) presents Lukács’s most sustained discussion of the
formal and moral distinction between narration—the selective linking of a
character’s concrete potentialities and social context to the presentation of events
and details—and mere description—the proliferation of details with indifferent or
indiscriminate connection to the life-worlds and concrete contexts of the characters
(128–30).

> in [...] Wallace [...], we get, as it were, “the whole of boredom”—the
author’s corrupted language just mimics an actually existing
corrupted language we all know too well, and are in fact quite
desperate to escape. (34)
26 Whether this is approached under the name “realism”, “postmodernism”, etc. is
of little consequence.
27 Though in many important respects it does partake of these qualities.
28 I mean this in the strict sense of the hysteric being, as it were, methodologically
restricted. I do not mean it to imply political impotence.
29 My emphasis in this thesis is on Wallace’s last two works of fiction: _Oblivion_ and
_The Pale King_. These works concentrate, historically contextualise and bring into
clearer focus the central preoccupations of his entire career. Because all of
Wallace’s work—irrespective of generic differences—overlaps and returns to
certain figures, metaphors and ideas, a specific reading should always relate back to
the œuvre as a whole. The centrality of these later works is thus synecdochic:
explicitly or implicitly, my readings of them reflect also on the earlier works.
30 Consider also James Incandenza’s background as the “A.E.C.-optics man”
(Wallace, _If_ 82), his genius in baroquely complex optical systems leading eventually
to his prototyping and production of the fatally enthralling _Infinite Jest (V)_
cartridge. What is alluded to as the film’s “radical experiments in viewer’s optical perspective and context” (993) in the academicese-inflected Filmography endnote (n24, 985–993) is a thoroughgoing infantalisation of the viewer: “the weird wobble-lensed maternal ‘I’m-so-terribly-sorry’ monologue-scene of the last thing he’d done” (999). The scene is so satisfying that it obliterates its viewers’ desire to do anything but watch it, eventually killing them. Such is the power of aesthetic mediation, the technical and formal elements of aesthetic production: the content of *Infinite Jest* alone is not lethal, it is only when the viewer can see it from the correct perspective that it becomes so potent.

31 In the introduction to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), the book from which the sixth story of *Oblivion* appropriates its title, Richard Rorty argues that

the common message of Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Heidegger is a historicist one. Each of the three reminds us that investigations of the foundations of knowledge or morality or language or society may be simply apologetics, attempts to eternalize a certain contemporary language-game, social practice, or self-image. (Rorty 9–10)

“Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature”, the David Foster Wallace story, begins in medias res—not in explicit action or dialogue, but in the midst of a first-person monologue: “Then just as I was being released in late 1996 Mother won a small product liability settlement and used the money to promptly go get cosmetic surgery on the crow’s feet around her eyes” (*O:S* 182). Half of the eight stories in *Oblivion* begin in this way, syntactically referring to inexistient prior context. This is a Heideggerian thrown-ness into the story: the reader is subjected to an apparently illegitimate grammatical momentum and givenness. Where Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939), for example, bears the incompleteness of its beginning typographically—“riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s” (Joyce 3)—, “Mister Squishy”, “The Soul Is Not a Smithy”, “Another Pioneer” and “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” do not formally disclose anything about their respective openings’ absent referents. Indeed, the second sentence of “Another Pioneer” operates within the fictional frame as part of the (ostensibly) ongoing monologue, while metatextually emphasising that the text has in fact only just begun, and that the significance of the first sentence’s complex involutions may be indeterminate: “[c]ertain key contextual details remained obscure” (*O:S* 117). As J. Hillis Miller notes in *On Literature*, art as such (and literature in particular) depends upon the “extraordinary power of words to go on signifying in the total absence of any phenomenal referent” (16). Here, the ability of words to go on signifying in the
total absence of any syntactical referent indicates the purely formal ability of grammar to generate virtual chronology, to entail a fictional world in time with a single operator like “then” or “nevertheless”. Wallace’s work constantly redeployed this ability, shifting chronological positions without notice.

“Philosophy”’s second sentence cannot but reinforce the importance of the Saussurian split in the sign: “[h]owever the cosmetic surgeon botched it and did something to the musculature of her face which caused her to look insanely frightened at all times” (O:S 182). The signifier’s arbitrariness, its materiality, are literally embodied. Mother’s face, the “chronic mask of insane terror” (O:S 182), inscribes Derridean différance, or Lacanian “significance” into the direct physical description of the fictional world. At its most basic level, the permanent apparent terror on Mother’s face exemplifies the signifier’s power to misdirect, and the virtual domain that this basic trait of signification makes possible. The failure of the terrified expression to correspond to real fright does not prevent it from setting in motion the effects of real fright:

on select occasions such a specimen will, if predisposed by environmental conditioning or instinctive temperament, appear to assume that the stimulus causing her expression is me. That with my size and distinctive mark that I have kidnapped this horror-stricken middle-aged female or behaved in a somehow threatening manner toward her saying, Ma’am is there some problem or, Why don’t you just leave the lady alone. (O:S 18

There is thus a performative realism to the empty signifier of fear: what Slavoj Žižek has called the “actuality of the virtual” (Plague 193). While the signifier itself has no meaning, is mere contingently distorted flesh, the reactions it causes in other bus passengers are precisely the same as what they would be if Mother were in fact insanely frightened. This conjuncture of actual effectivity and meaninglessness is also borne out at the level of discourse.

The narrating voice of “Philosophy...” is characterised by two primary features:

1. A schizoid lack of contextual continuity; a tendency to switch without warning between times and subjects in consecutive sentences that grammatically ought to refer to the same topic. The entire eight-page story is a single paragraph.
2. The use of a scientific, specifically biological style and jargon intermingled with a conversational tone. Italics are used for emphasis, for quotations, and to indicate technical jargon. The use of technical idioms is extremely common throughout all of Wallace’s fiction and journalism. Idiom—in direct speech, indirect discourse and stream-of-consciousness—is the primary index of his characters, always indicating far more about their subjective position than whatever concrete action they take, which in the instance of “Philosophy” is merely the narrator accompanying his mother on a bus ride. The core of Wallace’s hysterical realism is the hystericalisation of discourse. Wallace’s hystericalisation of discourse, as I define it, involves applying a particular torsion to official, bureaucratic, academic, scientific or technical speech, allowing the repressed, systematically excluded and disavowed elements of these discourses to rise to the surface. Hystericalisation is always also a historicisation—supposedly “neutral”, “factual”, “essential”, “eternal” or “fundamental” knowledge claims, descriptions and representations are shown to in fact be contingent and historically conditioned. By presenting hegemonic discourses in their lack, their insufficiency, as systematically excluding something—what both Lacan and Georg Lukács both call “caput mortuum” (Lukács, “Narrate” 113; Lacan, Écrits 38)—, hystericalisation functions as an immanent critique. Rather than keeping an ironic distance from its content, hysterical realism comes too close, shows too much.

“Philosophy” indifferently turns biological discourse onto the law, cinema, and the habits of bus riders. Its discomfiting, claustrophobic conjuncture of intimacy and objectivity recalls a classic prototype of hysterical realism, Charlotte Perkins Gilbert’s classic “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1899). In Gilbert’s story, the “rational” narrating voice descends into deeper and deeper disturbance under the mandatory indolence of the “rest cure”. The narrator of “Philosophy”, like Gilbert’s narrator, mediates his discourse through a legitimating filter. In “Wallpaper”, the legitimating discourse is that which acquiesces to the demands of her husband and physician: “rational acceptance” of patriarchal authority and knowledge (the master signifier, S1). “Philosophy” invokes biological description and factual knowledge (S2). In both stories, the legitimating discourses are heavily hystericalised: the configurations of power and interest behind the supposedly factual and neutral insist; their disavowals become obvious and obscene.

“Philosophy”, referring in its first sentence to “Mother” and “being released” (O:S 182), establishes a somewhat disturbing, intertextually inflected narrating voice from its outset. Reading the second sentence, quoted above, and the
“[n]o doubt you know the way an individual’s face can look in the spit second before they start to scream” (182)—it is difficult not to begin to form aesthetic associations to three iconic images from Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960): the horrified face of Marion Crane as she turns around in the shower, the rictus of Mrs Bates’s ill-preserved corpse, revealed to Lila Crane in the basement, and the reverse shot of Lila’s reaction.

The diction of the sentences quoted above seems to quite unambiguously allude to the *Psycho* intertext, but the link is almost immediately made explicit: “[i]t turns out that it only takes a minuscule slip of the knife one way or the other in this procedure and now you look like someone in the shower scene of Hitchcock” (*O:S* 182). At the level of discourse, we must consider the importance of turning the allusion into a (nearly) direct reference.

Without directly referencing Hitchcock’s most famous scene, the story would appear, at the level of authorship, to be consciously and quite obviously alluding to it. Including the reference, however, converts what might be considered
an unconscious or *accidental* identification with Norman Bates on the narrator’s part to unambiguous avowal of just that identification. From this point onwards, the narrator’s discourse and identifications will be hybrid, all tarred by this more-or-less conscious and deliberate self-identification with one of Hollywood’s most disturbing characters. Another classic Hollywood reference, even more direct, follows on the same page: “she looked more like Elsa Lanchester when Elsa Lanchester first laid eyes on her prospective mate in the 1935 classic of the studio system *Bride of Frankenstein*”.

These allusions and references to cinematic images of terrified (and about-to-die/dead/undead) women, all variations of the same basic image, the same signifier, reiterate the problem of context and meaning: each image represents a very different configuration of threat and fear—but in each we have the same gestalt: “gaping mouth and mandibular distention and protruding tendons and so forth” (*O:S* 182). Here Rorty’s critique of “the Sellarsian notion that the inside of people and quasi-people is to be explained by what goes on outside” (191) is rehearsed in images.

The story’s title has a peculiar resonance with *Bride of Frankenstein*. The later Wittgenstein, to whom Rorty refers extensively in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, writes at length about the “language-game” of “ostensive teaching of words” (4). *The Bride of Frankenstein* shows the Monster being taught how to speak by a blind hermit whose cabin he is attracted to by the sound of violin. The Monster appears at his most “human” in this sequence, instantly subdued by the music, and clearly touched by the kindness and patience of his first “friend”. The hermit points at objects—“bread”, “wine”, and pronounces their names, allowing the Monster to repeat after him, soon moving on to more abstract concepts: “friends, good” “alone, bad”. From this rudimentary education, the Monster proceeds almost instantaneously to complex—properly sexual—desire. After a chance meeting with the grave robbing Dr Pretorius, the Monster becomes, like Adam in *Paradise Lost*, obsessed with the idea of needing a “proper mate”. The Monster’s desires are
essentially pre-existing outside of language, needing only to be catalysed and attached to a signifier: “woman—friend—wife”. The Monster learned “friend” from the hermit, “woman” from Pretorius, but the last in this series seems to come from nowhere—as if the signifier comes naturally, in some sense directly articulating its signified. This, then, will bear on our interpretation of the Bride’s face when she “first lays eyes on her prospective mate”. Her look is one of repulsion and fear—but, given that she is effectively a “new-born” adult, can we really be sure, or even reasonably assume that what her face appears to signify corresponds to her actual feelings, or indeed that she has “human” feelings at all? The Monster quickly jumps to this conclusion: “She hate me. Like Others”.

For Lacan, the body becomes written over with signifiers as one becomes a subject (Fink 24–5). In the Bride of Frankenstein, the body’s signifiers are immediately effective, as if the life-force with which Frankenstein and Pretorius meddle carries with it a set of personal, complex desires and means for their somatic articulation: the body does not signify accidentally. Independent of the social, the human body—even the composite, monstrous not-quite-human body—inherently carries the properties of the Woodsian “human”.

The dimension of accidental signification in “Philosophy” is accounted for by biological discourse. Accounted for, because it is acknowledged and faithfully recorded, but in a way that domesticates and distances at the same time. This is the scientific (as opposed to scientific) discourse at its core: it attempts to cover over the Real in its entirety, to capture everything in a fully articulated, systematised and symbolically complete battery that encompasses everything without discrimination; it seeks all qua all, and divides itself into specialisations whose functions overlap minimally so as to best capture all/everything. It confronts the primordial Real with a view to abolishing it once and for all, and sets about doing so systematically. But this system is premised on an assumption that nothing can escape its conceptual and methodological grasp, and it thus denies the existence of the second-order caput mortuum Real. It is also not invulnerable to error: like the computer system ID conflation between the IRS’s two David Wallaces, “Philosophy”’s narrator conflates two Hollywood Golden Age Leighs, substituting “Vivian” for Janet (188). Its discourse is that of merely contingent incompleteness, blind to the omissions that its premises entail. The biological discourse of “Philosophy” bears this blindness very close to its surface. It is a discourse that knows many things, but nonetheless has incompetent command over meaning. Hysterical realism requires,
but also facilitates, the reader’s discrimination between false appearance and loose facts on one hand (the master’s) and truth on the other.

32 (Wallace, PK 67)

33 Thierry de Duve observes that Fountain’s “import seems indeed to have reduced the work of art to being the very symbol of [the] symbolic value that the word ‘art’ confers on the objects of an exchange, whether linguistic, economic, ritual, or sumptuary” (12). Like the hysterical symptom, art is always one step ahead of any definition; “an autonomous business that is its own foundation, names itself, and finds its justification in itself” (de Duve 12).

34 I use “post-ideological” in Žižek’s sense: when I believe myself to outside of ideology, I am most thoroughly immured in it. It is a concept aptly illustrated by one of the footnotes of “Octet”. Evaluating the risks that “Octet” itself takes, it cites the possibility that the reader will take the cycle’s meta-commentary as “Carsoning” (after Johnny Carson), a tactic used to salvage a lame joke by assuming a self-consciously mortified expression that sort of meta-commented on the joke’s lameness and showed the audience he knew very well it was lame, a strategy which year after year and decade after decade often produced an even bigger and more delighted laugh from the audience than a good original joke would have…and the fact that Carson was deploying this Maneuver in LCD commercial entertainment as far back as the late 1960s shows that it’s not exactly a breathtakingly original device”. (Bl 135n17)

35 The dangers of which are be suggested by Wallace’s explicit statement that the death of the author concept is “arcane” and the implicit crucial importance of that very concept to “Octet”, The Pale King’s “Author’s Foreword”, etc. as discussed below.

36 As Wallace argues in “E Unibus Pluram”, metafiction was only able to emerge in the context of “television and the metastasis of self-conscious watching” (SFT 34). The re-capture of metatextuality qua self-conscious irony by television forecloses the slight political-ethical potential of watching-oneself-watching by redirecting this awareness towards ideological and commercial ends. A similar foreclosure of politics proper seems inevitable in Konstantinou’s model of belief as such: antagonism is excluded a priori.

37 This is the same stance that Milton takes in Paradise Lost (1674): if one were to read univocally, so to speak, without discrimination between different forms of
discourse, one might endorse Satan’s knotted rhetoric. But of course, discrimination is the point; the Satanic discourse in *Paradise Lost* is immediately attractive precisely because its purpose is seduction. Milton is in many ways a prototypical hysterical realist—subversively inhabiting the sophistical debates in Pandæmonium, courting the styles of his epic predecessors, deploying stock “types”, integrating rather silly numerical jokes (Death’s first appearance in Book 2 is on line 666)—all the while forcing the reader to carefully integrate the contradictory polyphony into a coherent reading.

38 That is, crudely: with really existing socialism no longer existing, the process of globalisation effectively complete, and the triumph of neoliberalism in the West not ultimately having been greatly threatened by the Global Financial Crisis, it has become extremely difficult to think the possibility of a non-capitalist future. Jameson’s “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (76) has only become more poignant with time. Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* and Jonathan Crary’s *24/7* provide astute analyses of how these general political conditions translate into unprecedented modes of exploitation and a diminution of care for basic human needs like rest, mental health, etc.

39 Mark Fisher’s analogy for this process of voracious but indifferent assimilation is apt:

\[
\text{capitalism [is] like the Thing in John Carpenter’s film of the same name: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact. (6)}
\]

40 Wallace’s two fiction works that came between *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* have standard disclaimers that are not alluded to within the text.

41 *Infinite Jest*’s disclaimer, ironically, did not prevent Wallace and Little, Brown and Company being sued by the real life Kate Gompert, but the case was ultimately ruled in Wallace’s favour (Max 161).

42 This may seem a little strong, but the overwhelming seriousness of the presentation combined with the normal anxiety of beginning at a new job and the feeling of being completely lost and confused is perhaps more terrifying in its ordinariness than more traditional objects of terror.

Consider also the dimension of existential terror related to “irrelevant complexity” (85) that *The Pale King* treats as a subspecies of boredom, and a means by which important political moves can be made, as it were, hidden in plain sight.

43 Adorno uses this phrase to describe boredom (141), but I suggest we ought to expand it to describe the broader malaise of “capitalist realism” and
“communicative capitalism”: digital twitch, inability to concentrate, decline of symbolic efficiency; the sense of a futureless, perpetual present.

44 It is hence the university discourse, not the master’s, that receives the greatest attention in this thesis.

45 The Pale King’s “Author’s Foreword” expresses this concept apropos complexity in an economic and political context: there is “more to it...as in vastly more, right here before us all, hidden by virtue of its size” (85).

46 The symbolism is not, however, 1 to 1; just like Freudian dream associations, equivalences and substitutions spill across multiple characters and motifs. For example, Mr. Simmons is also importantly related to the narrator’s father, but at certain turns in the narrative stands in for Mr. Johnson.

47 Zupančič expresses this impasse well:

There is certainly no shortage of unsatisfied people, also ready to show this nonsatisfaction in [...] various ways. But there is also a general feeling of utter impotence, not only as to the question of the effect of this demonstration of nonsatisfaction, but also as to the question of whom exactly to attack. Who, for instance, is globalism? (Zupančič 174)

48 We find vestiges of propagandic Marxian (as opposed to unconscious Žižekian) ideology in one of the narrator’s early fantasies involving “Batman’s then-archnemesis, the Red Commando” (O:S 72). The Red Commando seems to be Wallace’s invention, clearly representing Cold War anti-communist propaganda. The antiquation of this form of heavy-handed pop-cultural indoctrination is another marker of the shift from discipline to control.

49 While a different kind of display, and perhaps not conscious, these repetitions belong to the same category of surplus jouissance as the “spiteful” groans that, for the narrator of Dostoyevsky’s Notes From Underground (1864), “are an expression of the sufferer’s pleasure” (15).

50 That is, his journalistic persona.

51 This imagery seems to have been borrowed from King Vidor’s 1928 film The Crowd:
Lacan in *Seminar XVII* contradicts the distinction between fear and anxiety that posits the respective presence or absence of an object as the essential difference between the two. Anxiety’s object is a nameless something—“it”: it’s surplus jouissance, but it’s not nameable, even if it’s approximately nameable, translatable, in this way. This is why it has been translated by the term “surplus value”. This object without which anxiety is not can still be addressed in some other way (147).

The concept of waste takes on several distinct but thoroughly interrelated forms in Wallace’s writing.

Repressed environmental and human limits return in manifold gruesome forms in *Infinite Jest*. As Heather Houser points out, the affect of disgust is deployed “as a way to set our ethical bearing, as solder for social and environmental bonds” (139). The simultaneous repulsion and fascination inspired by Wallace’s detailed “medicalized” descriptions of abject, toxically distorted bodies and environments, she argues, functions to reconnect the reader in an immediate, embodied sense to their social and environmental context.

At a verbal/formal level, as Andrew Letzler notes in “Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction”, the tension between cruft’s overwhelming presence and apparent uselessness necessitates “high tolerance for boredom and the ability to be bored by totally useless data so that one may skip on to more vital information” (Letzler 312). But, as a reader, the “totally useless” has its use. Wallace’s cruft in its very entropic wastefulness indicates both the need to identify and screen out distraction and masks the appearance of some crucial, indispensable information as mere verbal waste.

For example, Claude Sylvanshine’s “Spontaneous Data Intrusion[s]” (Wallace, *PK* 415)—irruptions of complex, detailed, baroque information that generally holds no relevance to him, or has insufficient context to be integrated into any differential meaning. The information is a constant distraction and causes him to forget what he consciously tries to concentrate on.
The message form is not about getting to the point, nor avoiding details and complexity. While *The Pale King*’s “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle’s 98-page story of being “called to account” (154–252) delves into great detail in apparently minor aspects of his story, we should not take the diegetic David Wallace’s “editorial” comments on Fogle’s story as representative of the real Wallace’s aesthetic intent in including it. There is no isolable sentence that finally reveals the meaning or raison d’être of the story, and there is no obvious padding or “irrelevant” waste. The perceived “irrelevance” that gives Fogle his IRS nickname arises from Fogle’s hysterical inability to settle on a condensed version of the truth. Again, we see this in “Good Old Neon”:

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many of the most important impressions and thoughts in a person’s life are ones that flash through your head so fast that fast isn’t even the right word, they seem totally different from or outside of the regular sequential clock time we all live by, and they have so little relation to the sort of linear, one-word-after-another-word English we all communicate with each other with that it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out the contents of one split-second’s flash of thoughts and connections, etc.—and yet we all seem to go around trying to use English (or whatever language our native country happens to use, it goes without saying) to try to convey to other people what we’re thinking and to find out what they’re thinking, when in fact deep down everybody knows it’s a charade and they’re just going through the motions. What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant. (O:S 150–1)
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The impossibility of ever adequately representing the full truth is a part of the truth itself, but expressing this problem greatly complicates and bloats any kind of communication of the truth.

This informs what Paul Quinn calls Wallace’s “tornadic” (104) aesthetic method—an unmasterable flux of language that begins in a whirl of debris that gradually connects to the funnel cloud; the vortex finally becoming visible (102–3). One could never hope to adequately comprehend the tornado’s totality, but its outline, at once material and abstract, formed and unstable (103–4), is provisionally comprehensible. One of the inherent difficulties of Wallace criticism is avoiding reducing the message—the tornado’s dynamic outline—to its constituent pieces—
the chaos of displaced matter and voices. Few of Wallace’s sentences or paragraphs are isolably self-contained. It is in their relationship to the work as a whole—indeed his corpus as a whole; the symbolic order as a whole—that they must be considered. The Wallace critic thus contends with making quotations and summaries that are not only unusually lengthy but always taken out of context, and that always do violence to the aesthetic project as a whole.
Works Cited


The Crowd. Dir. King Vidor. Bach, 1928. DVD.
Elliot Yates


