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Theories, Interpretations, Contexts

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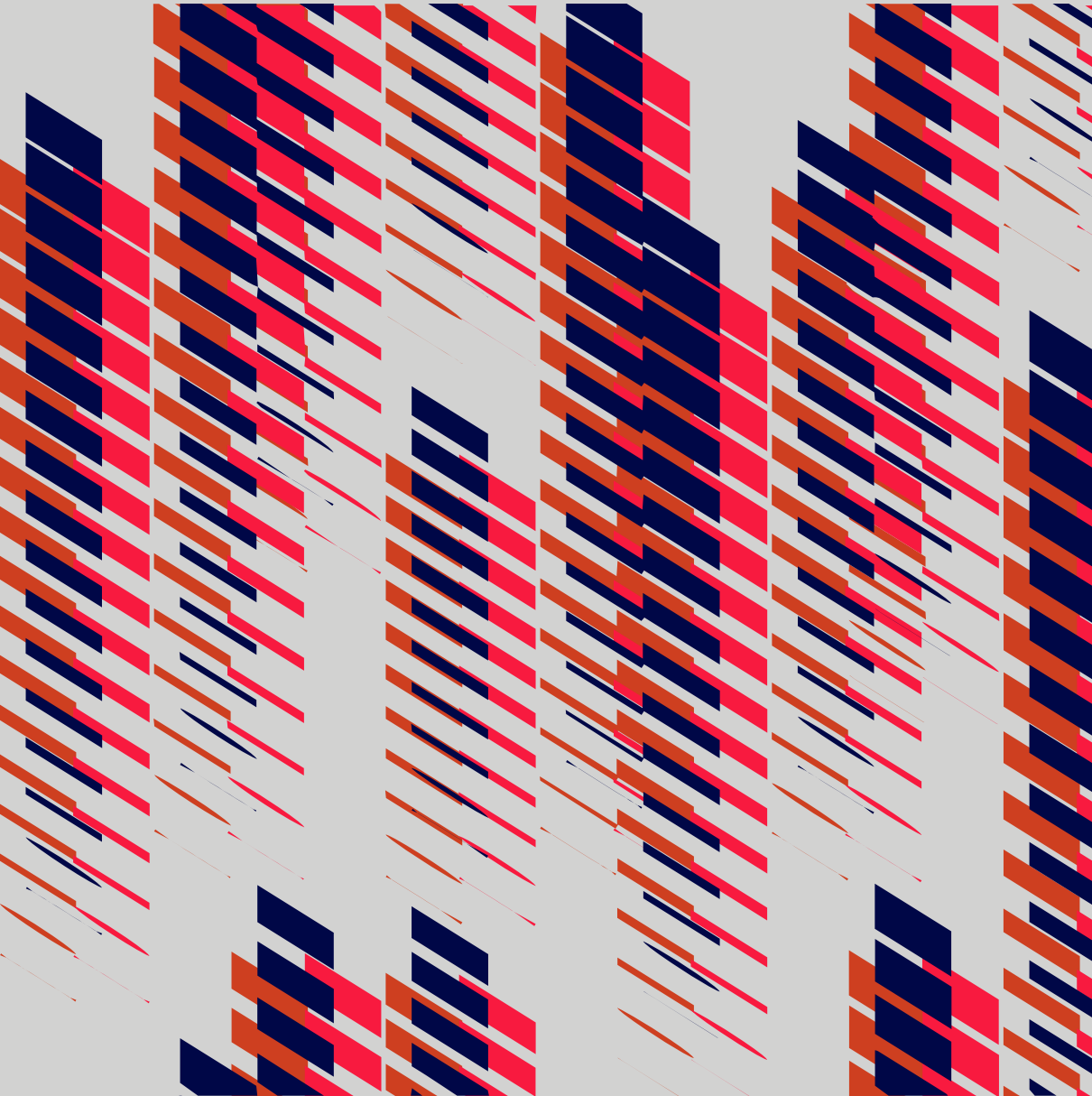

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Section 1
David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* Turns 25

edited by Allard Den Dulk and Pia Masiero

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English Literature
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Introduction

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Infinite Jest, David Foster Wallace's most famous book, published on February 1, 1996, turned 25 this year. This special issue celebrates the novel's silver anniversary with six fresh re-readings by prominent Wallace readers.

In the past twenty-five years, *Infinite Jest* has come to be regarded as a landmark attempt to move beyond the quicksands of postmodernist metafiction and irony, toward ways of mobilizing reflexivity, irony and other devices to new, *post*-postmodernist – that is, communicative and affirmative – ends. As such, Wallace's novel has become a main reference point beyond literary studies as well, in debates on what comes 'after postmodernism' (e.g. 'new sincerity', 'metamodernism' in film, visual art, or popular music), and can also be related to discussions about the need for new directions in Humanities scholarship (e.g. 'post-critique', 'surface reading').

As Mary Holland points out, *Infinite Jest* is both "a defining achievement and the beginning of a new literary project for Wallace", which "expresses in grand style the complex potential of its author and its period to reimagine the future of America, and of American letters" (2018, 127-8). *Infinite Jest* amplifies and deepens many themes that Wallace worked on in his earlier texts – addiction (both to drugs and entertainment), solipsism, narcissism, tennis, language and communication, to name the most obvious, placing them within a powerful tripartite institutional frame – the Enfield Tennis Academy, Ennet House halfway facility, in a country called O.N.A.N. (the Organization of North American Nations, in which the US has annexed Canada and Mexico) – that hammers home the pervasiveness of the poisons beleaguering present-day America. Formally speaking too, *Infinite Jest* magnifies (rather literally) the devices Wallace employed ever

since his debut novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) – disruption of linearity, elliptical structures, shifting focalizations, heavy footnoting, pervasive allusiveness, multivocality (in terms of registers and idiolects) –, but within a scaffolding that suggests that coherence can be brought about by the reader, with the help of a shifting, evanescent but recognizable narrator who remains audibly present within the 1,079 pages of main text and endnotes. As such, thematically and formally, *Infinite Jest* is also the basis for the rest of Wallace's fiction oeuvre – the story collections *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and *Oblivion* (2004), and the posthumous novel *The Pale King* (2011) – and the further development these works represent.

Whether these features of *Infinite Jest* point to postmodernism, post-postmodernism or, as some scholars (such as Timothy Jacobs and Andrew Hoberek) seem to suggest, to a pre-modernist – that is, realistic – framing, testifies to the book's richness and complexity, and provides one of the reasons why it bears and invites new readings. Tim Vermeulen's essay, which closes this special issue, is a further contribution to this intriguing debate. A further reason for *Infinite Jest*'s continuing appeal may well be that "the book's future is [contemporary readers'] present" (Boswell 2018, 30), or, even more radically, that it "increasingly becomes less a contemporary or futuristic American novel and more a historical one" (Holland 2018, 133). According to Jeffrey Severs, in his contribution to this special issue, *Infinite Jest* discerns the origins of the media forms through which American conservative politics has gone on to agitate and mobilize its base; while Mary Shapiro, in her article, remarks that Wallace's caricature of celebrity politics may even seem "gentle and benign in retrospect", compared to what the world has witnessed in the past years.

Be it because of its prescience, its revolving around the philosophical core of Marathe and Steeply's conversation concerning free will, choice, necessity and responsibility, or the sheer beauty of its linguistic pyrotechnics, or its ambiguous relationship with phases or movements in literary history, or the perpetual issue of the fate of its two main characters, Hal Incandenza and Don Gately, *Infinite Jest* is worth re-reading. With this special issue, we want to argue that *Infinite Jest* is "not an independent entity but a node in a network" (Burn 2012, 6). But whereas Stephen Burn uses this characterization to refer to the "different components of [Wallace's] novelistic toolkit" that allow him to "[throw] his genealogy into sharper relief" (13), we would like to borrow the phrase to evoke the complex relationship that reading creates, the unique communicative process that is shaped when a singular experiential background interacts with a given text – as such, the novel is a node in a network of (re)readings.

We are well aware of the controversies that have surrounded Wallace lately – such as his real-life mistreatment of women – in the wake of the MeToo movement. We are also well aware that these revela-

tions have caused debate among scholars, some of whom have voiced their uneasiness reading, teaching and researching Wallace. In a time in which many of us are trying to open up the canonical selection of our syllabi, to diversify our reading lists, getting away from the preoccupation with white male genius, there can be good reasons to focus on other authors than Wallace. But we also believe that Wallace's works hold significant meaningful potential for contemporary readers, and that the worlds they disclose are worth exploring, from different perspectives. As far as we are concerned, we would like to avoid the controversy to bar our engagement with the literary text. In much the same way that disentangling the reading of Wallace's works from the so-called "essay-interview nexus" (Kelly 2010) – that is, the essay "E Unibus Pluram" and interview with Larry McCaffery largely determining the outlines of Wallace interpretation – has meant that wider disciplinary, thematic and transnational views have opened up Wallace's literary project to much more nuance and intricacies, we think it is preferable to move past any deterministic way of making sense of Wallace's story worlds, narratives, and characters.

The six pieces gathered here are as many examples of the different ways in which each reader co-determines the meaning that *Infinite Jest* may have for audiences twenty-five years since its publication. A book happens differently in every single reader because it is a communicative endeavor that mobilizes the network of experiential repertoires belonging to distinctive individualities. Reading intersects our deictic field, what/where/when we are, and responds to the different readerly expectations/assumptions/questions that we each bring into play. We may see in these differently shaped co-determinations a confirmation of Wolfgang Iser's insight that texts are actualized by readers, or an instantiation of what Ed Finn calls "the social lives of books" (2012, 151).

Thus, the most obvious feature of the essays that follow is heterogeneity – attesting to both the richness of Wallace's novel and the individual networks activated by reading. However, it is possible to detect in these different conversations with *Infinite Jest* a common denominator that we find important and insightful to remark on. That is, we recognize in the contributions to this issue an overall return to close reading. Some scholars have discerned specific periods in Wallace studies, such as the early reception of *Infinite Jest* as 'just another' postmodernist novel, followed by criticism centering on the above-mentioned "essay-interview nexus", and then a widening of hermeneutic contexts. While we do not want to speak of a new period (simply because it suggests a consecutiveness that does not do justice to different simultaneous developments), we do venture to say that this return to close reading may amount to a new accentuation; and we cannot but express our personal satisfaction in witnessing this renewed attention to the textual specificities of *Infinite Jest*.

The essays in this issue thus close-read Wallace's novel starting from different subjective stances, offering distinct ways of engaging with a text that is uncannily attuned to the disquieting textures of our present world and that confirms itself as a goldmine both at the linguistic and narratological level (see Shapiro and Ardovino/Masiero) and at the intertextual (see Den Dulk), philosophical and sociocultural levels (see Redgate, Severs, and Vermeulen). Most of all, in celebrating *Infinite Jest*'s 25th anniversary, this special issue demonstrates that the rich scholarly conversation Wallace's book has spawned is far from being exhausted.

Looked at macroscopically, this special issue draws a trajectory that goes from the particular to the general. Mary Shapiro's essay – "Hidden Gems: Unexpectedly Poetic Lines Easily Overlooked (?) in *Infinite Jest*'s Voluminous Flow" – analyzes several moments of the novel's "breathtaking poeticism" – "hidden gems", as she calls them. In offering highly detailed close readings of these lines, Shapiro does not just want to remind us of Wallace's oft-praised "extraordinary facility with language" and of the "playfulness" of his prose, but shows that these lines can be seen to connect, through their careful composition, to the larger themes of the novel. For example, Shapiro looks closely at the meter, phonology, indefinite identifiers, and agentive construction of the line – focalized through Hal Incandenza – "A Brockton man in a Land's End parka took a fall too burlesque to have been unstaged" (Wallace 1996, 949), as indicative of Hal's awakening awareness of choice and responsibility. Shapiro also brings out the easily overlooked "linguistic patterning" of a not-so-hidden gem, the novel's final line – "And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out" (981) – and contrasts it with a similar line halfway the novel, as bookending Don Gately's development, in order to suggest a hopeful reading of *Infinite Jest*'s conclusion. Overall, Shapiro's impressive analyses remind us of how syntactic and semantic patterning contribute to what makes Wallace's novel a great literary work: that the beauty and pleasure generated by language help us understand the world anew.

With Allard den Dulk's contribution – "'I Am in Here': A Comparative Reading of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*" – the zooming in is enriched in an intertextual direction. Den Dulk starts with Wallace's praise of Kafka's fiction for its "radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical" and compares Kafka's famous novella to the two opening sections of *Infinite Jest*. Gregor Samsa and Hal Incandenza are both imprisoned in a "verminous" state, incapable of speech and violently subdued, while Ken Erdedy exhibits a reflective self-deception similar to Gregor's. Den Dulk analyzes the structure, descriptions and themes of these three 'transformation' narratives, in order to ask:

what metaphor is literalized by Hal's situation in the opening scene? Most Wallace scholars have assumed the situation to be an exacerbation of the emptiness experienced by the younger Hal in other parts of the novel. But understanding it, like the metamorphosis conjured up by Kafka, as a literalized metaphor rooted in the specific cultural context invoked by the novel, allows Den Dulk to analyze the imagery at hand more precisely and – dare we say – more optimistically. Whereas Erdedy (as one of the novel's many addict-characters) represents a contemporary iteration of Kafka's original metaphor of insect-hood as alienation, Hal's metamorphosis can be seen to dramatize the values and risks of the development of selfhood *and* of writing literary fiction in a contemporary context: throughout *Infinite Jest*, and in other parts of Wallace's oeuvre, the desire to develop a self and to communicate with the other (selfhood and acknowledgment by/of the other being inextricably tied together) come with the risk of being deemed 'horrific' and the fear of isolation. As such, Den Dulk contends, it is ultimately up to the reader to decide whether Hal, and Wallace, are 'in there', communicating something meaningful, and thus whether *Infinite Jest* is indeed a novel of redemption.

In "*Infinite Jest*'s Voice(s) – Notes for an (Audible) Map", Adriano Ardovino and Pia Masiero too reflect on the reader's engagement with the text and look at meaningfulness as it might take place listening to the novel's voice. To do so, Ardovino and Masiero introduce the notion of 'vocal field' in order to understand the multilayered and dynamic workings of voice in Wallace's novel and try to get past the classical narratological concept of voice. Their proposal strives to bring out how *Infinite Jest* – which they take to be exemplary of but also more radical in this regard than "other masterpieces of contemporary literature" – is able to generate a "clear and recognizable voice" that at the same time is a "vocal paradox": it is present in and binds together all the novel's voices, but "without coalescing in a static whole"; the novel's voice is an "essence without essence", a presence that cannot be pinpointed or ascribed a consistent identity, what resonates in each reader while accepting to inhabit the novel's story world. Ardovino and Masiero do so by paying specific attention to Madame Psychosis/Joelle van Dyne, because she most clearly manifests the oscillatory qualities of the novel's narrative voice: the authors show how passages regularly switch between third and first-person, between omniscient and particularized, generating a "vocal confusion" that at the same time remains "fairly easy to navigate at the level of the single scene", as the reader is invited to abandon certainty regarding the "voice in charge of the telling", in favor of imagining "a shared existential positioning". Both Madame Psychosis's radio show and Joelle's veil can be seen as models or representations of the novel's voice: the show privileges an "evocative and evanescent rather than grounded rhetorical manner" and Joelle's veil "openly conceals" an individual character. Ardovino and Masiero

demonstrate that it is this permeability of voice, which readers need to "ventriloquize" in their acts of reading, that generates the particular "intimacy and understanding" that readers experience in *Infinite Jest*.

Jeffrey Severs's "Memories of the Limbaugh Administration: 1990s Politics, Conservative Media, and *Infinite Jest* as a Novel of Radio" also close-reads elements of voice, sound and silence in *Infinite Jest*, as well as in Wallace's essay "Host" (2005), about conservative US talk radio. Severs does so in order to nuance Wallace's supposed view of entertainment media, to show Wallace's awareness – already from the early 1990s onward – of "the media forms through which conservative politics reached (and, increasingly, inflamed) its audience", and to propose certain portrayals of radio in *Infinite Jest* as a representation of "Wallace's own ideals" for the "positive, generative, anti-irony effects" of fictional voice. Severs uses "Host" – an analysis of Rush Limbaugh-style conservative talk radio – to retrospectively understand *Infinite Jest*'s (fleeting) imagining of President Limbaugh (who precedes Johnny Gentle) as suggesting Limbaugh's influence to be an "origin point of the nation's political degradation". But Severs also shows that Wallace – "a heavy listener to all sorts of radio" – sees a commonality in the "special intimacy" of the voice of a long novel and of a long radio show, and – akin to the analysis of Ardovino and Masiero – that there's a "symbiosis" between *Infinite Jest* and Madame Psychosis's radio show portrayed therein, as "good" productions of voice, versus destructive media forms, such as the lethal film *Infinite Jest* and Limbaugh's rhetorical style. As such, Severs contends, Wallace's "thinking about art, sincerity, and sentiment" can be seen as "radio-inspired", and understanding radio as offering a potential "set of counter-possibilities", including silence, versus the "loquacious certainty and simplistic truths" of contemporary conservative politics.

Jamie Redgate shifts toward a more philosophical direction with his "The Triumph of the Will of Athletes in *Infinite Jest*". His first move is to go against a seeming "truism in Wallace studies", namely that *Infinite Jest* demonstrates the illusion of "autonomous selfhood" and of "agency" via "inner life"; instead Redgate argues that the novel's portrayal of the sport of tennis – often seen by scholars to confirm the futility of selfhood – invites us to revise this view. Redgate contends that scholars have approached the "problem of athletic genius" in Wallace as being either materialistic or mystical: those who excel at tennis are either "dumb jocks" or touched by "divine inspiration"; but – and we should extend this to all Wallace's characters, Redgate says – they are *both*, "both body and soul, both machine and ghost *at the same time*", and Wallace's treatment of "tennis helps us see it". Though Wallace at points associates addiction and tennis, they are ultimately different ways of dealing with the problem of the self. Redgate points out that the important part of Schtitt's philosophy at ETA does not focus on physicality alone, but on being a self in a body.

Whereas drugs are a way of escaping consciousness, tennis is ultimately about being "present", being "*in* there", "such that the dualistic split between the two" – between body and soul – "is dissolved". In an analysis akin to that of Den Dulk, Redgate shows that Hal Incandenza's initial problem, as well as that of many of the other young tennis players, is that he has been inundated by materialistic theories of the individual as only a body – and that the change in Hal perhaps lies in a realization that he needs to "revise his theory", and that his ending might in fact be a "happy beginning". In any case, Redgate takes *Infinite Jest* as Wallace's warning that the atheist disbelief of Hal's generation's may lead them to seek refuge in a "political ideology that ultimately threatens their individuality".

Timotheus Vermeulen's "Wallace After Postmodernism (Again): Metamodernism, Tone, Tennis" concludes this issue on the silver anniversary of *Infinite Jest* by placing the study of Wallace as a post-postmodern author (which tends to limit its discussions to an American and British context, and focus only on literature) in relation to a "more transnational view", and "alongside other media and cultural forms"; and, like Redgate, Vermeulen therein also pays specific attention to the figure of the tennis player. Vermeulen considers different post-postmodern strategies that may be discerned in Wallace's work as well as in "visual art, popular media and even politics", focusing specifically on what has been termed "post-irony"; and rather than mapping the commonalities, Vermeulen focuses on bringing out the nuanced differences. For example, he compares the post-ironic, "credulous metafiction" – the explication of artificial strategies to achieve human connection – in Wallace and in visual artists Ragnar Kjartansson's *God* and Guido van der Werve's *Nummer 8*, in order to conclude that whereas Wallace "looks in vain for convincing solutions to the problem of depoliticized or corporatized irony", Kjartansson and Van der Werve are "purposefully unpersuasive": their works "keep the faith", even though it may seem ridiculous to do so. What the works share is what Vermeulen calls the "metamodern structure of feeling": "a re-energised and dispersed modernist impulse held in check (for better or worse) by postmodern doubt". This leads Vermeulen to consider what he deems one of the "pivots" of this structure of feeling in Wallace's oeuvre, namely the recurring concern with the tennis player: the (mostly white) tennis player as the "baseline" from which other identities deviate, the "center of attention", but also the "black hole" into which individual and "cultural sensibilities disappear". Even though Vermeulen does not say it in so many words, with reference to Redgate we might propose that the tennis player as representing a "materialist understanding of the self" also embodies the incentive for a "performance of transcendence" toward the other, for the "intersubjective care, empathy" that Wallace's work strives to establish.

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Hidden Gems
Unexpectedly Poetic Lines Easily Overlooked (?) in *Infinite Jest*'s Voluminous Flow

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Abstract Although readers are more likely to dwell upon particularly funny, surprising, or disturbing moments in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, the novel contains many instances of breathtaking poeticism. A close reading of a few such lines, hidden gems that could easily be overlooked in the voluminous flow of the novel, demonstrates the array of linguistic variables that Wallace skilfully manipulated to create iconic reminders that moments of beauty and pleasure can be found in the most mundane, ridiculous, and/or depressing of contexts.

Keywords David Foster Wallace. Infinite Jest. Linguistic criticism. Stylistics. Poetic language.

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I read *Infinite Jest* when it first came out twenty-five years ago, and have read it several times since then, and it has never disappointed, though it has certainly taken on new layers of meaning as the world has changed around us. Wallace's caricature of a celebrity with no political experience being elected president proved prophetic with respect to the Trump presidency, but what seemed over-the-top and farcical at the time now seems gentle and benign in retrospect. Re-reading the novel mid-pandemic, I feel more nostalgia than I would ever have predicted for a seamy world full of drug addicts, terrorists, and overly competitive teenaged athletes, in which masks are mentioned frequently, but are never worn to prevent the spread of infection, a world in which characters frequently gather unmasked in large groups (in 12-step meetings, in the halfway house, in the locker room, in the stands of tennis matches), without fear of infection. One cannot help but wonder what Wallace would have made of the events we have witnessed in the last few years, including the packing of the US Supreme Court with right-wing ideologues, 'ordinary' citizens storming the capital building armed with zip ties, looking for legislators to torture and/or kill, State governors outlawing public health measures recommended by the CDC to slow the spread of infection, the Black Lives Matter protests, the #MeToo movement, and on and on. How could he have written something more outlandish, more nightmarish than these realities – and if he had found a way, could we bear to read it? In some respect, this makes *Infinite Jest* less scary and more comforting: we can think fondly "remember when *this* is what we were afraid of?"

Wallace would be amused, I imagine, to see us using this novel for escapism, but also gratified that we can find comfort in it. Beyond the plot, we can also find joy in the writing: each time I dip into the novel, I stumble across instances of great lines I had forgotten (or never consciously registered, being caught up in the flow), moments of breathtaking poeticism and linguistic cleverness. I share a few of these here, in case you also skimmed right by these the first time or two you read the novel. In subjecting these to very close reading, I hope to demonstrate again Wallace's extraordinary facility with language, but also that his deployment of this went beyond mere playfulness. In each case, when I have stopped to dwell on a newly discovered 'hidden gem', I have been able to see how it connects to the larger themes of the novel, and sometimes directly corresponds to other, more prominently placed lines, creating a complex interweaving of ideas that makes the novel become ever more satisfying the more deeply you dive into it.

Although readers are probably more likely to dwell upon particularly funny, unexpected, or disturbing moments in *Infinite Jest*, all of which are available in great abundance, I have demonstrated elsewhere (Shapiro 2019) that Wallace congruently manipulated varia-

bles on multiple levels of language (phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic) to create extraordinary phrases and sentences, and that these work not only to slow down the reader as Hayes-Brady (2016, 140) has argued, but to underline and bring readers' attention to important themes. There may have been many instances when Wallace was not conscious of all the linguistic variables that he was deploying, when he just liked the sound or weight of a phrase without consciously analyzing why it 'worked', though there are passages that cannot just be the product of a good ear for language. It is easy for such complex linguistic patterning to escape the notice of even a careful and trained reader. Letzler singles out the repeated entries in James O. Incandenza's filmography (endnote 24 of the novel, 985-93) that read merely "Untitled. Unfinished. UNRELEASED" as "cruft", i.e. "junk text, simultaneously too excessive and too vacuous to be worth anyone's attention" (2012, 308), adding that they "do not represent pointlessness – they are pointless" (314). However, I have shown previously that this refrain is artfully and strategically constructed and deployed, not just to create some cohesive linguistic patterning, but to allow for a fractal splintering of interpretations (Shapiro 2020).

Of course, different readers respond to different elements of the novel, and may remain unaware (on a conscious level, at least) of these displays of linguistic virtuosity, much the same way that a musically naïve listener might nonetheless appreciate a Beethoven symphony without being able to analyze its structure. But it is this level of linguistic sophistication and complexity that makes me return time and again to Wallace's work, despite my discomfort with aspects of his worldview (and indeed with the author's own life). I am frequently dismayed by the centering of white male experience, frequently grossed out by graphic descriptions, appalled by the author's real-life admitted stalking and abuse of Mary Karr, deeply saddened by his struggles with depression and eventual suicide, but when I allow myself to sink into Wallace's sentences, the sheer pleasure I get from the words and sounds outweighs my other emotional responses. Wallace's writing does what all great literature does: it allows us to find the right distance from the 'real' world in order to see it better, to consider how it could be different, to find solace in the reminder that we are capable of such acts of imagination; that our everyday taken-for-granted language can be reworked in such fresh and surprising ways offers hope that the humdrum and routine can at any moment become uplifting and transcendent.

Take, to start with, a passing observation by Hal Incandenza, out walking the streets alone and upset:

> A Brockton man in a Land's End parka took a fall too burlesque to have been unstaged. (949)

It is easy to skim over this line, as just a moment of slapstick comedic relief, just another detail in a chaotic kaleidoscopic description of activity on a busy public street – until you read it out loud, which I encourage you to do. First of all, you might notice the meter, which is satisfyingly singsong. It starts with a couple of strongly iambic feet (ă Bróck/ tŏn mán), loses any regular sense of rhythm for a moment (ĭn ă Lánd's/ Énd/ párk ă/), then comes roaring back with three anapests in a row (tŏŏk ă fall/ tŏŏ bŭr lésque/ tŏ hăve béen) and finishes up with another strong iamb (ŭn stáged). It *could* just be epiphenomenal, the English tendency to drift into iambic meter, broken up by some lexical choices that interrupt the natural flow. Except that when you think about it, does it not exactly mirror the action that is being described? Normal, basic guy (iambic) stumbles and flails (loss of rhythm), Hal thinks about it (sting of anapests) and comes to an important realization (final iamb).

Then you might notice quite a bit more phonological patterning, the alliteration and consonance of *Brockton*, *burlesque*, and *been*, the additional consonance (slightly camouflaged by the different spellings) of the non-initial /k/ sounds in *Brockton*, *parka*, *burlesque*, then the yet more pervasive consonance of the (again, non-initial) nasal /n/, which is patterned even more deliberately, with five tightly clustered in the initial subject noun phrase, then after ten /n/-less syllables, we get two more tightly clustered together in the final two words. There is a near rhyme of *man* and *land*. The visual repeat of *took*, *too*, *to* is likely mere coincidence, but maybe not, given that these come at the start of each anapestic foot. One can go too far down this road – it begins to feel like looking for alphanumeric codes in the Bible to solve *Da Vinci code*-type riddles. The English language only has so many sounds that some patterning is unavoidable. But then you think about how much Wallace loved to play with language, and you cannot help but wonder.

Going beyond phonology, all three articles in the sentence are indefinite (the unstressed *a* each time, no definite *the*, *this*, *that*, *his*). Wallace thus sketches a specific, concrete visualization, but simultaneously evokes an infinity of alternate realities: the man is "a Brockton man", but could have been any man (and really, how could Hal know where the man lives?); he is in "a Land's End parka", but he could have been wearing anything), and he took "a fall", though he could have taken anything, done anything. Why does it matter that he is from Brockton, and that his parka is from Land's End, if indeed Hal is correct in these identifications? What does it tell us that Hal would notice and/or infer these unspoken signals of identity? Does a reader who understands what Brockton and Land's End index in the social semiotics of the Boston area in the 1990s read this sentence differently than one for whom these are meaningless signifiers? My guess is no, because these are white middle-class default specifica-

tions for Wallace's imagined white middle-class default kind of readers. The guy is intended to be a basic guy – and if you do not know the basicness of Brockton and Land's End, you would still have to default to a basic interpretation. (In fact, Brockton has a much higher percentage of Black residents than Boston does, but as Hal always uncomfortably registers ethnic differences, we may infer that this particular man is white.) So why not just call him 'a man', full stop? Why not give him other 'default' descriptions (which, in Hal's view, might include, e.g. average height, a tense or worried expression, less than perfect posture, or a myriad of other potential descriptors)?

Likewise, Hal might have registered in his thoughts that the man *fell*, *fell down*, *fell over*, or *tripped* or *stumbled* or *came crashing down*, but instead he "took a fall", an agentive construction that underlines Hal's belief that it *could not* "have been unstaged". The implied double negative (as opposed to just saying that it was certainly 'staged') adds additional emphasis, cementing the certainty in Hal's mind that this man deliberately chose his actions. At the same time, 'taking a fall' evokes the more shameful meanings from boxing, when a fight is thrown for money, or in law enforcement, when a 'fall guy' is punished for a crime in the place of others.

Thus, this 'simple' sentence actually gets to the heart of some deep concerns, not just the question of seeing past theatrical artifice to reality, but also the issue of agency and assuming responsibility for one's actions. It focuses Hal, and by extension the reader, on how we all, constantly, are making the choice to act (or not to act), and whether we are willing to take the responsibility (or blame) associated with having made such choices. Perhaps the dude really just stumbled and flailed, even if a bit dramatically – but Hal sees intention there because he needs to, because this allows him to contemplate doing the same: he realizes just a few pages later that if he fakes a fall, he will not have to play in the upcoming tennis competition, or indeed ever again. He imagines a few different scenarios, in which he could

> fall so carefully badly, I'd take out all the ankle's ligaments and never play again. Never have to, never get to. I could be the faultless victim of a freak accident and be knocked from the game while still on the ascendant. Becoming the object of compassionate sorrow rather than disappointed sorrow. (954-5)

This chunk of text itself deserves some close reading, as Hal keep restating and reframing the idea, as if he cannot stop thinking about it. The fragments "never have to, never get to" echo the original formulation "never play again", but the contrast between the flip sides of the coin of obligation and opportunity is brought into stark relief by the absence of subject and object. It is exactly when Hal flips that coin that the perspective shifts, from Hal's point of view (taking de-

liberate action to free himself from the crushing pressure) to the assumed point of view of others (feeling sorry for him).

While sentences with multiple layers of linguistic patterning are a joy unto themselves, they take on even more significance when juxtaposed with other lines scattered elsewhere. We take Hal's threat to self-harm more seriously if the line about the Brockton man is still ringing in our heads. The louder a line resonates, the longer it echoes in our minds, the more likely we are to see connections with other moments in the text. Hal gets more than his fair share of these lines, but only in his thoughts, never in his reported speech, which is appropriate since one of the main plot points we try to figure out throughout the text, introduced in the very first section of the novel, is the disconnect between his enormous intellect and his communication skills, the mystery of how and why he has become completely unable to speak, and whether he will be able to recover from this catastrophic mutism. The less Hal is able to speak for himself, the more Wallace gives us access to his thoughts, and the greater the contrast between his inarticulateness and the poeticism of his thoughts, the more we invest in these questions.

When we do see Hal (in flashback) talking to his classmates, friends, or siblings, he is occasionally long-winded and/or erudite, often clever and funny – often to the point where he no longer seems like a realistic adolescent – but never poetic. Take, for instance, this snippet of a phone conversation with his older brother Orin, which like many of Hal's conversations gives only direct dialogue, never dipping into the minds of the interlocutors:

> Don't feel bad. There's no guarantee anybody would have told you even if you'd popped in for, say, the memorial service. I for one wasn't exactly a jabberjaw at the time. I seemed to have been evincing shock and trauma throughout the whole funeral period. What I mostly recall is a great deal of quiet talk about my psychic well-being. It got so I kind of enjoyed popping in and out of rooms just to enjoy the quiet conversations stopping in mid-clause. (251-2)

It is, therefore, all the more arresting when we find elaborate linguistic patterning in his thoughts, as Wallace shows us when Hal most clearly tries to remember his father:

> The tall thin quiet man, Himself, with his razor-burn and bent glasses and chinos too short, whose neck was slender and shoulders sloped, who slumped in candied east-window sunlight with his tailbone supported by windowsills, meekly stirring a glass of something with his finger while the Moms stood there telling him she's long since abandoned any reasonable hope that he could hear what she was telling him – this silent figure, of whom I still

> remember mostly endless legs and the smell of Noxema shave-cream, seems, still, impossible to reconcile with the sensibility of something like *Accomplice!* (951)

This single sentence is notable simply due to its length; it is ninety-six words, the first sixty-seven of which turn out to be one long appositive phrase. This is nowhere near a record for Wallace, and the sort of thing he is famous for, the sort of sentence Wallace himself described as "a kind of hostility to the reader […] syntactically not incorrect but kind of a bitch to read" (McCaffery 2012, 25), but we do not find sentences like that on every page. Simply comparing it to other passages quoted here shows that he varied his syntax quite dramatically, both in the sense of 'widely' and in the sense of 'for dramatic effect'. The paragraph that this sentence begins in fact continues with a series of more normal-sized, easier to process sentences, finishing with a gut-punching pair of short independent clauses connected by a colon: "I accepted it: I could not remember" (951), sputtering out as Hal's memory has done.

The long sentence begins matter-of-factly, with a string of short adjectives that could come in any order, as if we are being hit with just a concise and objective list of descriptors. Then we get to the appositive phrase within the appositive phrase: "Himself", the pronoun used as a proper noun, which was defamiliarizing the first time we encountered it, as if Hal's earthly father has been given the status of a heavenly Father (which stands in stark contrast to the oddly-plural-yet-informal moniker for "the Moms"), but by this point in the novel this should already have become familiar to us. Each of the adjectives must be stressed (which slows us down, even in the absence of commas separating the adjectives), and of course the noun head of the noun phrase "man" must also likewise be stressed, and each syllable of the appositive "Himself", too – resulting in a string of slower stressed syllables that is quite unlikely to occur in normal discourse (six stressed syllables with only the unstressed second syllable of "quiet" interrupting them). After this, the sentence then spins off into a dizzying array of prepositional phrases with conjoined objects and relative clauses themselves containing internal modifiers, while simultaneously breaking the punishing pounding of the stressed syllables, as if the sentence is spinning out of control, as if Hal's thoughts are doing so. (Though, of course, even when Hal's thoughts are out of control, he has been well-trained enough by his grammarian mother to use the formal case-marked relative pronoun *whom*.) The syntactic explosion is mirrored phonologically, again, in the strategic deployment of sibilance. Notably, there are no occurrences of *s*/*z*/*sh* in the initial list, with its impression of controlled description ("the tall thin quiet man") – this does contain softer interdental fricatives, but none that hiss. After this, however, we never get more than a brief respite

from sibilance, as if Hal has lost control and is just spitting out slices, slashes of details. It is as if we can hear his thoughts churning.

There are three *sl-* onsets, in particular, that come in rapid succession: *slender*, *sloped*, and *slumped*. Although linguists disagree about the role phonaesthemes play in spoken language (and how this fits with morphological theories, as Winter et al. 2017 discuss), there can be no doubt that word-initial *sl-* is associated with more than a random sampling of negative connotations, mostly having to do with unpleasant moistness (*slime*, *slop*, *sluice*, *slush*, *sludge*), but also clumsiness, lack of care (as in *slouch*, *slump*, *slip*), and some more abstract sense of being pejorative (as in *sly*, *slander*) (Mattielo 2013, 203-4 provides a review of these dating back to studies beginning in the 1930s). It is not a *morpheme* with an independent meaning, yet it certainly activates associations with these other words in our minds and may thus still evoke a negative, unpleasant feeling. Wallace cannot have chosen three of these in rapid succession because they sounded *pretty* together.

On the semantic level, the descriptions are insistently redundant, featuring no fewer than four twinned lexemes: *quiet* as well as *silent*, *thin* and also *slender*, both *sloped* and *slumped*, and not just the visual cue of *razor-burn* but the *smell of Noxema shave-cream*. There is even a triplet to reinforce, especially, the man's height: he is *tall*, his *chinos too short*, and he has *endless legs*. Hal "still" remembers what "still" seems impossible to him. One might imagine a creative writing instructor attempting to steer a new writer away from this kind of repetition, particularly within a single sentence. But it is clear that what Wallace is doing here is intentionally underlining not the description of Incandenza Senior (which, had it been important, would likely have taken place long before nearing the thousandth page of the novel), but how Hal experiences the world, becoming obsessed with particular details and replaying them in an endless loop in his head.

We are supposedly experiencing Hal's memories, but he does not share all the sensory details with us; what is missing from this paragraph is as important as what is included. All we 'see' of Incandenza is "razor-burn" and "glasses" (incidentals, not a description of his actual face). We know he is wearing chinos, but we do not know what he is wearing on his upper body. This is all the more striking as the sentence follows an extremely detailed portrait of the remembered living room, full of shapes and colours, all remembered in almost excruciating detail. The sunlight coming through the window is "candied", which describes a process of making something sweet (and preserving it), but the Dante reference to "abandoned… hope" makes it perfectly clear that this is not a sweet or happy memory for Hal, and presumably yellowish, but it lends the only colour to the scene.

Notably, although we are told that the Moms is speaking, we do not hear it for ourselves – the dialogue is interpreted for us, not rep-

resented directly. In effect, Hal presents his memories as a blurry, silent, black-and-white film, one in which Hal (like the reader) is a viewer, not a participant; he does not remember interacting, nor do his parents show any awareness of his presence. While Avril was still trying to communicate with her husband (all the while averring that she had lost hope of succeeding), Hal had already given up entirely. James (in his son's eyes, at least) shares Hal's lack of agency: the only action attributed to him, stirring his drink with his finger, is done "meekly" and in a socially unacceptable way. He appears to have little control over his own body: his shoulders are sloped, as if permanently or independent of his will (as opposed to him more actively *shrugging* or *hunching* over or choosing a posture), and his tailbone is likewise 'supported' by the windowsills (as opposed to him deciding to *perch* or *pose*). He does not speak, lending some credibility to Avril's doubt about his ability to hear and understand her. Hal not only appears to share his mother's misgivings, not recalling any details of his father reacting to her speech in any way, but takes it one step further, specifying in the sentence that follows this one that "[i]t was impossible to imagine Himself conceiving of sodomy and razors, no matter how theoretically" (951), not recognizing this as Hal's own personal failure of imagination projected onto his father and readers both. (It is particularly ironic that he cannot imagine his father imagining razors, as he has just told us about his father's razor-burn and his smell of shaving cream.) Notably, the sibilance that persisted through the first long sentence continues well into this following sentence as well, until we reach the final murmured disclaimer.

Although much of the poetic language in *Infinite Jest* comes from Hal's thoughts (which ties in to him being a language prodigy, and a pretty clear proxy for the author), it is not entirely absent elsewhere, though many of the poetic moments that do not belong to Hal are more prominently placed and therefore harder to miss in an initial reading, such as the final line of the section in which Lucien Antitoi is brutally tortured to death:

> As he finally sheds his body's suit, Lucien finds his gut and throat again and newly whole, clean and unimpeded, and is free, catapulted home over fans and the Convexity's glass palisades at desperate speeds, soaring north, sounding a bell-clear and nearly maternal alarmed call-to-arms in all the world's well-known tongues. (488-9)

If this line has done its job properly, it may still be able to prompt connections in the reader's mind, though separated from the lines we have just looked at by hundreds of pages and therefore likely days if not weeks of reading time. Both the Brockton man and Lucien are portrayed as agents, although we may suspect that the former is merely experiencing an accident and we know that the latter

did not choose to be sadistically tortured. Both Hal and Lucien see their bodies as a prison (and perhaps Hal's father as well, given his eventual suicide). Notably, the freedom that Lucien finds in being released from the constraints of his body is the ability to communicate freely (precisely the ability we see Hal lose at the start of the novel, and one that James also struggles with, both with his family in Hal's memory and in his film-making career).

The ending line of any novel is a particularly privileged position, intended to keep echoing in reader's minds after we finish reading the novel. This is perhaps even more notable in an open, postmodern novel that no longer carries the burden of expectation that it will neatly tie off loose ends, providing the reader with a sense of closure. Much, of course, has already been written about Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, ending mid-sentence. Hayes-Brady (2016, 2) points out that it "ends by cutting off the very word 'word', reflexively invoking the absence of linguistic closure that has been problematized throughout the narrative". *Infinite Jest* is not quite that open, although readers are left to wonder whether life is looking up for Don Gately or not:

> And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out. (981)

Although I can hardly claim the ending sentence as a 'hidden gem', I suspect may readers do not consciously stop to think about some of the nice linguistic patterning it contains, and how these may push us toward a more hopeful reading of the line. In a 1996 interview with the *Boston Phoenix*, Wallace said the ending of the novel "is supposed to stop and then kind of hum and project" (Donahue 2012, 72) In a live 2004 radio interview, a caller asked Wallace about this final line, describing it as a "moment of redemption" to which Wallace responded "I like it as a last sentence, so obviously, I'm going to agree with you" (Goldfarb 2012, 144).

Freezing sand may sound unpleasant, but since Gately has been burning up with fever (and in memory, burning up from drugs), in this context it is more refreshing than not. He is been flat on his back in the hospital, so being flat on his back on a beach is a much more pleasant prospect. "Raining out of a low sky" is almost redundant, given that it can hardly rain out of something that *is not* the sky. "Low" is, of course, both ambiguous and vague. Low as in 'sad'? As in 'underhanded' and 'unworthy'? Or low physically, close to the ground, so that Gately feels like he can almost reach out and touch it (and therefore a rather optimistic way of looking at the situation)? Note that it is not *soaking* or *drenching* him (it is reported impersonally, removed from his experience), not *storming*, or *pouring*, or *pelt-*

ing down. Compared to how he has been, lying feverishly in his own filth, the idea of lying on cold sand while being washed by the rain, seems cleansing: Gately emerges from his ordeals not just unscathed, but practically purified.

Tides come and go in a cycle, and he is lucky that the tide is "way out" (which, of course, evokes not just distance, but a possible escape, and even an echo of the hippie phrase for something groovy). He may be feeling unpleasantly cold and wet, but he is safe, at no risk of drowning, Bobby C is not going to hurt him, and life will go on. The rising diphthongs in *sky*, *tide*, *out* and the lip rounding in the many /w/ glides and back vowels support a reading in which this line evokes both surprise and wonder. The string of simple conjunctions ("and… and… and") is also pretty notable from an author who included "multiple conjunctions at the start of independent clauses" in a list of his own stylistic quirks that he did not want the copy editor of *Infinite Jest* to edit out (see Harry Ransom Center's David Foster Wallace collection, container 20.5). There is no contradictory *but*, no disjunctive *or*, no *so* in sight, here, adding to the hopeful reading that things will just keep going on, that everything will be okay.

There is a 'hidden gem' of a line that forms a direct point of comparison for this ending sentence, that readers may have skimmed right past more than five hundred pages previously, about halfway through the novel:

> And his dreams late that night, after the Braintree/Bob Death Commitment, seem to set him under a sort of sea, at terrific depths, the water all around him silent and dim and the same temperature he is. (449)

In both the dream sequence and the (we presume) real memory that ends the novel, Gately is portrayed as entirely non-agentive; he does not even contemplate taking any sort of action, content to observe the world around him. This could be read as passivity to the point of impotence, or as the Alcoholics Anonymous serenity prayer deems it, "the serenity to accept the things I cannot change", and he does seem by the end of the novel to have achieved a transition from the former to the latter, developing the also-prayed-for "wisdom to know the difference". The alliterative sibilance of this sentence had to be worked for – Gately is not just "under water", he "seems" to be "set" under a "sort" of "sea" – but it is not sustained through successive syllables, alternating with non-sibilant onsets, creating a more lulling ebb and flow. The water is "silent", and this is reinforced by the frequent bilabial nasal stop codas, which muffle the effect of the sibilance. The nasal codas come mostly in rhymed pairs: *dream(s)*/*seem*, *him*/*dim*, *commitment*/*silent*. (The final spelled /t/ of this last pair is not normally pronounced in most US dialects, so these syllables actually end

in nasalized vowels followed by a glottal stop, and the rhyming syllables are not stressed, so the effect is pretty subtle.) The conjunction *and* (which would normally be pronounced just as a syllabic nasal) forms identity rhymes with each of its repetitions, adding again to the soothing ebb-and-flow effect.

"Dim" lighting may be romantic in restaurants, but it can also be scary, if you cannot see what dangers lurk. "Terrific" has this same ambiguity: it is wonderful, marvellous, *and*/*or* terrifying. Gately is being gently sucked under the water, encouraged to give up, to drown, to die. This is quite different from the rain that falls on him as if to wake him up at the end of the novel. Importantly, both of these are framed as scenes that Gately is remembering, memories he has been dredging up to work through his past as part of his road to recovery. It is painful (both for Don and the reader) to relive such scene, but it is also reassuring that he can face these low moments in his life with, now, enough distance to understand them and learn from them.

Could Wallace really have hoped that readers would make a connection between these moments that are so many hundreds of pages apart, with so much else that has happened in between? Boswell (2012, 368) notes that "Wallace's longer work achieves its effect through accumulation and collage", and much has already been written of the very intricate structuring of the novel, which Wallace has said was based on a fractal known as the Sierpinski Gasket (Hering 2017, 63). Michael Pietsch, Wallace's longtime editor, has described the structure of *Infinite Jest* and the structure apparently intended for *The Pale King* as "large portions of apparently unconnected fragments presented to the reader before a main story line begins to make sense" (Pietsch 2011, viii), and many have quoted Wallace's famous line that the reader "is going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work" (McCaffery 2012, 35). Perhaps most revealingly, Wallace wrote to Pietsch, "I think I'd presumed in some of this stuff that it was OK to make a reader read the book twice" (Max 2012, 199). Someone reading the novel for the second time (who remembers puzzling over that final line) is more likely to look closely at this line, and to see both the similarities and the differences, and to feel rewarded by having found this connection. Perhaps they will also stop to admire the language that Wallace so carefully controlled.

Language continues to change, as Wallace clearly knew, and it is sad that we will not get to see how Wallace's language use would have adapted (or not) to the changes he would have perceived taking place around him. Would he have whole-heartedly and unironically adopted new usages, or would he have eschewed them and the new identities and stances associated with them? Would he have put them in the mouths of characters, to mark them as young, or used them with a touch of ironic distance in his narration, unable to resist the siren call of a cool phrase?

Wallace acknowledged to McCaffery (2012) that he "rip[ped] off poetry a lot" (39), that he was motivated by a "desire to make something pretty. And for me, a lot of prettiness in written art has to do with sound and tempo" (38), but his fascination with language went far beyond the phonetic and phonological. Little poetic snippets of prose that also present evidence of syntactic and semantic patterning pop out of the text as we read (and especially as we reread), not just to draw attention to or underline important themes (though they certainly also serve this function); they provide us with iconic reminders that moments of beauty and pleasure can be found in the most mundane, ridiculous, grotesque, and/or depressing of contexts. This is a reminder well worth rereading for.

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"I Am in Here": A Comparative Reading of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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Abstract Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), with Gregor Samsa's transformation "into a gigantic insect", forms an insightful comparative reading to the opening of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), including Hal Incandenza's seeming, unexplained catatonia. Wallace described Kafka's fiction as conducting a "radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical". In comparing Kafka's novella and *Infinite Jest*, the question 'what has happened to Hal?' thus means: what metaphor is literalized by Hal's situation? In both texts, the metaphors represent selfhood and writing fiction; but, contrary to Gregor, Hal has taken up the task of self-becoming and symbolizes literary disclosure and communication – rendering *Infinite Jest* as a redemptive novel.

Keywords David Foster Wallace. Infinite Jest. Franz Kafka. The Metamorphosis. Alienation. Self-becoming. Communication. Acknowledgment. Role of literature.

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1 Introduction[1]

In his essay "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from which Probably not Enough Has Been Removed" (1998), David Foster Wallace describes Franz Kafka's fiction as conducting a "radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical" (2005, 63). Perhaps the most famous example of this is Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915): in the first sentence, main character Gregor Samsa is described as having been transformed "into a gigantic insect" (75). Kafka's novella provides an insightful comparative reading to the two opening sections of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), which portray, respectively, the novel's protagonist Hal Incandenza locked in a seeming state of catatonia, and the breakdown of addict Ken Erdedy (as part of which he increasingly identifies with an insect). Both Gregor and Hal are imprisoned in their transformed state, incapable of speech and treated as non-human, while Erdedy embodies an attitude of reflective self-deception leading to self-alienation similar to Gregor's. The question 'What has happened to Hal?' can be said to be the main driver of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative and to encapsulate its thematics. In the scholarship, Hal's situation has mostly been approached as a matter of plot – is Hal clinically depressed? Did he ingest the hallucinogen DMZ? Did he watch the film *Infinite Jest* –, to which the novel "deliberately withholds a linear conclusion" (Boswell 2003, 174)? A few scholars, however, have suggested we should not approach Hal's situation through "plot-hypothesizing" (Henry 2015, 495), but instead, as Rob Mayo puts it, as a "prompt to consider what the condition represents" (2021, 78). In the comparison with Kafka, this means asking: what metaphor is literalized by Hal's situation?

Several scholars have analyzed connections between Wallace's and Kafka's work (Staes 2010; 2014; Severs 2017; Thompson 2017; Gourley 2018). Perhaps most relevant to my approach is Toon Staes's argument that Kafka's writing functions as a "model" for Wallace's "ongoing trust in fiction's redemptive quality" (2010, 459-60) – but whereas Staes focuses on Wallace's portrayal of artist figures, such as in "The Suffering Channel", I will focus on how this redemption can be seen to come about through *Infinite Jest*'s reworking of devices and themes from *The Metamorphosis*. Lucas Thompson has insightfully sketched some of the ways in which Wallace "refracts Kafka's themes and ideas within a US context". But Thompson's scope is broad, tracking influences from world literature, with Kafka representing "German" and "Eastern European" traditions, whose sociopo-

1 I am grateful for the support of the Frederic D. Weinstein Memorial Fellowship at the Harry Ransom Center (University of Texas, Austin), which made possible an important part of the research underlying this paper.

litical and cultural dimensions Wallace largely ignores, as Thompson shows (2017, 22, 123, 155). As such, I think the importance of Kafka's fiction for Wallace – both in its themes and formal innovation – can in fact be best understood within the perspective of Wallace's interest in existentialism, and – as I have argued elsewhere (Den Dulk 2015; forthcoming a and b) – of Wallace's work critically renewing ideas and concerns from existentialist philosophy and literature. Furthermore, though these scholars (also see: Severs 2017) have noted some of the links between *Infinite Jest* and *The Metamorphosis* that I would like to draw out, no sustained comparative reading between these texts has been conducted so far.

In order to do so in this article, I will first address the development of *Infinite Jest*'s opening sections, based on materials from the Wallace archive. Then, I will bring out the similarities and differences between the thematic and formal rendering of Gregor, Hal and Erdedy. Subsequently, I will analyze which metaphors are made literal in *The Metamorphosis* and *Infinite Jest*, in relation to their respective socio-cultural contexts. This will show that, for both Wallace and Kafka, selfhood in general and writing literary fiction in particular are at stake in these metaphors, and that, contrary to Gregor, Hal can be seen as having taken up the existentialist task of self-becoming and as symbolizing literary disclosure and communication – thereby rendering *Infinite Jest* as ultimately a novel of redemption.

2 *Infinite Jest*: Development

To begin, it is worth noting that the opening section of *Infinite Jest*, Hal's admission interview, appeared relatively late in the development of the novel, namely in the "Typescript Draft" submitted in June 1994 – a manuscript subsequently trimmed down for the "Draft for Copyedit". In the archival materials, no previous drafts of the opening section are available. By contrast, other key sections from the start of the novel, such as the professional conversationalist scene and Erdedy's breakdown, are available in early individual handwritten or typed drafts (some of which may date back to 1986)[2] and are included in the partial manuscript sent to the publisher in May 1992, for the book to be contracted, and the Spring 1993 revised typescript (WP).

This late addition of the opening scene is significant because it suggests the section was conceived to bring together different strands

2 David Hering dates an autobiographical draft of the conversationalist scene to 1986 (2016, 39). Herein, Hal is called "David"; it is titled "What are you exactly – unadorned autobio – automabiography", and set in 1974 (April 1), with David 13 years old (Wallace himself would have been 12 on that date) (WP 15.7).

of the novel, and make it work as a whole. In June 1993, editor Michael Pietsch told Wallace that the manuscript needed significant cuts, and that he saw Hal as the "emotional core of the novel" and hoped "to see lots more of Hal in extremis" (LB 3.2). Later that year, Wallace sent the manuscript to Steven Moore, for advice on revisions and cuts. One of Moore's recommendations was to change the novel's opening (then still the professional conversationalist scene): "1-5: Hal at therapist: this is wild and funny, but rather too much so;" "it will give the reader the wrong idea of what kind of novel this is going to be" (SM 2.1). With the admission interview, Wallace can be seen to combine Pietsch's and Moore's suggestions, changing the opening section to something that combines the humor and sadness so characteristic of the novel, while maintaining the focus on Hal and providing us with an episode much farther into Hal's future than anything in the novel's previous drafts.

It may have been the Erdedy section that sparked the new opening section. In the first two typescripts the Erdedy section directly followed the professional conversationalist opening. In the version he sent to Moore, Wallace had placed, as an insert between the opening and Erdedy, a section on Orin – which Moore then recommended to "cut or condense", thereby inviting Wallace to keep Hal and Erdedy partnered (SM 2.1). As to the Erdedy section itself: the handwritten draft and subsequent typescripts already contain the insect imagery, so indicative of the links with *The Metamorphosis*. The handwritten draft already features the insect's three 'protrusions', which can be said to mirror Gregor's three exits that give *The Metamorphosis* its three-part structure. Subsequently, "Three Protrusions" even becomes the title of the Erdedy section in the 1992 manuscript, which suggests the importance of the recurring insect imagery to Wallace's development of the section (WP 15.7, 16.1). As Thompson notes, Wallace's debut novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) mentions a rewriting of *The Metamorphosis* as part of a character's list of manuscripts, which includes at least one real Wallace story ("The Enema Bandit and the Cosmic Buzzer"): "it is not impossible that 'A Metamorphosis for the Eighties' refers to a genuine piece of fiction", Thompson speculates (134). I would contend that *Infinite Jest* is that fiction.

That is, as a portrayal of a 'useless' man paralyzed by self-deceptive reflexivity, Wallace may have already modeled Erdedy on Gregor, and later saw the possibility of partnering this with a portrayal of possible further 'metamorphosis' through Hal's admission interview as the new opening section. With the novel's structure largely finalized, Wallace wrote to Pietsch that "Hal's psychological situation" should be understood through "backlighting against the Ennet characters", including Erdedy (LB 3.3). This comment reinforces the impression that the two opening sections can be treated as a meaningful complementary unit.

3 Metamorphoses

Below, I will compare Gregor, Hal and Erdedy, in order to bring out the differences and similarities between these characters and their situations.[3]

First of all, the structure of *The Metamorphosis* and *Infinite Jest* invites comparison. With the miraculous transformation of their main characters, both texts offer their narrative climax in, respectively, their first sentence and section – perhaps doubly so in the case of *Infinite Jest*, because its opening section describes what are chronologically the last events of the narrative. As such, both texts employ another 'Kafka-esque' technique identified in Wallace's essay, namely 'exformation': the exclusion of crucial information forcing the reader to make associations and connections – which in Kafka's case, according to Wallace, tend to be of the "*nightmarish*" kind, "primordial little-kid stuff from which myths derive" (2005, 61-2). We could even take Hal's 'flashback', midway the opening section, to having eaten a piece of "horrific" mold as a child, as a (Kafka-esque) 'literalization' of this exformative effect: the flashback could be interpreted as Hal (and, with him, the reader) attempting to fill in the gaps of his story, while he himself does not recall this event, but was told by his notoriously unreliable brother Orin – suggesting a possible (though highly unlikely) explanation for Hal's 'catatonic' state thirteen years later (10-11). As discussed above, the insect's three 'protrusions' in the Erdedy section, which punctuate the escalation toward Erdedy's breakdown, suggest a similarity with the three-part structure of *The Metamorphosis*, each part concluding with an attempt by Gregor to leave (protrude from) his room.

As to thematics, in the first sentence of *The Metamorphosis* Gregor is described as having been transformed "into a gigantic insect". This transformation has already taken place before the start of the story, and the how and why of it remain unexplained (75). The first two sections of *Infinite Jest* also feature two largely unexplained transformations or crises. First, Hal seems to be in some sort of catatonic state – he is seen by others as unresponsive and repulsive –, the nature and causes of which remain ambiguous throughout the rest of the novel. In the subsequent section, Erdedy's obsessive waiting for a marijuana delivery gradually escalates and seems to end in some sort of addiction breakdown, which he is recovering from in a halfway house later on in the novel.

3 The characters' names and two protagonists' links to their authors also invite interpretation. For conciseness, this is left out here and will instead be included in my forthcoming *Wallace's Existentialist Intertexts*.

3.1 Gregor and Hal

In *The Metamorphosis*, it quickly turns out Gregor has lost the capacity for human speech. When he first tries to speak, there was a "persistent horrible twittering squeak behind [his voice] like an undertone", that "rose up reverberating round them to destroy their sense". Gregor tries to control this by speaking calmly. But after he gets agitated, in response to questions from his family and the chief clerk, his attempt to speak is shown to be futile: "Did you understand a word of it?", say the others: "That was no human voice" (78, 85). At the start of *Infinite Jest*, Hal also seems unable to speak: "I'd tell you all you want and more, if the sounds I made could be what you hear." Like Gregor, Hal tries to speak calmly. And similar to Gregor's rant, Hal's attempt to explain himself is unsuccessful; instead, he is met with disgust: "'What in God's name are those…,' one Dean cries shrilly, '…those *sounds*?'" "Indescribable", "Like an animal" (9, 12).

Furthermore, both Gregor and Hal feel forced to speak up in response to accusations by officials, are then met with disgust, and violently subdued. In Gregor's case, the chief clerk arrives to accuse Gregor of neglecting his tasks: "For some time past your work has been most unsatisfactory"; "I beg you quite seriously to give me an immediate and precise explanation" (83-4). In his admission interview, the committee question Hal about his test scores, which "this past year" have "fallen off a bit": "there's some frank and candid concern about the recipient of these unfortunate test scores, though perhaps explainable test scores" (6-7).

When Gregor and Hal reveal themselves, the horror of these officials is highly similar. As Gregor pushes through the doorway, "he heard the chief clerk utter a loud 'Oh!' – it sounded like a gust of wind", "clapping one hand before his open mouth and slowly backing away as if driven by some invisible steady pressure". Gregor moves toward the chief clerk, who "stared at him with parted lips over one twitching shoulder", "yelling 'Ugh!'" (87-9). Likewise, while explaining himself, Hal opens his eyes, gets up and makes a soothing gesture, only to deepen his audience's disgust: "Directed my way is horror", "I see jowls sagging, eyebrows high on trembling foreheads, cheeks bright-white"; "From the yellow Dean's expression, there's a brutal wind blowing from my direction"; "Sweet mother of Christ", someone exclaims (12).

The description of what these officials are disgusted *with* also warrants further scrutiny. As noted, both Gregor and Hal are said to sound like an animal. Gregor is described as "vermin", which is later specified to be an insect or beetle.[4] Hal's appearance is (even) more

4 Cf. the upcoming section on the literalization of metaphor.

ambiguous, but resounds with that of Gregor. The admission officials describe Hal exclusively in 'animal' ('non-human') terms. Descriptions like "only marginally *mammalian*" and, even more so, "*sub*animalistic", call to mind "vermin", i.e. a lower, 'unclean' animal. Furthermore, emphases on formlessness and on jittery, slithering movements call to mind insects and reptiles (14; cf. Thompson 2017, 153).

Following the disgust at their appearance, both Gregor and Hal face violent restraint. Gregor's father "gave him a strong push […] and he flew far into the room, bleeding freely. The door was slammed behind him with the stick" (90-2). In Hal's case: "Both my arms are pinioned from behind by the Director of Comp., who wrestles me roughly down, on me with all his weight. I taste floor". Like Gregor, Hal is subdued and isolated in a marginal space – in his case, a restroom (12-13).

3.2 Gregor and Erdedy

Erdedy also seems incapable of communication. He can only think about the marijuana he is waiting for but is terrified of the exchange it might involve. And his planned binge will only foster that isolation: "He couldn't even be around anyone else if he'd smoked marijuana that same day, it made him so self-conscious". Like Gregor, Erdedy is trying to project a sense of calm and does not want to call the "woman who said she'd come", because he "had been very casual about the whole thing" and "he didn't want her to know how much now he felt like he needed it". Meanwhile, he "considered getting up to check the color of the bong he'd be using but decided that obsessive checking and convulsive movements could compromise the atmosphere of casual calm he needed to maintain while he waited" (21-3).

This is an example of the reflective self-deception – after all, Erdedy's considerations suggest the opposite of 'casual' waiting – that characterizes both Erdedy and Gregor. A first example in *The Metamorphosis* is when Gregor, upon having found himself transformed into an insect, thinks: "What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense" (75). Throughout, Gregor's self-reflection serves to avoid the truths of his situation – it is the motor of the self-alienation embodied by his transformation into an insect. The clearest example in Erdedy's case is his 'justification' for his marijuana binge, namely that he will "cure himself by excess", even though he has already used this 'plan' "70 or 80 times before"; "[h]e always lasted a week, or two weeks, or maybe two days, and then he'd think and decide to have some in his home one more last time" (18) – the latter phrase, "one more last time", aptly capturing the self-deceived character of this scenario.

This does not mean that Gregor and Erdedy are unaware of the dissatisfactory character of what drives their self-alienation, respec-

tively submission to a demeaning job and marijuana addiction. This becomes clear, even as Gregor tries to deny his transformation and catch the train: "Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Traveling about day in, day out". And, when the chief clerk arrives: "What a fate, to be condemned to work for a firm where the smallest omission at once gave rise to the gravest suspicion!" (76, 81). Similarly, Erdedy observes he is obsessively waiting for "something that had stopped being fun anyway". Shortly after, he elaborates: "[t]he dope scared him"; "[i]t wasn't that he was afraid of the dope, it was that smoking it made him afraid of everything else" (21, 22).

Because they try to hide their dissatisfaction from themselves, Gregor and Erdedy also have to hide from others. Gregor locks his bedroom door in his own family home, describing it as the "prudent habit he had acquired in travelling of locking all doors during the night, even at home" (78). He hides his work issues from his family, and has a secretive, controlling desire toward his sister. In *Infinite Jest*, addiction is shown to breed (a 'verminous') secrecy: "a drug addict was at root a craven and pathetic creature: a thing that basically hides". Erdedy "had long ago forbidden himself to smoke dope around anyone else"; "he considered himself creepy when it came to dope, and he was afraid that others would see that he was creepy about it as well" (932, 21, 18). In his Kafka essay, Wallace uses the word "creepy" as an example of how *The Metamorphosis* literalizes metaphor (63): it could suggest the 'creeping' of an insect, which barely registers as movement but rather as hidden shifts of position – and, through his self-designation as 'creepy', Erdedy is thus again associated with Gregor's 'insectile' properties.

In fact, their constant self-reflection fosters paralysis – as they try to suppress every conclusion about themselves. Gregor longs for his situation to be decided for him: "[i]f [the others] were horrified then the responsibility was no longer his and he could stay quiet. But if they took it calmly, then he had no reason either to be upset" (84). The purpose of Erdedy's binge is to "shut the whole system down", while it is his addiction that feeds this system, i.e. his obsessive thinking. Tragically, after the section's climactic paralysis – in which Erdedy, as both phone and front door ring, "moved first toward the telephone console, then over toward his intercom module, then convulsively back toward the sounding phone, and then tried somehow to move toward both at once" –, it is only in his subsequent breakdown that Erdedy ends up "without a thought in his head" (20, 27).

Moreover, these moments of paralysis and self-alienation are explicitly connected with Erdedy's anxious, increasing identification with an insect in his room. The first mention (and first 'protrusion'), in the sixth line of the section, follows a statement of Erdedy's paralyzed waiting: "[t]here was an insect on one of the steel shelves that held his audio equipment"; "he was afraid that if he came closer and

saw it closer he would kill it, and he was afraid to kill it". Erdedy's fear of killing the insect prefigures his gradual identification with it. Two pages later, descriptions of how Erdedy "was committed to several courses of action" – i.e. having no choice in the matter – because of the binge, alternate with the first intimations (and suppressions) of similarity with the insect: "[i]t didn't seem to do anything"; "[h]e felt similar to the insect", "but was not sure just how". After this second appearance of the insect, Erdedy observes: "[i]t protruded, but it did not move". Then, upon stating his purpose to "shut the whole system down", Erdedy further intuits but declines to understand his similarity with the insect: "[i]t occurred to him that he would disappear into a hole in a girder inside him"; "[h]e was unsure what the thing inside him was and was unprepared to commit himself to the course of action that would be required to explore the question". However, the similarity slips in, when the above-quoted "atmosphere of casual calm [while he waited]" is directly followed by Erdedy's understanding of himself as "protruding but not moving" (17-21).

The third and final protrusion follows another description of Erdedy's passive alienation, namely his tendency to let the impression of himself in others "gather its own life and force". This prompts the observation: "[t]he insect sat inside its dark shiny case with an immobility that seemed like the gathering of a force, it sat like the hull of a vehicle from which the engine had been for the moment removed" – in which the echoed phrase 'to gather force' further links Erdedy's inaction to the insect's 'immobility'. Then, as Erdedy's obsession escalates: "he thought of impulses being starved of expression and drying out and floating dryly away", "but he could not even begin to try to see how the image of desiccated impulses floating dryly related to either him or the insect" (23-7). Here, the connection between Erdedy and the insect reaches its peak, but his deceptive self-reflection continues to stave off such conclusions, because accepting these would entail commitment to a truth about himself. He ends up, like Gregor, "without a thought in his head", "as if something's flung, splayed" (27) – a state, as Severs notes, "appropriate to an insect-man" (19), "splatted or squashed like a small bug", as Thompson puts it (154).

3.3 Hal versus Gregor and Erdedy

The Erdedy section helps to bring out differences between, on the one hand, Hal in the opening section and, on the other hand, Gregor and Erdedy, as well as the younger Hal we encounter later in the novel. First of all, Hal, contrary to Gregor and Erdedy, does not deceive himself about his situation. Whereas Gregor pretends he might sleep it off – and later in the story still thinks his situation will pass if he just "lie[s] low" (94) – and Erdedy refuses to even consider his prob-

lem, Hal knows very well and acknowledges it. He knows his words will not be what the Deans hear, nor his movement what they see: "I would yield to the urge to bolt for the door ahead of them if I could know that bolting for the door is what the men in this room would see" (8). This example recalls Gregor, who does bolt for the door, three times, and remains in denial of how this will be experienced by others. Hal is aware of the possible discrepancy of what he intends and how he is perceived.

Such awareness is possible, because there *is* a discrepancy: while Gregor and Erdedy have no self to contrast with their 'insect'-hood, this seems different with Hal as we encounter him in the opening section. As Casey Michael Henry points out, the "awakened feeling" that is "manifest in Hal at the novel's opening" is "of central importance" but "little discussed" (2015, 495). Most Wallace scholars have assumed that Hal's situation in the opening scene is some sort of exacerbation of the emptiness experienced by the younger Hal (e.g. Boswell 2003, 139-40; Burn 2013, 75-6), who is described as having "no idea he even knows something's wrong" and without any "bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion" (1040, 694) – and thus resembles Gregor and Erdedy. But this stands in contrast with Hal in the opening section, which constitutes, as Mayo formulates it, a "defiant assertion" of Hal's "bona-fide-intensity-of-interior-life" (77).

Hal's 'awakened feeling' manifests in his desire for communication, for his selfhood to be acknowledged, as well as his display of empathy. Despite their shared loss of speech, a crucial distinction between Hal and Gregor (and Erdedy) is that Hal wants to explain himself. Gregor's attempt at speech merely serves to placate his family and the chief clerk, to be left alone again. Despite his dissatisfaction with his job, he wants to be determined by and compliant with it: "I'll put my clothes on at once, pack up my samples and start off. Will you only let me go? You see, sir, I'm not obstinate, and I'm willing to work" (87). Gregor's rant is an extension of his desire to remain hidden. Again, this desire is shared by the younger Hal, who – like Erdedy – "likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he's as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high". However, in the opening section, when Hal senses that a "familiar panic at feeling misperceived is rising", this is not because he wants to remain hidden; it is because "I cannot make myself understood. 'I am not just a jock,' I say slowly". Hal wants to be understood for who he really is: "I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings". Contrary to Gregor, Hal does not seem to feel dissatisfied with his (athletic) pursuits, and does not see himself as fully determined by or compliant with certain social and professional expectations: "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions", he says: "I'm not just a creātus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function" (49, 8, 10-12, 852). Furthermore, as Henry notes,

an "affective affinity" or "empathy" has entered in "Hal's relation to those around him" (2015, 495).

Hal's manifestation of selfhood, feeling and empathy is embodied by his repeated assertion "I am in here", and related statements "I am not what you see and hear" and "I'm not" (3, 13) – which signify a claim to an interiority not determined by the context in which Hal finds himself. Importantly, even though Hal's self-assertions are not understood by the admission committee, we as readers do understand him and witness his interiority. We do have access to his thoughts and feelings, and can discern that the claims about his selfhood are largely right: he comes across as eloquent and intelligent.

This is facilitated by Hal's first-person narration in the opening section. For most of the novel, Hal's sections are narrated in third-person. This changes on page 851, after Hal quits marijuana, opens up to Mario about his fear that quitting may uncover the underlying "hole" in him, and Hal attends (what he thinks is an) AA meeting (785, 851). Jamie Redgate is right in pointing out that as Hal's "withdrawal gets steadily worse", we see his "interior self wake up as the narcotising flood recedes: he turns out to be in there after all" – which, I claim, is symbolically underscored by the switch to first-person narration. But Redgate's conclusion that Hal "emphatically does have [an interior self], he just doesn't know how to treat it with anything more than ironic contempt" clearly does not apply anymore in the opening section (2019, 147).

There, Hal's repeated appeals to his interiority do not suggest contempt, but rather that the success of such appeals is always dependent on acknowledgment by others. This is denied to him by the committee, and also, Hal expects, by the doctor he will encounter in the ambulance or E.R., "wanting gurneyside Q&A, etiology and diagnosis by Socratic method, ordered and point-by-point" – i.e. aiming for objective diagnosis rather than subjective disclosure. But Hal clearly does have experience with such disclosure and acknowledgment, as he expects that in the hospital "someone blue-collar and unlicensed, though, inevitably" – perhaps referring to Hal's intermediate experiences with AA's informal, peer-centered practices – will ask Hal "So yo then man what's *your* story?". This hypothetical but 'inevitable' interlocutor points to the reader, to whom Hal has been narrating, and who now wants to know: what's the rest of this story, what has happened to Hal? The inclusion of the M.D.'s "etiology and diagnosis" approach, which will lead to Hal being "*unresponsive*", "sedated", can be seen as a suggestion to the reader which readerly attitudes may be less or more productive: diagnosis or acknowledgment (16-17).[5]

5 The interpretation that Hal is on the mend in the opening section can be further supported by reading it in light of R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self*, and in contrast to Ste-

4 Metaphor Made Literal: *The Metamorphosis*

Kafka's "literalization-of-metaphor tactic", as Wallace calls it, is well-established in scholarship, particularly with regard to *The Metamorphosis*. Günther Anders writes that Kafka "takes metaphors at their word" (40).[6] In depicting Gregor "like a cockroach", because of "his spineless and abject behavior and parasitic wishes", Kafka "drops the word 'like' and has the metaphor become reality", Walter Sokel explains. Thereby Kafka "reverses the original act of metamorphosis carried out by thought when it forms metaphor", and "this counter-metamorphosis becomes the starting point of his tale", Sokel writes (1966, 5). In doing so, Kafka does not just offer a literalized extended metaphor, of "dreckiger Käfer" (dirty bug) and "Mistkäfer" (dung beetle) denoting a slovenly and unclean individual: rather, the "textual and poetic complexity" complicates the single metaphor (Sokel 1956, 203-4). Stanley Corngold takes up this idea of reversal and complication of metaphor, asking whether the "literalization of the metaphor is actually accomplished". The different descriptions of Gregor are inconsistent with any bug we might try to visualize; and Gregor's reaction, and that of his family – despite their horror – suggests a more indefinite mix of human and animal being, not 'simply a bug.' Corngold posits that this indeterminacy characterizes Kafka's complication of the metaphor: Gregor's metamorphosis exists as an "opaque sign" (56).

This ambiguity is already introduced in the story's first sentence, which describes Gregor as transformed into an "ungeheueren Ungeziefer" (2004, 96). The usual English translation 'gigantic insect' does not convey the meaning of the original German phrase. 'Ungeziefer' means 'vermin', rather than bug or insect – the word originally meaning "the unclean animal not suited for sacrifice" (Corngold 1988, 57). In turn, 'ungeheuer' evokes the monstrous, a category that is vague by definition, Mark M. Anderson points out, adding that the 'un-' prefixes in both words "double the term's lack of specificity into a kind of negative infinity" (1996, 155).

As Melissa de Bruyker shows, Gregor's "hybridity" – his opaque mix of animal and human characteristics – "signals a contested boundary between social norms and the individual". Gregor experiences a "social crisis", in which his body becomes a "metaphoric border between the self and society" (191-2). How should we understand this social crisis? In Gregor's transformation into an uncanny

phen Burn's use of Laing as confirming Hal's "schizophrenia" (Burn 2013, 75-6). However, the discussion thereof goes beyond the scope of this article and will instead be included in my forthcoming *Wallace's Existentialist Intertexts*.

6 Translation adopted from Corngold 1988, 49.

vermin we can discern both his resistance *and* conformity to societal norms and expectations, as well as Kafka's own hopes *and* anxieties about being a writer.

As we have seen, though the metamorphosis makes literal and confronts Gregor with the truth of his life (for which he despises himself, like he begrudges his job) – namely, that he lacks 'humanity', that he has evaded the task of becoming a self –, Gregor keeps deceiving himself about his situation, his lack of self, his relation to his family – in short, about what Wallace describes as the central Kafka insight, namely "that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (2005, 64-5). Furthermore, Kafka elsewhere "established a link between the bug and the activity of writing itself". In these other writings, positive and negative aspects of the image are brought out. In "Wedding Preparations in the Country" (1907), protagonist Edouard Raban dreams of becoming a beetle, in a "mystic exaltation" of the act of writing. Conversely, in "The Judgment" (1913), the father disparages Georg's artist friend as "yellow enough to be thrown away" (Corngold 1988, 68-9). This anticipates both Gregor's sickly state and Kafka writing, in "Letter to His Father" (1919), that his father compared Kafka's actor friend Löwy "terribly, in a way I've now forgotten, to some kind of vermin", and possibly regarded Kafka himself as a "vermin" for wanting to be a writer (2009, 106, 139). As such, Gregor's metamorphosis is also a reflection of Kafka's conflicted feelings about the writer's ability to speak the truth, at risk of isolation, of being outcast.

Another 'literalized' element in *The Metamorphosis*, related to this metaphor for becoming a self and becoming an artist, and relevant to *Infinite Jest*, appears when a starving Gregor intuits a connection between art and sustenance but also – again – verminousness. Toward the end of the novella, when the family's three lodgers are having dinner, Gregor seems to have an epiphany: "I'm hungry enough […] but not for that kind of food. How these lodgers are stuffing themselves, and here am I dying of starvation!" (117). At this point, Gregor is no longer eating and thus literally starving, but the lodgers' food makes him realize he above all craves something else. The original German is even more purposefully ambiguous here, with Gregor being 'hungry', 'but not for these *things*' ("Ich habe ja Appetit", "aber nicht auf diese Dinge") – further opening up 'hunger' to other things than food; also, 'dying of starvation' in the original text is "ich komme um", which means 'I am dying/perishing', but 'umkommen' can also mean to 'become corrupted/depraved' – which signals Gregor's awareness of his alienation but also his ambiguity with regard to his possible redemption (2004, 47). For, subsequently, after dinner, his sister's violin playing draws Gregor into the living room, indifferent to the responses of others. Gregor observes: "[w]as he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way

were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved" (119). Here, a starving Gregor intuits art to be the 'unknown nourishment' he craves. At the same time, Gregor sees this attraction as a form of animality, and thus a confirmation, perhaps definitively, of his 'verminous' state, which is why he ultimately recoils from this nourishment. This association with animality may seem odd (we tend to see music, and art more generally, as particularly human expressions) but makes sense in light of Kafka's conflicted views about being an artist: the passion to art holds both the promise of truth and the fear of isolation.

5 Metaphor Made Literal: *Infinite Jest*

These aspects of the literalization of metaphor in *The Metamorphosis* are particularly insightful to *Infinite Jest*. Wallace once stated: "maybe any 'realistic' fiction's job is opposite what it used to be – no longer making the strange familiar but making the familiar *strange* again" (McCaffery 2012, 38). In relation to this quote, Staes remarks that "Kafka does just that", "defamiliarize the delusive immediacy of modern society" (2010, 461). Thompson adds that a key way in which Wallace's fiction shows this influence of Kafka, is in its adoption of the literalization of metaphor – making a culture's expressions and assumptions visible (2017, 142). In my comparative reading, this means asking: what metaphor is literalized by Hal's situation?

Below, I will show that *Infinite Jest*'s imagery of 'verminousness' implies its own version of being regarded as 'sub-human' in relation to the contemporary social context invoked in the novel. Like in Kafka, this constitutes both a social/existential crisis (what does it mean to be a self in contemporary society?) and an aesthetic crisis (how to be a writer in that society?). Hal's transformation can be seen to embody the rejection of certain societal norms (but also the fears and risks that accompany this rejection), as well as Wallace's hopes and anxieties about moving beyond equivalent norms and expectations with regard to fiction. As such, there is a purposeful indeterminacy about the 'metamorphosis' in *Infinite Jest*: like in Kafka's novella, it is an 'opaque sign'.

What does it mean, in the world of *Infinite Jest*, to be seen as 'sub-animalistic', as 'damaged' or 'cognitively underdeveloped'? Such imagery occurs throughout the novel, as well as at other points in Wallace's writing, in relation to a contemporary 'fear' or 'distaste' for selfhood, emotion and commitment, and for the exploration of such values in literary fiction. This is expressed most directly in relation to the younger Hal, who believes that to have an "internal self", to be "really human", is to be "hideous", to be "something that pules and writhes", "some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging

itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool" (695). In this description we can already recognize several attributions from the opening section: a deformity with reptilian traits that moves in an unsettling (dragging, writhing) way.

This belief – that to have a self, with emotions and attachments, is to be "naïve", "goo-prone and generally pathetic" – has been conditioned by Hal's social context: "Sentiment equals naïveté on this continent"; and "naïveté is the last true terrible sin in the theology of millennial America". Instead, "weary cynicism" is celebrated as "sav[ing] us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté". The dominant idea of *Infinite Jest*'s contemporary cultural formation is the "queerly persistent U.S. myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive" (694-5) – a phrase that appears, almost identically, in Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" (63) and story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (304), as the "delusion" that "cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive". This recurrence suggests the importance of this 'myth' or 'delusion' to Wallace's cultural critique.

The metaphoric imagery associated with this myth – that selfhood equals naïveté equals hideousness, deformity – pervades *Infinite Jest* and its story world, not just in relation to Hal. Similar imagery is associated with AA, which is said to be "unromantic, unhip, clichéd", its gatherings full of "lobotomized smiles and goopy sentiment". AA stands as the novel's counterpart to the self-deception, paralysis and self-alienation of its many addict characters, such as Erdedy: AA is about choosing to stay clean, uncertain whether the programme will work, but doing it anyway and thereby committing to one's choice and affirming one's sobriety. Therefore, the dominant 'myth' leads the program to be seen as "goofy", "so lame you just *know* there's no way it could ever possibly work except for the utterest morons". In an extension of 'verminous' imagery, AA veterans are called "Crocodiles", with "green", "hideous turd-like cigars" in "their misshapen fingers" (350-4).

But the imagery is perhaps clearest (and most literal) in Hal's brother Mario, who "doesn't seem to resemble much of anyone", because he suffers from severe physical handicaps, but also because he is the most empathetic and humane character in the novel. Mario is described as having a "reptilian/dinosaurian look", with "khaki-colored skin" and "talonesque" spidery fingers. Mario also has a "broad", "involuntarily constant smile" (101, 313-14, 154) – compare this to AA's "lobotomized smiles". This in turn recalls Hal's "grimace", the first aspect of Hal's appearance that is remarked upon in the opening section: "'[i]s Hal all right, Chuck?' Athletic Affairs asks. 'Hal just seemed to... well, grimace. Is he in pain? Are you in pain, son?'" Similar comments about Hal's facial expressions appear toward the end of the novel, after Hal has quit marijuana. One person observes,

"[s]hoot, are you crying? What's the matter?", while shortly after someone else asks: "What may we ask is so amusing, then?"; "Your face is a hilarity-face" (5, 865, 875). A 'grimace' is an ambiguous facial expression: while mostly associated with negative emotions (pain, disgust), it can also be a sort of smile, expressing joy.[7] What seems crucial is that these expressions, however they are perceived, suggest emotion, and thus Hal's above-discussed 'awakened feeling' and 'interior life'. In the opening section, when concerns are raised about his appearance, Hal's initial response is "emptying out all expression", "to err on the side of neutrality and not attempt what would feel to me like a pleasant expression or smile" (5, 3), because display of emotion (whether pain or joy) triggers concern about his appearance.

At the same time, it is clear these feelings are not just happy, positive ones: Hal's awakened interiority is not presented as a magical solution to the malaise sketched in the novel. His transformation literalizes the fear of isolation and misperception that characterize (i.e. that make 'horrific') the above-quoted Kafka insight, that the "horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (Wallace 2005, 64). This indeterminacy – which makes that the reader has to actively consider what it means in which cases and for what reasons – is further reinforced by the fact that similar imagery is also associated with the violent 'wheelchair terrorists' of the A.F.R., with the lethal film *Infinite Jest*, and with addiction more generally. The A.F.R, and especially the character Marathe, are at points depicted (like AA) as another counterpart to U.S. cynicism, given that they choose and act, based on their terrorist beliefs. The novel describes an advertising display of a "man in a wheelchair", "his smile's arc of the extreme curvature that exists between mirth and fury" (224). This depiction may refer to the A.F.R.'s (fanaticist) beliefs, but also to the effect of having watched the lethally addictive film *Infinite Jest* (which the display may be seen to advertise – it has an opening for a film cartridge), a victim of which is described elsewhere in the novel as catatonic while his "face produces the little smiles and grimaces of a person who's being thoroughly entertained" (483). Insect and vermin imagery is related to addiction more generally: addiction itself is described as "The Spider" and long-term addicts are described as "bug-eyed" (e.g. 274); addicts experience "subjective bugs and rodents, then one more binge and more formicative bugs" (346). And, obviously, toward his breakdown Erdedy increasingly identifies with an insect. But the lat-

7 When clinically depressed Kate Gompert is in withdrawal from marijuana, like Hal is toward the end of the novel, she is described as looking "either pained or trying somehow to suppress hilarity" (76). Also see: "a whole new Hal, a Hal who does not get high, or hide", will hand in his urine test with a "wide smile", "and not a secretive thought in his head" (635).

ter case, with its juxtaposition to Hal in the preceding section – Hal a clear manifestation of interiority, Erdedy the lack thereof –, also instructs us on how to differentiate among these occurrences. The addicts' insect imagery appears as an echo of Kafka's original literalized metaphor, symbolizing and confronting these addicts with their self-alienation, their neglect of the task of becoming a self. This echo allows us to better discern, to contrast the new literalized metaphor that Wallace places next to it, in the form of Hal's metamorphosis, particular to the contemporary cultural context.

Here we should also compare the literalized metaphors of 'nourishment' in *The Metamorphosis* and *Infinite Jest*. While Gregor ultimately recoils from the "unknown nourishment he craved", Hal at one point explains his situation in the opening scene by saying: "[c]all it something I ate". This baffling comment is followed by the flashback to five-year old Hal having eaten some "horrific" mold (10). From the perspective of there being something *wrong* with Hal, it is tempting to read this episode as a reference to him having ingested something harmful (e.g. the – fungus-based – hallucinogen DMZ). But note that Hal says "*call it* something I ate", which calls into question whether he's referring to something particular he ingested. Instead, if we read it as a literalized metaphor, a first option is to return to the flashback, which tells of Hal eating something "horrific", and read this as symbolic of Hal craving something that – as I have shown above – his societal context deems horrific, namely the development of a human self.

But perhaps more interestingly, "call it something I ate" can be seen to refer to what Henry calls Hal's "pseudo-epiphanic" insight, toward the end of the novel, regarding the "conceivably endless repetitions his current lifestyle will be composed of – a comprehension potentially brought about by sobriety" (494). That is, shortly after quitting drugs and his switch to first-person narration, Hal experiences a "panic" that "wasn't like being high, but it was still very: *lucid*": "[t]he world seemed suddenly almost edible, there for the ingesting". Here, Hal's epiphanic comprehension, his 'taking in' of the world, is rendered via the literalized metaphor of the world being 'edible'. One could regard this as a withdrawing marijuana addict experiencing the 'munchies'. But the term 'lucid' evokes Camus's characterization of a consciousness that faces absurdity, that realizes meaning is not inherent to this world (which is abundant, indifferent) but has to be consciously made, instead of eluding this absurdity by fleeing into pre-given, unquestioned pursuits of something. In Hal's case, he starts to realize the absurdity, the "crushing cumulative aspect", of "Academy routine". And the "worst part" of these lucid "cognitions" involves eating, the "incredible volume of food I was going to have to consume over the rest of my life": "I experienced, vividly, the image of a broad cool well-lit room piled floor to ceiling with nothing but

the lightly breaded chicken fillets I was going to consume over the next sixty years"; "[a]nd another, dimmer room, filled with the rising mass of the excrement I'd produce". The repetitive character of relating oneself to the world is literalized via repetitive eating. And Hal realizes that most people's pursuits serve as a distraction from this repetition, this inherent meaninglessness: "A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into. Flight from exactly what? These rooms blandly filled with excrement and meat? To what purpose?" (896-900). The comment "call it something I ate" in the opening section can be read as a reference to this epiphany, as an embrace of the repetitive nature of existence, which should not be evaded through unquestioned pursuits, but actively chosen as part of the development of selfhood. Thereby, *Infinite Jest* can again be seen to take up a literalized metaphor from *The Metamorphosis* and transform its outcome: whereas Gregor is unable to accept the 'unknown nourishment' that would remedy his starvation, Hal has 'digested' repetition and the need for choice in the development of a self – as part of his metamorphosis.[8]

This brings me to the relation to literature. We have already seen that Kafka connects the image of the bug to the artist: it conveys Kafka's anxieties about being a writer and reigning prejudices against such a pursuit, that the artist is 'useless', 'slovenly', 'sick' etc. Wallace also employs the 'horrific' imagery associated with Hal's transformation in relation to writing – perhaps most explicitly in the essay "The Nature of the Fun": there he adapts a metaphor from Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, describing a "book-in progress as a kind of hideously damaged infant", "crawling", "dragging", "hideously defective, hydrocephalic and noseless and flipper-armed and incontinent and retarded"; but that attending to your "horrifically defective" fiction becomes a "weird way to countenance yourself and to tell the truth instead of being a way to escape ourself" (193, 198-9). This imagery is highly similar to younger Hal's fear of 'being really human'.

The social context underlying Hal's initial fear also affects literary fiction. Like Hal trying to be 'really human', Wallace describes the task of "really good fiction" as "illuminat[ing] the possibilities for being alive and human" (McCaffery 2012, 26). But if for contemporary culture the "crime is naïveté", "betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability" means that a writer will be seen as "[b]ackward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic", Wallace writes in "E Unibus Pluram" (63, 81). Elsewhere, the similarity between Hal's fear and Wallace's own fear as a writer are even clearer: "[r]eally good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself", and "ask the reader really to feel something"; "[w]hat's poisonous about

8 For an elaboration of the role of repetition in the development of selfhood in *Infinite Jest*, see Den Dulk 2015, 213-28.

the cultural environment today is that it makes this so scary to try to carry out" (Miller 2012, 50).

Another aspect of Wallace's Kafka-inspired view of fiction is that the reader experiences a similar anxiety *as well as* release from it. Wallace once stated that fiction should first "aggravate" the "sense of entrapment and loneliness and death" in the reader, in order to then "countenance it" (McCaffery 2012, 32). As Staes points out, this is exactly what Wallace admires in Kafka, "to provoke a release of pressure" – of "anxieties and fears" – "that already exists 'inside the reader'" (2010, 473-4). I would contend that this is what happens as we work through *Infinite Jest*: Hal's situation at the start of the narrative may antagonize a sense of isolation in the reader, to which the novel then provides different possible forms of release, including the possibility of circling back to the opening and re-evaluating Hal's isolation as standing in need of acknowledgment of selfhood.

Given these links, *Infinite Jest* can be seen to dramatize Wallace's view of literature, the desire to – like Hal – disclose yourself and communicate; but also the uncertainty how this will come across, and fear that the venture may not succeed, that it may be perceived as sentimental drivel. As such, with Hal's 'I am in here' the author, too, declares his presence, reminding the reader of the communicative nature of the literary text. As noted above, the first iteration of the Hal character (in the conversationalist scene) was strongly autobiographical, and it is thus fitting that it is Hal who declares the author's presence.

Understanding the question that drives the narrative of *Infinite Jest* – what has happened to Hal? – means asking: what metaphor is literalized by Hal's situation? We have seen that, like in *The Metamorphosis*, it represents both a social/existential crisis and an aesthetic crisis. That Hal's 'awakened feeling' and 'interior self' – in short, his development of selfhood – lead him to being perceived as horrific, primitive, 'subanimalistic', is a literalization of the imagery associated by the novel with a contemporary 'fear' or 'distaste' for selfhood, emotion and commitment. Hal's metamorphosis is the new literalized metaphor, particular to a contemporary cultural context, that Wallace builds on Kafka's original metaphor of insecthood as alienation, echoed in *Infinite Jest*'s representations of addiction to drugs and entertainment (e.g. Erdedy). The same values at stake in Hal's selfhood – feeling, disclosure, communication – are also at stake in literary fiction, in Wallace's view. As such, the literalized metaphor of Hal's metamorphosis dramatizes what both author and reader experience as the pressure (isolation, finding oneself 'horrific') and release (acknowledgement by the other) offered by fiction.

These aspects of the transformative process at the heart of *Infinite Jest* – what has happened to Hal? – are indeterminate, an 'opaque sign'. But, like with Kafka, this does not mean that the sign can mean

'anything', rather that the reader has to actively contribute to bring out its meanings. As Corngold notes, it's a popular tendency to regard Kafka's stories as "indecipherable", but this "ignores his view that literature intends to speak the truth" (80). And, as De Bruyker points out, in facing the 'opaque' hybridity of Kafka's fiction, it is the reader "who turns words into images" and by whom the truth of the transformation is "created", "identified" (192). This desire for truth and the role of the reader equally apply to the metamorphosis at the heart of Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. So what is your story?

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Infinite Jest's Voice(s)
Notes for an (Audible) Map

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Abstract We often refer to a book as having a voice that sounds uniquely distinctive, a voice that stays with us after a book is over. Voice is a key narratological term; together with its twin partner – focalization – it constitutes the skeleton of a given storyworld. The first – experiential – conception of voice is difficult to grasp and articulate and has something to do with a specific tonality we perceive in a direct, almost visceral way. The second – scholarly – produces a host of definitional moves, which tend to crystallize it in a dominant mode of articulating a story. "*Infinite Jest*'s Voice(s)" aims to bridge the two conceptions of voice just sketched, trying to give the sense of the book's having a distinctive, unforgettable, voice as far as the reader's experience is concerned.

Keywords David Foster Wallace. Infinite Jest. Voice. Narrator. Madame Psychosis. Joelle van Dyne.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 In Search of *IJ*'s Vocal Map. – 2.1 Madame Psychosis. – 2.2 Joelle van Dyne. – 3 Conclusions.

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1 Introduction

Richard Aczel, who contributed the entry "voice" to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, after detailing the narratological birth of the term (with Genette) and its meandering critical history (from Chatman's to Bakhtin's to Fludernik's takes), concludes:

> One might do better to think of voices less as given qualities present writing texts, and more as constructs of the readers who interpret these texts. Literary works are perhaps best seen as acts of complex ventriloquism, where the ultimate ventriloquist is the reader. (1998, 636)

Aczel's final, somewhat provocative, statement and the metaphor of ventriloquism he employs, align particularly well with the aim of the pages that follow: presenting a vocal map of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (henceforth *IJ*)[1] as it takes shape in the reader's experience of the text. The notion of ventriloquism condenses well the basic idea that a literary text is the result of an authorial intentional system, which both hides and shows the source of its own materiality and can be productively thought of in terms of voice. Here we intend to reflect on what it might mean to re-center the notion of ventriloquism on the reader as Aczel suggests: we will thus take the reading experience as the (main) reference point to assess the vocal contours of Wallace's novel.

The typical recent narratological analysis of narrative texts has asked either too much or too little of the notion of voice restricting and limiting its much vaster field mainly to the issue of narrative voices (with their unnatural variants)[2] and/or to their polyphonic interweaving. The concept of voice, furthermore, instead of marking the departure for an analytical experience of the text, represents the culmination of a static classification, which tends to ignore the intrinsically dynamic nature of every act of reading (and especially re-reading).

We would rather posit voice as "a formal indication" – to echo Heidegger[3] – that any act of understanding must avoid objectivizing traps and aim at a transformation both of our way of looking and

Although this article is the result of a close and mutually enriching collaboration, Adriano Ardovino is the author of section 1, of footnotes 14 and 15 and of the paragraph that precedes footnote 15. Pia Masiero is the author of section 2 and of the conclusion.

1 All parenthetical page numbers without other indications come from Wallace (1996).

2 Richardson 2006.

3 This theme, whose importance goes well beyond the phenomenological method and conceptualization, is discussed on many occasions. See especially Heidegger 1995, 291 ff. and 2004, 39 ff.

of our way of listening. Putting this transformation center stage implies claiming the necessity of considering the reader's contribution as essential to give performative completion to (narratological) concepts – voice in the case at hand – that cannot generate themselves without the reader's experiential participation. To return to Aczel's suggestion, the transformation in perceiving and listening to a text takes shape in the reader's becoming the text's own ventriloquist – making the sound of the text his/her own. This is not very far from what Wolfgang Iser in his foundational *The Act of Reading* wrote: "the text establishes itself as a correlative in the reader's consciousness" (1978, 107).

We treat voice not as mere function and not as mere effect but as an indication/invitation whose existence depends on the reader's listening to the text, on his/her complex relationship between remembering and forgetting the text's voices and their interrelations and ultimately on the acceptance of their suspension. The reader, in this respect, is called to listen to the differential system of voices of the text (Voice hereafter) and let it resonate within him/her.

Given this first premise, we need to add a second one that qualifies our objective: focusing as much as we can on the variations of the vocal theme and try to pinpoint the cumulative overall voice both of the novel itself and of its author's. When we think about the physical and cognitive experience of reading a book, in fact, we easily recognize the very common tendency to consider reading a given text as an imaginative and vocal experience. What remains with readers is the verbal and mental persistence of a voice they claim to be unmistakably dear or fastidious and that stays with them no matter how many times the experience is renewed.

To round up these introductory remarks, we would like to introduce the notion of vocal field as it appropriately conveys the kind of multilayered dynamics at the center of our proposal. Firstly, the term subsumes well the dimensional and differential aspects that the notion of voice condenses: the mental, spatial, temporal, functional and structural angles that emerge once we consider Voice as referring to the author, or the narrator, or the characters, or the text itself. Secondly, the term lends itself to a heuristic analogy, well beyond its metaphorical suggestiveness: the vocal field might be productively compared with the group of events and properties that bear the name of electromagnetic field. The analogy considers the central fact that in its quantic articulations, an electromagnetic field describes transformative and multidimensional phenomena governed by a fluctuating and intrinsically indeterminate set of events that conjugate consistency and materiality with evanescence and emptiness. Much more than the apparently readier analogies with the acoustic or gravitational fields, electromagnetism concerns those dynamic and not easily objectifiable aspects we associate with the notion of Voice. As

the human voice contains both its absolute individuality and intrinsic self-dissipation and disappearance, similarly *IJ*'s unique vocal dimension reminds us of the paradoxical coexistence of emptiness and fullness, reality and evanescence. This dimension is, we would argue, more relevant than the coexistence of what is visible and invisible, what is hidden and manifest.

In *IJ*, our argument goes, similarly but more radically than in other masterpieces of contemporary literature, a clear and recognizable voice does not antagonize the myriad sounds that inhabit the text. As in the human voice the purity of vowels coexists with the impurity of consonants, *IJ* presents a vocal paradox: as much as its Voice keeps at bay the determinacies that belong to impurity and approaches the indeterminacies of a field governed by interactions and differences, it becomes more recognizable and unforgettable; it becomes, to put it differently, the essence without essence of all its voices, the Voice that sustains and intersects all the coexisting voices without coalescing in a static whole.

Explaining the concrete form all this takes is the challenge we take up in the pages that follow. Among the many possible examples *IJ* provides, we will single out the textual places devoted to just one character: Madame Psychosis/Joelle van Dyne.[4] We would argue that the vocal map we have in mind emerges in its key components once we follow the narrative trajectory of this central character. She is central not in the mere sense that the novel revolves around her in myriad ways, but because she occupies the center of the novel's vocal field. All the other characters too present a distinctive voice and interact in their own singular and specific manner with the differential field that constitutes the novel, but she is the one character who manifests in the clearest of ways how it is not possible to think about the inhabitants of Wallace's storyworld bypassing a reflection on each one's oscillatory engagement with vocality.

Specifically, we will focus on Madame Psychosis's radio program on October 22nd of the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment and we will then consider the scene in which we meet Joelle for the first time, on November 7th of the same year, at Molly Notkin's party. Along this textual path, some other related scenes will be touched upon.

4 There is another (possible) name that emerges during Molly Notkin's interview by R. Tine Jr. many many pages later: Lucille Duquette. We could easily file this as depending on Molly Notkin's (unreliable) perspective – she tells "everything she believed she knew" (788); however, we would rather consider this detail and the web of references that it entails as a further example of the tendency of the novel to open up windows of possibilities, in this instance referring to Joelle's being the daughter of an E. Duquette, in the circle of James Incandenza's film related friends (mentioned by people attending Molly's party, by Orin, in the JOI's filmography, for example). The tenuousness of the relationship notwithstanding, what the text wants us to do is entertain and accept this possibility together with all the others.

2 In Search of *IJ*'s Vocal Map

2.1 Madame Psychosis

Our attempt at drawing a vocal map of *IJ* starts with listening to Joelle who reaches us "in the guise of 'Madame Psychosis'" (Alexander 2017, 3-4) as hidden both behind a pseudonym and a veil, which doubles, so to speak, her coming to us only as voice: the scene – significantly – is built on two aural horizons, one belonging to Mario who listens to the program from his sitting room and one belonging to the student engineer at the radio station who listens from "the Union rooftop" and monitors the broadcast "from a height" (185). It is worth dwelling on the presentation of the scene as it goes a long way in helping us to begin to single out some features that qualify the meaning of Voice as we have described it – not as mere phonation, but as the emblem of everything each discourse admits, fosters, evokes, allows: words both meaningful and meaningless, monologic and dialogic, together with the silence that precedes and follows them.

> The E.S.T. clock's trackable hand carves off the last few seconds from the five minutes of dead air Madame Psychosis's contract stipulates gets to precede her show. You can see her silhouette putting out the cigarette very methodically […]. Madame Psychosis is smoking again, listening, head cocked. Her tall screen will leak smoke for her show's whole hour. The student engineer is counting down from five on an outstretched hand he can't see how she sees. And as pinkie meets palm, she says what she's said for three years of midnights, an opening bit that Mario Incandenza, the least cynical person in the history of Enfield MA, across the river, listening faithfully, finds, for all its black cynicism, terribly compelling […].
>
> A toneless male voice is then cued in to say It's Sixty Minutes More Or Less With Madame Psychosis On YYY-109, Largest Whole Prime On The FM Band. The different sounds are encoded and pumped by the student engineer up through the building's corpus and out the roof's aerial. (183-4)

This passage abounds in vocal details: Madame Psychosis's "terribly compelling" opening follows five minutes of "dead air", which is then followed by "a toneless male voice" announcing the program, whose sounds are then encoded and pumped out in the air to be welcomed by faithful listeners. All these details are in themselves highly significant in sketching the dance between absence and presence on which Madame Psychosis grounds her ensnaring power. We would nonetheless like to pause on other features of this scene that give it the kind of emblematic texture we are trying to describe.

The obvious question that all those who tried to square the narratological circle of *IJ* could not avoid asking concerns the narrative instance in *IJ*. We would like to approach this foundational issue circumscribing it to the textual space we are working on: here, who is in charge of Madame Psychosis's presentation?

The narrative pact that takes shape when crossing the threshold of any fictional text is rather fluid, maybe impossible to sign, with *IJ*. Maybe this impossibility is what makes this novel what it is. Filippo Pennacchio perceptively speaks of "an extreme flamboyancy" and of an "utmost vocal confusion" (2018, 227; Authors' transl.) that demands of the reader a remarkable interpretive endeavor.

This is definitely the case: the narrative voice oscillates macroscopically – from third person to first person contexts – and microscopically – from authorial and omniscient to particularized, that is, internally focalized or intradiegetic. Our working hypothesis is that this "vocal confusion" is precisely the kind of overall vocal field that readers associate *IJ* with and that they are required to sustain and allow.

Let us return to the above passage: the present tense gives the passage a precise coloring bespeaking simultaneity and process. Both convey immersion and rawness. Madame Psychosis waits *now*: the impact on the deictic field of the reading moment – which is now too – is amplified by the conjuring up of a 'you' who can see what she is doing. The engineer student is the one there that sees and whose perspective we are offered and invited to share, an invitation that passes through the spelling out of the 'you' that inevitably engages the reader beyond its generic employment.[5] Indirectly but unmistakably, the same movement staged in the presentation of the scene – first what the student witnesses here and now on October 22nd, and then what Mario Incandenza listens to now, but from an elsewhere – is reflected in the crossing of narrative levels the 'you' implies.

It is furthermore worth noticing how the now is connected both to the future – "her tall screen will leak smoke for her show's whole hour" – and the past as she repeats the same opening "she's said for three years of midnights". This knowledge concerning the temporal underpinnings of the show, complemented by the detail of what the engineer student does not know – "he can't see how she can see" – and what Mario thinks, is indicative of a privilege transcending the student's perceptual positioning. The male voice launching the program may be "toneless" and well in keeping with Madame Psychosis's eschewing "chatty openings and contextual filler", but what the reader experiences is not toneless, but specifically connot-

5 For a detailed account of the rhetorical effects of the employment of the second person pronoun, see Fludernik 1993.

ed: the vocal connotation will turn out to be a systematic blurring of perceptual, cognitive, temporal and spatial coordinates that may be macroscopically confusing, but is fairly easy to navigate at the level of the single scene. In other words, we may not be sure of the voice in charge of the telling, but the dominant present tense and the heavy employment of heres and nows and yous that collapse singular individuation in favor of a shared existential positioning, shape a vocal field we grow familiar with page after page and that allows us to sustain suspension, to accept (and expect) that the past, the present and the future, the here and there, the (diegetically) inside and outside, the beginning and the end will keep turning into one another leaving traces of their reciprocal fertilization.

This oscillatory vocal quality is manifested in other details, which belong both to this scene and the novel as a whole.[6] One such detail is the structuring of the scene on fragmentation and juxtaposition. The broadcast of Madame Psychosis's reading a long list of categories of people who could join the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (U.H.I.D.) is interspersed with scenes from the Headmaster's House at E.T.A. which are not limited to describing Mario's listening to the program from there, but concern details on Avril and Jim's marriage, Avril's own biography, snapshots on Mario's educational trajectory, Jim's will, the configuration of the interior of the HmH. This latter architectural consideration – no interior doors – follows an interesting detail that enriches the vocal canvas of the scene and allows us to illuminate another important feature of the vocal field we are trying to describe taking the (re-)reading experience as its measure:

> He really does have to sit right up close to listen to 'Sixty Minutes +/−…' […] because Avril has some auditory thing about broadcast sound and gets the howling fantods from any voice that does not exit a living corporeal head, and though Avril's made it clear that Mario's free at any time to activate and align the Tatsuoka's ghostly-green tuner to whatever he wishes, he keeps the volume so low that he has to be lowered onto a low coffee table and lean in and almost put his ear up against the woofer's tremble and concentrate closely to hear YYY's signal over the conversation in the

6 Mary Shapiro demonstrates magnificently how Wallace worked on many linguistic variables at all levels to create a narrative language that can be dubbed "poetic" (2019). The details we are here presenting are more macroscopic than hers, but – we believe – go in the same, vocal, direction. In her conclusions Shapiro writes: "[t]he great payoff in Wallace's writing has never been plot-related (as readers often struggle to make sense of a plot at all, and Wallace consistently denies us any closure), nor is it the creation of particularly likeable or memorable characters (although there are some of these here and there); it is the pleasure readers take in his distinctive voice" (2019, 31). We agree.

> dining room, which tends to get sort of manically high-pitched toward the end of supper. Avril never actually asks Mario to keep it down; he does it out of unspoken consideration for her thing about sound. (*IJ*, 189)

Avril's "thing about sound" is that she freaks out when a voice cannot be connected to a "living corporeal head". This may qualify as an obsessive (paranoiac) need for clear-cut cause and effect relations and – interestingly – contrasts radically with Mario's own reaction to Madame Psychosis's music, her voice and the show itself: "Mario thinks of the word haunting, like in 'a haunting echo of thus-and-such'" (191). Mario relishes in the effects of suspension and indeterminacy, accepting the fluctuations inherent in an electromagnetic quantic field and thus becoming the textual embodiment of *IJ*'s ideal reader: the one who accepts the way it privileges an evocative and evanescent rather than grounded rhetorical manner. Thinking in vocal terms, we cannot but acknowledge the fact that this notation about Avril is embedded in a scene that is centered on a radio program, which is quintessentially a voice without a body. Mario's enjoying the program provides the trigger for this juxtaposition and keeps weaving the oscillatory movement of the novel, shifting between embodied voices and disembodied ones. Madame Psychosis amplifies this oscillation as she is, as we have already underlined, much more than a local radio star without a body and a face for her audience because she is faceless and bodiless for the engineer student too. We should nonetheless avoid the easy leap that associates the veil with the magnification of a voice, for, as we will see later on, the situation is more complex than this – both an allurement to create connections which are then dwarfed and the instantiation of the very concept of showing/hiding we are trying to pinpoint.

Avril's "thing about sound" is, furthermore, associated with the powerful theme of vocality as David Hering interprets it in the first chapter of his latest book. Hering, in fact, is concerned with voices without bodies, that is, ghostly voices – specifically the wraith's as far as *IJ* is concerned – which he connects with Wallace's "anxiety over narrative authority" (2016, 25). This is not the place to rehearse Hering's persuasive mapping of this connection; we would like simply to mention his describing the wraith as "a site of authorial confusion" (27) and its conversation with Gately as resulting "in a narrative register that is virtually impossible to disentangle, as it is unclear to what extent the wraith is inflecting Gately's 'brain-voice'". He concludes this description by pointing out that this is "the first time in Wallace's fiction [in which] we see the kind of 'permeable narrator' described by Richardson, whereby the dead directly influence the linguistic choices of the living" (28). We would argue that this concerns the entire vocal field of Wallace's masterpiece: the permeabil-

ity Hering detects here is *both* the source *and* the consequence of the forces that play in the novel's vocal field whose structuring skeleton is vocal contagion, the cohabitation of different voices that are not necessarily (always) distinguishable. The fact that Voice and authorship are interwoven is suggested by our case character too: Madame Psychosis displays the kind of mastery of her show that we tend to associate with authorship – that is, possessing the absolute command of one's materials.

The scene in this instance too is exemplary of the kind of vocal experience the novel fosters: the disruption of linearity through fragmentation and juxtaposition of other scenes belonging to other places and times that might make sense once the vocal threads are gathered and held together by a reader who accepts this gathering and holding as the attitude this novel requires and, in requiring, allows. It is important for us to reinforce here our reading: *IJ* is not simply a fragmented and non-linear novel, but rather a novel that makes fragmentation and non-linearity its dominant and structuring essence. As such we could take a further step and suggest that *IJ* is the quintessential literary text – that is, a text that stages the aesthetic experience of confronting what is not a representation but an invention.

We should not forget a further detail belonging to this oscillatory dynamics of interruptions and blanks in this scene: Madame Psychosis herself reaches us first in note 24 as probably (her name is followed by a question mark) featuring in *Infinite Jest (IV)*. The reader who has accepted the task of reading through the very long note may presume that Madame Psychosis might be relevant, simply because she is mentioned in reference to (one of the versions of) *Infinite Jest*, but s/he has to wait to connect this detail to others and recompose them all in a meaningful whole, hoping in a possible completion in a book in which closure is macroscopically prevented by the chronology gap that structures its plot. Against the backdrop of a text that is radically suspended, that does not close the circle between the most recent element of the novel's chronology represented by the opening scene with the preceding scene – that is, the scene that closes the book, every moment of (partial) recognition cannot but be lived as a gift. The first re-reading inevitably targets this glaring gap; the reader, however, re-reads in vain. The search for an explanation may produce some candidates,[7] that cannot, in spite of their plausibility, be textually verified: suspension and interruption are structural principles of the novel; they belong to the vocal field of the book. This and many other details – not the least the one concerning Mad-

7 See the detailed reasoning Carlisle offers at the end of his book, *Elegant Complexity* in a specific section titled "What Happens from Late November Y.D.A.U. to Late November Y.G.?" (480-5).

ame Psychosis/Joelle's veil – remain unvoiced. This amounts to saying that the reader is explicitly, we could say programmatically, called to ventriloquize this vocal trait and produce in him/herself an attitude that sustains and maintains the suspension and refrains from resolving or contrasting it with the imposition of this or that explanation. Suspension is crucially shared by the author in his inventive search for his novel's storyworld and the reader who has to gather and listen to its components.

Suspension and indeterminacy[8] are predicated upon in another way throughout the novel, namely, the massive employment of what Heather Houser calls "arcana" (2014, 745) – from (actual) physics and chemistry to (invented) political and geographical configurations – that baffle the reader and require him/her either to stop reading and search for an answer (be it outside the text or in a footnote) – entering what Frank Cioffi aptly calls "paratextual mode" (2000, 162) – or to privilege the flow of reading accepting the – hopefully provisional – indeterminacy.

At least programmatically, Clare Hayes-Brady connects incompleteness (specifically a "consistent resistance to closure" or an "antiteleology" and "plurality", or a "decentered and unfixed narrative", 2016, 21, 22, 28) with vocal choices.[9] Even if the actual chapter 2 puts much more emphasis on communication and its failures and mentions "vocal frames" (2016, 40) and narrative voice only in its final paragraph, Hayes-Brady indirectly confirms our own reading of incompleteness together with fragmentation as pertaining to vocality. A confirmation of this connection comes from choices at the sentence level as well.

> Madame takes one phone call per show, at random. Mostly she solos. The show kind of flies itself. She could do it in her sleep, behind the screen. Sometimes she seems very sad. The engineer likes to monitor the broadcast from a height, the Union's rooftop, summer sun and winter wind. *The more correct term for an asthmatic's inhaler is 'nebulizer'*. (185; italics added)

The description comes to us in a multiform way: as factual in the first two sentences, as subjectively colored in "the show kind of flies itself", which cannot but be the opinion of an enthusiastic audience, as potentially privileged in "she could do it in her sleep" since, strictly

8 A different, but interrelated, issue concerns the "sense of interminability" (2020, 222) that Robert Seguin considers central to Wallace's imaginative attention "to matters of pattern and form" (220).

9 "Chapter 2 undertakes an investigation of ideas of incompleteness in Wallace's work generally, pointing to and exploring the consistent resistance to closure that marks the writing in structural, *vocal* and narrative ways" (Hayes-Brady 2016, 12; italics added).

speaking, she is the only one to know, and as filtered in "sometimes she *seems* very sad".

The engineer, here (and for the entirety of the show), is the one to whom we are invited to ascribe the governing point of view because of the expressions "behind the screen", "seem" and, because, in a micro retrospective re-reading, the thought that "she could do it in her sleep" could be drained of any ulterior, external, knowledge. Then the drastic change, the italicized words, which, as in the case of the detail of what Madame Psychosis could do in her sleep, may be attributed either to the focalizing source, the engineer student, or to the external presence that is in charge of passages lacking an explicit focalizing candidate. The latter option would seem to be the more plausible as this sentence sounds like many others that have nothing to do with a specific focalizer, but with a generalized impulse to display linguistic precision readers tend – with the accumulation of pages – to ascribe to an authorial presence.[10] The very fact that it could be argued that this sentence too belongs to the engineer student's perceptual field is, in itself, part and parcel of the kind of electromagnetic-like forces *IJ*'s vocal field exercises. What we might dub the quicksand of attribution is one of those forces. We used the pair 'either/or', but it would be more pertinent to describe the vocal quality we are trying to pinpoint with the pair 'both/and'.

The content of the program too goes in this (vocal) both/and direction: as we have seen, Madame Psychosis reads[11] a catalogue: not only does she echo the list of the dispossessed that Jesus Christ announces as belonging to the category of the blessed in the Gospel, but she reinforces another vocal trait of the novel – enumeration as a descriptive strategy. This strategy displays an encyclopedic tendency together with its intrinsic admission of "the impossibility of completism" (Houser 2014, 747).

Speaking about (possible) moments of authorial audibility, in one of the scenes that interrupts the flow of the program we find a different kind of vocal insertion: "Hal sometimes complains privately to Mario that he gets more than enough UV during the day *thank you very much*" (189; italics added). The reader here is made privy, we could say, overhears, what may be either something Hal has actually said or something he says internally. In this case too the vocal feature depends on an ambiguity, or rather, the co-existence of two distinguishable vocal effects.

Matters of attribution intermingle with vocal details in another vocally relevant passage:

10 Greg Carlisle employs another term, "meta-narrator" (205).

11 It is worth stressing, at least in a note, the fact that Madame Psychosis wears the shoes of the reader. Her reading-performance adumbrates our own ventriloquistic one.

> Madame Psychosis's broadcast accent is not Boston. There are r's, for one thing, and there is no cultured Cambridge stutter. It's the accent of someone who's spent time either losing a southern lilt or cultivating one. It's not flat and twangy like Stice's, and it's not a drawl like the people at Gainesville's academy. Her voice itself is sparely modulated and strangely empty, as if she were speaking from inside a small box. It's not bored or laconic or ironic or tongue-in-cheek. 'The basilisk-breathed and pyorrheic.' It's reflective but not judgmental, somehow. Her voice seems low-depth familiar to Mario the way certain childhood smells will strike you as familiar and oddly sad. (189-90)

The detailed description of Madame Psychosis's accent is accurate and precise. It is not, however, generic; it is, like most of the descriptions throughout the novel, organized according to a local, that is, a diegetically attributable perspective, in this case the perspective of someone who may find the reference to Stice's accent or to people belonging to a specific (local) academy descriptively functional. And yet, this embodied perspective does not plausibly pertain to Mario because of the kind of terms employed. Once again we have both the phonetic precision we associate with an authorial voice and the localized comparisons we connect to the diegetic rendering of a detail. Significantly, as in a previous passage, here too we find a 'you'. The sentence in which the 'you' surfaces is – crucially, as far as the typical features of the vocal field of *IJ* are concerned – a particularized embodied situation. The general details about the kind of voice Madame Psychosis has is juxtaposed to the highly subjective response it triggers in Mario: from within this individualized response the 'you' creates the space for our own imaginative aural figuration of something which is *for us* "familiar and oddly sad" thus providing an emotional bridge between the reader and the text.

A final example (among the many possible) of this vocal mix – authorial and particularized – comes from the very long and detailed description of the building itself:

> The Union's soft latex-polymer roof is cerebrally domed and a cloudy pia-mater pink […]. *From the air* it looks wrinkled; *from the roof's fire door* it's an almost *nauseous* system of serpentine trenches, like water-slides in hell. The Union itself […] is a great hollow brain-frame, […] and *is not as ghastly as out-of-towners suppose it must be*, though *the vitreally inflated balloon-eyes* […] *take a bit of getting used to*, and *some like the engineer never do get comfortable with them* and use the less garish auditory side-doors; and the abundant sulcus-fissures and gyrus-bulges of the slick latex roof make rain-drainage complex and footing chancy at best, so there's not a whole lot of recreational strolling *up here* […]. (*IJ*, 186; emphasis added)

The description of the building itself is vocally impressive, abounding in punctilious visual and tactile details which juxtapose the two vocal perspectives we are presenting: knowledgeable and Olympic – the roof's appearance "from the air", the misalignment between what out-of-towners suppose and what it really is, the time it takes to get used to its "vitreally inflated balloon-eyes", the fact that not even the passing of time does the trick of getting used to them, our engineer included – and localized and embodied – the roof's appearance "from the roof's fire door" and the "nauseous" feeling it provokes. The spelling out of the deictic "up here" collapses powerfully the two perspectives suggesting the permeability of narrative (and vocal) levels. A further detail that emerges in the lines that complete this description is worth mentioning: we are told that "the balcony resembles at once corporeal bone and numinous aura" (*IJ* 186) which condenses the simultaneous co-existence of materiality and evanescence, of corporeality and spirituality *IJ*'s vocal field is made of.

It could be argued that our employment of the term Voice collapses the narratological distinction between voice and perspective. Well, yes, our notion of vocal field contains both classical items simply because they both make up what the reader brings home of a given text. We hope the analyses that we are presenting are – at least – convincing enough to propose this – non-ritual – conflation.[12]

To wrap-up this section devoted to Madame Psychosis, we would like to reflect on the fact that everything about this show may be read as metanarratively containing, in a sort of *mise en abyme*, the vocal map of the novel as a whole. Madame Psychosis's monologues "seem both free-associative and intricately structured, not unlike nightmares. There's no telling what'll be up on a given night. If there's one even remotely consistent theme it's maybe film and film-cartridges" (185); her themes "are at once unpredictable and somehow rhythmic, more like probability-waves for subhadronics than anything else" (187); the music she cues for her readings "is weirdly compelling. You can never predict what it will be, but over time some kind of pattern emerges, a trend or rhythm" (190).

Let us follow the emergence of this rhythmical pattern in the section devoted to Joelle van Dyne's first appearance.

12 In a very fascinating (narratological) analysis of endnote 123, Richard Stock maintains: "If we have a 'meta-narrator', then Hal-as-narrator (or perhaps 'subnarrator') can just as easily be called a focalizing character. The distinction between lower levels of narrator and characters presented as if they were narrators is largely irrelevant" (45). Even if it could be argued that defining Hal a focalizing character is not enough to explain Hal's employment of the first person to narrate, we would like to take up this suggestion as a reminder that from a readerly perspective – the one we are considering here – there is a natural, that is intuitive, way of making sense of texts. It is worth mentioning that Genette's initial distinction has gone through numerous re-visitations. See, most notably, Fludernik 2001.

2.2 Joelle van Dyne

Some 30 pages after the scene staging Madame Psychosis's show (and after 15 subsidized days), Madame Psychosis (re-)enters the stage as Joelle van Dyne. The reader is cued to connect Joelle to Madame Psychosis both indirectly – Joelle wears a "disconcerting veil"[13] – and explicitly as we are told about "the doctoral program where Joelle – before her retreat into broadcast sound – had met [Molly]" (220): the incidental spells out the connection unmistakably.

The section titled "7 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment" begins as follows:

> You can be at certain parties and not really be there. You can hear how certain parties have their own implied ends embedded in the choreography of the party itself. One of the saddest times Joelle van Dyne ever feels anywhere is that invisible pivot where a party ends – even a bad party – that moment of unspoken accord when everyone starts collecting his lighter […]. When everybody's voices recede down the hall. (219)

The reference to one of Joelle's "saddest times" is presented against an experience that can be recognized in its emotional texture by everybody, by a generic you and by the reader's you too. This texture is eminently embodied and is conveyed in vocal-aural details. The end of a party has a certain sound: we know what Joelle hears because we are asked to relate experientially to that distinct sound. Given these choices, it could easily be argued that the new section opens on a highly immersive note. The immersion is due not only to the implicit invitation to retrieve that sound, but to the possibility that we are already within Joelle's focalizing perspective and that we are actually hearing her own internal voice. This would not be a far-fetched hypothesis as the whole scene is internally focalized on Joelle and tips repeatedly towards Free Indirect Discourse.

> She and poor Molly Notkin are just the same, Joelle reflects, seated alone, watching doctoral candidates taste wine – sisters, soroal twins. With her fear of direct light, Notkin. And the disguises and whiskers are simply veiled veils. How many sub-rosa twins are there, out there, really? What if heredity, instead of linear, is branching? […] The whole and the partial. The damaged and the intact. The deformed and the paralyzingly beautiful. The insane and the attendant. The hidden and the blindingly open. The per-

13 "[T]he daughter of a low-pH chemist and homemaker from western Kentucky, a lot of fun to be with, normally, if you can get over the disconcerting veil" (220).

> former and the audience. No Zen-type One, always rather Two, one upside-down in a convex lens. (220)

Interestingly, the sliding toward FID marks a sliding toward Madame Psychosis's voice and her cataloguing of October 22nd. Here a list of binaries riffs on some of the themes that we will later discover constitute Joelle's existential predicaments. Vocally speaking, the rhythm stresses the oscillatory movement we have already hinted at: intriguingly the first and the two closing couples remind us of the metaphor of ventriloquism we started off from. Readers listen to and handle the text while becoming more and more aware that "the hidden and the blindingly open" material the novel provides reaches them as the novel articulates its clues; in their turn they are mobilized to engage in a recomposing job which trades in the experiential stuff their own lives are made of. "The hidden and the blindingly open" binary here listed together with the others – "the whole and the partial" and "the performer and the audience" – direct us once again to Joelle's veil. We cannot develop this element rich in Heideggerian undertones thoroughly,[14] but we would like – at least – to suggest that the veil in itself may be read as a synecdoche of *IJ*'s vocal field: Joelle's veil is a textual locus that activates the dynamics of an open concealment, that is, of a concealment that instead of hiding becomes the manifestation of the act (of concealment) itself. As such, veiled Joelle is both the emblem of the general notion of veiling/concealing and a highly individualized (and cherished) character. Her "odd empty half-accented voice" (618) stands – partially – for the whole that contains it.

Because of Joelle's emblematic presence, we cannot refrain from sharing a brief reflection on the very complex relationship between body, voice (word) and mind. If on the one hand, voice, as an embodied phenomenon, is, rather literally, the sound of the body, on the other, in its impalpability, it represents the most advanced stage of a trajectory that heads toward dematerialized purity as it transforms each physical object and visible image into listening. This constitutive trajectory alludes to and inaugurates a mental, spiritual and at times hallucinatory dimension. Furthermore, once we return to the

14 We are here referring to Heidegger's interpretation of the Greek word for truth, ἀλήθεια, as un-concealment, that is, not so much as a removal of concealment, but as the opening up of a space in which concealment is possible. It is worth stressing in the wake of this possible reading, a specific reference (both ironic and allusive) to "a Heideggerian perspective" (233) and to his analysis of the form unconcealment takes in our present times, namely, a technologically constituted space (enframing), in the fragments of a conversation during Molly Notkin's party. In this "space as a concept […] enframed by technology" (233), Heidegger subsumes broadcasting considered as the distribution of audio/video content to a dispersed audience via any medium using the electromagnetic spectrum. About Wallace's familiarity with Heidegger's thought, see the excerpt of a letter he sent to Gerry Howard quoted in D.T. Max's biography (2012, 75).

notion of oscillation we are working on, voice appears as representing every disembodied phenomenon, not as mere being without or beyond the body, but as pointing to the perpetual differential tension between being body (and mind) and being voice. Needless to say, and, once again, Joelle condenses perfectly this tension, that in the very moment in which the voice of the body, thanks to the body, gives voice to a pure mental experience, it cannot do it without referring to the image or the trace of a body, be it veiled or unveiled, beautiful or deformed, represented as present or evoked as absent. Thus, in spite of the impossibility of reducing voice either to the body or to the mind, as it does not coincide with either, Voice is both body and mind according to the internal tension we have just sketched.

Let us return to Joelle.[15] As these passages make clear, the scene of the party mirrors the scene of the radio program as far as vocal features are concerned: the juxtaposition of perspectives, the jumbled chronology, the interruption of the flow of the narrative of the party that is not only interrupted by the walk that precedes the party, and by memories of herself in the past, but by the out-of-the-blue confirmation of the "CHRONOLOGY OF ORGANIZATION OF NORTH AMERICAN NATIONS' REVENUE-ENHANCING SUBSIDIZED TIME™, BY YEAR" (223) too.

Sounds and voices are all over the place in this scene: they begin even before Joelle arrives at the door – "[t]he party-sounds start around the second landing" (228) – and reach a pinnacle when Joelle looks at her veil "instead of through the translucent cloth". Thus concentrated in "the Improbably Deformed's equivalent of closing the eyes in concentration on sound", she lets her very last party "wash over her, […] listening to different mingling voices the way the unveiled young taste wine" (231).

15 A note on Hal Incandenza is in order here. Well in keeping with Madame Psychosis' radiophonic existence, Hal is the one who leaves a message on Orin's answering machine that says "[t]his is the disembodied voice of Hal Incandenza" (854), which will be later commented by his brother ironically – "I'm surprised you were even there. In person. I was expecting the Disembodied Voice" (1009). Hal, furthermore, stages the complexity of voice as an embodied matter well past its ordinary communicative dimension. In the scene opening the novel, Hal's embodied voice is presented as a frustrated endeavor, that is, as occluded or obstructed in nature manifesting itself with its "subanimalistic noises and sounds" (14) the indistinct space between human and non-human: these sounds may be read either as bespeaking the body's own journey toward its own individualized voice connected with a fully human mind, or as the disquieting reality that human voice (and the human more broadly) may regress toward the non-human that emerges in *Infinite Jest* as technological and subanimal, disturbingly disembodied and frustratingly embodied. According to our reading of the oscillatory nature of the vocal field in *Infinite Jest*, thus, whereas in Madame Psychosis/Joelle van Dyne's case the Voice is not only figure of the subtracted body, but emphasis on the veiling of a body that manifests itself as not appearing, in the episode staging Hal's crisis, it is the body that manifests itself as the place in which a voice is hiding but might be on its way to reconstitute itself.

And again:

> she [Molly] *has no idea* that Joelle's been in a cage since Y.T.S.D.B., has no idea what she and Jim Incandenza were even about for twenty-one months, whether they were lovers or what, whether Orin left because they were lovers or what, [80] or that Joelle even now lives hand-to-lung on a grossly generous trust willed her by a man she unveiled for but never slept with, the prodigious punter's father, infinite jester, director of a final opus so magnum he'd claimed to have had it locked away. Joelle's never seen the completed assembly of what she'd appeared in, or seen anyone who's seen it, and doubts that any sum of scenes as pathologic as he'd stuck that long quartzy auto-wobbling lens on the camera and filmed her for could have been as entertaining as he'd said the thing he'd always wanted to make had broken his heart by ending up. (228)

The number of details we are showered with in these ten lines is astounding. Everything comes to us as what Molly "has no idea" of. As in other examples that we have presented, the attribution of the source of this info is debatable. Even more so once we consider the endnote here referenced: note 80[16] tells us what Orin "knew", what Mrs. Avril Incandenza "did not know", what Jim "hadn't know" about this or that item, thus displaying a clear (authorial) privilege only to be undermined by adverbs such as "apparently" and "presumably" (999).

The account of her walk is a masterful example of a description that depends heavily on the focalizer's, that is, Joelle's positioning:

> cars sheening by with the special lonely sound of cars in rain, wipers making black rainbows on taxis' shining windshields. […] And the sound of her wood-sole clogs against the receding staccato of brittle women's high heels on brick westward as Charles St. now approaches Boston Common and becomes less quaint and upscale […]; and the rustle and jut of limbs from dumpsters being sifted by people who all day do nothing but sift through I.W.D. dumpsters; […] and the little cataract of rainwater off the edge of each dumpster's red annex's downsloping side and hitting refrigerator boxes' tops with a rhythmless thappathappappathap; somebody going Pssssst from an alley's lip. (221)

Joelle's alleged last walk instantiates a kind of perceptual immersion (both visual and aural) that counterbalances another kind of de-

16 Speaking about (authorial) privileged knowledge: in note 80 readers find crucial information about the cartridge and Jim's will, which allows them to fill some of the gaps they had been facing.

scription, which targets perceptual overflow. Here, the description follows Joelle's perceptions as they change while she walks – "the *receding* staccato", "now approaches […] and becomes less quaint", "appears" – and is thus centralized. Unlike the kind of description Heather Houser convincingly analyses as "decentralizing a managerial ego", that is to say, requiring "more and more narratorial nodes" (749), this description allows a possible perceptual alignment and in so doing, instead of "sidelining the human subject" (Houser 2014, 751) as is the case with Houser's example, a human subject is favored. The passage we are commenting on is just an excerpt from the long description of Joelle's walk and it could be argued that, in its entirety, it presents examples of other narratorial – that is, perceptual – nodes. Yes. Our point concerns the overall vocal map: (perceptual) centering and decentering too, belong to the oscillatory movement the reader progressively recognizes as what *IJ* sounds like.

3 Conclusions

As we all know, Joelle will not, eventually, kill herself at Molly's party and she will end up crossing paths with Don Gately. We would like, then, to conclude our search for the experiential mapping of *IJ*'s vocal field with the moment in which Don recognizes Joelle's voice.

At the party we are told (by the authorial narrator? through Joelle's own filtering perspective?) that, while perched alone, Joelle has been "glanced at covertly by persons who don't know they know her voice" (228-9), and now, some 400 pages later, Don Gately lies in front of the Ennet House with a bullet in his shoulder:

> 'Get him off the phone! Say prank for Christ's sake! You hear me?' Her kimono smells good. Her voice has a Staff-like authority. The scene out here has changed: Gately's down, Madame Psychosis is in charge. 'We're going to get him up and we're going to get him inside,' she says to the circle. 'Lenz.' […] Her voice is that one Madame lady's voice on no-subscription radio, from out of nowhere he's all of a sudden sure, is where he heard that odd empty half-accented voice before. […] 'I knew I knew you,' Gately says to Joelle, whose veil remains inscrutable. […] 'Boy do I know guys loved that show you did'. (618-19)

This scene too juxtaposes two voices: the external referring to Joelle as Madame Psychosis, and the internal (focalized through Don Gately) referring to her as "that one Madame lady". It is an epiphanic moment, in which in spite of the persistence of the inscrutable veil, Don says out loud that he knew he knew her. The voice is more than enough to grant this feeling.

This is exactly what we have been trying to say about the Voice of *IJ*: as Madame Psychosis's music, *IJ* resounds within us as "both predictable and, within that predictability, surprising: it's periodic". "It suggests expansion without really expanding. It leads up to the exact kind of inevitability it denies. [...] Mario thinks of the word haunting, as in 'a haunting echo of thus-and-such" (191).

Note 66 says about Madame Psychosis's listeners: "Some M.I.T.s are compulsive about taping the shows and then listening to the musics again and trying to track them down in stores and college archives" (997). We might be compulsive too in considering the novel's Voice "queerly powerful and compelling" and find it haunting and the reason might actually be that "it tends to give you the feeling there's an in-joke that you and [it] alone are in on" (191). You and it alone: the listener of Madame Psychosis's program/the reader of Wallace's novel as the protagonists of that exclusive intimacy and understanding Wallace hoped his writing could achieve. Mario would love to tell Madame Psychosis "she'd feel a lot better if she listened to her own show" (190); we are telling David Foster Wallace that the Voice of his novel makes us feel a lot better too.

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Memories of the Limbaugh Administration
1990s Politics, Conservative Media, and *Infinite Jest* as a Novel of Radio

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Abstract This essay asks why radio host Rush Limbaugh appears in *Infinite Jest* as president and what this detail suggests about the relationship of the novel to conservative media, the later rise of Donald Trump, and radio's role in Wallace's imagination of narrative voice. Limbaugh is also threaded through Wallace's analysis of US politics and potential fascism, from the early 1990s in which Wallace composed *Infinite Jest* through to his essay "Host" (2005). I closely analyze sonic elements of *Infinite Jest* and subliminal anti-Limbaugh agendas in the radio host Madame Psychosis, nuancing analyses of Wallace focused exclusively on visual media.

Keywords David Foster Wallace. Infinite Jest. Rush Limbaugh. Conservative Politics. Radio.

Summary 1 President Limbaugh and the Political Wallace. – 2 Limbaugh, the Right, and Wallace's Vision of Political Media. – 3 "Somebody's Mind Coming Apart Right Before Your Ears": *Infinite Jest* as a Novel of Radio. – 4 In Conclusion: The 2024 Candidates.

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"Makes misogyny seem literary the same way Rush
makes fascism seem funny".
David Foster Wallace, "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One
Would Sort of Have to Think (Re John Updike's *Toward the End of Time*)"

1 President Limbaugh and the Political Wallace

An odd conjunction of right-wing American political lives and the nation's contemporary literature occurred in February 2021. In the space of eight days, newly former president Donald Trump's second impeachment trial began (this one for inciting insurrection at the Capitol on January 6) and long-time conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh died of lung cancer. Pundits and interested citizens took immediate note of the irony of these paired endings: Limbaugh's massively popular daily show, syndicated nationwide on hundreds of stations from 1988 to shortly before his death, had laid the groundwork for cruel, xenophobic, demagogic Trump-style politics, a fact acknowledged at the January 2020 State of the Union when Trump awarded Limbaugh the Presidential Medal of Freedom. February 2021 also happened to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Infinite Jest*, in which David Foster Wallace had described a dystopian future US led by two presidents, in the years between 1996 and an era of Subsidized Time revealed to be the late 2000s: Rush Limbaugh (elected presumably in 1996, since the book fleetingly mentions "the premillennial Limbaugh Era", p. 411, which apparently ends with his assassination, p. 929) and the invented leader of the Clean US Party, a former Vegas lounge singer, Inaugural microphone-twirler, and major germaphobe and waste-displacer named Johnny Gentle (who must come to power, in the book's implied history, in 2000, since the change to Subsidized Time he oversees can be dated to roughly 2001).

Gentle, upon Trump's rise from reality TV celebrity to the presidency in 2016, led some readers to credit Wallace with uncanny prophecy of Trump's widely unexpected election. Making the case for a Gentle/Trump comparison, for instance, Sonny Bunch, in a May 2017 *Washington Post* overview of novels that help readers deal with Trump, cited not just vapid entertainment and germaphobia as their common ground but passages describing the electorate's exhaustion and apathy with mainstream US political life, a subject in Wallace's later writing as well. "[T]he C.U.S.P.", as Bunch quotes from *Infinite Jest*, "suddenly swept to quadrennial victory in an angry reaction voter-spasm [over domestic waste] […] as the Dems and the G.O.P.'s stood on either side watching dumbly, like doubles partners who each think the other's got it, the two established mainstream parties split along tired philosophical lines", with the nation thereby, in the absence of post-Cold War foreign enemies, "turn[ing] in on itself and its own philosophical fatigue" (382).

In this essay, while I do have things to say about Trump, I sidestep the somewhat facile question of whether Wallace, 25 years ago, in fact predicted his presidency or the particular American disillusionment or derangement that led to it. Instead, I use the retrospect offered by the novel's silver anniversary to focus on Wallace's concrete (if elliptical) prediction of President Limbaugh, as well as the larger role Limbaugh's strident, cruel voice played in the way Wallace (a heavy listener to all sorts of radio, this essay also reveals) imagined political, media, and even fiction-writing possibilities. In doing so, I examine how Limbaugh as major conservative media figure lies not just in the background of *Infinite Jest* but is threaded through Wallace's analysis of US politics and potential fascism, from the early 1990s in which *Infinite Jest* was largely composed through to one of Wallace's final major essays, a 2005 account of conservative talk radio titled "Host". When *Infinite Jest* appeared in February 1996, Rupert Murdoch's Fox News was still eight months from going on the air (its twenty-fifth anniversary arrives in October 2021), internet discourse was in its infancy, and the social media that also greatly aided Trump's rise did not exist. Major conservative media, beyond print sources, largely began and ended with Rush's voice on the radio. But Wallace, my readings make clear, kept track of – and worried about the dangerous political effects of – Rush's career and Rush-inspired media across eras, from the early 1990s through the Iraq War era of the early twenty-first century in which he composed much of *The Pale King*.

The questions I explore here, through close-readings of "Host" and of scenes that emphasize radio, sound, and silence in *Infinite Jest*, are as follows: what did Wallace hear in Limbaugh that led him to project an election over incumbent Bill Clinton in November 1996 and subsequent assassination? (In another disturbing bit of Wallace's invented history, Jack Kemp, who was Bob Dole's actual Republican running mate in 1996, has also had a pre-Gentle presidential administration, presumably taking over from Limbaugh, p. 177, and then being assassinated as well before 2000, since Marathe says obliquely to Steeply that historical hatred of the US includes the "trans-Latin cocaine cartels and the poor late M. Kemp with his exploding home", p. 422.) According to the comment in my epigraph (supposedly from a female friend who hates Updike, a Wallace influence who also grants my essay its title), Rush made fascism "funny" on the radio; can we then read *Infinite Jest* for signs that there are effects of Limbaugh's real-life rhetoric on the "funny" fascist creation Gentle, whose ridiculous tactics wed media strategies with authoritarian tendencies in things like the "*Totalitarian's Guide to Iron-Fisted Spin*" (404)? What if anything does analysis of Limbaugh suggest about Wallace's notorious votes for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, revealed by D.T. Max's biography (2012a, 259), or the largely sympathetic portrait of Republi-

can John McCain in "Up, Simba"? And finally, by closely re-reading sonic elements of *Infinite Jest* and certain subliminal anti-Limbaugh and anti-Gentle agendas in the radio host the novel does describe at length, Joelle van Dyne, a.k.a. Madame Psychosis, can we add much-needed nuance to analyses of Wallace that focus exclusively on visual media as dominant and lethally ironic forces in US culture? In other words, can we broaden our understanding of the novel's media representations to include radio and even find in it positive, generative, anti-irony effects that correlate with Wallace's own ideals about fictional voice? While the traces of Limbaugh in *Infinite Jest* are admittedly scarce and perhaps less intriguing than seeming predictions of Trump, the brief mentions expose in negative some understudied aspects of Wallace's critiques of media and entertainment, as well as the renewed relevance of his 1996 novel to the political and media turmoil gripping America in the era of a dominant Fox News and, for the last six years and counting, a dominant Trump.

Criticism of Wallace as a political writer has, justifiably, focused on *The Pale King*, a book squarely about government, taxation, civic duty, citizenship, the 1980s solidification of neoliberalism, and the role of financial capital in US political economy (see, for example, Clare 2014; Boswell 2014; Godden, Szalay 2014). Critics often take Wallace's 2000 *Rolling Stone* article on presidential candidate John McCain, low voter turnout, and political apathy as the turning point leading to a late-career, twenty-first-century Wallace newly concerned with politics in his fiction, culminating in the posthumous 2011 publication of *The Pale King*. *Infinite Jest*, by comparison, seems a politically far less serious book, far less focused on governmental entities, far more given to crude slapstick when it does cover cabinet meetings, and generally far more interested in, as Andrew Warren demonstrates, localized acts – "failed or felicitous", and always incomplete – of community-making, "communities built and dismantled by shared language", seen perhaps most clearly in processes of speaker/audience identification at AA meetings (Warren 2014, 67). Many of *Infinite Jest*'s large-scale (geo)political fictions – especially the plot-instigating facts of waste-displacement, Reconfiguration, and the Great Concavity/Convexity – seem more like extremely large-scale metaphors for the potentially toxic interpersonal relationship between self and other that dominates the novel on the level of individual character. Elements like the distortive mirror language of concavity and convexity, along with a "sham-arrangement of quote Interdependence that's really just a crude nationalist scheme to indulge my own US individual pleasure-lust without the complications […] of considering some neighbor's own desires" (1996, 427), lend support to Mary K. Holland's (2006) suggestion that the central problem of the book on all levels is the personal pathology of an infantile narcissism.

At the same time, much of the book's embeddedness in early 1990s history and topicality, especially figures in the 1992 presidential campaign, has gone unnoticed and uninterpreted, and in paying deep attention to the implications of Limbaugh being elected over Clinton in Wallace's imagination I expand on my monograph's claims that Wallace, who worked intensively on *Infinite Jest* during what Max describes as "the breakthrough of 1991-92" (2012a, 159), was not only a career-long political writer but placed sly (and consequential) allusions in *Infinite Jest* to presidential politics – for instance, George H.W. Bush's famous 1988 "read my lips" convention line about taxes (Gentle says, "I told them on Inauguration Day. I said look into my eyes: no new [revenue] enhancements", p. 441) and the neoliberal economic incursions throughout the early 1990s of NAFTA (which Wallace's US/Canadian/Mexican Interdependence and Reconfiguration examine in indirect ways) (Severs 2017, 101-4). And while Gentle, a B-movie actor who before becoming a politician represents performers' labor rights as head of the "Velvety Vocalists Guild" (1996, 381), is clearly identified with Reagan (known for his leadership of the Screen Actors Guild in the Hollywood blacklist era), there are also in Gentle's entertainment antics nods to Clinton, in sunglasses, campaigning by playing an Elvis song on his saxophone on the Arsenio Hall Show in June 1992.[1]

As (re-)readers have come to know, events narrated in the endnotes and minor asides of *Infinite Jest* are hardly marked as ancillary or subordinate; in the book's highly elliptical beginning and ending pages, as well, momentous and even cataclysmic events are left fleetingly and ambiguously implied – including not just the fate of the killer Entertainment's master-copy buried with James O. Incandenza and

1 I focus on Limbaugh's media presence in this essay, but I should note that a whole other article waits to be written about the allusions in *Infinite Jest* to Ross Perot, the upstart independent candidate who changed the 1992 election (and led the polls for a time), in no small part by using paid media in a new way, and who has also often been cited as a populist precedent for Trump. Without apparently knowing how he voted, Max notes that Wallace supported Perot in 1992, writing to a friend that "[y]ou need someone really insane to fix the economy" (Max 2012a, 259). The "philosophical fatigue" with the two major parties that Bunch cites in his Gentle/Trump comparison is really, in the context of *Infinite Jest*'s 1990s composition, about Perot the reformer: Gentle's C.U.S.P. (as "cusp" suggests) defines an edge drawing the disaffected of right and left and is, in its first three unsuccessful years, "a kind of post-Perot national joke". The party brings together "ultra-right jingoist" deer hunters with automatic weapons and "far-left […] ponytailed granola crunchers" advocating environmentalism, and is also "a surreal union of both Rush L.- and Hillary R.C.-disillusioned fringes" (1996, 382) (Wallace seems here to predict runs for the highest office by Hillary Clinton well ahead of 2008). Perot's unprecedented multi-million-dollar half-hour prime-time campaign infomercials in 1992 drew great interest, mainly because of his low-tech use of economic charts and graphs, tapped upon by his pointer, which had a fake alligator claw on the end and Perot called his "voodoo stick" (perhaps a distant comic inspiration for the telescoping weatherman's pointer that Rodney Tine, architect of O.N.A.N., wields in various meetings).

possibly exhumed, but also what international conflict has occurred between the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment and the Year of Glad, such that, in the first section, Hal blandly notes that "some sort of ultra-mach fighter too high overhead to hear slices the sky from south to north" (16). Reading nuclear weapons in this post-Cold War novel outside of Eschaton's game context, Bradley Fest suggests that an ambiguous news fragment from Mario's Interdependence Day puppet-show film may mean that a deranged Gentle created the irradiated Great Concavity by ordering that all nuclear missiles "north of 44°" latitude (Wallace 1996, 407) be inverted in their silos and shot into the ground (Fest 2012, 133-4). Thus, a scarcity of the narrative's direct attention to Limbaugh's presidential term and the shock of his assassination might be taken as reason to look even more closely, not less, at those events' implications. I therefore make much in this essay's climactic section of the invented Gentle sharing a background in broadcast sound with Limbaugh, his presidential predecessor, especially when placed in the context of the novel's rich, direct depictions of avant-garde radio.

Infinite Jest (which Wallace began drafting in the late 1980s) continued in a vein of political writing seen in his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, in which another deranged politician, Governor Raymond Zusatz, orders the creation of a state wasteland, the Great Ohio Desert. While setting novels alongside wasted deserts is an idea that (like Eschaton) Wallace took from Don DeLillo's *End Zone*, the mode of comedy Wallace deploys for Zusatz – the surgical mask- and bubble-helmet-wearing Gentle, the penis-measuring Rodney Tine, and others in these first two novels – arises from the absurdist political satire of Donald Barthelme (in stories like "The President", featuring a leader only 48 inches tall) and Robert Coover (in novels like *The Public Burning*, whose mythical Uncle Sam and fictional Richard Nixon Wallace alludes to in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction"). Wallace is not simply derivative of these writers (though more derivative than his infamous "patriarch[s] for my patricide" list, which includes Coover, would suggest [McCaffery 2012, 48]), and he certainly had other modes of political writing, though they do not correlate simply with supposed phases of career maturation. Wallace wrote in depth and with pathos about a historical politician in his early-career story "Lyndon" – indeed, with a solemn respect for government work and its difficulties (there he was influenced by a different Barthelme, the author of "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning"). Lyndon Johnson sits alongside many well-known figures (David Letterman, Alex Trebek, etc.) in *Girl With Curious Hair*, and by the last years of his career, with *The Pale King*'s direct mentions of Reagan and George H.W. Bush, its echoes of ideas from "Lyndon", as well as with the unpublished draft "Wickedness" (about Reagan suffering from dementia in a nursing home), Wallace would return to

this mode of embellished but mainly realistic historical fiction (Max 2012b). I cannot help but think, too, that the legal troubles that delayed *Girl*'s publication – potential lawsuits from using real people as characters (Max 2012a, 106-9) – might have led Wallace in *Infinite Jest* to diminish (though apparently not to cut out altogether) references to invented careers and gruesome deaths for real people like Limbaugh and Kemp.

Whether regarding Reagan, Perot, or other candidates, Wallace's personal ballot-box politics will continue to draw critics' interest, no doubt. According to one of the most eyebrow-raising revelations in Max's biography, Wallace was "politically fairly conservative", voted twice for Reagan in the 1980s, and practiced in his younger years "a girlfriend-pleasing campus liberalism" (2012a, 259) before becoming much more of a leftist in later years, partly through the influence of his partner Karen Green. As he makes clear early in the McCain essay, without mentioning his earlier Republicanism, he had already voted in the 2000 Illinois Democratic Primary for Bill Bradley. And *The Pale King*'s acid remarks in § 19 about Americans "elect[ing] someone who can cast himself as a Rebel, maybe even a cowboy" (2011, 149), while directed at Reagan, are easily read as a critique of George W. Bush, a son of eastern privilege who played Crawford, Texas rancher in brush-cutting photo ops (the logic could apply as well to Trump, who cast himself as what *The Pale King* calls the "Rebel Outsider President" while running as the incumbent in 2020, p. 150). James Santel has argued that at their philosophical core "Wallace's essays evince a real interest in some of conservatism's central principles, particularly its valorization of individual choice", noting with reference to *This Is Water* that its "assignment of ultimate responsibility to individual agency" offers "a strikingly anomic view" for "someone interested in how Americans could foster civic empathy" (2014). Santel's readings, focused on the nonfiction and mainly about the McCain essay, make some missteps as to how Wallace philosophically defined individualism and choice (and the criticisms he mounted of the myth of individual agency propagated by neoliberalism). Santel also misses something I want to draw out here by reading Wallace 'out of order' and turning to a late-career essay about conservative politics hardly ever discussed by critics: "Host", a piece that draws even further to the fore something that remains latent in the much-discussed "Up, Simba" as it investigates McCain's chances of sincere political communication amid spectacle-based campaigning – that is, Wallace's systematic attention, from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, to the media forms through which conservative politics reached (and, increasingly, inflamed) its audience.

2 Limbaugh, the Right, and Wallace's Vision of Political Media

If *Infinite Jest*'s writing about Limbaugh's impact on US life is scant, "Host", a profile of Los Angeles radio host John Ziegler originally published in *The Atlantic* in April 2005, is voluminous on this subject. Several Wallace essays connect thematically to certain narratives and have been instrumental (primers, even) in critical dissections of the fiction that followed: "E Unibus Pluram" with themes of irony in *Infinite Jest*, "Authority and American Usage" and "Up, Simba" with issues of authority and civics in *The Pale King*, and "Derideri-zation" with ideas about information theory and consciousness that run throughout *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*. "Host", however, becomes most interesting as a companion to Wallace's fiction if allowed to cast backward light on *Infinite Jest*. As it details Ziegler and his sound engineers, who run the show 10:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. five nights a week, a long-time reader of Wallace across genres inevitably makes associations with the detailed scenes in *Infinite Jest* of the WYYY studio at MIT and Madame Psychosis's midnight show *Sixty Minutes More or Less*, a fictional world of sound to which I will return.

In "Host", about eight years into the network's lifespan, Wallace does write about new conservative media leader Fox News, identifying Ziegler's station early in the essay as the "Radio Home of Fox News" (2005, 275). Conservative media (especially talk radio) has undergone massive growth since Wallace's creation of President Limbaugh: Wallace notes Sean Hannity (who began on Fox News TV in 1996 and started his radio show in 2001), Laura Ingraham (whose nationally syndicated radio show brought her to fame starting in 2001), and several other lesser-known figures, all while describing the rise not only of Fox News on TV (where Ingraham and others would later end up with shows) but also the great corporate radio beasts Infinity and Clear Channel. "Host" is a rueful view of media consolidation in radio with certain connections to the analysis of magazine and book-publishing homogenization Wallace mounted a year earlier in "The Suffering Channel".

Wallace bluntly says near the start that Ziegler "is not a journalist – he is an entertainer" (2005, 282). And before turning to any real focus on Ziegler as personality, Wallace emphasizes that political talk radio is not "motivated by ideology". It "is a business" (290), "more lucrative […] than most people know" (291). Indeed, "Host" might be seen as a key transfer point in Wallace's career-long concern with various (but primarily visual) media: the essay applies *Infinite Jest*'s concerns about the effects of entertainment and its constant "stimulation" (280) of American subjects to Ziegler's attempts to make ostensible journalism and information entertaining, leading to questions of authority, politics, and communal responsibility that

preoccupy Wallace in a different register in *The Pale King*. As "Host" puts it, Ziegler and his ilk would like the "authority and influence of a journalist without the stodgy constraints of fairness, objectivity, and responsibility" (282-3), something like the general American obliviousness to and disdain for the exacting, tedious work of good government that the IRS embodies. The parasitism and virality hinted at by the stark title (unlike some others in *Consider the Lobster*, unchanged between magazine and essay collection, suggesting perhaps it was Wallace's choice and not a magazine editor's) connote a media system that has been deleterious to the American discourse that (whether in terms of grammatical prescription, political speech-making, or food industries) Wallace strives to make more transparent, ethical, and deservingly authoritative throughout *Lobster*.

Limbaugh, in "Host", is the predecessor and accelerant in this transformation within the culture over the years since *Infinite Jest*, where things like Ziegler's xenophobic caricatures of the diverse Islamic world are simply much more prominent and accepted in the US media-sphere – and not only because of 9/11. By comparison to the small-time imitators like Ziegler, Rush has "14.5 million regular listeners" for his daytime show, which runs three hours every weekday in national syndication (2005, 287). Ziegler is also Limbaugh's pale imitator in a mode of subtle irony and distancing-from-truth that Wallace often looks for in media: Ziegler has a "slight air of self-mockery",

> [a] half-pretend pretension, which is ingenious in all sorts of ways [and] was pioneered in talk radio by Rush Limbaugh, although with Limbaugh the semi-self-mockery is more tonal than syntactic. (279)

Perhaps Limbaugh is the David Letterman (the ironizing force portrayed in "My Appearance") of the radio airwaves. On the level of content, Wallace credits Limbaugh with instilling in radio a mode of alleged news-broadcasting that "really means editorializing" (285): Limbaugh has set "the rhetorical template […] on which most syndicated and large-market political talk radio is modeled" (286).

Indeed, Limbaugh created the very Teflon conditions for conservative discourse that ruled throughout the 1990s and 2000s. While revealing yet more about his long-time fandom by calling Limbaugh "a host of extraordinary, once-in-a-generation talent and charisma – bright, loquacious, witty, complexly authoritative" (315), Wallace zeroes in on the key feature of his rhetorical template, one that must be in any genealogy of Fox News' market-dominance and Trump's later reliance on a trope of 'fake news': Limbaugh was "the first great promulgator of the Mainstream Media's Liberal Bias idea". The "MMLB concept"

> turned out to be a brilliantly effective rhetorical move, since [it] functioned simultaneously as a standard around which Rush's audience could rally, as an articulation of the need for right-wing (i.e., unbiased) media, and as a mechanism by which any criticism or refutation of conservative ideas could be dismissed (either as biased or as the product of indoctrination by biased media). Boiled way down, the MMLB thesis is able both to exploit and to perpetuate many conservatives' dissatisfaction with extant media sources – and it's this dissatisfaction that cements political talk radio's large and loyal audience. (315-16)

Five years after "Up, Simba", without a McCain to examine, Wallace seems far less hopeful about the possibilities of conservative politics, but this is because he is not exploring one sincere voice's attempt to fight through an ironizing, apathy-inducing media environment – Wallace is instead describing the well-marketed environment itself, the major voice that has set the tone that all others, on right and left, must relate or react to. In essence, in "Host", Wallace the journalist reverts to a premise glimpsed in *Infinite Jest*: Limbaugh, preceding Gentle, is at the origin point of the nation's political degradation.

"Host" is Wallace's most extensive analysis of Limbaugh; but elsewhere in post-*Infinite Jest* commentary Wallace was more ominous about his impact on American political culture. His days-long 1996 interview with David Lipsky, which became *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (2010), cements the image of Wallace as radio fan and analyst, from his thoughts on the pop songs playing on the car radio (and their "*sellable*" status, p. 212), to the "pretty" voices of his radio interviewers (whose tones distract him from the questions and remind him of his father reading him Melville as a child, p. 49), the strange ruts of Wallace's radio habits (he claims to listen to a single genre/station for a year at a time, p. 212), and his realizations about the beauty of country stations (he learns to find "profundity" in these "incredibly existentialist songs", p. 198, a hint for interpreting the country radio in "Incarnations of Burned Children"). And Wallace proves again that his dial has often been tuned to Limbaugh, saying at one point while discussing themes of *Infinite Jest*:

> The thing that really scares me about this country – and again, […] I'm a private citizen, I am not a pundit […] I think we're *really* setting ourselves up for repression and fascism. I think our hunger, our hunger to have somebody else tell us what to do – or for some sort of *certainty*, or something to steer by – is getting *so* bad, um, that I think it's, there's even a, Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, I mean, makes a similar argument economically. But I think, you know, in Pat Buchanan, in Rush Limbaugh, there are *rumbles* on the Western horizon, you know. And that it's going to be, that the next few

> decades are going to be really scary. Particularly if things get economically shaky, and people for instance – people who've never been hungry before, might be hungry or cold. (158)

In these casual remarks, it is difficult to see Wallace making a clear and coherent claim about an authoritarian future – though some might take this itself as a good prediction of Trump's presidency! But what precisely are Limbaugh's and Buchanan's "*rumbles* on the Western horizon"? The desire "to have somebody else tell us what to do" and offer "*certainty*" tracks with *Infinite Jest*'s emphasis on the US's collective failure of so many tests of free will, as well as with remarks in "Host" that conservative talk radio outruns any liberal shows by purporting to offer "received truths" (286), "energizing" and uniting its audience with "a coherent set of simple ideas" (288). But are the conditions of hardship and hunger Wallace mentions really there in *Infinite Jest*? As I have argued (Severs 2017, 62-87), Wallace did frequently invoke the trials of his grandparents' generation – the Depression of the 1930s – as something that was missing for the Boomer generation who came of age in the 1960s and forged the world of affluence and supposed greater freedoms his generation inherited. But as many have noted, the apocalypse and collapse are always in Wallace's endings left in the offing, implied but rarely engaged.

Is Gentle the leader that, in the fiction, Limbaugh and Buchanan's "rumbles" led to (the vituperative, culture-war-fomenting Buchanan mounted a significant campaign to unseat George H.W. Bush for the Republican nomination in 1992 and ran again in 1996)? It seems hard to say, given how ridiculous and "funny" Gentle is, how hard it is to assimilate his literal cleaning obsession to the genocidal fantasies of purification that define fascist and authoritarian movements. Still, while Wallace's novel is no *Gravity's Rainbow* in prophesying an American turn toward the authoritarian (though see Brian McHale 2013 on all of Wallace's major debts to *Gravity's Rainbow* and its views on social control), many elements in *Infinite Jest* do align Gentle with fascism and totalitarianism. We might see his name itself as an echo of Giovanni (read: John) Gentile, Italian philosopher of fascism who led fascist councils and ghost-wrote Mussolini's manifestoes. Reconfiguration of O.N.A.N., Gentle's keynote geopolitical move (as backed by Tine), gets associated with Nazi manoeuvres in the 1930s and 1940s: there is talk of "Mexico's Vichified puppet-state" and "a three-country continental Anschluss" (1020) (the latter term, describing Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938, comes up several times in the novel). The text also describes Gentle's "experialism" as (from Quebec's perspective) "Finlandization", a term originating in the smaller Finland bowing to the desires of the totalitarian Soviet Union during the Cold War (1996, 421).

Gentle is no Gentile-like intellectual of the state apparatus, and as Bunch (2017) points out in his review of Trump-era reading, Gen-

tle "isn't evil; he's just a buffoon manipulating social undercurrents while being manipulated himself by far more devious individuals". I suggest that, to flesh out what forecasts about the entanglement of evil, politics, media, and entertainment *Infinite Jest* itself is making, we need to read the novel's two presidents, Limbaugh and Gentle, together – and as figures of a shared medium of sound. When these two are triangulated with the work of Madame Psychosis, a counter-reading of radio and sound in *Infinite Jest* becomes possible.

3 "Somebody's Mind Coming Apart Right Before Your Ears": *Infinite Jest* as a Novel of Radio

I argue in this climactic part of the essay that Limbaugh, despite his absence, haunts *Infinite Jest* when it is considered as a novel in which radio, broadcasting, voice, and silence are vehicles of real power, often political power. Wallace clearly prized his writing's achievement of vocal or oral effects. As he put his goals in a 1998 interview,

> I like stuff that sounds intimate to me, and that sounds like almost there's somebody talkin' in my ear. And I think at least some of the stuff that I do tries to sound out-loud, aural. (Scocca 2012, 41)

Wallace also noted that the complex *Infinite Jest* was structured like a sonic artifact: "It's really designed more like a piece of music than like a book, so a lot of it consists of leitmotifs and things that curve back" (Donahue 2012, 71). Some of the descriptions of talk radio in "Host" follow in this vein by seeming self-reflective about the goals of a fiction writer too: radio, somewhat like reading, "is the most solitary of broadcast media", and talk radio can achieve (like the fiction Wallace likes) a "special intimacy" with listeners (2005, 294). Talking solo for long stretches in inviting ways is very difficult, and as one of Wallace's station interviewees says of his shots at hosting, "It's *you*" listeners hear. If they tune out, "they don't like *you*" (296). Sustaining a long novel's voice and sustaining a long radio show have some things in common in Wallace's mind.

Long before "Host," Wallace had described radio in relation to TV in a curious way in 1990 in "E Unibus Pluram". There, radio figures as a pre-irony mode, and with the potential, it would seem (outside of Limbaugh's hands at least), to counteract TV's pervasive ironizing effects. In all the writing on Wallace, TV, and irony, as well as the connections between that manifesto essay and the novel that followed it, no critics have noted the power Wallace grants to radio's lack of images. TV "is a bisensuous medium", Wallace claims, and "needs irony because television was practically *made* for irony". TV's "displacement of radio wasn't picture displacing sound; it was picture

added. Since the tension between what's said and what's seen is irony's whole sales territory, classic televisual irony works via the conflicting juxtaposition of pictures and sounds. What's seen undercuts what's said" (1997, 35). Watching has special powers that radio does not, even though Wallace admits (perhaps undercutting the tidiness of this media and entertainment history?) that radio's comedic narrative shows too were often self-referential (a more sophisticated and complex account of new media recycling and re-presenting older ones is available in the term, influential in media studies of the last two decades, of "remediation" – Bolter, Grusin 1999). For Wallace, "once television introduces the element of watching, and once it informs an economy and culture like radio never could have, the referential stakes go way up". Humans as TV watchers "become vastly more spectatorial, self-conscious. Because the practice of 'watching' is expansive. Exponential" (1997, 34).

In *Infinite Jest* Wallace puts these distinct phases in mass media history into a powerfully regressive sequence for Joelle. She goes from visuality to invisibility, from acting in James's films (including, according to Molly Notkin, the Entertainment itself) to – when readers first come to know her in Y.D.A.U., through much obscuring of her identity – being a mysterious radio host, Madame Psychosis. There is something penitential-seeming in Joelle's veil, and while Wallace leaves ambiguous whether she is deformed by (and ashamed of?) her tremendous beauty or by acid thrown in her face, in a world of exponentially proliferating images with damaging effects, the veil seems self-imposed punishment for her visual role in the Entertainment (though she is unaware of its deadliness). Is her radio career, focused on the unbeautiful, likewise a kind of penance, an attempt at the moral perfection she seems to crave in identifying with Bernini's St. Teresa (though as in the story of *Blood Sister*, the path to moral purity for Joelle is one of Augustine-esque excess)? Such self-directed penitence lies in tension with the message she apparently utters in the Entertainment, the only audio as she bends naked over a crib: "I'm sorry. I'm so terribly sorry. I am so, so sorry" (1996, 939). That "sorry" reads as a message of apology from parent to child – an external message that infantilizes its audience and cannot be the basis for true adult maturation, even if it is wholly appropriate to all the execrably bad parenting *Infinite Jest*'s characters suffer through.

While at times invoking all sorts of esoterica, poetry, film talk, and so on, the audio of Madame Psychosis's show – especially her reading of dozens of deformities from a U.H.I.D. leaflet (185 ff.), with touches of the Bible's Beatitudes – is obviously filled with the suffering of birth and the challenges of growing up in a body that cannot be apologized away. All this is broadcast from a brain-like building that suggests the shows are dark interior monologues receiving verbal expression. Her broadcasts "seem both free-associative and intri-

cately structured, not unlike nightmares" (185) – and not unlike *Infinite Jest* itself. Her show is likened to (or consists of) literature during her stint of "'Madame's Downer-Lit Hour'", which includes readings of Stephen Crane, James Baldwin, and a "truly ghastly Bret Ellis period" (191) (with that well-known Wallace opinion of Ellis underscoring that the first two turn up on his interview lists of favorites and teaching syllabi – Miller 2012, 63; Jacob 2012, 155). A highly eclectic radio show is thus one of the novel means of metafictional reflection Wallace so often sought. DeLillo was probably again his guide: among the many wonderful talkers in his fiction, the rambling, improvisatory radio DJ's of the man who became Wallace's mentor-by-way-of-letters include the quite Joycean Warren Beasley in *Americana* and "Weird Beard" in *Libra*. In Wallace texts preceding the crowning radio creation of Madame Psychosis, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" stands out as preparation: the novella's whole long reflection on what it takes for Mark Nechtr to "produce[]" (1989, 233) fiction leads up to an ending short story of archery-murder that is "basically a rearranged rip-off of the radio's 'People's Precinct' episode" he heard on the long car ride (355-6). Wallace is suggesting more than postmodernist pastiche of recycled genre narratives here; he places in the 1980s the very unlikely material of an afternoon radio drama to install in this critique of TV commercials and J.D.'s deadly filming plans a literature-inspiring return to pre-visual media. A similar symbiosis exists between *Infinite Jest* and Madame Psychosis's shows, and here too there are contrasts between these 'good' productions of voice and other deadly visual material, in this case the Entertainment.

Vocality, silence, and possession are subjects in *Infinite Jest* with which Madame Psychosis's transformation into a disembodied radio voice might be correlated, and there I would point and defer to the incredibly thorough account of voice, authorial presence, and the supernatural wraith's abilities to enter others' minds offered in David Hering's chapter on vocality (2016, 24-37). Here (to wend my way from Madame Psychosis back to Rush Limbaugh and political themes) I will stick to recorded and broadcast voices and note what happens to the novel's radio associations when Joelle goes into rehab but her show stays on the air. She is missed most mightily by her unlikely top fan, Mario, who, an exceptional character in so many respects, points to radio's contribution to Wallace's central ideas about art, as well as to the important vocal and non-visual qualities that *Infinite Jest* the novel possesses and "Infinite Jest" the film does not. In the scene of Mario's insomniac nighttime walks down to Ennet House, Wallace stages a rare moment when his two separate communities are momentarily connected, and with far more therapeutic effects than when Mario's brother later goes there seeking addiction-recovery options. When Mario hears his favourite radio show (one from "Mad-

ame's inaugural year") through an open upstairs window, which "has a billowing lengthwise flag for a curtain", Joelle is, as it were, doubly veiled, doubly unvisual: Mario, from family dinners and his involvement in his father's films, would recognize Joelle if he saw her face, but of course she is veiled. But still he would not know an unveiled Joelle to be his beloved Madame Psychosis and not just 'a fellow listener', since he seems never to have recognized the former actor's voice before. This distance between Joelle as visual actor for Mario's father and Joelle as aural host for Boston becomes all the more potent if we start to wonder whether Mario, his father's cameraman at times, was present for the filming of the Entertainment (or even perhaps protected from its effects by not having to look through the anamorphic lens on his head-mounted camera?). The "tapes" (1996, 591) of Madame Psychosis that Mario hopes to ask for stand as salutary auditory alternatives to the film cartridges we know are transferred from E.T.A. to Ennet when sent home with residents who are on the cleaning staff (perhaps, as Marathe suspects, including the Entertainment?).

On a thematic level, Wallace introduces an aesthetic concept of tremendous importance to him here: Mario reflects upon hearing the early show that he had

> fallen in love with the first Madame Psychosis programs because he felt like he was listening to someone sad read from yellow letters she'd taken out of a shoebox on a rainy P.M., stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, stuff that was real. It is increasingly hard to find valid art that is about stuff that is real in this way. (592)

After that last sentence, which along with the phrase "U.S. woe" seems to drift momentarily from Mario's limited consciousness and vocabulary and into omniscient narration, the rest of the paragraph attends to Mario's uneasy laughter at an E.T.A. joke about belief in God. The entire paragraph marks not only a continuation of the associations of the radio show's effects and the novel's goals but also a gateway rhetorical moment in the argument *Infinite Jest* builds about 'real' and 'valid art' in general. A little over a hundred pages later, in the paragraph that is perhaps the most frequently excerpted in *Infinite Jest* criticism and reviewing, the text echoes the language of Mario's reaction to the radio tapes, though approaching the problem of US art from the other end, as it were, and through Hal's cool consciousness: "It's of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial USA treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool", this paragraph begins, going on to critique approaches to "U.S. arts" that will not admit of "gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naivete" (694) and thus miss out on (that Wallace obsession) what it means "to

be really human" (695). These are all, in my reading, radio-inspired thoughts about US art. For it is Mario the radio fan who serves as a first access point to this all-important line of Wallace's thinking about art, sincerity, and sentiment.

An alternate path from death-by-Entertainment, a turn toward a different kind of art, is thus glimpsed in a radio-centred *Infinite Jest*; but is that alternate path truly political in any way, as I am suggesting by associating Limbaugh and Madame Psychosis? The flag veiling Joelle, the presidential ring of "her inaugural year", and the turn to the language of "U.S. woe" all subtly signal that there are national political implications to this experimental Boston radio show. But to fully associate Madame Psychosis and President Limbaugh, I again need Gentle as a key mediating factor. Indeed, we could say that Wallace has structured the novel such that Gentle and Madame Psychosis can ultimately be seen as rivals in silence. Gentle's pre-politics background with the Velvety Vocalists Guild mimics Reagan's, including his strike with the SAG in a successful 1960 effort to secure residuals. Among all the types of leadership Wallace could have made the precedent to Gentle's political rise, he chooses the unlikely event of a sonic strike, the "seven months of infamously dreadful 'Live Silence'" that "brings GE/RCA to heel" on payments for sales and radio play of singers' recordings (381-2). An endnote describes the Live Silence as

> all sound withheld, a Job Action, rendered even more chilling by the skill with which the Frankies and Tonies lip-synch to utter silence – and the way the beautiful casino audiences, hit someplace they lived, somehow, clearly, responded with near-psychotic feelings of deprivation and abandonment, became a mob, almost tore lounges down, upended little round tables, threw free ice-intensive drinks, audiences in their well-heeled majority behaving like dysfunctional or inadequately nurtured children. (1029, endnote 149)

The scene of infantile reaction seems a precursor of the content and reception of the Entertainment, and there are hints too of the lab rats crazed over their p-terminals no longer being stimulated (471-2). This reaction to the silence of lounge-singers (seemingly not indispensable artists) exposes something about US culture that Wallace would explore more deeply in *The Pale King*, a final novel that marks (as I have argued – 2019, 184-5) a culmination in the examination of silence as an antidote to a society overloaded with information from all sorts of devices, including radios. In *The Pale King*'s "Author's Foreword", Wallace writes of "psychic pain" that most spaces try to cover over with "Muzak", TVs everywhere, cell phones, and iPods: "This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do" (2011, 87).

I have also argued that Wallace is deeply interested in depicting not just silence or the act of listening but "the art of falling silent"

after speaking, including in his own short stories' ending lines (Severs 2019). In *Infinite Jest*, Madame Psychosis's form of falling silent, when contrasted with Gentle's, seems the aesthetically and politically superior kind, even if done out of a kind of desperation. When she goes into rehab, she still insists on having her show occupy her time-slot, and her recasting of Gentle's Live Silence agitates the usually unflappable Mario:

> For the past several nights Mario has lain there in a sarcophogally tapered sleeping bag of GoreTex and fiberfill and listened to them run the weird static ambient musics Madame Psychosis uses for background, but without any spoken voice as foreground; and the static, momentumless music as subject instead of environment is somehow terribly disturbing: Hal listened to a few minutes of the stuff and told his brother it sounded like somebody's mind coming apart right before your ears. (1996, 450)

Mario in his mummy bag seems to be confronting death, to go along with the mental dissolution Hal says he hears; but to sense such motifs in one of *Infinite Jest*'s countless depictions of media reception is to have entered an exaggerated symbolic system of image and sound that proposes the stakes are as high as actual paralysis, dehydration, and starvation. The dangers of American media are not really death-by-viewing, though, and this big, masterful novel implies many types of casualties, including (as Wallace would say in increasingly profound ways over the remaining twelve years of his life after *Infinite Jest*) viably mindful forms of political discourse and public opinion for a complex nation. Radios across the land that immersed Americans in Limbaugh's dangerous world of loquacious certainty and simplistic truths were things that Wallace would go on to more directly critique into the next decade. So Limbaugh as past president makes sense as the backdrop against which *Infinite Jest*'s war of sound, silence, art, music, and power is waged.

4 In Conclusion: The 2024 Candidates

It was widely speculated throughout 2019 and 2020 that a post-presidency Trump would follow Limbaugh's lead and launch his own media company to rival Fox News – "Trump TV" or similar, with the subscription and ad money he needed and craved replacing the votes he had never expected to win in 2016. When Limbaugh's cancer forced him into retirement in October 2020, some speculated Trump might even fill his radio niche. When I began writing this essay last spring, Fox News host Tucker Carlson was being talked about as a frontrunner for the Republican nomination in 2024 – that is, if the perennial-

ly popular Trump did not make a comeback and run, which by now in fall 2021 seems a lock to happen. Some challengers are spoken of (Ron DeSantis, Kristi Noem, Mike Pence), but they will surely face a difficult path against inexplicable frontrunner Trump. And Trump's presidency, even in the President Biden era, still produces speculation that the Democrats' best bets are to get celebrity candidates of their own, governing experience be damned, whether Oprah Winfrey, Matthew McConaughey, or Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Wallace, even if he did not exactly predict Trump, did foresee much of this trend, on both sides of the aisle.

Whatever the electoral outcomes, it seems clear the legacy of Rush Limbaugh will continue to be felt everywhere in Republican politics. Wallace took a shot in the early-to-mid-1990s at predicting a future in which the transfers between the media world and political prominence would become more frequent and powerful. But the overlooked figure in Wallace's prediction of a dire future – the one in whom he heard fascist rumblings on the horizon – was Limbaugh, who fascinated Wallace because he could be brought into a dense symbolic system of sound, image, talk, and media. Wallace correctly saw that Rush had a cruel showman's rhetorical style that could have a real impact on what politicians did. But Wallace also admired in the medium of radio a set of counter-possibilities, an emphasis on voice that, absent of images, could instil the same kind of intimate relationship with its listener that he wanted to have with his reader's imagination. Better, though, to cultivate minds coming apart in the presence of his daunting pages for 25 years and more, rather than speak stridently for decades to a legion of Dittoheads.

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The Triumph of the Will of Athletes in *Infinite Jest*

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Abstract In 1995, in the introduction to *Tennis and the Meaning of Life: A Literary Anthology of the Game*, Jay Jennings lamented that there were still "no great" tennis novels. Had the collection been published just a year later, a revision would have been in order. David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), the encyclopaedic masterpiece set around the grounds of Enfield Tennis Academy, is a great tennis novel. Yet, when critics discuss Wallace's work on tennis, the focus is usually on his essays and tends to fall into one of two camps: either emphasizing the bodies of Wallace's dumb jocks, or the divine inspiration that helps them play so well. Once we recognise that Wallace's treatment of character was itself always dualistic, we can begin to reconcile these two apparently conflicting points of view. Doing so will shed new light on Wallace's treatment of tennis as a stress-test of the connection between body and soul, and will raise difficult questions about the fate of a country where that test is so necessary.

Keywords Dualism. Tennis. Humanism. Descartes. Fascism.

Summary 1 The Most Beautiful Sport There Is. – 2 Inspired Machines. – 3 Not Either. – 4 Triumph of the Will.

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And blest are those
Whose blood and judgement are so well co-meddled
(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 301)

1 The Most Beautiful Sport There Is

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) is one of the great tennis novels. It marks the high point of a life-long interest in tennis for Wallace – he was himself a "near-great junior tennis player" (Wallace 1997, 3), who grew up to be an even greater tennis writer – yet one need not know anything about the man to see why a sport like tennis might have appealed to the author of a novel about madness and solitude and suffering. Tennis matches have "no fixed duration" and can, in principle, go on indefinitely (Wilson 2014, 23). And since every position on an infinite score-line is as close to 0 as it is to 1, the joke is on you: two hours in and two sets up there are still endless opportunities to lose. Tennis players get to learn pretty quickly what it means to be a mind imprisoned in an imperfect body. Perfect subjects, then, "not just for writers but for philosophers too. The perfect game for Wallace" (Sullivan 2016, xi). Though it is a truism in Wallace studies, best put by Elizabeth Freudenthal and N. Katherine Hayles, that *Infinite Jest* is a "demonstrat[ion] of the futility of seeking agency via what is conventionally known as one's inner life" (Freudenthal 2010, 195), that "autonomous selfhood", indeed, is a dangerous "illusion" (Hayes 1999, 693) and the human will a dead idea, the sport of tennis, which sets the human soul so sharply at odds with the machine it is stuck inside, invites us to revise this prevailing view.

That tennis is the best and most important sport needs, I think, no justification. That *Infinite Jest* is Wallace's best and most important piece of tennis writing still perhaps needs some. When it comes to tennis, Wallace is usually remembered for his essays. The publication of *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis* (2016) – a Library of America Special Publication that collects Wallace's tennis nonfiction – is proof of their endurance, and shows how much has changed from 1996 when Wallace's piece on "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open" was not even "on the radar" of the editor of *The Best American Sports Writing* (Pilon 2015). Indeed, ever since the publication of Wallace's Federer essay – "the greatest tennis writer of his generation […] writing about the greatest player of his generation" (Sullivan 2016, xiii) – sports writers have been wrestling with the legacy of a piece "that did more to construct the terms in which we now view Federer than any other" (Phillips 2016). Much of the academic criticism of Wallace's tennis writing is similarly focused. Kyle R. King, Alexander Kozin, James Schiff, and James Wilberding all primarily orbit the argument Wallace makes in his essays, or at

most consider the opening pages of *Jest*.[1] In his survey of tennis's long literary history, Jeffrey O. Segrave does include *Jest* at the end of a prestigious line that takes in Webster (whose stage-players are bounced around like the "Starres tennis-balls"), Montaigne, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Shaw, Amis, and others, though his reading of Wallace's novel as a "lampoon" of "nepotis[tic]" academies, and of Hal being "used and abused for his tennis talent" because he could not possibly have written "a series of bewildering essays" (2013), suggests he has only read the novel's introduction.

Other than the obvious reason of its length, one explanation for why *Jest* gets overlooked is that tennis has been thought of, traditionally, as the "sport of love" and luxury (Segrave 2013): a game played by the leisured class on the Riviera grass (Wilson 2014, 43). In the Mexican writer Álvaro Enrigue's mini-encyclopaedic novel *Sudden Death* (2017), tennis is certainly emblematic of that old, courtly world. The pass-time of such great Western figures as Caravaggio and Don Quixote's temptress, tennis, for Enrigue, is also a synecdoche of European imperialism and the devastation of the New World. History, as he puts it, is a rigged match in which "the bad guys" always seem to "have the advantage" (190). While *Jest* pays homage to tradition – it is set in Boston, where a lawn tennis ball "first bounce[d] in the United States" (Gillmeister 1997, 207), thanks in part to a suitor of Edith Wharton, no less (Wilson 2014, 18) – his is a very modernly American game: capitalistic, high tech, hard courted, televisual, the site of grim "economic interests" of the sort described in his least-loved tennis essay (2012a, 133).[2] This is all in striking contrast to a novel like *Double Fault* (1997) by Lionel Shriver, which, though it is set in the same "cut-throat Open era" (20), is above all a romance:

> After all, tennis is like sex, isn't it? […] Listen to the language! *Long-body, sweet spot, throat* of the racket. *Dish* and *shank*, *stab* and *slice*, *punch* and *penetrate* – it's pornographic! […] *Approach* and *hold*, *break*, *break back*, *stroke*, *regain position*, and *connect* – it's romantic. (1997, 45; emphasis in the original)

Tennis is only like sex in Wallace's work insofar as sex, in Wallace's work, is also a philosophical exercise. For Wallace, tennis, like any other kind of "courtship" (Shriver 1997, 50), is a game for hideously isolated individuals.

1 From here onwards, only the abbreviated form *Jest* will be used.

2 In this sense *Jest* speaks to the years in which it was written. Tennis in the 1990s was dominated by American players, before Courier, Sampras, and Agassi were supplanted by the 'Big 4' from the Old World: Federer (Switzerland), Nadal (Spain), Djokovic (Serbia), and Murray (Scotland).

2 Inspired Machines

When it comes to those individuals, critics are divided. The question Wallace's essays raise, as Wilberding summarizes it, is the "problem of athletic genius" (2017, 109): how does he (and how, more broadly, do we) understand athletes? Are jocks little more than unthinking machines, or have they access to some special something? The problem is perfectly emblematized by Hal, who in the opening pages of *Jest* is able to play tennis beautifully yet whose ability to communicate has profoundly broken down. Wallace criticism has struggled to account for this – Stephen J. Burn calls it one of the novel's "most vexing problems" (2013, 75) – and readings tend to go one of two ways. On the one hand, critics such as Burn unpack the "mechanistic materialism" (2004, 45) that underpins much of the pedagogy at Enfield, where students are taught to think of themselves as ball-striking machines. Burn argues that Hal's breakdown can be read, in this context, as the consequence of an "impairment to his left [language-heavy] hemisphere" (48 fn. 4) or as a sign of full-blown "schizophrenia" (2013, 76), while Matthew J. Darling suggests that Hal has sacrificed "normal teenage selfhood" (2013, 223) to become a brilliant "tennis-playing automaton" (217). Wilberding, on the other hand, concludes that only "divine inspiration" (2017, 117) can explain the opening chapter and Hal's surprizing lack of an inability to play. Wilberding's reading runs in a similar vein to Kozin (who interprets the wind in Wallace's first tennis essay as a friendly "divinity" – 2017, 7), King (who argues that Wallace's view of athletes in the essays is "escapist", because "transcenden[t]" – 2018, 224), and Schiff (who, in his comparison of the sports essays of Wallace and John Updike, argues Wallace's writing style is that of a grafting player who does not have the "God-given prowess" of his seemingly effortlessly talented senior – 2018, 24).

It is a peculiarity of Wallace studies that its readings are either materialistic, or, at the other extreme, literally divine. In my view, this dualistic split in the criticism is a manifestation of the dualism that is so central to Wallace's own work, and we can begin to reconcile these two conflicting points of view when we understand that Wallace's treatment of all his characters, especially his tennis players, owed as much to the essentialism of Plato and Descartes as it did to the mechanistic models of cognitive science.

Wallace's debt to cognitive science is clearly evident at Enfield Tennis Academy, which treats its students in the same way you "might restore vintage autos or build ships inside bottles" (Wallace 1996, 63). They are bodies first. Indeed, the idea behind all the "frustrating mindless repetitive practice" (115) is precisely that it is "mind*less*": that practice is made permanent when it gets into the muscles and is not thought about. As Wallace puts it, the "sheer repetitive

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weight" of drills makes them "sink down into the gut […] down under your like consciousness into the more nether regions […] the hardware, the C.P.S." (117). The verticality in Wallace's description ("sink down"; "down under"; "nether regions") speaks to his understanding of the modern model of mind in which consciousness is just the tip of the iceberg of human cognition. "The self", as Antonio Damasio puts it, "is not a central knower and inspector of everything that happens in our minds" (2006, 227). Real skill is not in making conscious choices but in letting the hardware (i.e. the body and the just-as-bodied brain) do its thing.

There are two sides to this story, however, and this model on its own does not account for the Old World, humanistic philosophy that actually animates Wallace's (otherwise mechanical) characters. James Sr. may insist that his junior is "a machine a body an object, Jim" (Wallace 1996, 159), but James Jr.'s "fierc[e]" "woo[ing]" of a coach like Schtitt (79) is a reaction *against* his father's philosophy. Though Burn argues that the "prevalent mode of self-conception" at Enfield is still "mechanistic", despite Schtitt's best efforts (2004, 45), that materialist worldview is just the bedrock for what is the academy's most important lesson. As Hal puts it, the physical stuff is "just pro forma" (113): once the body works by rote, that is when "the character shit starts" (118). A materialistic reading of Wallace's tennis players stops before it does.

Descartes gives us a better framework. Though much contemporary cognitive science begins with what Antonio Damasio calls "Descartes' Error", the caricature is unhelpful. In "The Passions of the Soul", Descartes writes that

> every movement we make without any contribution from our will – as often happens when we breathe, walk, eat and, indeed, when we perform any action which is common to us and the beasts – depends solely on the arrangement of our limbs and on the route which the spirits, produced by the heat of the heart, follow naturally in the brain, nerves and muscles. This occurs in the same way that the movement of a watch is produced merely by the strength of its spring and the configuration of its wheels. (1988, 225)

Even the scientist, Descartes had to concede that the brain and swathes of the mind were in fact mechanical, and he was forced – in a kind of God-of-the-Gaps argument ("anything in us which we cannot conceive in any way as capable of belonging to a body must be attributed to our soul", p. 219) – to reduce the soul to an increasingly small role in the brain's "innermost part" (230). Thus, where Plato could separate "Reason" from the body entirely (2003, 153), for Descartes it was only the shrinking will, only conscious thought, only the "thinking thing" (2000, 25) that he could legitimately separate from a mech-

anistic universe whose remit had grown worryingly broad.[3] The philosopher Gilbert Ryle famously disparaged Descartes's theory that human beings are more than machine body objects as "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine" (2000, 17), and Wallace's critics follow suit when they celebrate his "critique of subjectivity" (Freudenthal 2010, 195) and his "subver[sion] of the Cartesian tradition" (206). Yet it is Descartes's error that animates Wallace's work. It may be wrong in the details, it may be a ghost story, but then Wallace was a *fiction* writer: a writer whose characters are, as he put it in the early draft of *The Pale King*, like "ghosts haunting [their] own fucking bod[ies]" (quoted in Redgate 2019, 69).

There is a consistent pattern of Cartesian imagery across Wallace's work – and particularly in *Jest* – that emphasizes the presence of both machine *and* occupier. Ira Halpern writes that tennis, like drugs and entertainment and everything else in *Jest*, is on a "continuum" between the two "pole[s]" of addiction and therapy (2015). Armed with Descartes we can begin to clarify their effects. A Cartesian model explains, for example, why "sedation" is synonymous with "depart[ure]" (Wallace 1996, 16), or why narcotics make you feel "less high than disembodied" (981), since in a Cartesian world-view putting the conscious mind to sleep is equivalent to vacating the body: drugs help you "literally *los*[*e*] [your] mind, like the massive dose pick[s] [your] mind up and carrie[s] it off somewhere" (214; emphasis in the original). It also explains why the Entertainment renders its viewers "docile and continent but blank, as if on some deep reptile-brain level pithed" (548). When the attaché is hooked by the Entertainment in the beginning of the novel, for example, others go into the room with "all good spiritual intentions" (87) only to find themselves trapped too, and bodied, and beginning to smell: "possessed of roughly the mental/spiritual energies of a moth, now" (549). Note Wallace's word choice here: "spiritual" intentions, "mental/spiritual energies", and, tellingly, "possession." According to Descartes, human beings without a soul are not human anymore, only the "configuration of wheels" that are "common to us and the beasts" (1988, 225). Wallace's characters go into the room as if "possessed" by a human spirit, and when that spirit is exorcized they become Carte-

3 Hence Descartes's peculiarly specific theory – "ridicule[d]" by his contemporaries (Makari 2016, 96) – that the soul must be located in a small gland in the brain: the "pineal gland" that Wallace used as the McGuffin in his first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987, 149). Descartes's model speaks more readily to the mechanical mindset that has never really left us, yet there are commonalities between Wallace and Plato, too. Wallace's description of Lucien literally "shed[ding] his body's suit" (1996, 488) at the moment of his death, for example, clearly owes a debt to Plato's description of the soul "wear[ing] out" the body like a "tailor['s] […] cloak" (2003, 159).

sian machines only, reptilian and insectile and inhuman.[4] You have to have something to lose for a drug to leave you "utterly empty, a shell, void inside" (Wallace 1996, 218), or for the Entertainment to turn you into an "empty shell. The iron will, the analytic savvy […]. All gone" (508). When the ghost is misplaced, the absence is felt so strongly because it was in there to begin with.

While it is important to emphasize that Wallace was not simplistically essentialist, the existence of actual, literal ghosts in his novel (James; Lucien) should suggest he was not entirely materialist either. Yet critics, especially when it comes to Wallace's tennis players, are split down a quite dramatic line: one group reads Wallace as a materialist who deconstructs the "liberal humanist self" (Hayles 1999, 693), while the other sees a literally divine force at play. What Wallace was, I think, was a humanist in the classical sense. To quote the title of Wallace's Federer essay, his characters are "Both Flesh and Not", both body and soul, both machine and ghost *at the same time*. Shriver wrote that "the tennis game is the window of the soul" (1997, 12), and though Wallace was hardly romantic this is literally true of his own work. The verticality in Wallace's descriptions of the low guts and high mind, of "subterranean compulsive[ness]" (Wallace 1996, 270) vs. the "command headquarters in the head" (272), is borne out of a Western metaphysical tradition wherein God is at the top of the Chain of Being and animals are at the bottom. Human beings, being both bodied and souled, are squarely in its centre: each of us, as Wallace puts it in his essay on the tennis player Tracy Austin, is that "exquisite hybrid of animal and angel" (2005, 143). We are *both*, not one or the other. Tennis helps us see it.

3 Not Either

On the 11th November in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, Helen Steeply sits with Aubrey deLint (and, later, Thierry Poutrincourt) to watch Hal and Stice play an exhibition match. The chapter's slower-than-real-time description of each point played is highly technical, as if the laws of physics have taken over: as if the boys' bodies are just going through the motions, and points are won be-

4 A blackout, explains Pat Montesian, feels "like your mind wasn't in *possession* of your body" (Wallace 1996, 464; emphasis added). The word occurs throughout *Jest*, and is often associated when it is with the Cartesian 'will'. Joelle's father "exert[s] every gram of trembling will he'd possessed trying not to drill" a hole in his daughter's wall (794), while Stice believes a ghost is trying to "possess" objects in his room and similarly "exert [its] will on them" (943). When Gately's stash of Demerol is discovered he is charged with "Possession with Intent" (462), though in this instance perhaps the crime's title should be extended to 'Possession with Intent to End Possession'.

fore they've run their course (on one shot we are told, for example, that there is no way, "statistically", of "Hal fucking up: Hal Incandenza does not fuck up passes off floater half-volleys" – Wallace 1996, 653). The play-by-play is so detailed, in fact, that it is quite boring to read. But this is the point, because it encourages us to think deeper than the details. Part of the cleverness of the scene's construction is that Hal is distant, in both senses of the word. Alone on the court far away from the stands (where the chapter's focalization locks the reader), he is also maintaining a learned stare, a way of "acting as if unwatched" (674), "register[ing] nothing on the face" (680). It is only the "mishit" (661) of his second serve and his going down 5-6 against a lower ranked player that tells us something – beyond the mechanics – has gone wrong. High-level tennis is about the character shit that complicates the rigid laws of physics.

Hal and Stice's match is a way for Wallace to set two different kinds of bodies, and thus two different models of mind, against each other. There is a stark difference between Hal's "fluid" mechanics (658) and Stice's, which are said to look a little like "bad animation" (653), a "segmented windup" (656), like "he'd learned to serve by studying still photos of the motion's different stages" (656). Interestingly, Wallace uses much the same language to describe Tracy Austin's book, calling it "inanimate" because it "gives us no sense of a conscious person" inside it (2005, 151). The metaphor evokes Genesis. Unlike Federer who is "inspired" (2012a, 33) – as God *inspired* life into the man he made from dust – Stice is a stop-motion maquette, a clay "man of parts" (1996, 658), not animated by a soul but golem only. This is fitting for a player whose head is said to contain "a wheel inside another wheel, gears and cogs being widgeted into place" (635), and it perhaps explains why the wraith chooses him, of all people, to haunt, there being such a vacancy.

Wayne, the academy's best player, is a similar sort of machine, though his game is even more "complete" (662): not comprised of turning gears but solid-state, like "tungsten-steel" (681). The difference, says DeLint, between Hal and players like Wayne is "the head" (682). Wayne "doesn't feel fear, pity, remorse" (682) – a description Wallace lifts, significantly, from James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) – because he is a machine through-and-through. And though Freudenthal reads such players as success stories because they "embrac[e] materiality" (2010, 205), locating their selves in their bodies instead of in some "inner essence" (206), Wallace's description of Wayne is less kind. He is said to be "less alive than undead" (1996, 263), a sort of a walking example of the "Philosophical Zombie", which *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines as an entity "exactly like us in all physical respects but without conscious experiences" (2019). The problem for the living, like Hal, is that despite his insistence that he is not "in there, inside his own hull, as a human

being", that he is in fact "far more robotic than John Wayne" (Wallace 1996, 694), his machine is occupied. "Hal *looks* just as perfectly dead out there", DeLint says, "but he's more vulnerable in terms of, like, emotionally. […] Some days you can almost see Hal like flit in and out of a match, like *some part of him leaves and hovers and then comes back*" (682; emphasis added).[5]

As Timothy D. Wilson puts it, the sporting "Zone" is a zen-like state where an athlete "is 'unconscious,' […] performing at an optimal level without any awareness of exactly *what* [they are] doing" (2002, 52; emphasis in the original). Wallace's players chase this phenomenological experience: the place where "[y]our body's doing it for you and the court and Game's doing it for your body. *You're barely involved*. It's magic" (Wallace 1996, 166; emphasis added). Yet his description of players turning into undead, machine-beings with a "chilly reptilian film of concentration" (678), is somewhat at odds with the religious ecstasies induced by a veteran of the Zone like Federer. The language Wallace uses in *Jest* suggests that tennis is just another means to an ugly end for characters who live in a world where it is not unusual to "year[n] for unconsciousness" (697). It is true that, when Hal and Stice play, the sky looks significantly "clear" and "washed" (653), free of the kind of "internal weather[s]" mentioned earlier in the novel (53). Yet even a healthy kind of brain-washing can be abused. "Talent's unconscious exercise becomes a way to escape yourself", Hal tells us (173). It does not augur well for Hal that his creator described the same "fugue-state" he spent his own tennis career "chasing" (1997, 19), in an essay cut short by an apocalyptic tornado.

Though Wallace charts a close association between drugs and sport, the obliteration players find in the Zone is very different to that which they find through narcotics. Tennis is not about erasing consciousness, exactly, but a way of being "*in* there […] a self that touches all edges" (Wallace 1996, 168), so "perfectly calibrated" (242) with the body that the soul becomes its image, such that the dualistic split between the two is dissolved. This is the same end, by very different means, of the way Entertainments free Joelle because they make her feel "full" (235), or the way Ennet residents sit "so close" to a screen that it "fills [their] whole vision" (202). Instead of a ghost in touch with every edge of its machine, addicts are filled to the ceiling of the skull by something other, leaving no space for the ghost to haunt. While I agree to an extent with Halpern that the programs

5 Gregory Phipps argues that the Canadian Wayne's "apparent lack of subjectivity is based largely on his inability to occupy the idealistic American narratives of athletics which would ostensibly humanize him" (2010, 77). Phipps is referring to a traditional narrative of "the ideal American athlete" who "displays tenacity in the face of hardship" (77), but the ideal athlete in *Jest* (American or otherwise) is hardly traditional: it appears to be someone who can willingly terminate their subjectivity.

of Ennet and Enfield both require the surrendering of the mind, I do not read them as a critique of the "Cartesian dualism" that Wallace apparently "succinctly collapse[s]" (2015). Similarly, Freudenthal argues that the "happiest characters" in the novel embrace a "material world without any Cartesian transcendence" (2010, 208), but the solution for winning tennis matches and for being a person, in Wallace's work, is to be *more* interior, not less: it is to "Occur" (Wallace 1996, 461); it is to be *in there*. In Wallace's Cartesian universe, drugs misplace the soul altogether. Tennis has the potential to "reconcil[e]" it with "the fact of having a body" (2012a, 8).

The problem is that Hal, being so well-read and so terrified of naivety, agrees with the materialistic theories about him. "I feel [like] a hole" (785), he says, and he takes drugs precisely for that reason: to be anti-interior, to get rid of himself, and though it helps his tennis for a while it is hardly a solution. Hal's is a peculiar kind of drug-enhanced performance. On drugs, with his consciousness dulled, Hal's "arm" feels like "an extension of his mind and the stick an extension of the arm" (689). "Bob-Hopeless", however, Hal is haunted, and his ghost's unwelcome presence destroys what he has "in the way of a kinaesthetic sense" (689).[6] It is telling that Hal's first-person narration begins in the novel when withdrawal kicks in, and he wakes from a nightmare of a "zoo" (851). That the chapter begins with a resounding "I" signals that Hal is not an unconscious zoo-animal anymore but a thinking thing, dissociated from the body he is housed in, disconnected but trapped, the victim of a terrible Cartesian bothness. It is because of that dualistic split, so at odds with the artificial Zone Hal had created with marijuana, that he nearly loses to Stice. "It's a will issue" (682), DeLint explains (in Cartesian terms), and Hal "just never quite occurred" (686) on court because he is too much a product of his culture to accept that the academy's Old World philosophy is aimed at him. Schtitt insists on it: "You are not arms. Arms in the real tennis is like wheels of vehicles. Not engine. Legs: not either" (461). Hayles argues that "Schtitt's tennis philosophy [is] meant to cure the dysfunctionalities of autonomous selfhood" (1999, 694), but the point of the lesson is that Hal has a self he needs to hold on to. Hal is more than a machine: he is a human being. He has to treat tennis as a way to be present, not absent. He has to revise his theory.

This begs the question, then, as to whether Hal's ending is a happy beginning for him? In the novel's opening pages his first-person narration is in full flow. "I'm not a machine", he tells us at last (Wal-

6 Schacht predicts Hal's fall early on, believing that Hal's substance-use and his consequent "explosion up the rankings has got to be a temporary thing, that there's like a psychic credit-card bill for Hal in the mail, somewhere, coming […] [something's] surely got to give, eventually" (270).

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lace 1996, 12), but someone highly interior and articulate, while on the court his tennis is even more extraordinary than before (5). Has he found the best of both worlds? Matthew J. Darling argues along these lines, suggesting that Hal's failure as a person needs to be understood as a consequence of his success as a player (2013, 215): that all sports people, indeed, must sacrifice normality for greatness. Hal has certainly sacrificed that. In the University office he is the opposite of in the Zone. His ghost and his machine are entirely split. Perhaps what matters, though, is that he is both. In the end at last he knows it more than most.

4 Triumph of the Will

Twenty-five years since its publication, *Infinite Jest*'s prescient depictions of "panagoraphobi[cs]" using videophones (151) and a populist, "sterile-toupee-wearing" imbecile getting elected President (381) have been unnerving. The lessons of Wallace's tennis academy may be more prescient yet. Discussing Enfield's Head Coach Gerhardt Schtitt, Wallace made the following comments in an interview with Michael Silverblatt on *Bookworm*:

> The stuff at the academy is kind of weird because, yeah, it's very high tech, and it's very 'become technically better so that you can achieve x, y, and z,' but also the guy who essentially runs the academy now is a fascist, and whether it comes out or not, he's really the only one there who to me is saying anything that's even remotely non-horrifying, except it is horrifying because he's a fascist. And part of the stuff that was rattling around in my head when I was doing this is that it seems to me that one of the scary things about the nihilism of contemporary culture is that we're really setting ourselves up for fascism, because as we empty more and more values, motivating principles, spiritual principles almost, out of the culture, we're creating a hunger that eventually is gonna drive us to the state that we may accept fascism, just because the nice thing about fascists is that they'll tell you what to think, they'll tell you what to do, they'll tell you what's important, and we as a culture aren't doing that for ourselves yet. (2008, 20′12″-21′37″)

Though the Coach's comic moniker and broken English suggest he may be talking Schtitt, we might recall also that Wallace admitted only being "able to have people say stuff that I think is serious if I'm

simultaneously making fun of the character" (2012b, 9-10).[7] It is what Hal calls Schtitt's "character shit" (1996, 118), his "Old World" values that "anchor nicely the soul", that are the academy's most important (albeit slightly "proto-fascist") lesson (82).

They are values that, to an educated American like Hal – so used to the cynical celebration of "internal emptiness as hip and cool" (694) – seem utterly "alien" (82). But this says more about Hal than it does about the values themselves. Wallace jokes elsewhere that watching the Eastern-European tennis player Ivan Lendl play is like watching Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi-propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (2012a, 29 fn. 14), but the joke is as much at his own expense as it is at Lendl's: as if conviction and resolve are as unthinkable as Nazism is to a good American like him. The same joke plays out in *Jest*. The Quebecois terrorists certainly have strong values and a willingness to sacrifice life and limb to uphold them, but their function in the novel is as antithesis. They are not so much a direct threat as a photographic-negative of a United States which will destroy itself on its own if it cannot escape the "totalitarian grip" of irony and cynicism on its "psyche" (Wallace 1997, 73). As in tennis, "the true opponent" is always "the player himself" (1996, 84). Fascism will find its voice in the New World for the same reason that AA, though it may be "totalitarian […] dare I say un-American?" (1003 fn. 90), is so necessary: because both can claim the sort of "moral clarity" (2005, 294) that Wallace felt his own generation so profoundly lacked.

It is not hard to see how appealing it must be for someone (a boy, say, of academy age) to be told not only how to anchor soul to body but to be reminded that they have a soul in the first place. The academy does what all fascist systems do and tries to fill the modern void by returning to the wellspring of old mythologies, and though the goal might be to have its adherents serve the Show or the State or their own selfish wants in the end, it has to start – as Robert O. Paxton puts it in *The Anatomy of Fascism* (2005) – with a celebration of "the efficacy of will" (219). The paradox is that Hal's generation is so inured to that lesson, such atheists when it comes to their own capacity for soul and will and action, that they have to be strong-armed into believing it by the kind of political ideology that ultimately threatens their individuality. Hunger is dangerous. People take nourishment where they can get it. We should not, to risk agreeing with Marathe, decide that "temples are for fanatics only and [take] away the temples" (Wallace 1996, 319). We should not leave the stories that matter to the wrong side to tell. It is a dangerous game but the quickest way to lose is not to play.

7 Schtitt's German-ish name presumably owes a debt to coach "Rolf Hauptfuhrer", the mini-Fuhrer from Don DeLillo's *End Zone* (2004, 12).

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Wallace After Postmodernism (Again): Metamodernism, Tone, Tennis

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Abstract David Foster Wallace's writing has come to be synonymous with post-postmodernism. Strategies that are often singled out in this respect include the return to epic forms of storytelling; a post-ironic attitude towards its subject matter; a concern with empathy and affective generosity; and an ambiguous but reinvigorated relationship of language to 'reality'. In this essay I consider some of these in the context of visual art. The aim is less to map one onto another, detailing how much they have in common, than it is to tease out some of the differences between them so as to pinpoint Wallace's position on post-postmodernism's cognitive map across the disciplines.

Keywords David Foster Wallace. Metamodernism. Post-irony. Art. Identity. Tennis.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Everything Will be Alright – Right?. – 3 Tennis for One.

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1 Introduction

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that David Foster Wallace, the man as much as his oeuvre, has come to be synonymous with what is variously labelled the "passing of postmodernism" (Toth 2010), a "succeeding postmodernism" (Holland 2013), "post-postmodernism" (McLaughlin 2012; Nixon 2013), and metamodernism (Vermeulen, Van den Akker 2010; Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen 2017). This correlation can hardly be called a surprise. After all, Wallace himself in a series of essays and interviews explicitly cast his doubts on postmodernism's critical sustainability, while not dismissing its legacy altogether. Indeed, his relationship to the postmodern structure of feeling oft seems defined in the first instance by these commentaries more than his novels, which, though less emphatic, can equally be read as attempts to liberate literature from what to many in the nineties had come to feel – rightly or wrongly – like an epistemological, poetic and ethical straightjacket. But certainly there have been plenty of insightful and incisive analyses of these latter attempts as well.

I am not a Wallace scholar. But from what I gather from the accounts of Wallace's relationship to postmodernism and its perceived passing, a few strategies and devices stand out. These include: the return to epic forms of storytelling, in terms of word count (Cioffi 2000), footnotes (cf. Letzler 2012; Nadel 2012) and worldbuilding (Hayes-Brady 2016), but also in the way of ethical coverage and ambition (cf. Boswell 2014; Sher 2015); a sincere or more specifically a post-ironic attitude towards its subject matter (Kelly 2010; Konstantinou 2016; 2017); a concern with empathy and affective generosity, both towards and between characters (Timmer 2010; 2017); the reconstitution of self beyond the Cartesian subject and its subsequent deconstruction (Den Dulk 2014; 2015); and an ambiguous but reinvigorated relationship of language to 'reality' (Bolger, Korb 2014; Hering 2015). I am certain that this list is not exhaustive (nor the selected references), but it suffices for my purposes here.

What strikes me about much of the scholarship around Wallace, post- and post-postmodernism – as well as, I suppose, a lot of the scholarship on literature and the cultural dominant more generally – is that it, firstly, pertains predominantly to an Anglophone and often quite centralized American and British context; that it, secondly, is discussed in virtual isolation from the other arts, be they museal and curatorial practices or popular media; and that it, thirdly, only rarely takes into account issues of representation, such as those of race, gender, or class. This observation is not a criticism. Not necessarily in any case. Wallace was an American author writing in an American context. His output, essayistic or novelistic, related to US culture and politics more than the goings-on in, say, Norway, or indeed places like Argentina, Bangladesh, Russia or Rwanda, even if

it might have, as Lucas Thompson (2017) has pointed out, been influenced by some of these countries' cultural traditions (e.g. the oeuvres of Borges and Dostoyevsky). It should not come as a surprise that most criticism concentrates precisely on this American and literary context.

At the same time, it seems self-evident that the study of Wallace would benefit from scholarship that takes into account a global or in any case more transnational view and that considers his writing alongside other media and cultural forms. Judging from his essays and interviews, Wallace was a voracious consumer of popular visual media, whilst the global sales and critical influence suggests that, whatever it was that he was onto, it resonated with interests and attitudes elsewhere in the world. To situate Wallace's writing in a broader cultural context does not diminish any of what renders it special to its readers. On the contrary, it might help us understand precisely why it has such an impact. Tastes, after all, are fickle: they change over time. But we do know that they do tend to be shared within cultures, classes, generations and/or locales.

In what follows, I consider some of the above-mentioned strategies and devices in the context of visual art, popular media and even politics. I am interested specifically in what scholars like Lee Konstantinou (2016; 2017) and Lukas Hoffman (2016) have called "post-irony": a critical reconsideration, often but not necessarily in the service of sincerity, empathy or immersion, of postmodernism's project of irony. The aim is less to map one onto another, detailing – or marvelling – how much they have in common; than it is to tease out some of the differences between them, the nuances that separate Wallace's attitude towards his stories, worlds and the people inhabiting them from for instance Ragnar Kjartansson's ambiguous relation to his material or Wes Anderson's tone in his cinematic oeuvre. What do Wallace and studies of Wallace have to offer accounts of contemporary art or movies and the critical discourses they have prompted, and vice versa?

Towards the end of this essay, I want to spend some time thinking through Wallace's relation to some of the current debates around identity, a concept or politics that is one of the pivots, I think it is fair to say, of whatever it is that the post-postmodern structure of feeling is about (Van den Akker, Gibbons, Vermeulen 2017; Brunton 2018). I will do this resorting to a little discussed but recurrent concern throughout his oeuvre, fictional or documentary: the tennis player. As decades of structuralism, poststructuralism and more recently the affective turn have demonstrated, notions of identity have historically been developed relationally: here and there, I and you, us and others. This relationality was rarely democratic: one party was generally thought of as the measure by which the other was to be judged. We all know who this measure was, of course: the white man, more

often than not from the upper ranks of the socio-economic stratum. Interestingly, though Wallace's writing is said to be characterized by a multiplication of viewpoints and worldviews, I would suggest that he, too, positions, quite literally, a baseline from which the others deviate. This baseline is that occupied by – who else but – the mostly white tennis player: John "No Relation" Wayne in *Infinite Jest*, but beyond that Michael Joyce, Tracy Austin, and Roger Federer, each of them at once the center of a culture's attention (for Hal, for April, for Wallace) and the 'black hole', if that's the term, in which all cultural sensibilities disappear; both more than human and nonhuman. If the first part of this essay takes the form of a generalizing overview, recontextualising some of the research I and others have done already, this latter argument is both specific and provisional: an attempt to begin making sense of a trope that I suspect is both central to Wallace's oeuvre and his relationship with post-postmodern culture, but that requires far more study to be persuasive: the tennis pro.

2 Everything Will be Alright – Right?

Lee Konstantinou (2016) has argued that one of the defining features of Wallace's work in the context of post-postmodernism is what he calls "post-irony". Post-irony describes an attitude characterized simultaneously by a problematization and affirmation of irony, the latter the unshakeable burden of having grown up, as Zadie Smith (2007) once put it, "under postmodernity"; to behave postironically means you do not want to put everything in quotation marks but feel that doing away with them altogether seems ill advisable too – and anyway, you cannot help yourself. Post-irony resembles the new sincerity, the popular label proposed by scholars like Adam Kelly (2010; 2016) and A.D. Jameson (2012), but is not the same exactly. What distinguishes postirony from the new sincerity is first that it does not delimit itself to a single response: sincerity is but one of many possible registers, which can include "commitment, or passion, or emotion, or decision" (Kelly 2016, 38). Second, post-irony does not articulate a liberation from irony as much as that it reconceives our relationship to irony. It does not presuppose, for one, that sincerity and irony stand in opposition to one another. It suggests on the contrary that they are not mutually exclusive at all. As such, it revises not just the relationship between sincerity and irony, but complicates the very notion of irony itself.

This account of Wallace's writing itself undoubtedly resonates with scholars of contemporary art or movies. Indeed, defined as such, Wallace's project seems to be the literary variant of what I and others in cultural theory and art history have described as a return of a 'Romantic desire' – characterised as it is by oscillation between extremes – in art (Vermeulen, van den Akker 2010) and what in film

studies is called "quirky" (MacDowell 2010; 2012; 2017) or "eccentric cinema" (Wilkins 2019). For example, this is how the critic Jerry Saltz in the mid 2000s characterized millennial art:

> I'm noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows […] It's an attitude that says, I know that the art I'm creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn't mean this isn't serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind. (2010)

And here is a description of 'quirky':

> a modal combination of the melodramatic with the comedic; a mixing of comic styles such as bathetic deadpan, comedy-of-embarassment and slapstick; a visual and aural style that frequently courts a fastidious and simplified sense of artificiality; and a thematic interest in childhood and 'innocence'. Most pervasive, however, is a tone that balances ironic detachment from, and sincere engagement with, films' fictional worlds and their characters. (MacDowell 2017, 29)

I argue indeed that Wallace's post-irony shares an interest, tonal approach and possibly even politics with each of these, as well as similar sensibilities in music, architecture, politics and philosophy. There is even a name for this widely shared sensibility, this prevalent structure of feeling: metamodernism. But for now, I want to narrow this general sentiment down to a few more specific devices to compare them in more detail. I will return to metamodernism briefly later in the essay.

To corroborate Konstantinou's argument, we might turn here to Wallace himself, whose oft-cited call for a critical rejoinder to postmodern irony in an interview with Larry McCaffery suggests both a more ambiguous relation to irony and a more nuanced – and multiplicitous – understanding of irony.

> The problem is that, however misprised it's been, what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. You've got to understand that this stuff has permeated the culture. It's become our language; we're so in it we don't even see that it's one perspective, one among many possi-

> ble ways of seeing. Postmodern irony's become our environment. (McCaffery 2012, 147-8)

This seems obvious to me, but let me say it nonetheless: Wallace here discusses post-irony but not necessarily sincerity. What he talks about, explicitly, is redemption, which suggests atonement for committed sins as much as it does absolving one from them. Certainly each of these, in their own sense, implies a sincere attitude towards both oneself and the subject matter – the sin. But they could equally be said to indicate distinct registers of commitment, passion, decision, and so forth: the commitment to do good, the decision to save whatever one can salvage. Similarly, the mentions variously of "sarcasm", "cynicism", "ennui", "suspicion" of authority, and a "penchant for […] diagnosis" might all be related, but they are each significantly different variations of the theme of irony. It is true that sarcasm and cynicism are each intersubjective distancing devices. But sarcasm signals contempt on behalf of the listener or reader, whereas cynicism, on the contrary, suggests the speaker (or their statement) is found to be untrustworthy. In the same vein, suspicion and diagnosis are both depth-models, yet the former assumes ulterior *motives*, whilst the latter is interested in involuntary *symptoms*.

Infinite Jest's attitude towards and treatment of irony are more convoluted. It remains ambiguous, tonally and concretely, as to what the alternatives to irony might be, describing it through expressly self-aware and perhaps even apologetic adjectives such as "*gooey* sentiment" and "*unsophisticated* naivety". This postirony, moreover, appears unachievable except for in times, sites and characters of what Giorgo Agamben might have called "exception", localized suspensions of the rule of law that precisely exemplify the rule of law beyond it ([1995] 1998), such as John Wayne's drug induced, incomprehensible stream of consciousness, AA meetings, and the posthumanised figure of Mario Incandenza, the stumbling, "grey-green" dinosaur – hardly sustainable models for a more rewarding sociality. This ambiguity seems partly the result of an indefinite notion of all that irony might entail: intersubjective distancing techniques, "weary cynicism" when it comes to truth, "embarrassment" and discomfort with what's "really real", a laugh that is not "happy". Kelly (2014) calls *Infinite Jest* a "novel of ideas", but I wonder in this regard if we should not rather think of it as 'poetic theory'; an intuitive feeling out of what the concepts that make up much of the characters' and our frameworks of signification might entail.

There are, Konstantinou (2017) contends, at least four types of postirony. These are: motivated postmodernism, credulous metafiction, the postironic bildungsroman, and relational art. Not all of these are drawn from the novels of Wallace, nor do they each apply to it. Indeed, only credulous metafiction can really be said to be relevant

here. Credulous metafiction is the use of postmodern form precisely to "reject postmodern content" (2017, 93). Postmodern form here includes self-reflexivity, intertextuality, formal play, pastiche and a generalized irony. The rejection of postmodern content more often than not takes the shape of a return to pre-postmodern values and commitments. Konstantinou cites Wallace, who described his own practice as "using postmodern techniques [...] a postmodern aesthetic", but

> using that to discuss or represent very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community and ideas that the avant-garde would find very old-fashioned. (93)

In practice, what this might look like in his writing is the movement between styles, sites and multiple competing viewpoints to render a fragmented yet coherent universe, as is the case in *Infinite Jest*; or the explication of artificial strategies to achieve human connection, like in the short stories "Octet" and "Good Old Neon". Credulous metafiction uses the tools that cut short the relationship of the words to things (i.e. 'reality') precisely to try and put the two together again in whatever form it manages to muster, like a puzzle made with no instructions and with pieces that belonged to different boxes; or a Lego figure thought up by a child. The point here is not to make the reader believe, connect or immerse themselves in the reality but rather to suggest to them the possibility of *a real world*. Robert McLaughlin has elsewhere characterized this as follows: this writing explores

> how to live in the world with incomplete systems of knowledge, how various systems of knowledge can be linked together or embedded within one another to create a contingent but useful structure. (2012, 221)

In summary, credulous metafiction acknowledges that metafiction has broken the relationship between language and reality beyond repair but not salvation – for the puzzle from the box and the puzzle pieced together from different boxes both communicate worlds, just as the Lego figure built after the manual marks a character no less than the five-headed, unstable one put together from scratch.

This description of credulous metafiction in literature could well have been the wall text accompanying any one of the art works considered by Saltz in his commentary on PS1's generational showcase *Younger than Jesus*, or indeed, nearly all of the practices that Robin van den Akker and I have discussed under the rubric of the return of a 'Romantic Desire' in art, 'informed naivety' in film and 'pragmatic utopianism' in architecture specifically and metamodernism more generally, but let me here discuss just a few. I mentioned above video and performance artist Ragnar Kjartansson, whose best known work

God, from 2007, depicts the artist as a crooner – his hair slick with gel and wearing a bowtie and smoking – standing in front of an eleven-piece orchestra, the stage and walls covered in pink velvet drapes, singing for thirty minutes straight the line "Sorrow conquers happiness", carefully looking for new pronunciations, notes and octaves to voice it with each new iteration. The visual aesthetic jars with the lyrical semiotics, the first suggestive of a heightened nostalgia for, as a New Yorker profile put it, "Frank Sinatra and Technicolor musicals" (Tomkins 2016), whilst the second calls to mind, I suppose, either the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard or the state of mind of a depressive – or both. This semiotic sense, however, is in turn called into question by a third register: that of the artist repeating the line again and again and again, seemingly ad infinitum reiterating this sad experience of the world, like a mantra of *Weltschmerz*. Yet because Kjartansson continually changes the manner in which he articulates the line, now altering his intonation then deciding on another note, the effect of the semiotic repetition is paradoxically one of affective movement, of progress: a feeling out of the possibility that somewhere between or beyond the words there is hope for another experience, and, indeed, in that feeling out the very experience of hope is achieved, rendering this video not so much as a mocking, indifferent account of despair but rather a manifesto for keeping the faith.

Guido van der Werve's video *Nummer 8*, also from 2007, follows a similar feedback-loop trajectory, a double redirection. The video opens with a note against a black screen stating: "Nummer Acht. Everything will be alright", which is followed immediately by an extreme long shot of a man strolling leisurely on a frozen sea as an icebreaker just behind him literally threatens to crush the ground beneath his feet. This juxtaposition between the proclamation and its apparent negation – the man is so insignificant, the ship so massive, the distance between them negligible, an instance at once of the mathematical and the dynamic sublime that conjures an image of catastrophe – is as surprising here as it is a cliché more generally, since this type of pun is common in late modern and postmodern video art but more still cinema, with directors like Todd Solondz, Alexander Payne and Quentin Tarantino frequently preparing characters or audiences for one reality only to, as a rule in a deadpan manner, deliver the opposite: the declaration of love in exceptionally unflattering lighting, or followed by a fart, the ice cream that falls on the ground, the grenade that is stuck to the finger. Yet like Kjartansson, van der Werve casts doubt on the video's dualistic structure by reneging to fulfil the second promise as well: for the duration of the video, the man keeps strolling, in the same constant, unhurried pace, whilst the ship remains at the same distance. The claim that "everything will be alright" thus goes from 'assuring' to 'preposterous' to 'hopeful in spite of, well, every rational thought or logic'.

The conceptual framework that Robin van den Akker and I (2010; 2015) have used to describe these feedback-loops is that of Romantic Desire as described by the philosopher Jos de Mul or, before him, Isaiah Berlin, and, before him, who else but Schlegel: a continuous oscillation between viewpoints, the pendulum's swing maintained by the equal but inconsistent pull of each of the different dispositions. One moment Kjartansson pulls us towards enthusiasm, the next he relocates the weight to pessimism, sincerity to parody, nostalgia to meditative mantra, just as van der Werve wavers between hope, despair, deadpan, etc. I do not have the space here to detail this oscillation in the feature length movies associated with quirky cinema, such as Wes Anderson's *Royal Tenenbaums*, Spike Jonze's *Her*, Miranda July's *You, Me and Everyone we Know*, or more recently Greta Gerwig's *Ladybird*, but James MacDowell (2017) and Kim Wilkins (2019) have suggested a similar productive tension is at play here, pitting against one another plot and mise-en-scene or performance and place only to subsequently problematize that ambiguity through yet another stylistic device – a diegetic impossibility, the cliché of the happy end, etc.

I would argue that an important distinction between Wallace's credulous metafiction and the Romantic Desires of some of these artists is that Wallace looks in vain for convincing solutions to the problem of depoliticized or corporatized irony, whereas the performance of Kjartansson and the video loop of van der Werve (and indeed, much of quirky cinema) find solutions – it is just that they are purposefully unpersuasive. This distinction becomes all the more pronounced in overtly political art practices, such as Ulf Aminde, Yael Bartana or Jonas Staal's performances of utopias that are as riveting (can diasporic cultures claim back land? Is this democratically functioning parliament of banned and terrorist groups really possible?) as they are ridiculous (for the answer is ultimately always no, the utopian performances expansions of our imaginary horizons more than programme politics).

Compare Wallace's project to David Thorpe's collages. Made from a variety of eclectic materials such as glass, steel, bark, leather, oil paint, paper, wood, and ceramics, these collages, often small in size, depict worlds that appear at once familiar and strange – and as uncanny as they are unmistakably utopian. They are familiar in that they appropriate conventions and motifs many of which can be assumed part of our globalised collective unconscious: we have seen them before, even if we might not be able to say where or when. These include: mid-century science fiction, new age and sectarian iconography, Populuxe, German Romanticism, nineteenth century American landscape painting, traditional Japanese wood cutting, Nietzsche's tightrope walker, indigenous architecture, and a range of religious and messianistic imagery and pagan elements. What is strange is that these eclectic conventions are not merely put into contact but seam-

lessly integrated, an achievement that would appear to be ethically transgressive to the point of being impossible since they each connote conflicting and in many cases incommensurable worlds: single-minded utopias that either were never realized or that, upon actualization, turned into dystopias; but in any case truth systems that would not allow for any of the others. It is little surprise, in this regard, that few of the collages are populated: these imaginary places are not to be lived in. Indeed, few of the church and temple-like structures even have doors. Thorpe, in other words, constructs novel utopias by picking and mixing fragments and rubble from precisely those all-consuming, mutually exclusive grand narratives that postmodernism helped us dispel; a vision for the future that shows us the warnings from the past, an activist piecing together loose puzzle parts they found in a historian's archive, science fiction fair, and New Age second hand shop (for a detailed study of Thorpe's oeuvre see Vermeulen, Van den Akker 2015).

I think it is fair to say that Wallace and Thorpe's aesthetic registers have little in common: mathematics versus mythology, flat and barren midwestern landscapes vis à vis mountainous forests, the presence of people as absence versus the absence of people as presence, tennis as opposed to tightrope walking. Yet they certainly share an ethical concern: both appropriate postmodern techniques – or in any case techniques we've come to associate with postmodernism – such as self-reflexivity, eclecticism and/or pastiche, to invoke the tradition of the epic. I use the term epic here not simply to talk about a distinct poetic register, plot or length, but the expansive, incomplete and often contradictory world that these instantiate and of which they are a consequence. For as classicist John Peradotto notes, epics are defined as much by their teleological purposiveness as they are by "the gaps, the disjunctions, inconsistencies, contradictions, and indeterminacies" (Peradotto 2011, 390): however much ground a story covers, it is only a fragment of a cosmos the bounds of which are unknown. Indeed, epics often draw attention precisely to the myths that we do not get access to, the routes we will not travel, the characters we do not get to meet. The epic's "referentiality", writes Marilyn Katz, "is forever open to question" (Katz cited in Peradotto 2011, 390). *Infinite Jest* moves eclectically and self-reflexively between stories, lines of inquiry, characters, voices, styles, times, places and referential frameworks so as to communicate and immerse us in a world that appears to be near-infinitely expandible: each new story, character, or timeline adds to the world, to the point that the reader assumes the world is less an afterthought, a side-effect, than the novel's central concern; and not a closed system but a topology, opening up into all directions without fundamentally changing its ontological properties. Similarly, Thorpe's range of material, stylistic and ethical references is so varied that one cannot imagine anything being

off-limits; indeed, in some sense Thorpe's collages remind me of the 'Wimmel' paintings of Brueghel or Bosch, where the most diverse, perverse and above all unrelated scenes compete for our attention across the visual field – just collapsed into one.

Evidently, Wallace is more descriptive, detailed, delineatory, in his account of the fictional world then Thorpe is. This includes the explicit address of referential frameworks, often through footnotes of scholarly length and precision. It is no surprise that Wallace's writing is often called "encyclopaedic" (Letzler 2012). Thorpe's collages are certainly representative, forms and colours designating recognisable objects, but minimalist and limited in size. The works also offer little in the way of explanation as to the references included and/or drawn on. Narrative, ontological properties and cultural context are the spectator's to figure out. If these differences appear unimpressive or insignificant, let me assure you they are not: they point to the artists' respective attitudes towards their work as well the nature of their engagement with us, a subtle but elementary distinction between two types, or media, or even pedagogies. Wallace sets out to connect with us by taking us by the hand, like an overeager parent or teacher, guiding us to the best of his ability through this world with the express purpose, I would argue, of having us experience differently and as such discover alternate models for inhabiting and reterritorializing ours. Thorpe, on the contrary, takes what I suppose we can call a more Montessorian or Steinerian approach: he allows us to explore and figure out this world – which is, of course, itself equally a commentary or revision of ours – and its possibilities on our terms.

I want to draw attention here, finally, to another recently popular approach in art making that is called 'parafiction'. Art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty defines parafiction as follows:

> like a paramedic as opposed to a medical doctor, a parafiction is related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic art […] It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. (2009, 54)

Interestingly, most parafiction I have come across the past years is explicit about its reference to fiction to the point of caricature: the real is reterritorialized by the most overtly surreal scenarios. If parafiction is about the "pragmatics of trust", its purpose appears to be to see just how far they can stretch that trust: how far are we able to extend our horizon of possibilities before it collapses in on

us? One case that I myself have written about in this context (Vermeulen 2014; Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2017) is Oscar Santillan's installation *Zephyr*, which was created between 2012 and 2014. *Zephyr* provides the account of the artist's real trip to the Ecuadorian Jungle to posthumously realise Carl Jung's alleged desire to see the Civilization of the Jaguar. Santillan's method for achieving this was, a slideshow of titled snapshots inform us entirely in earnest, to ask a local shaman for route descriptions, take a vacuum cleaner and suck up jaguar smells and dust from the assigned site, and deposit these into a sculpture that was made after Jung's astrological birth chart. The sculpture is placed squarely within the exhibit atop a thin column. This installation both multiplies and exacerbates the feedback loops or double negations characterizing the work of Wallace, Kjartansson et al. Indeed, each new element here reterritorializes the previous: the earnestness and even gravitas of the presentation (a darkened room, the clicking sound of the slideshow, the sacralization of the sculptural object as trace) versus the absurdity of the endeavor, the shaman and the vacuum cleaner, the smells as deposits, the sculpture and the birth chart, the whole unsubstantiated but possibly true backstory of Jung's desire, past and future, exoticism and the Occident, colonialism and heritage, the report of the slideshow and the indexicality suggested by the sculpture. The whole experience is as moving as it is ridiculous, imbuing upon the visitor the sense of significance being sought, meaning made, even in the most unlikely of combinations and configurations. Santillan scrambles together remains of a range of conflicting but each now abandoned systems of signification and affect, indeed, 'puzzles', to try and unearth something, anything of spiritual value in the process. If Wallace's postironic attitude in *Infinite Jest* is called credulous metafiction, then this might be labelled credulous metalepsis, or alternatively incredible realism.

Wallace's postironic attitude, thus, even as narrowly defined as it is here through the register of credulous metafiction, resonates across these various artistic and cinematic practices, regardless of their formal differences or ethical disagreements. Yet, to be sure, this resonance has little to do with the reflexive recursivity of the mirror. Rather it might be compared to what I believe in English is called the Telephone Game: a story is passed on from one to the other, and though the gist remains the same, its developments, characters and outcomes do not: possible impossibilities and impossible possibilities, encyclopedic epics and ill-defined myths, generosity of spirit and trust-based action, forking paths and circular reasoning. I do not think that Wallace initiated this game, to be sure; I doubt any one artist has. It is more likely that many of them around the same time began hearing, truly or falsely, whispers from all over the place – generational fatigue, historical revisionism, socio-economic

crises, political discourse, climate change, the advent of the Internet and later social media; fragments they themselves pieced together in whatever format made intuitive sense to them and which they shared with others, whether out of kindness, desperation or narcissism. What matters is that this indexical diffusiveness and incompleteness notwithstanding they each had the desire to reach out to one another – to connect. This – all of this – taken together, I would argue, is what we might call the 'metamodern structure of feeling': the intent to look for meaning precisely where you are unlikely to find it, together with varying others – but going ahead with it nonetheless because there is not anywhere else to rummage left; a re-energised and dispersed modernist impulse held in check (for better or worse) by postmodern doubt.

3 Tennis for One

"Wallace's characters and narrators", Timmer writes, "are not good at all at explicating what really moves them, what they truly value" (2017, 115). They are, of course, quite accomplished at talking through what they do not appreciate, about themselves or others: their anhedonia masking their existential loneliness, described as an inability to connect fully to the 'human' they hope but are by no means sure is still hiding somewhere deep inside of them. Few of Wallace's protagonists are more reflective, of course, than Hal Incandenza:

> Hal Incandenza, though he has no idea yet of why his father really put his head in a specially-dickied microwave in the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar, is pretty sure that it wasn't because of standard U.S. anhedonia. Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like joie and value to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being – but in fact he's far more robotic than John Wayne. One of his troubles with his Moms is the fact that Avril Incandenza believes she knows him inside and out as a human being, and an internally worthy one at that, when in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing at all, he knows. His Moms Avril hears her own echoes inside him and thinks what she hears is him, and this makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely. (694)

What is intriguing about this fragment is that Hal's neuroticism, perceiving himself as hollowed out, is communicated relationally: in relation to his father, the mystic/charlatan; his mom, the delusional; and, above all, John Wayne, the academy's star tennis player, who

he suspects of never having had any interior depth at all – an automaton, a 'robot'. Elsewhere in the novel other types are proposed, of course – the addict, the mathematic, the hysterical – but they are each variations on the same relational theme: responses to hollowness, depthlessness. For Wallace, identity is relational not by choice but by necessity: whatever homunculi, souls or transcendence there might once have been, it is gone now, consumed like any other commodity (undergarment, whoppers) by the late capitalist culture they inhabit and which – judging from the description of the "echoes" – inhabit them. This Cartesian emptiness is an open wound that, depending on the character, is confronted, oppressed, or disavowed differentially. To Hal's mind, the single exception is Wayne, however. For this "robot", supposedly, this emptiness is not a signifier of loss nor liberation but simply the absent index of presence. He passes through culture unaffected and culture passes through him unaffectively. Indeed, in a paradoxical sense, what renders Hal and others human, still, is precisely this ability to be culturally dehumanised. Wayne, in this regard, was never human to begin with: he is nonhuman.

There has, to my knowledge, been very little writing on Wayne, and the reasons would appear obvious: he is but a minor character; he appears almost exclusively anecdotally, in descriptions of others; and much of what these accounts tell us about him – a "machine" with "stellar calf-development" (956), "reserve in motion" (1073), whose locker is "neat and organized" (103), someone with only "one gear" (1010) with an "unreadable expression" – does not speak to the imagination, exactly, unless you're a fan of science fiction, and robots. (His single redeeming quality would seem to be that he farts like a Canadian, lifting one leg slightly, but this too is generic, the opposite of specific to him). At the same time, however, Wayne stands out, is to the other players what his famous namesake is to the other Waynes: the measure. He is the player they all desire to be, the one they compare themselves to. He is also the one they want (to want) to be more like them. They do not know how to interact with him, this silent guy with his "unreadable expression" – who, when he speaks, does so in platitudes and clichés. Larger than life and the most insignificant of them all, central to so much of the narrative and yet himself for the most part absent from the narration. (Indeed, there are a few indications in the text that hint at Wayne precisely as enigma: his obvious working class roots, his relationship with his family and country, his inner life as implied by the Joni Mitchell CD he quietly listens to, his acting out – or being abused into – what would appear to be Avril's sexual fantasy, and, of course, his final, drug-induced stream-of-conscious).

Readers of Wallace's essays on tennis (2014)[1] know these qualities well, for he describes exceptional tennis players along the same lines: idealized athletes who disappoint us spiritually ("flat" and "affectless" are words that are used frequently), human aliens who experience life on such different terms from most of us (moving with "transcendent beauty that makes manifest God in man" – from the essay on Austin) that they cannot be described in the vernacular we use to connote the latter, automatons beyond idiocy or mysticism, or sincerity or irony – for whom the cliché is not trite but "simply true", "imperatives that are either useful or not and, if useful, to be invoked and obeyed and that's all there is to it" (from the essay on Joyce). Considering the sparse allusions to Wayne to these latter reports, I argue that what these characters have in common is their relationship to their immediate environment, which is at once acute and disaffected. "Ascetic", Wallace calls it somewhere (Joyce). "Childlike", elsewhere (Austin). In Wallace's accounts, tennis pros pass through their environment and let it pass through them as evenly and cleanly as possible, except for the moments on the court, when they act in motion with it (as he puts it, like in *The Matrix*).

There are three observations I want to share here, provisionally. The first is this: in Wallace's conceptual framework of identity and culture, the tennis pro occupies a special place: they are both the frame, the boundary outside of which we are no longer in the territory of humans but nonhumans; and what in painting is called the 'vanishing' or 'direction' point, the point on the image plane where all lines converge – and which as a rule corresponds to the 'eye point', the position from which the whole should be viewed. This 'vanishing point' is either the invisible origin of humanity, humanity before culture; or alternately, as some commentators have suggested, a materialist understanding of the self, which is to say, the disintegration of the mind-body split (the "ghost in the machine") and the reconstitution of a monadic self, a "machine in the ghost" (cf. Burn 2012; Hering 2016). The tennis player, after all, is as pragmatic as they are unreflective. This, probably, is why Wallace finds them so fascinating: they are at once nonhuman and more than human. As for Wallace's other characters – and the rest of us: they find themselves suspended between, a ball moving between the baseline and net – which is to say, of course, a rock and a hard place.

The second observation is that this privileged position would seem to be not entirely unrelated to the tennis player's class and race. Even though Wayne is suggested to come from a working class background, tennis is not a working class game and indeed Wayne's life at the school, perched atop a hill towering over the rest of town, is no

1 Since I make use of the epub version, I refer to essay titles instead of page numbers.

longer working class, economically or socially. The players to whom the essays are devoted are without exception middle class. What all of them further have in common is that they are white. What this suggests is that Wallace's framework for identity – the baseline and the net – quite literally is middle class and white (see also Hayes-Brady 2016). Indeed, I do wonder whether athletes playing sports that are either or both less middle class or/and less white, and especially athletes that are themselves neither of those, could serve the same function. Judging from recent discussions in popular media, especially around Colin Kapernick taking the knee and Lebron James' spat with Zlatan Ibrahimovic, which centered around the question whether an athlete should bring their politics to the game or their game to the politics, it seems unlikely. It might be further noted, in this regard, that much of the debates around post-irony, or indeed Romantic Desire in art or quirky in cinema, has been concerned precisely with middle class, white and more often than not urban authors, artists, filmmakers and characters. Given the difficulty in conceiving of a conceptual framework of identity and culture not bounded or centered around middle class or white athletes, how representative are these developments, really? Or put like this: who might we assume to be represented by them? If this question seems disingenuous to you, or at least an oversimplification, I urge you to consider those cultural products concerned with baseball, like the novels of Bernard Malamud, Phillip Roth or more recently Chad Harbach, or the films of Ken Burns or Richard Linklater: as scholars of these works have long acknowledged (cf. Elias 2001; Baker 2021), the American Dream as it is presented by the 'national pastime' is generally exclusive to middle class, white men from rural towns.

In the context of these two observations, let me make a third and final comment. Wallace's suggestion for a meaningful mediation of one's suspense on the tennis court, which was all he could imagine in the absence of a conceivable possibility to exit, i.e. to transcend, it altogether, was intersubjective care, empathy (Timmer 2010). His novels establish, between author and reader as much as between characters, what we might call a 'sensitive' or 'affective' community: slivers of space momentary sliced open in the middle of the game, sensations of a live lived differently only fleetingly available yet forever reterritorializing the horizon of possibilities beyond the baseline – on the baseline. It is this affective generosity – one that combines the ambition of the depth-model with the pragmatism of materialism, resulting in a performance of transcendence in a theatre where the audience knows metaphysics are a myth (a sentiment I have elsewhere described as "depthiness" – Vermeulen 2015) – that offers the impossible possibility of recontextualization, of reterritorializing the competitiveness, rules, divisions and straight lines of the tennis court into one of companionship.

If we ask after Wallace's reach beyond literature, I am not sure this suggestion has been heeded, especially not by the millennials and generation Z that are so often felt to be his intellectual and spiritual disciples. Here, in the despising and despicable post-truth populism of the alt right as much as the well-intentioned woke culture, this care itself is often argued to have become yet another abstracted commodity, a prized object to exchange on the public marketplace of moral virtue (Dean 2009). Not a use value as much as an exchange value. Not a reterritorialization of the competitive logic of the tennis court but another trick in the player's arsenal. Whether this is a fair assessment or not I am not sure, but judging from most self-presentations on social media and accounts in popular fiction ranging from *The Flame Alphabet* to *The Topeka School*, *I May Destroy You* to *The Chair*, and the comedy of Hannah Gadsby to the stand-up of Dave Chapelle, it is certainly one that is widely shared. Consider, for instance, this conversation between a middle-aged couple and their daughter in the recent HBO hit series *The White Lotus* (season 1, episode 3), a show concerned partly with this generational disparity. Father Mark, played by Steve Zahn, has just found out that his father, who was his role-model for how to be a man, was gay – and died of AIDS. He is taken by surprise by the news to the point of shock. His daughter Olivia (Sydney Sweeney) finds it difficult to empathise, as does her friend Paula (Brittany O'Grady). This, in turn, annoys Olivia's mom Nicole (Connie Britton).

Olivia: Dad, why are you so upset, though? You're like catatonic.
Nicole: Well, it was a secret that was kept from him his entire life, Liv. So now, whatever image he had of his father, of his childhood, has been pulverized.
Olivia: You know, he was probably a bottom. That's how you mostly get it, receiving. Dad, do you feel like your father was less of a man or something? […] Even if he wasn't a top, it doesn't mean he was a femme. He could've still been butch, dad. […] Maybe he was a power bottom. Does that make you feel better?
Mark: No. That makes me want to throw up.
Olivia: Dad, you don't want to say that.
Nicole: Well, he can say whatever he wants. You know, if he's having a negative visceral reaction to his father having gay sex, it's valid. It's fine.
Olivia: Well, it comes off as homophobic.
Nicole: Well, it's not. […] Luckily he is in a safe space and he's here with our family, so he can come off however he wants.
Olivia: Up to a point.
Nicole: Or what, you'll cancel him? Dox him? Sic the K-Pop fans on him?
Olivia: See [to Paula] what I have to deal with?

The White Lotus plays out empathy along two lines, which run parallel but never meet. The first is Nicole's private empathy for her husband's shock regardless of whether this is publicly ethically considerate (which, to be clear, it is not). Let us call this concrete and contextual empathy 'hypothetical'. The second is Olivia's public ethical consideration for an oppressed minority, LGBTQ, which allows no private affective generosity towards her father's feelings. Traditional philosophers might have termed this abstract and decontextualised ethics 'categorical'. This categorical approach is, however, suggested to be a question of principle as much as it is of peer-approval, and as much about the other as about oneself: she looks at Paula throughout to gauge her friend's opinion. Paradoxically, here, empathy is not so much a means of reaching out, as it is of receiving back. If it is absolute, it is also 'impure', disingenuous. It is a moral virtue not in its own right but to be shown off to others. To return to the vernacular of critics like Jodi Dean described above: it is less a use value than exchange value, not a signified but signifier. It buys one social credit.

Wallace proposes, in *Infinite Jest* as well as his other novels, essays and interviews, an intimate, immediate empathy that allows for the possibility of a more abstract affective generosity. What *The White Lotus* here suggests is that the former does not necessarily imply the latter, indeed, it might actually impede it, an extrapolated 'cruel optimism'; and that generation Z have turned their attention to empathy, but without heart, just another signifier in an endless chain of signifiers that has long been detached from whatever reality it was once locked to. This does not only not open up within the tennis court spaces of community, as Wallace had hoped, but is the opposite of what he had in mind: it closes down, fills up, even those remaining niches and cracks.

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Section 2
Children's Literature and Political Correctness

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Transgression vs the Politically Correct: Phases and Faces of a Core Category in Children's Literature

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It seems that in recent years criticism has been eagerly focusing on 'transgression' and 'transgressive' as keywords that enlarge the epistemic horizon, allowing the scholar's gaze to descry areas previously untouched, or explored with a different cultural bias. In the literary domain, as an intentional act that involves trespassing, and the breaking of rules performed in explicit ways, transgression is often linked to language and form, and also to questions of gender, politics, social behaviour. The following articles, while dwelling on transgression, locate it within the area of children's fiction, thus operating a first preliminary transgression, inasmuch as this kind of literature has been traditionally moulded by the romantic and pastoral fallacy of childhood as an innocent, untainted, happy condition, and, in turn, by the Victorian cult of the child that thrived on aesthetically idealized representations of childhood and youth, teeming with sound moral principles, healthy didacticism, excellent examples of virtue.[1] It must be noted that children's literature does also include texts that foreground children intent on disobedience and mischief, such as *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845), *Max und Moritz* (1865), *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1870), *A Bad Boy's Diary* (1880), *The Wouldbegoods* (1901), *Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca* (1912), to quote a few titles: books whose

1 Fairy tales, not considered here, are not exempt from the stigma of bad behaviour (see Bottigheimer 1989).

content and protagonists are so distinct from the traditional fare for young readers as to constitute a genre apart, the 'bad boy story'.[2] With a few exceptions, however, these stories end up with the punishment, repentance and reformation of the bad boy, thus acquiring the mood of cautionary tales. This has to do with another element of complexity, namely the adult lurking within the text as author, or figure of power, slyly directing the reader's response and expectations: Jacqueline Rose (1984) has alerted the critics on the point, which, in our case, throws a suspicious light on transgression and its unavoidable limit, as described by Michel Foucault:

> [t]ransgression is an action which involves the limit […]. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them. The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess. (Foucault 1980, 33-4)

In the 1990s, Alison Lurie's pioneering work, *Not in Front of the Grown-Ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (1991), examined texts for children that were *not* of the improving kind: Lurie used the category of subversion as the tool meant to reveal not only the children's quest for freedom, knowledge, power, but also the hidden adult inhabiting their texts with his/her ideology, his/her moral lessons, and the more-or-less explicit fears and desires adults impart to the young generations:

> [t]here exists in our world an unusual, partly savage tribe, ancient and widely distributed, yet until recently little studied by anthropologists or historians. All of us were at one time members of this tribe: we knew its customs, manners, and rituals, its folklore and sacred texts. I refer, of course, to children. The sacred texts of childhood, however, are not always the ones adults recommend. (Lurie 1991, ix)[3]

2 In children's literature also animal stories may endorse the transgressive attitude: see Beatrix Potter's stories of Peter Rabbit, a disobedient young rabbit, of Tom Kitten, and the mischievous Squirrel Nutkin; also Kenneth Grahame's character of Mr Toad in *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) provides a good instance of transgressive behaviour.

3 Robyn McCallum and John Stephens (2010) have also investigated the role of adults in moulding children's literature.

What Lurie did with her book, delving into the area of subversion (itself a subtler form of transgression), also inspired the conference on *Transgression vs the Politically Correct in Children's Literature* held in 2019 at Milan State University, and the articles included in this journal. By contrasting the ambiguous yet constricting mantra of the 'politically correct' against 'transgression', the project sought to stimulate research on a category that, according to Peter Hunt, sums up *the heart of the conflicts* in children's literature.[4] Can children's books ever be truly transgressive when the power-structure that produces them is always bent on educating children into the current politically-correct norm? Indeed, however transgressive the books for young readers might be, they are at best in tension with the politically-correct publishing/author/adult complex, and at worst controlled or permitted – like carnival or Saturnalia.

The limits imposed on transgression have been pointed out by John Stephens in his seminal *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992), which examines the presence of principles and rules impinging on childhood, either as explicit beliefs expounded by the author, or as implicit passive notions endorsed by a writer, or as the ideology inherent in language itself. Stephens is also aware that the study of ideology inhabiting the text could be of interest to scholars who refer to reader-response theory. In fact, bringing to the fore the implicit reader in children's literature was a strategy meant to show the gap between the child reader and the author presiding over the text in even greater detail and often in dramatic conflict.

The authors who offer their contributions to the present collection have at once described the act of transgression and, more cogently, the uncertain territory where transgression is met by its limit, the politically correct, whether it be the net of language with its countless shades, omissions, ironies, uses and misuses, or the social prescriptions that write the agenda of rules for the young. The very ambiguity of the politically correct, its much-debated history in our recent culture, has increased the tension, possibly even the conflict, between a 'political correctness' related to language and placing its limit on unusable words, and the plea of those who defend freedom of expression and brand the politically correct policy as a superficial form of moralism (Hughes 2011).

In "Forbidden Words: Language Control and Victorian Political Correctness in Dickens and Carroll", Galia Benziman examines Victorian patterns of censorship and self-censorship in Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and Lewis Carroll's Alice books (1865; 1871). Her study goes back to Maria Edgeworth's campaign against fantasy books, and

4 I am grateful to Peter Hunt for attending and chairing the conference and offering these valuable and illuminating remarks on the subject.

then dwells on Victorian educational rules that involved language control. Dickens – elsewhere a staunch defender of fairy tales – exposed the explicit means of coercion used by adults, parents and teachers, to thwart the child's imagination and creativity, and to mould the obedient and hard-working citizen of the future. The school of Coketown is the place where the teacher – ironically, Mr Choakumchild – has devised a lexicon where numbers replace names, and where the empathic and knowledgeable description of a horse is replaced by an arid formula taken from a manual of zoology. Dickens's depiction of schools, classrooms, and teachers, was never brimming with praise, as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield* show. Yet *Hard Times* sets an even sharper focus on classroom didactics, especially when the Lancaster's monitorial system for the education of poor children, adopted in industrial districts, comes into the picture. Language control, self-censorship and verbal training were part of the Victorian-era politically-correct discourse. Benziman's epigraph, a quote from Orwell's *1984* defining that novel's "Newspeak", suggests that the sinister power attached to language control, when vocabulary is impoverished and sterilized, also extends to the control of minds and bodies. She argues, with Slavoj Žižek (2019), that "Political Correctness Is a More Dangerous Form of Totalitarianism". Benziman's essay also examines the Alice books, especially *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), where the educational system, manners, rank and race are duly satirized: "[a]s one may expect from an Oxford Don, the most thoroughly satirical attacks […] are directed at education" (Lurie 1991, 23).

However, political correctness was not only a staple of Victorian education. Deborah Lévy-Bertherat, in "The Blue Fairy and Wendy: Incest, Sacrifice or Feminine Empowerment?" finely examines the very subtle transgressive innuendos attached to two young female figures in children's fiction, namely the blue Fairy in *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*, 1883) by Carlo Collodi, and Wendy in James M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, first staged in 1904, and published as *Peter and Wendy* in 1911. Both described as girls, both acting as surrogate mothers, the blue Fairy and Wendy inhabit an ambiguous territory, where the child is also an adult mother figure. As such, empowered in their maternal role, they challenge gender hierarchy, and question the hero's responsibility and masculinity. Transgression appears in the form of incestuous desire, infantile sexuality and, in the case of the Peter Pan play, homoeroticism, Peter's role being played by an actress. The so-called Golden Age of children's literature contained, after inspection, much material that was just gilded. Lévy-Bertherat then moves to discuss the Disney adaptations of those two classics, where, predictably, Disneyfication did 'correct' all the aspects that made them questionable. Transgression was quenched by Disney's animated musical fantasies *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Peter Pan* (1953), which advocated

order and obedience, thus doing away with the freedom of childhood and whatever sounded transgressive in the motherly figures of blue Fairy and Wendy. Matteo Garrone's *Pinocchio* (2019) and Benh Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020) apparently mitigate gender stereotypes – a gesture towards the politically correct of recent years – but the disturbing ambivalence of the girls disappears in favour of more univocal characters.

Based on the analysis of a French novel that can be classed as young adult fiction, the article by Sylvie Servoise acknowledges the painstaking, dramatic tensions and pitfalls endangering the life of a young fourteen-year old boy when his family, with its parental figures, offers no certainties and no hopes for the future. Her article on "The Politically Incorrect and Its Limits in Late Twentieth-Century Youth Literature: *Rome, l'Enfer* (1995) by Malika Ferdjoukh" reflects on the contours and limits of the unstable notion of 'political correctness' in a novel for adolescents deprived of a happy ending, and which shocked many readers at the time of its publication. Servoise argues that *Rome, l'Enfer* is in more than one way a politically incorrect novel. The elements that Servoise disentangles within this text are above all the pessimistic view of the human condition tainting the boy's story in the context of a gloomy description of contemporary French society. The representation of social violence within a kind of descent-into-hell progression – Rome is the name of a Paris metro station – details the hellish journey through unknown and dangerous parts of Paris by night, which ends with the boy's death in a rubbish dump. Overarching these aspects with a kind of meta-anarrative effect there is the author's confutation of one of the most solid staples in children's education and literature, namely the edifying and beneficial role of literature and of the knowledge offered by books. Henry's bookish culture does not help him in the urban jungle where even the slang spoken by other boys sounds to him incomprehensible: in this sense the novel endorses what can be seen as the politically incorrect, insofar as reading and learning from books have always been recommended as means of improvement of the child's ignorant condition. But Servoise detects ulterior elements that portend a vision of society that can be associated with the 'politically correct' stance: the satire of middle-class mores and manners is there, as also the ethnic differentiation that concentrates the negative attitudes on the novel's white characters. On this slippery, ambiguous terrain, books and literature in general can be beneficial only when, instead of inducing painless dreams of Eden, they foster experience and promote the ability to judge in young readers.

With Beatrice Moja's article on "Children's Sexualisation and Toys: Barbie Doll as a Sexual Token in Sarah Strohmeyer's *Barbie Unbound*" the theme of sexuality and its configuration in adults and children is broached. This is one of the issues that transgression, since Foucault, has most frequently challenged inasmuch as adult

writers and readers usually repress the relationship of children with sexuality, to favour the stereotypical, socially and communally acceptable perception they have of themselves. Not so with a very popular toy, the Barbie doll, endowed with a sexy adult body, and with an environment of glossy wealth and trendy pink fashion. Yet, in the book *Barbie Unbound: A Parody of the Barbie Obsession* (1997), enriched by the realistic photos by Geoff Hansen, the famous doll is used as a medium to discuss sexual issues. The adventures of Barbie doll in different contexts – whether historical, as the avatar of famous figures like Joan of Arc, Marie Antoinette or Marie Curie, or as the victim of violence in a contemporary world – do not fail to raise cogent questions about political correctness, whenever the reader is alerted to the real dangers that surround and affect the apparently paradisiac adolescent world where Barbie lives in thoughtless hedonism. The fact that Strohmeyer's book addresses a crossover readership stimulates a dialogue between transgression and politically correctness that Moja has analysed pointing out the inevitable tensions arising from the subject. The experiences met by Barbie are violent and dangerous, especially when sex is involved: rape, harassment, unwanted pregnancies, abortion, venereal diseases, race and gender identity and discrimination, are so many events that mark the life of this unconventional Barbie, and are discussed in the appendix to the book. Strohmeyer wishes to highlight the limitations and false statements embedded in our social and cultural conventions. In this way she challenges the politically correct, even by highlighting that some apparently unpopular decisions taken by Mattel Inc., Barbie's real producer, are the result of shrewd evaluations of the financial benefits arising from the politically incorrect.

In "John Boyne's Representation of the Shoah in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*: A Paradigm of Transgression and Linguistic Uncertainties", Marco Canani brings up once again the theme of the historical tragedy of the Shoah and the discourses – whether in the 2006 book or the 2008 movie – that attempt its representation. The search for a paradigm fit to reconcile ethic concerns with aesthetic demands in the representation of the Shoah has been the object of extensive scholarly debate. How can the Shoah arouse feelings of aesthetic pleasure in readers and spectators? Especially when the subject matter is inhuman or barbarous, the risk is to elicit a morbid, voyeuristic effect, and to bring forth a response based on feelings of tolerance and compliance.

Thus the analysis points out the unspeakable, the silences and omissions in Boyne's book, deriving from a representational uncertainty integral to the memorial transgression involved in the very writer's aim. The nine-year old Bruno, the son of a SS commander, is fed with ignorance, understatement, and uncertainty about the concentration camp that he calls "Out-With". Bruno progressively learns

about the inhuman reality of the camp, and death will be his ultimate destination. Both the novel and the movie reveal a complex interplay between transgression and the limits of representation, especially when the movie appropriates Boyne's verbal discourse, by adding the visual power of images. The twists embedded in the verbal viewpoints that can be found in the novel, the difficulty in conceptualizing the horror of the Shoah, find a different treatment within the different visual medium, adding a further degree of tension, due to the inevitable visual aesthetics governing it, to this testimonial narrative.

These five articles, with their different issues pointing out transgression in speech and children's education, in parental and gender roles, in conventional views of literature, in sexuality, in the representations of the Shoah, altogether confirm that such critical category can be illuminating, especially when in tension with the unsaid and unspeakable, which once transgressed meet the limits imposed by political correctness. The many conflicts represented in children's literature, from the eighteenth century to present day, whenever social norms, customs, stereotypes, and discourse itself are threatened by transgression, are likely to produce a different, more complex, less conventional portrait of the child reader, still subject to the subtle compromises inherent in the very use of language but not so weak and submissive, not so powerless, and not so innocent.

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Forbidden Words: Language Control and Victorian Political Correctness in Dickens and Carroll

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Abstract This article examines Charles Dickens's and Lewis Carroll's representations of mechanisms of control over people's – especially young people's – language, imagination, and minds. Moralistic on the one hand, political on the other hand, Victorian patterns of censorship and self-censorship are reflected, critiqued, and satirised by Dickens in various stages of his career, and are related in his work to artistic creativity, language and the imagination. He attacks the utilitarian resistance to fairy tale and especially Maria Edgeworth's manifesto on the usefulness and uselessness of various genres of children's literature, and criticizes George Cruikshank's revisionist project of furthering certain social doctrines, mainly teetotalism, by interpolating moralistic messages into famous fairy tales. Much of this preoccupation is followed up in Carroll's Alice books. For both, I argue, these didactic revisions are related to patterns of language control, banned words, and euphemisms that they repeatedly probe and parody in their fiction. My essay will examine the representation of language control, self-censorship and verbal training in terms of an early, Victorian-era politically-correct discourse; I will ask what, if at all, Dickens and Carroll's treatment of these issues may contribute to the current debate surrounding our own politically-correct culture.

Keywords Charles Dickens. Lewis Carroll. Politically correct. Censorship. Offence. Hard Times. Alice in Wonderland. Through the Looking Glass.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Dickens: Utilitarianism, Industrialism, Censorship. – 3 Carroll: Offence, Jokes, Communication. – 4 Purification, Self-Silencing, and Creating a Better Society.

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> Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year
> (George Orwell, *1984*)[1]

1 Introduction

Mechanisms of control over people's – especially young people's – language, imagination, and minds in Victorian discourse receive an extensive, and often satirical, treatment in the work of Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll. For both authors, motifs of linguistic censorship and self-silencing serve to delineate what we may refer to as early discursive regimes of political correctness. The effort not to give offence, in an endless conscious attempt not to hurt anybody's feelings or allude to unwelcome facts and ideas, sterilises communication, as the very choice of words is shown to become flawed, artificial, and restricted. Dickens and Carroll both show how such caution turns all relationships perilously fragile. A close look at this motif in *Hard Times* (1854) and the *Alice* books (1865; 1871) reveals how Victorian culture anticipates certain aspects of what has been referred to in recent decades as a politically-correct culture. Some of these novels' concerns about the constricting Victorian discourse reverberated 150 years later in the contemporary debate about the impact of political correctness on academia, art, and the educational environment at large.

Moralistic on the one hand, political on the other hand, patterns of censorship and self-censorship appear in Victorian fiction of the mid-nineteenth century. One clarification is needed at this point: this essay will not discuss the moralistic censorship of sexuality as examined, for instance, in Michel Foucault's "We Other Victorians" (1976). By censorship, I do not refer to the famous Victorian priggishness and its manipulation of taste by the dictates of the circulating libraries, nor will I dwell on moral restrictions placed on so-called obscene literature, fearing the corruption of young female minds. Instead, I explore the censorship of other kinds of conversational expressions and the ideas behind them.

Cultural theory sometimes tends to offer a totalising view of censorship, regarding it as an omnipresent structural necessity of any given society. Such a view might blind us to the more subtle operation of linguistic training of the kind this essay sets out to describe. Any critique of political correctness or identity politics that dictate a restricting discourse is bound to clash with the idea that freedom of speech is an illusion to begin with, as suggested in the work of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, or Judith Butler, for whom any culture "produces an effect of censorship" (Butler 1997, 130), and for

1 The epigraph is from Orwell's *1984* (p. 49).

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whom censorship is always at work as the "implicit operation of power that rules out what will remain unspeakable" (Bourdieu 1991, 172). If there can be no freedom of speech in any culture, then it cannot be taken away. Yet the linguistic training observed in the Victorian texts cited in this essay, mediated through Dickens and Carroll's merciless satire, show how free speech can be, and is, gradually and quietly, almost voluntarily, taken away piece by piece, flattened, and narrowed down.

Dickens and Carroll are probably the two Victorian authors whose fiction offers the most consistent satire on verbal manipulation. Patterns of linguistic control and twisted discourse are among the chief targets of Dickens's satire at various stages of his literary and journalistic career, particularly in *Hard Times*. Dickens both relates and contrasts linguistic restrictions to his concern about artistic creativity, freedom of imagination, and communication transparency. His preoccupation with silencing mechanisms in language is inseparable from his attack on other forms of cultural censorship, e.g. Maria Edgeworth's utilitarian resistance to fairy tales or George Cruikshank's revisionist project of furthering certain social doctrines, mainly teetotalism, by interpolating moralistic messages into famous stories for children. A similar probe of this theme is taken up by Carroll, in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. For both authors, didactic revisionism is related to strategies of language control, banned words, and euphemisms, which they study closely and parody time after time. A sub-section of this censorship which they also explore in their writing is related to food and appetites: intriguingly, all texts examined in this essay reveal a recurrence of figurative associations between verbal control and dietary restrictions. Food prohibition repeatedly carries an ethical component and surfaces as an ingredient of cultural correctness. In this respect, too, the Victorian study of political correctness anticipates our own era.

2 Dickens: Utilitarianism, Industrialism, Censorship

Languages constantly grow; vocabularies expand. Yet, as the epigraph from George Orwell appended to this essay suggests, in some cases, the opposite dynamic might occur whereby society's range of speech, thought, and agency is narrowed down, and language is impoverished. Such discursive diminution happens when specific modes of expression, related to certain patterns of thought, lose their legitimacy.

In examining Dickens's critical take on such linguistic and cultural restrictions, a good place to start would be his discomfort with the narrowing down of literary forms. One target of his satire is the famous utilitarian resistance to fairy tales. In her "Preface, Addressed to Parents" that precedes *The Parent's Assistant*, a collection of sto-

ries for children published in 1796, Maria Edgeworth includes a famous diatribe against the useless, hence damaging, non-realistic genres of children's literature. Her declared goal is to write for the pleasure and instruction of young readers, seemingly adopting the Horatian idea of instructing and delighting. Yet, in her case, the second objective, to delight, is clearly sacrificed for the first. Regardless of her young readers' pleasure, Edgeworth opts for realism. She would wish to see all writers – especially for children – staying away from fantasy, romance, or melodrama and declares that in her own stories, "care has been taken to avoid inflaming the imagination, or exciting a restless spirit of adventure, by exhibiting false views of life" (x-xi). Edgeworth disputes Dr Johnson's opinion that children should "have their imaginations raised by tales of giants and fairies, and castles and inchantments [*sic*]" (xi). Succumbing to this wish, she says, would be a grave educational mistake:

> supposing that [young readers] do prefer such tales, is this a reason why they should be indulged in reading them? […] why should the mind be filled with fantastic visions, instead of useful knowledge? Why should so much valuable time be lost? Why should we vitiate their taste, and spoil their appetite, by suffering them to feed upon sweetmeats? (xi)

Edgeworth wishes to harness literature to create a better society, as so many champions of censorship tend to do. Her utilitarian goals are better served by didactic realism, which she employs in the series of tales that follow her preface. In one story after another, we encounter industrious, practical-minded, and self-reliant children who never complain, and they serve as the model her readers should emulate.

Intriguingly, Edgeworth's expurgation of fanciful fiction involves a gustatory metaphor. For some reason, she associates romances and fairy tales with "sweetmeats". Such figurative associations recur in other texts: time and again, food prohibition illustrates and is somehow coupled with the impulse to ban words, genres, and ideas. The critique of unethical or unhealthy food choices has been, and still is, an ingredient of cultural correctness, as appetite, like ideas and words, might become tinged with immorality. For Edgeworth, only a neglectful parent would allow one's children candy, as much as it is harmful to read to them a bedtime story about enchanted castles.

Maria Edgeworth and others of her stripe are the targets of Charles Dickens's satire in his 1853 essay "Frauds on the Fairies". Yet, the immediate trigger for writing the piece was George Cruikshank's didactic project of furthering certain social doctrines, mainly teetotalism, by interpolating moralistic messages into famous fairy tales. "Frauds on the Fairies" is part of a war Dickens is waging against the suppression of artistic freedom for allegedly correct goals:

> In an utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected. […] To preserve them in their usefulness, they must be as much preserved in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact. Whosoever alters them to suit his own opinions, whatever they are, is guilty, to our thinking, of an act of presumption, and appropriates to himself what does not belong to him. (97)

Rhetorically, when he talks about "actual facts" and "usefulness", Dickens uses the jargon of the enemy camp. Yet his opposition to the utilitarian regime of censorship, which he regards as a threat to artistic freedom, is unquestionable. "The world is too much with us", he concludes the essay with a quote from Wordsworth's famous poem: "early and late. Leave this precious old escape from it, alone" (100).

Dickens's resistance to moralistic censorship is fully developed in *Hard Times*, the novel he was working on while writing "Frauds on the Fairies". Published one year later (1854), the novel depicts a hermetic Fact-based utilitarian world from which fantasy, fancy, and the fairies were banished – as Edgeworth would have liked to banish poets and other non-useful liars from her envisioned Republic. Part of the dystopian vision of Dickens's novel concerns what looks like the triumph of Edgeworth's doctrine, which seems to have prevailed in the industrial city of Coketown with its regime of Fact. The children in Coketown are not allowed to daydream, listen to fairy tales, or watch the circus. They cannot even have painted flowers on the carpet because such flowers would not be real.

Dickens's novel delineates the way in which the regime of Fact prevails. Its dominant mechanism is a sophisticated and subtle language control, mainly manifested in the education of children but also at work in the mental oppression of factory operatives. As a rehearsal of Orwellian Newspeak, the two chief linguistic devices employed in Coketown are banned words and euphemisms. Concealing the truth, the regime of Fact is ironically shown to refute its own ideology. Its banned words and euphemisms distort and eliminate certain facts – those facts that would fail to serve the privileged elite.

The pupils at Thomas Gradgrind's school are informed by their masters: "You are to be in all things regulated and governed […] by fact. […] You *must discard the word* Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it" (9; emphasis added). Excising "the word" should do the trick: if an object or concept – in this case, Fancy – is never named, it will not be evoked, nor even desired. As in Orwell's dystopia, vocabulary shrinks, and so does thought.

The re-education of Sissy Jupe, the circus girl headmaster Thomas Gradgrind takes in and adopts, is founded on censorship. She must learn which words she may use and which are never to be mentioned. As Gradgrind is questioning Sissy – in the presence of his own young

daughter Louisa – about her past life with her widowed father, the circus clown, the dialogue emphasises the volatile potential of certain kinds of discourses and genres, bringing to mind Edgeworth's concern about stories of giants and enchanted castles:

> 'I understand you to have been in the habit of reading to your father?'
>
> 'O, yes, sir, thousands of times. They were the happiest–O, of all the happy times we had together, sir!'
>
> It was only now, when her sorrow broke out, that Louisa looked at her.
>
> 'And what,' asked Mr. Gradgrind, in a still lower voice, 'did you read to your father, Jupe?'
>
> 'About the Fairies, sir, and the Dwarf, and the Hunchback, and the Genies,' she sobbed out; 'and about –'
>
> 'Hush!' said Mr. Gradgrind, 'that is enough. Never breathe a word of such destructive nonsense any more. Bounderby, this is a case for rigid training.' […]
>
> So, Mr. Gradgrind and his daughter took Cecilia Jupe off with them to Stone Lodge, and on the way Louisa never spoke one word, good or bad. (40-1)

We should observe the side-effect of this exchange on the young Louisa Gradgrind. Though a mere witness to the beginning of Sissy's education in silencing, Louisa too turns dumb at once and "never [speaks] one word" on the way home. We may read this opinionated girl's silence as a protest against her father's tyranny. Still, as she grows up, we see again and again that Louisa's silence, while possibly expressive of her passive resistance to patriarchy, is deeply ingrained. When she does speak her mind, at last, years later, she accuses her father of inflicting on her a crippling inability to articulate her emotions.

Self-censorship is the ultimate success of any regime monitoring words and ideas, as it turns what begins as downright coercion into a seemingly voluntary suppression of undesirable thoughts. Devoid of self-knowledge, Louisa grows up only to find herself trapped in a loveless marriage to which she is pushed by her family, involved in a futile, undesirable, and unconsummated extramarital affair, and mixed in other kinds of self-negating situations, where she seems to be blind to her feelings and to lack a voice of her own. Her inner void is the result of the constant restriction of speech imposed on her since childhood, as shown, for example, in the following dialogue with her father when Louisa is still very young:

> 'I was tired, father. I have been tired a long time,' said Louisa.
>
> 'Tired? Of what?' asked the astonished father.
>
> 'I don't know of what – of everything I think.'

> 'Say not another word,' returned Mr. Gradgrind. 'You are childish. I will hear no more.' (14)

The Gradgrind silencing regime has an unmistakable political dimension. It installs fear: not just the fear of being reprimanded but also the anxiety of being in the wrong. When one is constantly apprehensive of using improper words or expressing incorrect ideas, the result is self-censorship. Thus, as Louisa is questioning Sissy about her previous life at the circus with her father, Sissy is very cautious, already implementing the new restrictive rules of discourse she encounters at the Gradgrind household:

> 'Did your father know so much himself, that he wished you to be well taught too, Sissy?'
>
> Sissy hesitated before replying, and so plainly showed her sense that they were entering on forbidden ground, that Louisa added, 'No one hears us.' […]
>
> 'Tell me more about him,' said Louisa, 'I will never ask you again. Where did you live?'
>
> 'We travelled about the country, and had no fixed place to live in. Father's a;' Sissy whispered the awful word, 'a clown.' (48-9)

Mr. Gradgrind's doctrine of Fact emerges from this conversation as a discourse that is not genuinely interested in facts. The plain truth is that Sissy's father is a clown, yet certain things must never be called by their name. Laughs, circuses, a sense of fun – everything that clowns stand for – are inconsistent with Gradgrind's austere, utilitarian ideology, so the word 'clown' must be expunged. Society's vocabulary becomes smaller.

Young Louisa is prone to indulge in daydreaming. This is yet another transgression in her utilitarian household, so she takes care not to be detected by the authorities. However, like any totalitarian regime, the Gradgrind system breeds spies, self-appointed agents of the patriarch. In the domestic arena, we have the mother, Mrs. Gradgrind, spying on her children and acting as a voluntary proxy of her husband with the occasional assistance of Tom, Louisa's brother:

> 'Wondering again!' said Tom.
>
> 'I have such unmanageable thoughts,' returned his sister, 'that they *will* wonder.'
>
> 'Then I beg of you, Louisa,' said Mrs. Gradgrind, who had opened the door without being heard, 'to do nothing of that description, for goodness' sake you inconsiderate girl, or I shall never hear the last of it from your father'. (45; emphasis in the original)

Language control has another political function besides checking the imagination: it aims to quell resistance. The economic elite uses its power over the discourse to foster a softened or inoffensive conversation that is meant to conceal and even falsify social reality, its wrongs, and its injustices. Bounderby, the powerful industrialist who owns Coketown's bank and factories, shares his friend Gradgrind's ideology of Fact yet uses words dishonestly to manipulate facts time and again. On the pretence of sticking to facts, he employs a euphemistic discourse to shirk responsibility:

> 'Now, you have heard a lot of talk about the work in our mills, no doubt. You have? Very good. I'll state the fact of it to you. It's the pleasantest work there is, and it's the lightest work there is, and it's the best paid work there is. More than that, we couldn't improve the mills themselves, unless we laid down Turkey carpets on the floors. Which we're not a-going to do'. (97-8)

It is intriguing that in Dickens, as in Edgeworth, food prohibition is part and parcel of the censorship of discourse. This is the case in both "Frauds on the Fairies" and *Hard Times*. In the 1853 essay, Dickens anticipates a revision of classic works of literature according to various fashionable mores, including culinary ones. He envisions, for example, an absurd vegetarian rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, among a few other ideological twists to Defoe's narrative:

> Imagine a Total abstinence edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, with the rum left out. Imagine a Peace edition, with the gunpowder left out, and the rum left in. Imagine a Vegetarian edition, with the goat's flesh left out. Imagine a Kentucky edition, to introduce a flogging of that 'tarnal old nigger Friday, twice a week. Imagine an Aborigines Protection Society edition, to deny the cannibalism and make Robinson embrace the amiable savages whenever they landed. *Robinson Crusoe* would be 'edited' out of his island in a hundred years, and the island would be swallowed up in the editorial ocean. (97-8)

In *Hard Times*, too, verbal dietary restrictions that block undesirable ideas and gloss over economic injustice are associated with forbidden food. The labourers – or Hands, as they are referred to in the novel – are thus suspected of insurrection via their alleged desire to gain upper-class food:

> 'There's not a Hand in this town, sir, man, woman, or child, but has one ultimate object in life. That object is, to be fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon. Now, they're not a-going – none of 'em – ever to be fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon'. (98)

Culinary delicacies for the working class might harm millocratic digestion and foster unrealistic and dangerous aspirations among the 'Hands'. Like Edgeworth's warning about the unwelcome provision of sweetmeats and fairy tales to children, the factory operatives of Coketown must abide by a strict dietary dictum as much as they should avoid unbound speech and free thought.

3 Carroll: Offence, Jokes, Communication

The culture of censorship is one of Dickens's primary targets of attack in *Hard Times*, no less than industrialism and utilitarianism. Besides Dickens, the most ferocious Victorian satire on verbal manipulation and control is probably to be found in Lewis Carroll's work. Language has many uses in the *Alice* books; not least among them is its efficacy as an instrument of mental and social control. Carroll derides the attempt to train children's minds by regulating their speech. Thus, constantly fearful of being in the wrong, Alice withdraws to self-silence almost as soon as she starts falling down the Rabbit hole at the very beginning of her adventures:

> 'I wonder if I shall fall right *through* the earth! How funny it'll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards! The Antipathies, I think –' (she was rather glad there *was* no one listening, this time, as it didn't sound at all the right word) '– but I shall have to ask them what the name of the country is, you know. Please, Ma'am, is this New Zealand or Australia?' (and she tried to curtsey as she spoke – fancy, curtseying as you're falling through the air! […]) 'And what an ignorant little girl she'll think me for asking! No, it'll never do to ask: perhaps I shall see it written up somewhere'. (27-8; emphases in the original)

Constantly mindful of the errors in what she is saying, Alice prefers not to speak at all.

However, as she arrives in Wonderland and starts meeting her curious interlocutors, she summons sufficient courage to ask many questions – only to be rebuffed as stupid or rude. Much of what Alice says turns out to be wrong, and the other characters gain a position of mastery over her by pointing that out. Saying the wrong thing repeatedly, she finds it hard to socialise as she keeps offending the other creatures' feelings. She is thus driven to shed what is considered offensive terms and sanitise her discourse. We see this process already when she encounters the Mouse and engages in her first dialogue in Wonderland. As soon as she opens her mouth, Alice commits one blunder after another. First, mistaking it for a French Mouse, she addresses the creature with the first sentence from her

French lesson book:

> 'Où est ma chatte?' […] The Mouse gave a sudden leap out of the water, and seemed to quiver all over with fright. 'Oh, I beg your pardon!' cried Alice hastily, afraid that she had hurt the poor animal's feelings. 'I quite forgot you didn't like cats'.
>
> 'Not like cats!' cried the Mouse, in a shrill, passionate voice. 'Would *you* like cats if you were me?' (42; emphasis in the original)

Having offended the Mouse's feelings, the regretful Alice practices self-censorship once they are reconciled in the next chapter. He has promised to tell her his sad history and explain why he dislikes cats and dogs. Now she reminds him of his promise:

> 'You promised to tell me your history, you know,' said Alice, 'and why it is you hate – C and D,' she added in a whisper, half afraid that it would be offended again. (50)

Like Sissy's whisper of the awful word 'clown', Alice is afraid that uttering the words 'cats' and 'dogs' aloud might give offence. Her over cautiousness is detrimental to the relationship; it precludes reciprocity or symmetry between two equal parties. Once things are not called by their name, communication becomes flawed and ultimately impossible. Offence sensitivity turns any potential relationship hopelessly fragile. Indeed, soon enough, Alice again says the wrong thing (innocently confusing 'not' with a 'knot'). The Mouse is so offended that he indignantly walks out:

> 'I didn't mean it!' pleaded poor Alice. 'But you're so easily offended, you know!'
>
> The Mouse only growled in reply.
>
> 'Please come back, and finish your story!' Alice called after it. And the others all joined in chorus 'Yes, please do!' But the Mouse only shook its head impatiently, and walked a little quicker. (52)

A culture based on over-sensitivity, as shown in this exchange, becomes sterile. Conversations are pointless and brought to a halt when things cannot be called by their name and when anything one says seems to cause offence.

In *That's Offensive! Criticism, Identity, Respect*, Stefan Collini argues that when criticising other people's ideas becomes offensive, the urge to show respect to the 'offended' party turns them into someone who has the right not to be criticised. When we accept the unwritten rules of identity politics and avoid criticising people or expressing our opinions freely because they might be offended, our sensitivity, masked as respect, becomes a form of condescension (Collini 2010, 27). To ex-

empt certain people or groups from criticism because they might be offended is to assume that they are too weak to respond adequately to challenges or controversy. This condescension is reflected in the asymmetrical relationship between the ever-guilty, overly-cautious Alice and the easily-offended Mouse. The discursive self-restraint Alice imposes on herself in her dealings with the Mouse is not unlike Sissy's prudence over articulating the word 'clown'. Any violation of the unwritten rule not to call certain things by their name becomes immoral, an offence to propriety, good order, and respect toward others.

As Slavoj Žižek observes in his critique of contemporary political correctness, public language that sheds offensive terms in order to avoid offending others produces a sanitised discourse and serves to conceal the very operation of injustice and oppression it hopes to resist. The pressure to commit self-censorship and maintain caution about certain expressions and ideas, Žižek claims, is patronising. The fear that certain jokes might give offence is condescending; it fosters cold relationships and precludes real contact. Rather than dealing with racial hatred, prejudice, or oppression, pretty language only conceals existing tensions and makes it impossible to oppose them.[2]

The *Alice* books demonstrate this mechanism perfectly. Offence sensitivity creates a discourse that masks genuine intention and baulks communication, as we see in the comic conversation with the Mouse. In an intellectual or academic setting, when we are too cautious about entering a dispute so as not to give offence, we sacrifice intellectual integrity, without which there is no free criticism, and so the discussion becomes sterile.

In Carroll, as in the earlier writers, speaking and eating are parts of the same moralistic regime. Always saying the wrong thing, Alice finds herself time and again also eating the wrong thing. Discourse sensitivity and food prohibition are entangled. In a famous passage, Alice is forbidden to eat a leg of mutton and pudding because she has just been introduced to these dishes by the Red Queen. And clearly, as the Red Queen lectures her, "it isn't etiquette to cut any one you've been introduced to". (331) Her eating habits always make Alice feel guilty. Earlier on, when a pigeon takes her for a serpent due to her long neck, Alice is indicted based on her culinary preferences:

> 'But I'm *not* a serpent, I tell you!' said Alice. 'I'm a – I'm a –'
>
> 'Well! *What* are you?' said the Pigeon. 'I can see you're trying to invent something! […] No, no! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!'

2 https://qz.com/398723/slavoj-zizek-thinks-political-correctness-is-exactly-what-perpetuates-prejudice-and-racism/.

> 'I *have* tasted eggs, certainly,' said Alice, who was a very truthful child; 'but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.'
>
> 'I don't believe it,' said the Pigeon; 'but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent: that's all I can say'. (76; emphases in the original)

In her encounter with the Mock Turtle, Alice's self-censorship reveals her shame over her eating habits as well as her concern about giving offence. When the Mock Turtle says, "'perhaps you were never even introduced to a lobster'", Alice begins to say "'I once tasted –' but check[s] herself hastily, and [says] 'No, never'" (131). Soon, in the same conversation, she makes another *faux pas*:

> 'Thank you, it's a very interesting dance to watch,' said Alice, feeling very glad that it was over at last: 'and I do so like that curious song about the whiting!'
>
> 'Oh, as to the whiting,' said the Mock Turtle, 'they – you've seen them, of course?'
>
> 'Yes,' said Alice, 'I've often seen them at dinn–' she checked herself hastily.
>
> 'I don't know where Dinn may be,' said the Mock Turtle, 'but if you've seen them so often, of course you know what they're like?'
>
> 'I believe so,' Alice replied thoughtfully. 'They have their tails in their mouths – and they're all over crumbs'. (135-6)

Eating the wrong thing is bad enough; talking about it is even worse. When everyone around is easily hurt, self-censorship is a necessary instinct. But does the avoidance of unpleasant truths undo the real problems that cause the unpleasantness to begin with? Not in Wonderland. Throughout the *Alice* books, there is an amazing and ludicrous contrast between the demand that Alice show over-sensitivity to others, and the brutal aggression, cutting verbal abuse, and physical violence of many of the other characters directed towards her or against each other. Language is either fiercely hostile or timidly, overly polite – and it is this gap that allows Carroll to show how artificial and dishonest the pleasant or 'correct' discourse is.

The underlying structure of the linguistic training of child characters such as Sissy Jupe, Louisa Gradgrind, or Alice is the same as any broader cultural ban on certain words (or foods) that are labelled as immoral. Its chief and invisible mechanism of control is its ability to make one feel constantly apologetic for what one might say, or consume, which might give offence.

4 Purification, Self-Silencing, and Creating a Better Society

The totalising view of censorship as an omnipresent structural necessity, as suggested in the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Butler, and others, precludes any critique of political correctness or identity politics that dictate a restricting discourse. If, as these theorists presume, freedom of speech is an illusion, to begin with, and censorship is always at work, then such liberty cannot be taken away. Yet, Dickens' and Carroll's satire illustrates how free speech is almost voluntarily taken away piece by piece under an ethical command to purify thought and discourse.

The purpose of political correctness is highly commendable: to curtail offensive speech and enhance respect towards underprivileged or ostracised individuals and groups. An educated person living in the twenty-first century is expected not to follow rude impulses but rather cultivate an inoffensive, respectful discourse. So where is the danger, exactly? Part of it lies in the failure to distinguish between politeness and self-censorship, but that is only part of the story. Perhaps our primary concern should be what John Stuart Mill termed "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion" and our willingness to abide by it (2003, 11). Beyond the personal injury to the individual whose speech has been curtailed, Mill underlines the damage to the intellectual discussion at large:

> the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. (87)

And he adds: "All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility" (88) – those who silence others assume they are always right. Limiting speech, even for a seemingly good cause, is bound to impoverish any conversation. When there is no disagreement, our intellect and critical engagement are anesthetised.

In *How Words Make Things Happen*, David Bromwich recounts historical cases of political censorship, which, he points out, were always justified by the need to "effect improvement" in society (2019, 83). Bromwich compares that to our contemporary culture, where speech codes and rules of politeness, sensitivity, and moderation, especially in the academic milieu, which aim to "soften the impact of unpleasant ideas", preclude genuine debate. The benefits

> obtainable through censorship turn out to be delusive once we recognise that […] censorship cannot make us better. […] Any law devised to winnow out the noxious materials can only weaken the very people it protects. (98-9)

The moralistic retelling of fairy tales is a case in point. Bearing in mind Dickens's critique of Cruikshank's mid-Victorian revision of such stories for didactic purposes could also apply to late-twentieth-century and more recent revisions of classic tales, which intend to make them fit contemporary egalitarian and feminist agendas. According to a large-scale survey held in 2018, as reported in *The Independent* on 11 May 2018, many parents frequently change the fairy tales they read to their children out of their concern that the stories are too scary, inappropriate, or politically incorrect. For instance, parents found it disturbing that Cinderella was forced to do all of the cleaning and household chores; that Sleeping Beauty was kissed without her consent; or that *The Ugly Duckling*'s emphasis on unattractive appearance encouraged body shaming and discrimination.[3] Schools and curricula often follow similar guidelines. According to Diane Ravitch, many people believe that almost "everything written before 1970 was either gender biased or racially biased" (Ravitch 2006, 287). Instead of using classic stories to increase knowledge and foster a debate about changing values and the history of social structures, schools are often asked to ban such texts altogether, thereby impoverishing learning and curtailing intellectual discussion.

When we talk about the constraints on free speech, we usually think of illiberal powers at work; but the case might be the reverse. Žižek regards political correctness as a tacit form of totalitarianism, an act of coercion built upon the totalitarian premise that "I know better than you what you really want".[4] As Alexey Ulko maintains, it would be wrong to assume that the conflict always involves the left-wing or liberal discourse as threatened and the conservative culture as dominant. "Sides are easily switched when the contemporary politically correct and 'progressive' discourse is challenged", and left-wing critics might impose their own censorship on art or ideas they deem incorrect (2018, 131). This view echoes Orwell, who, in his 1946 essay "Politics vs. Literature", observes that there is a totalitarian tendency even among anarchist or pacifist groups because of the "tremendous urge to conformity" in human beings, especially when their views are grounded in peace, harmony, and love. When humans are governed by prohibition ("thou shalt not"),

3 See https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/fairytales-parents-change-plot-politically-incorrect-children-reading-red-riding-hood-cinderella-a8346966.html.

According to *The Independent* report of May 2018, almost one in four parents think it is inappropriate to tell children the story of Cinderella, and another 27% feel the same about Robin Hood – "a man who stole from others". *Pinocchio* leaves 27% of parents "worrying as the story tells the tale of a boy who runs away from home and lies to people".

4 https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2019/03/04/slavoj-zizek-political-correctness-form-of-totalitarianism/.

> the individual can practise a certain amount of eccentricity: [but] when they are supposedly governed by 'love', he is under continuous pressure to make him behave and think in exactly the same way as everyone else. (241-2)

Despite its unquestionable value in defending the dignity of disadvantaged groups, the inevitable downside of a politically correct discourse is the curtailing of free speech; or perhaps it would be more accurate to talk about 'breadth of speech.' In assessing such curtailing, we should think about the extent to which contemporary liberal academic culture is heir to Victorian moralistic tyranny. A reading of Victorian satires such as *Hard Times* or the *Alice* books illustrates how the project of sterilising language by too many prohibitions works to stifle contact, artistic creativity, and critical thought. Offence sensitivity is likewise liable to impoverish speech. When Alice cautiously asks the Mouse about 'C and D' or tells the Mock Turtle that she has seen his friends the whiting at 'dinn', her fear of uttering the words 'Cat', 'Dog', and 'Dinner' renders her speech not only mute but absurdly unintelligible. Conversation, Carroll shows us, cannot carry on or mean anything when things are not called by their names. The repeated figurative association established in this essay between food prohibition and the impulse to ban words and ideas may illuminate how the critique of unethical or unhealthy food choices since the Victorian era has been, and still is, an ingredient of cultural correctness.

A final thought concerns the extent to which our current academic conversation is dominated by such restrictions. We might regard the intellectual atmosphere we live in as dominated by a new hermeneutics of suspicion. In the debate between the hermeneutics of suspicion (based on Paul Ricoeur) and the hermeneutics of trust, I propose that this is not the alternatives we are currently facing. Rather, the dominant hermeneutics of today is one of indictment. Suspicion is a productive stance because it is a condition of uncertainty, and for a good reader or a skilful critic, uncertainty is crucial. As long as we are suspicious, we may notice the ambiguities and complexities of the text we are reading or the conversation we are having. The problem with suspicion hermeneutics in literary criticism is that often, instead of suspicion, we have conviction. When the guilt of the text is assumed in advance, our analysis turns into dogma. As the Queen of Hearts would put it, "Sentence first – verdict afterwards" (Carroll 1970, 161): the hermeneutic of indictment means that we would like to feel morally superior to the text and know what is right, while placing ourselves beyond suspicion.

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The Blue Fairy and Wendy
Incest, Sacrifice or Feminine Empowerment?

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Abstract In Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (1883) and Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911), the little girls' characters – the fairy and Wendy – do grow up, adopting the roles of 'surrogate mothers' for the heroes. Playing the mother to excess, they challenge gender hierarchy. It is therefore less a transgression of rules than it is a subversion of values. Disney's *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Peter Pan* (1953) advocate order and obedience, thus doing away with the freedom of childhood. Garrone's *Pinocchio* (2019) and Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020) mitigate gender stereotypes, but the disturbing ambivalence of the girls disappears, in favour of more univocal characters.

Keywords Pinocchio. Peter Pan. Gender. Empowerment. Motherhood. Female education.

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1 Introduction

Carlo Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (1883) and J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911) are two monuments of youth culture heritage, whose male protagonists can be considered iconic representations of eternal childhood – neither of them ever grows up. Although both adventure novels are highly masculine (Collodi's characters being almost exclusively male), it is worth considering their main female characters: Collodi's fairy with "indigo hair"[1] and Barrie's Wendy. In contrast to their masculine heroes, these two little girls do grow up physically and morally, adopting the roles of precocious 'surrogate mothers' for the heroes.

At first glance, the 'little mother' role seems a *topos* of feminine educational culture; but in both novels, the role masks a transgressive relationship with the main character: playing a mother's part raises questions about child sexuality and incest, and could go as far as shattering masculine authority and the traditional division of gendered tasks. Exactly what kinds of power have been vested in these girls?

Through the motif of the 'little mother' in both novels, one may question the relevance of 'political correctness' – in other words, the moral and social norms of girlhood – and their transgression at the time of their first release, i.e. at the turn of the 20th Century. As those norms evolved through the first half of the century, how are these characters portrayed in the Disney movies? And what becomes of the young girl characters in the most recent adaptations of these novels for the cinema?

2 The All-Powerful *Bambina* from *Pinocchio*

2.1 An Unusual Family Structure

At the beginning of *Pinocchio*, the family structure is anything but patriarchal. The first three chapters of the story provide him with two fathers: Master Antonio, who supplies the material to make him (the enchanted block of wood, which is also an *anima*) and Geppetto who gives him a form, according to the traditional conception of male and female roles in reproduction. This transmission is accompanied by a fight between the two elderly men, a violent embrace ending in a mutual friendship, which one can interpret as a brutal rep-

1 "Capelli turchini". *Turchino* color is a medium blue, and should not be confused with *turchese* (turquoise). Ann Lawson Lucas's translation "indigo hair" also evokes an Oriental origin.

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resentation of conception. The paternal couple, perhaps a parody of Christ's dual paternity – Geppetto being a nickname for Giuseppe –, may represent the first transgression in the book. In the exclusively male world of the first fourteen chapters of the novel, Pinocchio can only be a motherless child:[2] "la mamma non l'ho mai conosciuta" (Collodi 1883, 46) ("I never knew my mama", Lawson Lucas 2009, 30). Geppetto must carry out the traditional maternal functions: feeding, sewing, clothing, and caring.

From her first appearance in chapter XV, the "little Fairy with indigo hair" will adopt the puppet and assume a maternal role towards him. Pinocchio's father and 'mother' never meet. As underlined by Jean-Marie Apostolides (1989, 23), they belong to separate and even opposite spheres. Geppetto's realistic world was marked by poverty, hard work and sacrifice. In contrast, the realm of the fairy is a space of fantasy, enchantment and effortless abundance. Geppetto's male education was weak and ineffective; whereas the fairy's severe and sometime cruel lessons lead the puppet to a certain moral progress, albeit temporary.

2.2 The Weak Masculine and All-Powerful Feminine?

The "bella Bambina dai capelli turchini" (Collodi 1883, 71) ("beautiful Little Girl, with indigo hair", Lawson Lucas 2009, 46) appears only in the middle of the novel (ch. XV), in the climactic scene of the hanging, where Collodi temporarily interrupts the action. A dead little girl with a waxy face, she shows up at the window of a seemingly empty house where Pinocchio seeks help when assassins chase him through the woods. She cruelly leaves him to die by hanging, only to save him later; this back and forth between abandonment and rescue will be carried on throughout the following chapters. The little fairy will re-emerge in various and mysterious forms: a charitable lady, a circus spectator, a goat, with only the persistent characteristic of her blue hair allowing Pinocchio to recognise her.

Her initial link with death remains constant throughout the novel; the little fairy belongs to an unreal world, she has the metamorphosis ability of a ghost. The childish appearance under which she first appears disguises her saintly identity of millennial, perhaps even immortal fairy:

> la Bambina dai capelli turchini non era altro, in fin dei conti, che una buonissima Fata, che da più di mill'anni abitava nelle vicinanze di quel bosco. (Collodi 1883, 72)

2 "Pinocchio is not merely the type of the motherless child; he is a foundling" (Perella 1986, 27).

> the Girl with indigo hair was really none other that a very good Fairy, who had lived beside that wood for more than a thousand years. (Lawson Lucas 2009, 49)

Although she appears, in chapters XV to XVIII, under the aspect of a *bambina*, she already possesses an adult's authority and power over the child-puppet who becomes her pupil in every meaning of the word.

The omnipotence of the fairy is diametrically opposed to the impotence of Geppetto: she is as rich as he is poor, she is obeyed by enchanted animals, she imposes over the puppet an authority of which his father is incapable. She summons three illustrious doctors – raven, owl and cricket – all male but, after having heard their opinions, she totally ignores them. It is she alone who will resuscitate the marionette:

> – Dunque la mia medicina t'ha fatto bene davvero?
> – Altro che bene! Mi ha rimesso al mondo! (Collodi 1883, 81)
>
> 'So my medicine really did you good?'
> 'Never mind good, it put me back to life'. (Lawson Lucas 2009, 56)

As in English *medicine*, the Italian word *medicina* can refer either to her *remedy* or to her *medical science*. It is noteworthy that the medical effectiveness of the little fairy is expressed through a maternal image: she literally gives him life again, re-birthes him.

From chapter XVI to XVIII, while hosting the puppet, the little fairy combines the functions of curing (medical) and caring (maternal): she takes Pinocchio "up in her arms" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 51) ("lo prese in collo", Collodi 1883, 74) like an infant and treats him "lovingly" ("amorosamente", Collodi 1883, 77), "with all the patience of a good mother" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 54) ("con tutta la pazienza di una buona mamma", Collodi 1883, 78). But she alternates her gentleness with a cruel pedagogy: when the puppet refuses his medication, four black rabbits bring a coffin for him.

Although systematically referred to as *buona*, the fairy is an ambivalent and fearsome figure, capable of giving life or death. As early as chapter XVI, she accommodates Pinocchio in two different places that symbolise, in a complementary way, the feminine and the maternal, but are also equivocal, as they announce dangerous episodes in the rest of the novel. First, the carriage in which she gets an unconscious Pinocchio transported is "lined inside with whipped cream and wafers and custard" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 51) ("foderata nell'interno di panna montata e di crema coi savoiardi", Collodi 1883, 74). It represents an ideally unctuous sweetness, but perhaps prefig-

ures the fatal coach of the *Omino* (Little Man),[3] leading to the *Paese dei Balocchi* (Land of Toys) where Pinocchio will be transformed into a donkey. The second space is the room in which the fairy cares for Pinocchio: "a bedroom which had walls of mother-of-pearl" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 51) ("una cameretta che aveva le pareti di madreperla", Collodi 1883, 74). The *mother-of-pearl* is not only a precious material, it also carries significant references. The word connotes motherhood both in English and Italian, and it also likens the room to the interior of a shell – an animal, marine and uterine place, foreshadowing the shark's belly, another episode of near-death and rebirth.

2.3 "Puberty" of the Fairy and the Temptation of Incest

Throughout chapters XV to XVIII, although she acts as a surrogate mother, the fairy remains a *bambina*. Regarding her age, the interpretations of the novel's first illustrators, Mazzanti and Chiostri,[4] obviously differ, although neither of them gives her the aspect of a little girl. The former portrays her as a teenager of unspecified age, whereas the latter distinctly represents her as an adult woman, albeit with her hair loose like a young girl **[figs 1-2]**.

The text, however, insists on the *equal childhood* of the fairy and the marionette, both being referred to by diminutives: "tu sarai il mio fratellino e io la tua buona sorellina" (Collodi 1883, 84) ("you shall be my little brother and I shall be your good little sister", Lawson Lucas 2009, 58). In Chapter XXIII, when Pinocchio returns and finds a tomb instead of the fairy's house, she is still identified as a child (*bambina*) and Pinocchio as her brother (*fratellino*):

> QUI GIACE
> LA BAMBINA DAI CAPELLI TURCHINI
> MORTA DI DOLORE
> PER ESSERE STATA ABBANDONATA DAL SUO
> FRATELLINO PINOCCHIO
> (Collodi 1883, 112)
>
> HERE LIES
> THE GIRL WITH THE INDIGO HAIR
> WHO DIED OF GRIEF
> HAVING BEEN ABANDONED BY HER

3 "Figuratevi un omino più largo che lungo, tenero e untuoso come una palla di burro" (Collodi 1883, 171).

4 Veronica Bonanni, "La Fata illustrata. Donna, fata e diva" (`http://www.arabeschi.it/12-la-fata-illustrata-donna-fata-e-diva/`).

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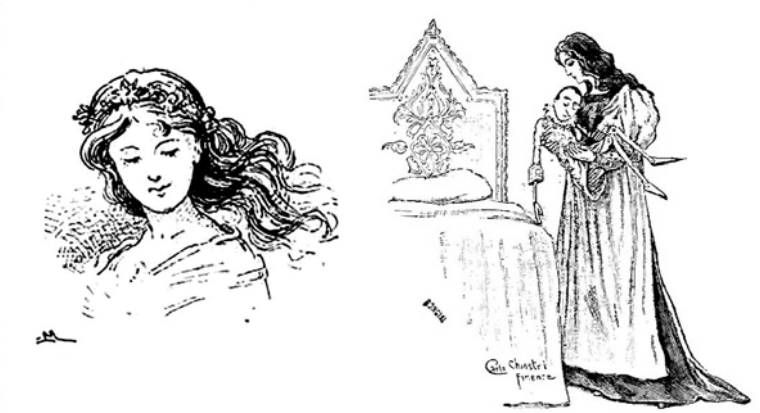

Figure 1 Enrico Mazzanti, illustration for Collodi, C. (1883). *Le avventure di Pinocchio*. Firenze: Felice Paggi. Public domain

Figure 2 Carlo Chiostri, illustration for Collodi, C. (1901). *Le avventure di Pinocchio*. Firenze: Bemporad e Figlio. Public domain

LITTLE BROTHER PINOCCHIO
(Lawson Lucas 2009, 78)

Her death, caused by abandonment, reveals a bond of love that goes beyond that of siblings' ordinary attachment. But it is in the following chapter in particular that their relationship will take an incestuous turn. The fairy reappears in the guise of "a nice little woman" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 87) ("una buona donnina", Collodi 1883, 124) who feeds the hungry puppet. In this new adult persona, the fairy designates herself as the possible mother of the marionette, and the diminutive *donnina* is soon replaced by *donna*:

> Mi lasciasti bambina, e ora mi ritrovi donna; tanto donna, che potrei quasi farti da mamma.
> — E io l'ho caro di molto, perché così, invece di sorellina, vi chiamerò la mia mamma. Gli è tanto tempo che mi struggo di avere una mamma come tutti gli altri ragazzi! (Collodi 1883, 128)

> 'When you left, I was a little girl, and now you have found me again, I'm a woman; so much so that I could almost be your mother.'
> 'I like that very much, because instead of calling you little sister, I shall call you my mama. I've been longing to have a mother like all the other boys for such a long time!' (Lawson Lucas 2009, 90)

The sudden puberty of the fairy inspires in Pinocchio the desire to grow up as well, but she reminds him of his hopeless existence as a marionette:

> — vorrei crescere un poco anch'io. […]
> — Ma tu non puoi crescere — replicò la Fata.
> — Perché?
> — Perché i burattini non crescono mai. Nascono burattini, vivono burattini e muoiono burattini. (Collodi 1883, 128-9)

> I wish I could grow a bit too. […]
> 'But you can't grow,' replied the Fairy.
> 'Why not?'
> 'Because puppets don't ever grow. They are born puppets, live as puppets and die puppets' (Lawson Lucas 2009, 90)

From Pinocchio's desire to grow, undoubtedly motivated by his love for the fairy, comes the desire for his metamorphosis into a being of flesh. But it should be noted that here there is no intention to become "a boy" (*un ragazzino*):[5] Pinocchio's wish is to be transformed immediately from puppet to *man*: "It's time I too became a man" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 90) ("Sarebbe ora che diventassi anch'io un uomo", Collodi 1883, 129). Collodi plays on the ambiguity of the word *uomo*, human and adult male, like the word *man* in English.

2.4 The Ultimate Sacrifice Demanded by the Fairy

Unlike Peter Pan, Pinocchio wants to grow up, precisely to escape a fixed childhood that would be death itself. Peter Pan invents and leads the game of eternal childhood, whereas the puppet has become, ironically, its toy. He discovers himself locked in a tragic cycle where he will be forever trapped, deceived, killed and resurrected. He does not want, as the fairy says, "to die a puppet". The contract imposed by the fairy defines her absolute authority as strictly maternal: "Now I'll be your Mama […] You will always be obedient and do what I tell you to'" (Lawson Lucas 2009, 91) ("Io sarò la tua mamma […] Tu mi ubbidirai e farai sempre quello che ti dirò io", Collodi 1883, 130). To become a man means to submit to a feminine protection that will accompany the adventures of the marionette, as Athena to Telemachus, but without the male guise of Mentor.

After repeatedly allowing the marionette to brush with death in order to teach him life lessons, the fairy demands one last sacrifice.

5 "Voglio diventare un ragazzino perbene" (Collodi 1883, 129).

Leading him to believe that she is lying destitute, sick, and miserable in the hospital, she convinces the once lazy child to promise that he will serve as a caregiver, working day and night to nurture his father and herself. Pinocchio wears himself out to earn a glass of milk that he gives to his Geppetto. This symbolic breastfeeding with the 'milk of human kindness' makes him the nurturer of his own father, in a hut provided by the blue goat, the nurturing animal *par excellence* – and avatar of the Mother Fairy.[6] Motherhood is the key to metamorphosis: the marionette must exercise a maternal role to access humanity.

3 Wendy: From Servitude to Empowerment

Barrie's novel's original title,[7] *Peter and Wendy*, suggests that equal roles were attributed to the hero and the heroine. Also, the first three chapters of *Peter and Wendy*, devoted to the Darling family, feature the girl prominently (her conception, her birth, her early years), and Peter does not appear until chapter III.

3.1 The Darling Family: A Matriarchy?

The Darling family, on which the novel *Peter and Wendy* opens, is more traditional in appearances than is Pinocchio's. But this normality is immediately subverted: Mr. Darling is an inconsequential and infantilised father – "Father's a cowardly custard" (Barrie 1911, 27). Like all the male characters in the novel, including Hook and Peter of course, Mr. Darling is an eternal child.

On the title page illustration of the original 1911 edition, F.D. Bedford features all the characters in one scene. The Darling family sits at the bottom, in an unusual male and female family distribution: on the left side, the mother with her sons, Michael sitting on her lap. On the right side, the father leans back as his daughter threatens him with a bottle of medicine – another typically maternal attribute that she has in common with Collodi's little fairy. The collapse of the patriarchal family order is already announced.

More generally, one can detect in Barrie's novel the reflection of a crisis of masculinity: according to J.A. Mangan (1987), at the end of the Victorian era (which takes its name from an almost divinised queen-

6 Pinocchio thus overcomes the curse of the "little man [...] whose appearance was all milk and honey" ("l'Omino [...] che aveva la fisionomia tutta latte e miele", Collodi 1883, 189).

7 It was also a way to distinguish it from the pre-text *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, published in 1906.

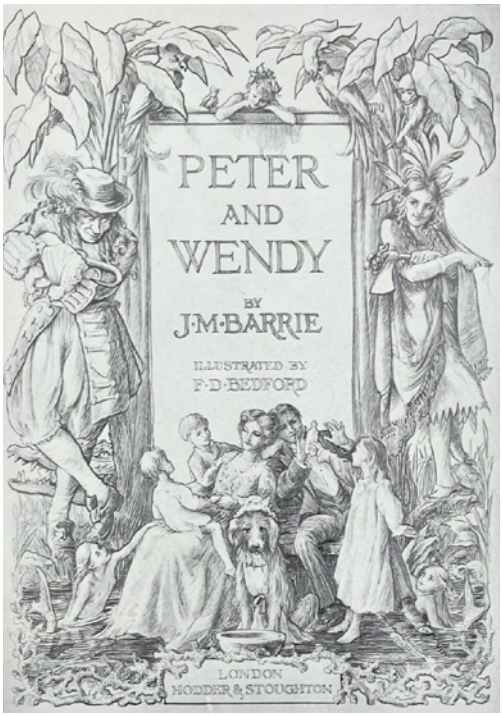

Figure 3
F.D. Bedford, title page for Barrie, J.M. (1911). *Peter and Wendy*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. Public domain

mother), the man is *puer aeternus*. Do only women become adults? Mrs. Darling is the true head of the family ("her mother was the chief one", Barrie 1911, 1); the mother knows everything and sees everything. At night, she lurks in her children's minds. The night lights are her eyes constantly watching: "they are the eyes a mother leaves behind her to guard her children" (Barrie 1911, 32). The maternal omniscience, reminiscent of that of Pinocchio's fairy, is abusive and disturbing.

Both in London and in Neverland, Wendy plays games in which she takes on the role of mother, and which are tinged with incest. She and her brother, John, pretend to be their own parents experiencing the birth of their children: "I am happy to inform you, Mrs. Darling, that you are now a mother" (21). This incestuous game extends to Neverland, where Peter takes the role of the father, while the Lost Boys and Wendy's brothers are their children. Peter, however, feels only filial feelings for Wendy ("a devoted son", 159), while she is actually in love with him.

Moreover, by acting as the mother of her own brothers, Wendy implicitly becomes the wife of her own father.[8] Hook, who intends to se-

8 "It is too easy to give an Oedipal reading of *Peter Pan*" (Rose 1984, 35).

duce the little girl, is also a father figure: in the play, which pre-existed the novel, the roles of Mr. Darling and Hook were played by the same actor. Incest is further complicated here by paedophilic overtones.

3.2 The Little Mother, Between Games and Sacrifice

Although Neverland is dominated by male figures and games, it is questionable to interpret it as a domain of the patriarchal order, as Heather Shipley[9] does. An imaginary family forms on the island around Wendy, who must fill the absence of the mother figure for the Lost Boys. In the underground house, she becomes, like Snow White among the dwarves, a willing little slave:

> there were whole weeks when, except perhaps with a stocking in the evening, she was never above ground. The cooking, I can tell you, kept her nose to the pot. […] Wendy's favourite time for sewing and darning was after they had all gone to bed. Then, as she expressed it, she had a breathing time for herself; and she occupied it in making new things for them. (114)

The words describing Wendy's play are very similar to those used by Barrie in his mother Margaret Ogilvy's biography, *Margaret Ogilvy by Her Son* (Barrie 1896). He paints a striking picture of Margaret Ogilvy's childhood, in which she not only takes on the full range of domestic and maternal tasks, but finds pleasure in them:

> She was eight when her mother's death made her mistress of the house and mother to her little brother, and from that time she scrubbed and mended and baked and sewed, […] and she carried the water from the pump, and had her washing-days and her ironings and a stocking always on the wire for odd moments, […] – all these things she did as a matter of course, leaping joyful from bed in the morning because there was so much to do, doing it as thoroughly and sedately as if the brides were already due for a lesson, and then rushing out in a fit of childishness to play dumps or palaulays with others of her age. (Barrie 1896, 28-9)

Was the writer inspired by a story told by Margaret herself? Or did he imagine his own mother predestined to motherhood since child-

9 "The childhood tale of Peter Pan, Neverland and the Lost Boys mirrors the hegemonic normalcy of economic trade created by men to exchange 'goods' (women as a guise for maintaining the narcissistic nature of the sociocultural order through desired homosocial relations)" (Shipley 2012, 146).

hood? The ease and even enjoyment of the little girl in the servitude of housework differs from Wendy's case, however, in one essential respect. For the young Margaret, there was a space for childish freedom (or at least her son imagined it that way). For Wendy, on the contrary, the only moment of leisure is still devoted to work: work *is* play, and her enjoyment is paradoxically found in the excess of toil, in exhaustion. She pushes to the extreme the imitation of the mother of a large family overwhelmed by her children. The play loses its lightheartedness and becomes a masochistic trap; it never ends.

In the eyes of a contemporary reader, the pleasure the little girl takes in assuming maternal servitude to the point of sacrifice seems to represent an outdated upbringing of girls. In reality, Wendy's masochism goes far beyond what was socially acceptable in 1911. Why did Barrie make it so extreme?

3.3 "Frightfully Fascinating": The Little Mother and Death

To the Lost Boys who beg her to be their mother, Wendy responds by reminding that she is "only a little girl":

> Then all went on their knees, and holding out their arms cried, 'O Wendy lady, be our mother.'
>
> 'Ought I?' Wendy said, all shining. 'Of course it's frightfully fascinating, but you see I am only a little girl. I have no real experience.'
>
> 'That doesn't matter,' said Peter, as if he were the only person present who knew all about it, though he was really the one who knew least. 'What we need is just a nice motherly person'. (Barrie 1911, 107)

Playing mother is more than an ordinary game: the simulacrum touches the sacred, vital stake of existence. For Wendy, it is an adventure as fascinating and dangerous as death is for Peter. Like the mother-of-pearl room of Pinocchio's fairy, the Lost Boys' underground house is both tomb and womb.

We know Barrie was inspired by the death of his older brother David at age thirteen, to write about the child who never grew up (Ridley 2016, 28-9). But Wendy is also inspired by a dead child; her name was invented by the author as a tribute to Margaret, daughter of his friend William Ernest Henley, who died at age six. The girl used to called Barrie "my friendy", mispronounced "fWendy". Besides, Wendy bears two ominous middle names, Moira and Angela, associating her with the Fates (*fata*) and the Angels, and hence with death. When Wendy reaches Neverland, she is struck by an arrow and seems to fall dead. The Lost Boys mourn her and build a little tomb-house for

her, from which she sings. This episode recalls the first appearance of the fairy as a talking dead girl at the window of a ghostly house.

The importance of needlework in her activities as a little mother also associates her with the figures of the Fates – her first gesture towards Peter is to sew up his shadow, i.e., symbolically, to reconnect him to life. In Neverland, she will mend the boys' clothes, a task that accompanies her tales and the questionnaires she invents to resurrect their memories. By all means, her point is to re-member.

Wendy sacrifices herself for her "sons", but she will demand from them a sacrifice to their motherland in the name of maternal love:

> At this moment Wendy was grand.' These are my last words, dear boys,' she said firmly. I feel that I have a message to you from your real mothers, and it is this: 'We hope our sons will die like English gentlemen'. (Barrie 1911, 210-11)

Masculine heroism depends on feminine empowerment.

It should be noted that, for the two authors, the sacrifice required of the son is not the same. For the Collodi, it is that of labour, in a book designed to instil the values of hard work in poor children; in Barrie's novel, it is that of life itself, in a moto directed towards the generation of the future soldiers of the Great War (Robertson 2008). Indeed, the call of the motherland, as a symbolic mother, will return in the propaganda of the Great War and Barrie will be enlisted by the War Propaganda Bureau (Feldmeyer 2017).

4 The Disney Versions: "Politically Corrected" Tales?

Disney's *Pinocchio* (1941) and *Peter Pan* (1953) have replaced Collodi's and Barrie's novels in the canon of youth culture. What may have seemed transgressive in the family and gender configurations of the two original works has been made socially acceptable and consistent with a conservative and conformist morality.

4.1 *Pinocchio* (1940)

In Hamilton Luske and Ben Sharpsteen's *Pinocchio*, the fairy emerges from a star at the beginning of the film, a beautiful blond woman dressed in pale blue, winged and haloed like a Virgin Mary, to answer Geppetto's prayer. Thus, a platonic parental couple with well-defined roles is formed from the outset. In his TV series *Pinocchio* of 1974, Comencini will then go so far as to marry them, making the fairy the deceased wife of Geppetto.

As the benevolent fairy godmother, Disney's "Blue Fairy" loses all mystery and ambivalence. She intervenes only twice to save Pinocchio: once in Stromboli's cage, then at the very end to resurrect him (that last time she remains invisible, present only in the luminous halo and the beautiful deep voice of Evelyn Venable). Throughout the rest of the film, Disney tones down the female empowerment of the novel by replacing her with her male side-kick, Jiminy Cricket. Endowed by the fairy to be the puppet's "official conscience", the Cricket behaves as the hero's Doppelgang soul (Jiminy/Gemini) guardian angel and moral guide, in a Christian perspective.

4.2 *Peter Pan* (1953)

In Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske's *Peter Pan* (1953) – see Ohmer 2009 – the father is less of a caricature than in the novel. As in the play, Mr. Darling and Hook are modelled and voiced by the same actor, Hans Conried, as grotesque and vain characters. But the father is notably redeemed by the end, where the Darlings (except for the sons) appear through the window: the father stands in the middle, much taller than the mother, and lays a protective hand on the shoulders of his wife and daughter, physically expressing his domination over the three females of the household: his wife, Wendy and Nana. The patriarchal order is obviously restored.

However, the biggest change is in the relationship between Peter and Wendy. In the play, as in the silent movie by Herbert Brennon (1924), Peter's role was always played by an actress (Tuite 2008, 105-7). The kissing exchanges between him and Wendy became homoerotic scenes whose subversive character did not seem to strike the censors. Disney, for the first time, masculinises the character by choosing teenager Bobby Driscoll, who had performed the role on TV (The Walt Disney Christmas Show), as a close-up model and voice actor. Disney ages the two characters ("Young lady, this is your last night in the nursery"), making them young adolescents whose romance is no longer suggestive of childhood sexuality. One may wonder whether the crocodile, who was female in Barrie's novel but now male (he), still evokes the fantasy of the '*vagina dentata*'?

5 Recent Reinterpretations in Films

Interestingly, two of the most recent adaptations of *Peter Pan* and *Pinocchio* for the cinema give a new insight on both of the young girl characters: Matteo Garrone's *Pinocchio* (2019) and Benh Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020). Despite their very different aesthetic and ideological approaches, these films both choose to focus on the young female character. But what do these directors' choices really mean?

5.1 Matteo Garrone's *Pinocchio* (2019)

Matteo Garrone's version of *Pinocchio* seems to have been the first to entrust the role of the Fairy with indigo hair to a very young girl (Alida Baldari Calabria, ten or eleven years old at the time it was filmed). This choice allows him to mark, as with Collodi, the evolution of the fairy, who has suddenly become an adult at the time of her second encounter with the puppet. But the interest of the novel's character lay in the contrast between her childish appearance and her authority towards the puppet, her servants or the doctors; her hieratic, solemn, mature figure, was in contradiction with her age.

After the episodes of Pinocchio's illness and the lengthening of his nose, Garrone inserts a kind of gratuitous interlude. The fairy plays hide-and-seek with him, they lie in her bed while the *lumaca* (she-snail) reads to them, or take a ride on the snail's back. The mother – or nanny's – role is obviously held by the she-snail, who in the novel doesn't appear before chapter XXIX. By putting the girl and the puppet on the same level of childhood and amusement, Garrone seems to have wanted to soften the severe figure of the little fairy, at the risk of making her lose all her gravity and her disturbing intensity. The episode of the fairy's grave and its guilt-inducing epitaph, a key scene in Comencini's TV series, has been removed.

5.2 Benh Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020)

Benh Zeitlin's *Wendy* (2020) seems to be the first, amongst the innumerable movies adapted from Barrie's novel and play, to focus on the hero's female counterpart. Instead of London, Zeitlin's movie sets the beginning of the story in contemporary Louisiana, where the matriarchal Darling family (grand-mother, mother and daughter, no male adults are ever mentioned) runs a shabby diner near a railroad. But Wendy's role as the elder sister of two brothers in Barrie's fable is reversed in the movie: the heroine (played by Devin Frances) has two older twin brothers Doug and James. Zeitlin thus displaces the twin motif from Barrie's Lost Boys group. Although Wendy, according to

the novel, is the first to answer Peter's call and follow him to Neverland, her buoyant and athletic and boisterous brothers are obviously drawn to the adventure even before Peter's call.

Neverland is a hostile volcanic island (the movie was shot on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, whose capital has become a ghost town since 1995 after it was destroyed by eruptions). Once on the island, Wendy remains the only girl among the group of lost children, but her role becomes secondary compared to Peter's magical power and to her brothers' dramatic fate – James ageing prematurely and becoming captain James Hook. Young actor Yashua Mack, who plays Peter, looks much younger than the other children, including Wendy. In his previous movie, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), Zeitlin celebrates a young girl's heroism in six-year-old Hushpuppy. In *Wendy*, the girl alone cannot accomplish any heroic deeds, she can only inspire the boys. The attempt to focus on the female character to offer a contemporary, even feminist, version of the fable, is therefore deceiving.

Zeitlin's modernisation of the tale also concerns the reversal of the colonial vision underlying *Peter Pan*, an almost all-male all-white fable in which Native Americans are ridiculed as the Picaninny tribe. Peter's role is played by young Antiguan actor Yashua Mack, and a majority of the Lost Boys are also of African descent. But the audacity of the transformation is, again, disappointing, as Zeitlin could be criticised (Bramesco 2020) for falling into another stereotype: confining black children to the wild side. Furthermore, the "first black Peter" is clearly no longer the hero of the story.[10] While Zeitlin may be trying to be 'politically correct' by giving the starring roles to minorities, he has, in fact, created the opposite effect.

Another disappointing twist comes at the end of the film; the mother theme takes a dramatic turn from Barrie's tale to Zeitlin's movie, losing its original subversive strength. Barrie had enhanced Peter's diffidence, even hatred, of mothers,[11] which Wendy desperately tried to contradict. In contrast, Zeitlin's Peter saves the children by leading them to repeat after him the motto "I love my mother", until a gigantic luminous fish called Mother, injured by Hook, is healed by their love and comes back to life.

10 "'Wendy' flirts a little too brazenly, for my taste, with the stereotype of the magical black man, the figure who props up and mystically empowers the story's white protagonists" (Chang 2020).

11 Céline-Albin Faivre mentions a draft in which Barrie planned to make Mrs. Darling the real mother of Peter, who had forgotten his existence (Faivre 2012).

6 Conclusion

Could these little girls' characters, who figure alongside male protagonists at the turn of the century, embody a type of feminine power? By playing the role of mothers, they are doing more than simply anticipating their future social function. To play the mother is to tell stories, to sew and mend, to nurse, to care, and to clean. It is even, symbolically, to give birth. The Bambina/Fata and Wendy do not disrupt the normalised distribution of roles and ideally perform all these tasks, but they overdo them. It is therefore less a transgression of rules than it is a subversion of values: playing the mother to excess, to the point of shattering the role, they challenge gender hierarchy. The cases of the little Fairy and Wendy consequently lead to a kind of axiological dead end. It is difficult to assign an educational value to these characters or to consider them as models. They push the maternal function to the point of *hubris* (Lévy-Bertherat 2020) and could hardly constitute models of "little mommies" like those offered, for example, by the Countess of Ségur (Heywood 2020, 120-2).

The end of both novels may seem disappointing in their return to order: human Pinocchio loses his marionette's fantasy, and the fairy, now useless, leaves him some gold coins and disappears. Wendy reenters the cycle of time and generations that Neverland had temporarily allowed her to escape. The Disney films extend throughout the entire length of the films the triumph of such values as order and obedience, thus doing away with the freedom of childhood. As for Garrone's and Zeitlin's films, they emphasise the little girl figures and mitigate gender stereotypes related to the little mother game. But in both films, the disturbing ambivalence of the young girl playing the role of a sacrificial and sacrificing mother disappears, in favor of more univocal and innocent characters.

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The Politically Incorrect and Its Limits in Late Twentieth-Century Youth Literature
Rome, l'Enfer by Malika Ferdjoukh

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Abstract This article reflects on the contours and limits of the extremely complex and unstable notion of 'politically correctness' in contemporary youth literature, based on the study of Malika Ferdjoukh's French novel *Rome, l'Enfer*. This novel for adolescents, which was published in 1995 by L'Ecole des Loisirs (Medium collection) and which shocked many readers at the time, is in many ways politically incorrect – in terms of the themes addressed (social violence, drugs, etc.), the structure of the story (a descent into hell ending with the death of the young protagonist), and the highly critical discourse on literature, which is allegedly incapable of preparing young people to face the 'real' world. Nevertheless, the article will show that this book, which in many ways is 'politically incorrect', does not give up its educational purpose.

Keywords Political correctness. Children's literature. Malika Ferdjoukh. French youth literature. Immoralism and amoralism.

Summary 1 Political Correctness and Youth Literature: Definitions and Problems. – 2 *Rome, l'enfer*: A 'Politically Incorrect' Novel? – 2.1 A Pessimistic Novel. – 2.2 The Discovery of a Violent and Unjust World. – 2.3 Is Literature Useless? – 3 Lessons from the Novel.

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1 Political Correctness and Youth Literature: Definitions and Problems

The concept of 'political correctness', though widespread, and often overused, is nevertheless extremely problematic: generally used in a pejorative sense to discredit a certain conformism, or dogmatism, it has gradually become (since its appearance in American conservative circles in the 1980s, and especially in France) the prerogative of those, often on the right or the extreme right of the political spectrum, who criticise the so-called 'soft' consensus, which is believed to be characteristic of democratic and liberal societies – or even the naivety or dogmatism of pro-human rights or anti-racist discourses. 'Political correctness' is therefore a politically connoted expression, which is often exploited in public debate and must therefore be used with care (Capozzi 2018).

It should also be noted that 'political correctness' is closely related to the question of language (Hugues 2011): political correctness is first and foremost a way of refraining from talking about something or someone. Talking about political correctness means delimiting the legitimate scope of the utterable, defining what can or cannot be the subject of public discussion. Those who defend it do so in order to reaffirm what they consider to be fundamental values (dignity of the person, respect for differences, etc.) that may have been violated in the past (in which case it is a question of remedying a past injustice) or that risk being violated in the future (in which case it is a question of a duty of care). On the contrary, those who criticise political correctness by associating it with a barely disguised form of 'moralism' see it as an unbearable limitation of other fundamental values, such as freedom of expression and freedom of thought, which are moreover closely linked to one another. As Kant said: no freedom of thought without freedom of expression. It is worth stressing, however, that both supporters and opponents of political correctness agree on a precise point: the common defence of a performative conception of language, according to which saying something means making it exist in the world. *Les mots sont des pistolets chargés* (words are loaded guns), wrote Brice Parain,[1] and it is well known that normative representations are also, and perhaps first and foremost, embedded in speech, language and grammar. Reinhart Koselleck, in a different perspective and to justify his method in the field of conceptual history, said that semantic struggles are often driven by social and political struggles (Koselleck 1979).

It is therefore easy to see what issues are at stake if we apply the concept of political correctness to the literary fact that, by its very na-

1 These words attributed to Brice Parain are quoted by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948).

ture, is an operator of representations. However, political correctness has, in the literary field perhaps more than elsewhere, a bad reputation (Talon-Hugon 2019): to introduce political correctness into literature would mean violating the writer's freedom of creation, imposing on him or her not only an ideology but also a certain use of words and language. It would mean making the literary text into a simple duplicate of the dominant discourse, and in short, calling into question the very essence of literature, at least if we adhere to a modern conception of literature based on the notion of the *écart* (gap) – the gap between literature and society and the (especially political, ideological) discourses that circulate within it; the gap between literary language and ordinary language; the gap between *l'écrivain* and he whom Roland Barthes called *l'écrivant* (Barthes 1981), etc.

But what about when the discourse on political correctness is set in the more specific framework of children's literature?[2] Certainly things become more complicated, precisely because of the status of children's literature, a literature by definition addressed to a young audience and which from the very beginning has found itself caught in a tension between *placere et docere* (please and teach), that is, entertaining and educating to the values prescribed by society. However, the didactic or moral purpose of youth literature should not be confused with political correctness. In fact, when we talk about politically-correct children's literature today, it is not so much the moral character of the works that is highlighted, but their moralising character, i.e. the expected and highly predictable way in which values are upheld that conform to consensual values that few are willing to challenge – at least publicly: altruism, tolerance, respect for differences, rejection of ethnic and social stereotypes, gender equality or, more recently, environmental protection.

However, the phrase has another connotation, linked to the very evolution of the conception of the addressee of children's literature: since the child is no longer considered as a "soft wax" (as Locke said)[3] on which to print 'good values', but a real individual, endowed with a sensitivity and a mode of understanding inherent to his degree of

2 This question is part of a broader reflection on moral issues pertaining to children's literature. The subject is an old one – as old as children's literature itself! – but there has been an evolution over the last fifty years. With the rise of realistic and sometimes crude stories in the tradition of American 'problem novels' during the 1970s and 80s, children's literature has been accused sometimes of immoralism or amoralism (see, in France, the pamphlet *Écrits pour nuire: Littérature enfantine et subversion* by Marie-Claude Monchaux, 1985). Now it is more often issues of political correctness that writers consider as problems. It is the position adopted for example by the writer Marie-Aude Murail. In an Op-Ed published in 2019, she deplores a new censorship, based on "a fundamentalist reading of texts, decontextualised, without hindsight, without humour" (2019).

3 John Locke describes the child's mind as a "white Paper, or Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases" (1968, 325, sect. 216).

maturity, it is no longer a question of writing *for* him/her, but *in respect of* him/her, taking care not to hurt or shock him/her. This concern for the protection of children, which is absolutely necessary, can however, as we know, turn into paternalism – paternalism in which I see a specific form of political correctness. Under the pretext of respecting the specificity of children, certain topics, which have become more or less taboo, should not be addressed. This is, moreover, one of the reasons why fairy tales, told to generations of children even if originally intended for them, are not politically correct in the current sense of the term – incest, rape, child abandonment, murderous jealousies between siblings are countless: which explains their rewritings, literary or cinematographic, which are also countless[4] (Connan-Pintado, Thauveron 2014).

Of course, one can only deplore the development of a literature that echoes and supports the moods, fashions and clichés of the moment and that, by sacrificing form and substance, would only provide children with ready-made thinking, taking them back to a passive state that was thought to have passed. But at this point, one might ask: if we do not want to be politically correct, what does that mean? That we are ready to promote 'politically incorrect' book for young people? Is it not right to want our children, the actors of tomorrow's society, to share principles of justice, to respect others and their differences – principles that are unfortunately often trampled on in our contemporary societies, despite the supposed prevalence of political correctness in the public sphere? Is it not right to want to protect them as long as possible from the horrors of the world – is this not our responsibility as adults (O'Neill 1988; Mesure 2001)?

Of course, I am pushing the argument a bit far. But the question of what the alternative to political correctness might be for a children's literature that is concerned with transmitting a certain number of values to its young readers, values that serve as reference points for our societies and which they cannot renounce without contradicting themselves, is not easily answered.

However, I will try to find one such answer, starting with an analysis of a novel for children, *Rome, l'enfer* by Malika Ferdjoukh, which, in my opinion, deals with this issue in an exemplary way: by showing a clear rejection of political correctness, this book, which in many ways is also politically incorrect, does not give up its educational purpose. The question then is what meaning exactly the novel intends to convey.

4 We can mention *My Correct Bedtime Stories: Modern Tales for Our Life and Times*, written by the American writer James Finn Garner (1994). Garner satirizes in his book, with an emphasis on humour and parody, the trend toward political correctness and censorship of children's literature. Garner wrote two follow-up books in 1995: *Once upon a More Enlightened Time: More Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* and P*olitically Correct Holiday Stories: For an Enlightened Yuletide Season*.

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2 *Rome, l'enfer*: A 'Politically Incorrect' Novel?

Published in 1995 by L'Ecole des Loisirs, in a series for readers aged between eleven and thirteen, *Rome l'Enfer* is a novel written by Malika Ferdjoukh, author of numerous books for children. Some of Ferjoukh's books have even been included in the lists of books recommended by the Ministry of National Education for Junior High School students (*Quatre sœurs*, 2003). However, it would be wrong to see Malika Ferdjoukh as a politically correct writer, especially if one looks at *Rome l'Enfer*, which provoked strong reactions when it was first published.[5] In many respects, it is indeed legitimate to speak of a politically incorrect novel, in the sense that it goes against a number of expectations of the reader of juvenile novels. I would identify three of them: first of all, the novel is characterised by a rare pessimism, which departs from the often implicit rule, but sometimes claimed by the authors themselves (I think of Susie Morgensten, for example),[6] of 'optimism despite everything' which prevails in youth literature. Secondly, the novel offers a particularly gloomy description of contemporary French society; finally, the novel seems to contradict a discourse that has become predominant in "politically correct" literature: that is, the praise of reading and literature, in which much of the edifying vocation of children's literature has found shelter.

2.1 A Pessimistic Novel

"Men take no path, neither the path of life nor the path of death. They are driven like straw into the storm" (Ferdjoukh 1995, 6). The book's epigraph, taken from Gustav Meyrink's fantastic novel *The Golem* (1915), brings into focus the symbolic dimension of Malika Ferdjoukh's story: behind the singular trajectory of the protagonist, it is about the human condition in its entirety. The young protagonist, Henri, a "straw in a storm" will be caught up in a whirlwind of events that he does not control and that will bring him a terrible fate.

5 See, for example, Laurin 1995: "Malika Ferdjoukh has written a hyper-realistic novel for informed adolescents… or those who wish they were. A shocking novel, bordering on the zany, a hard-hitting novel and a cry from the heart that is frightening. Too crude, *Rome L'Enfer*?".

6 Susie Morgensten (born in 1945) is an American and French author of children's literature. She has received numerous awards for her books (all written in French): the Grand prix du livre pour la jeunesse for *C'est pas juste!*, the Prix loisirs jeunes lecteurs for *Un anniversaire en pomme de terre*, the Prix 1000 jeunes lecteurs for *Oùkélé la télé* and *Les deux moitiés de l'amitié*. As an author for young people, she makes a point of being optimistic: "I make it my duty to be optimistic, to always say that we'll get through this and that life is good anyway. And even if hope is a liar!" (in Lartet-Geffard 2005, 92).

The novel, written in the first person, opens when the 14-year-old boy finds himself in bed one Saturday night in December, with a fever and a sore throat. His parents go to the theatre and a babysitter takes care of his little brother Juju, 7 years old. The reader is quickly informed that Henri's mother is not his real mother: five years earlier, the boy overheard a conversation between his parents in which the woman complained of having to take care of a child who was not her own. Henri has never spoken to his parents about his discovery, so they do not know how much he knows. While Henri was looking for a pillow in his parents' wardrobe, he dropped his father's jacket and discovered a photograph of an unknown woman, with the inscription on the back: *Pour Jean, Anna qui t'aime* ('For Jean [is the name of Henri's father] Anna who loves you', p. 21). It was then, Henri says with a nod to Lewis Carroll, that "I passed through the mirror" (21). Convinced that Anna is his mother, the boy looks up her address in his father's diary and finds it: "rue de Florence" in Paris, station "Rome". Henri lives on Boulevard Henri-IV, near the Bastille, on the other side of the city. But it does not matter: he rushes out of his house, in secret, dressed only in a T-shirt and jeans, with the photo in his pocket. Thus begins a hellish journey through Paris by night, which will be the occasion for a violent confrontation with a world that this young man from a good family – *fils à papa* (daddy's boy) as he says – never imagined existed. After a number of vicissitudes, which I will describe later, Henri finally manages to reach Anna's house. But chilled – it is snowing and his expensive clothes have been stolen – , disappointed by Anna whom he sees and hears from afar when she returns to her house,[7] Henri ends up taking refuge in the building's rubbish dump. He falls asleep for a few hours, half-naked, before waking up to vomit blood, and falls back to sleep (a sleep full of dreams and hallucinations, which will also be the occasion for a last imaginary dialogue with Juju). He eventually dies in his sleep like the little girl in the story of Andersen's *Little Match Girl*, to which Henri himself refers.[8]

The death of the protagonist is certainly not uncommon in fairy tales (and especially in Andersen's stories), but it is not common in the current production for young readers. In fact, Ferdjoukh's novel contravenes the politically-correct happy ending that dominates the field. But I would say that what is most striking, apart from Henri's death, is the fact that there is nothing at all in the novel to compensate for this tragic outcome, the fact that no light, be it even the

7 She is a woman wrapped up in her clothes, complaining of having had too much dinner, slandering the hosts and other guests.

8 In his delirium, Henri imagines his brother Juju telling him he wants to hear the story of *Little Match Girl* (214).

faintest, comes to illuminate, in retrospect, the boy's gloomy destiny: the novel ends with an epilogue, in the third person, staging first the discovery, at dawn, of the boy's corpse by the garbage collectors and then the announcement of his death by a policeman to his distraught parents. Beyond the unfortunate outcome, it is thus the novel's very structure, that of a doubly failed search (the object of the search, Anna, does not live up to Henri's expectations, and the hero, in his search for the person who gave him life, encounters death) that places the novel in a fundamentally pessimistic perspective, announced by the epigraph.

2.2 The Discovery of a Violent and Unjust World

Before arriving in rue de Florence, Henri crosses a Paris unknown to him, characterised by violence – physical, but above all social and economic. This very dark depiction of the world in which the young reader is called upon to grow up is not very politically correct – and was probably even less so in 1995 than it is today, at the time of trashy realism. Moreover, one might find the accumulation of misfortunes that befalls Henri excessive, even improbable: as soon as he enters the underground, he finds himself in the middle of a crowd trying to escape the tear gas thrown by the police; he loses consciousness and is saved by a young outcast, Waldo, whom, like Dante walking behind Virgil, Henri then decides to follow on his nocturnal journeys, discovering the world of drugs, prostitution, delinquency. A young pizza delivery boy, seeing Henri alone and lost in the middle of the night, takes pity on him and offers to drive him to the rue de Florence, where the boy says he lives. On the threshold of the door, convinced that the boy has arrived at his home, the young man robs him of his clothes, without imagining the terrible consequences of his action: in fact, Henri waits, in his underwear, in the snow, for hours for Anna.

These are undoubtedly bad encounters, but above all encounters with a world, the world of the slums, to which the corridors of the underground symbolically refer, which the character travels, just as Victor Hugo's characters in *Les Misérables* travelled through the sewers in their day. This world is the reverse of the bourgeois *pépère* (comfortable) world in which Henri has always lived. It is precisely the injustice of a profoundly unequal society, where the rich, the one *comme moi* (like me), says Henri, live side by side without ever mixing with the others, *les sans* (the without: 'without sleep', 'without a home', 'without a family', 'without love', 'without a penny', p. 71), that the adolescent discovers. Going through the mirror thus means suddenly finding oneself '*with* them', and seeing the world if not with their eyes, at least on their level. The change of perspective is brutal: "[w]hat is this world in which you watch someone eat

death while laughing at hooligans' tricks?" wonders Henri (100). Undoubtedly, the humour of the narrator, as well as the poetry of certain situations (the climb up to the roofs of Paris with Mélo, another brat met in the street, the snow falling on the city) or of certain characters (the beautiful Angela in particular) alleviate the tension in which the reader is immersed as he follows the character's journey into hell. But the fact remains that Malika Ferdjoukh depicts a fundamentally bleak, stupid and cruel world from which Henri cannot escape unscathed.

2.3 Is Literature Useless?

In fact, the narrator seems particularly ill-equipped to deal with what he discovers: not only because he comes from a privileged social background – his father is a gynaecologist, his mother is "a very *chic* lady" (Ferjoukh 1995, 13) – but also because he sees and experiences the world through books. Henri is in fact part of this category of characters, very common in contemporary children's novels, of 'great readers' who devour books – often classical literature by the way – like others devour candies. The multiplication of this type of character, as well as of stories that give a central role to the book or to the act of reading, should be understood in the context of a promotion of reading and literature as a value to be defended in itself, conducted in the name of the fight against illiteracy or against the decline of the book in favour of screens and new digital tools that attract adolescents in particular.

If it is possible to see the celebration of reading as a form of political correctness in the field of contemporary children's literature, it should be noted that Malika Ferdjoukh's novel takes the opposite view. In fact, Henri's bookish culture is of no use to him in deciphering the world and its language: on several occasions Henri does not understand the slang expressions used by Waldo and his friends, which often gives rise to amusing misunderstandings. This culture is even more an obstacle to the success of his enterprise, as it blinds him to his own abilities: beautiful intelligence, ready wit, sarcastic irony, these things do not work outside the closed world of Henri's flat or school. In order to live or survive in the urban jungle that unfolds before his eyes, other qualities are needed. It is precisely his naivety, the reverse of overconfidence, that is his undoing: neither parents nor books have prepared him for the experience he will have – or, more simply, for the experience of life.

In short, because it refuses to be optimistic, because it chooses to describe a bleak and violent social reality, and because it strives to counter the discourse that celebrates reading as a key to understanding the world and a factor in integration, Malika Ferdjoukh's

novel can be seen as politically incorrect. However, it seems to me that one cannot stop at these observations.

3 Lessons from the Novel

Firstly, in addition to the elements mentioned, there are other, albeit minor, elements which could be defined as politically correct: the fact, for example, that the writer seems to have taken care to diversify the ethnic origins of the negative characters and even to concentrate the most negative elements on the white characters; or the caricatured dimension of the representation of the 'bourgeoisie', which corresponds to a relatively well-exploited vein in current children's literature. We can mention Henri's stepmother, a lady seen as very 'chic' by those who do not know her and who, in her house, only swears and mistreats the *petit personnel* (baby sitter, gardener). We can mention also Henri's friends: these well-to-do youngsters enjoy making fun of the mispronunciation of the Algerian gardener Ahmed and show a frightening indifference when the latter tells them that his wife and two daughters have died in a car accident. This criticism is part of a relatively conventional discourse that seeks to morally disqualify those in economic and cultural power in order to better promote the selfless values of love, friendship and solidarity – but which, in this case, the group of outcasts does not embody, thus saving the novel from politically correct Manichaeism.

Secondly, the rejection of political correctness – at least in its most massive aspects – does not mean that the writer relinquishes a normative discourse or transmitting positive values to her reader. In fact, like many contemporary authors of realist novels such as Melvin Burgess, Malika Ferjouk justifies the dark character of her novel with a concern to show the young reader the world as it is, and not just how we would like to see it or how we would like our children to see it.

> My books are not testimonies, but observations. What I recount in *Rome, l'Enfer* never happened to me. But you just have to sit on an underground bench at eight o'clock in the evening, and observe, listen, that's all. (Laurin 1995)

The writer uses a similar argument to justify the death of the protagonist:

> Before I started this book, I knew it would end like this. It's an itinerary, Henri dies from knowing too much about the world. I would have been dishonest if I had written another ending. (Laurin 1995)

The term 'honesty' is important: her intellectual honesty leads her to refuse to sugarcoat the state of the world by inventing a happy ending. It is thus in the name of a positive demand for truth that Malika Ferdjoukh rejects the politically correct happy ending.

It is again this need that explains, in my opinion, the inversion of the *topos of* the child-reader I mentioned earlier. If Henri's reading was of no use to him, it is not because, like Flaubert's Emma Bovary, he read bad novels that deluded him. It is rather that he did not know how to make use of his readings, or more precisely find the right use for them. For this boy, embarrassed by his physical appearance and victim of the secret of his birth, books are a refuge, a way of escaping from the real world. It is no coincidence that from the very first pages of the novel books are compared to sleeping pills, which plunge the adolescent into a state of blissful unconsciousness: "Books I dream without sleeping, where I die awake. Silence and sleep. Better than Prince Valium or Angel Gardénal. [...] I forget. I read" (Ferdjoukh 1995, 14). It is obviously not this kind of use of books that Malika Ferdjoukh calls for: against the conception of reading as a withdrawal into oneself, she promotes a conception of reading as an open window on the world, which helps one to live instead of dispensing with living. Henri undoubtedly dies from violently and unpreparedly discovering the world as it is – or at least as it can also be. But in doing so, he shows the reader exactly what he should not do: close his eyes, shut himself up in an imaginary world, and keep the 'written world' and the 'lived world' radically separate.

However, Henri – his naivety and his misuse of books – cannot be blamed for everything. In fact, it seems to me that the boy dies less from the social horror he discovers than from the inability of adults to tell him the truth: the adults who should protect him have instead exposed him to the greatest danger by building his existence on a secret they cannot even keep. It is not by chance that the novel ends with the tears of Henri's father, to whom the policeman has just given the photo of Anna found in the boy's hand: "She is... the mother of my son, my first wife, how did you know? I... never told him..." (Ferdjoukh 1995, 223). The father's silence killed his son.

The message is therefore clear: in life as in novels, it is always necessary to tell children the truth. Not just any way, of course, as Bruno Bettelheim showed in his analysis of fairy tales (Bettelheim 1976). But according to a perspective that is obvious from the analysis of the novel: by reflecting on the place and function of values in children's literature and questioning the legitimacy of the poetic means to mobilise, to guide, simplify and circumscribe their reception. It is a question of recognising – and constructing – the autonomy of judgement of young readers: the responsibility of adults and literature is not to impose ends, but to prepare an access to truth that allows judgement to be exercised. This is tantamount to making truth

an ethical value and, as Malika Ferdjoukh offers, bringing it into play through a plot. On this condition, and only on this condition, can literature prepare us for life. In this sense, this novel written against a Manichaean and simplifying form of political correctness is also a work that embodies a reflexive form of political correctness for the protection and emancipation of young readers.

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Children's Sexualisation and Toys
Barbie Doll as a Sexual Token in Sarah Strohmeyer's *Barbie Unbound*

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Abstract This article offers an analysis of children's sexualisation in children's literature by focusing on the collection *Barbie Unbound: A Parody of the Barbie Obsession. With Photos by Geoff Hansen* (1997) by Sarah Strohmeyer. In the book, the Barbie doll is used as a medium to discuss sexual issues. Away from her typical pink, glossy and superficial world, in Strohmeyer's collection, Barbie is depicted while facing real problems; thus, she gets involved with dramatic historical events and violent life experiences, at a variety of social roles. Inasmuch as the famous toy is easily identifiable by a children's, adolescent, and adult audience, *Barbie Unbound* addresses a crossover readership, and stimulates an intergenerational debate about sexuality. Yet, since adult writers and readers usually repress children's relationship with sexuality, sex in *Barbie Unbound* is depicted in antithetical fashion. On the one hand, Strohmeyer offers detailed theoretical instructions to her young readers, and discusses topics of current interest. On the other hand, she tries to limit children's and teenagers' actual sexual experiences by stressing their terrible consequences, such as rape and venereal diseases, thus offering a dual interpretation between transgression and politically correct.

Keywords Barbie doll. Children's sexualisation. Gender stereotypes. Lesbianism. Sexual violence.

Summary 1 Introduction: Adult Writers and Children's Sexualisation. – 1.1 *Barbie Unbound* by Sarah Strohmeyer, with Photos by Geoff Hansen. – 1.2 *Barbie Unbound* and Sexualised Gender Stereotypes. – 1.3 *Barbie Unbound* and Rape: Children's Sexuality Must Be Punished. – 2 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction: Adult Writers and Children's Sexualisation

Today, when we think of children, the first image that comes to our mind is connected with carefree innocence, a concept that we find to be alien to our adult condition. Yet, childhood and innocence have not always been so inextricably linked. On the contrary, before the nineteenth century, believing in the Christian religion and in the doctrine of the original sin, most of the population used to think that all human beings had been contaminated since birth by a form of depravity, inherited from the first human creatures on earth, Adam and Eve. The only way to escape this terrible stain was to grow up and become aware both of their sin and of the means needed in order to obtain redemption. Therefore, parents in the past did not regard childhood as a separate life-phase from conscious adulthood; on the contrary, they sought to hasten their children's emotional, physical, and spiritual growth in every possible way (Gubar 2011, 122).

It was not just a religious issue. Before the eighteenth century, the childlike features that today may seem adorable, such as babbling and crawling, were considered as serious limitations when compared to the physical and intellectual completeness of the adults; these limits made children more akin to animals than to the dignified humankind (Gubar 2011, 122).

The Swiss philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was the first thinker to oppose this ideology. In fact, according to his theories, children are born in a state of innocence 'in nature', which in time, through puberty, is corrupted by the spoiling forces of 'human society'. Controversially, in his writings, Rousseau suggests that children are born innocent and pure, rejecting the belief that they are afflicted since their birth by the original sin. Consequently, the corruption of the child occurred during his growth and development in an injudicious society. For this reason, adults had to preserve children's innate innocence as long as possible, and defend it through careful education.

Given this interpretation that still affects our contemporary conception of childhood, it becomes clear that children's innocence is only an adult construction. Furthermore, children's alleged innocence is theorised through a series of 'lacks' compared to the complete adult life-experience: the *lacks* of guilt, guile, knowledge, and experience. In his *The Hidden Adult*, Nodelman maintains that the association between innocence and the so-called 'lacks' derives from Freud's theory of 'sublimation', which traces a link between innocence and sexual inexperience. By 'sublimation' Nodelman and Freud mean the ability to replace an intrinsically sexual discourse with another discourse, which may be valued more highly and which is not sexual (Nodelman 2008, 199).

James Kincaid, an American controversial[1] academic, in his *Erotic Innocence* has emphatised the association between children's innocence, lack of eroticism and sexuality. According to Kincaid, the label of 'innocence' that we apply to children transforms them into empty containers, ready to be filled in by adult projections and experiences. This is happening because our conception of 'innocence' is implicitly but indissolubly tied to its opposite, experience. This way, our culture tends to attribute sexual connotations to children, while denying doing such thing. In order to demonstrate his statement, Kincaid mentions as an example the highly eroticised figure of the child actor Shirley Temple (1928-2014), pointing out that the aesthetic features that characterise our idea of the 'innocent child' – "among other things, sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous" (Kincaid 1998, 14) – correspond to the contemporary conception of what is sexually attractive.

Joanne Faulkner in her *The Importance of Being Innocent* reminds us that innocence is interconnected with the concept of vulnerability and the need for protection, which, in turn, are loaded with sexual connotations in a culture like ours, where sexual relationships are considered in terms of the stronger person winning over the weaker (Faulkner 2011, 45). We implicitly endorse and promote a cultural representation of children that is both innocent and sexualised at the same time. Yet, if, as Kincaid and Faulkner state, our culture and society are so much inclined to sexualise children, why do we deny the obvious and insist in defining children as innocent? In her *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose tries to explain this ambiguous position. According to her interpretation, adults perceive themselves as the only legitimate sexual beings. Their conception of children, conceived as 'other' and not-adult creatures, must necessarily be devoid of sexual connotations. In this case, sexuality is considered solely in the physical sexual act, and not as an integral part of each person's identity. Consequently, accepting children's sexuality will force adults to reconsider all the concepts they have developed about their own nature, even in the sexual sphere; thus, children's sexuality threatens the adult construction of adulthood.

Freud is known to have undermined the concept of childhood innocence, but his real challenge is easily lost if we see in the child merely a miniature version of what our sexuality eventually comes to be. The child is sexual, but its sexuality (bisexual, polymorphous, perverse) threatens our own at its very roots. Setting up the child

1 Several critics accused Kincaid of legitimising paedophilia in his *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992). According to their interpretation, the author argues that paedophiles are a social necessity, becoming the scapegoat for a latent sexual desire that the whole adult community feel toward 'innocent' children.

as innocent is not, therefore, repressing its sexuality – it is above all holding off any possible challenge to our own (Rose 1992, 4). By insisting on representing children as pure and innocent creatures, and by persuading young readers to follow the example of their naïve peers in literature, adults succeed in maintaining the stereotypical – yet, socially and communally acceptable – perception they have of themselves. Thus, they can avoid confronting those aspects of their sexuality that they have repressed or wished to repress.

In agreement with the theory expressed by Rose, Gubar suggests a literary trend in support of it. While writing on children's alleged innocence, Gubar stresses that the rise of sexual maturity and the resulting loss of innocence are usually represented in children's and young adult literature in coincidence with catastrophic and potentially irreversible events. In Brain de Palma's movie adaptation (1976) of Stephen King's novel *Carrie* (1974), the main character's first period coincides with the sudden discovery that her mind has the supernatural ability to destroy and kill anyone who treats her ill. Likewise, in the famous *Twilight* saga (2005-08) by Stephanie Meyer, the main character's first sexual experience calls for her transformation into a dreadful vampire.

The difficult relationship between sexual experience and perdition is likely to arise from a motif in horror films that show young girls surviving their monstrous opponent only when still virgin and sexually pure (Gubar 2011, 126). Referring to the same type of sexually repressive dualism, Nodelman reminds his readers that most of the female characters in children's literature only achieve an important role in the story when asexual, usually being described as substitute mothers (Nodelman 2008, 276). Thus, the sexual experience in children's literature seems an insurmountable taboo.

From the literary point of view, this evolution in the relationship between adults – who tend to play the predominant roles within the publishing world for children –, children, and sexuality marks an equally significant trend. The books addressed at a children's audience, in fact, recently show an overcoming of the literary trends from which they had been characterised both from content and formal point of view. As Nikolajeva observes,

> an ever-growing segment of contemporary children's literature is transgressing its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting the most prominent features of postmodernism, such as genre eclecticism, disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity, and metafiction. (Nikolajeva 1998, 222)

In the same way, the contents in children's literature also evolve: they become more complex, face discussions on important historical

and social issues, question and suggest reflections on current topics. Moral teaching remains the ultimate goal of the narrative, but the psychological description of the child character moves deeper, authorised by the idea that

> transgressive behavior [is] no longer seen as a synonymous with bad character; good-hearted children [can] be shown as engaging in amusingly naughty behavior. (Barker 2016, 102)

The sexual characterisation, in particular, becomes a recurring topic in terms of queer sexuality, coming out, prevention of pregnancies and STIs. This transgressive approach to a realistic depiction of life in literature is not always appreciated and shared by the critic; several theorists would prefer that children's books maintain a lighter style, a less bloody and truthful vision of the world; in short, a more politically correct approach.

1.1 *Barbie Unbound* by Sarah Strohmeyer, with Photos by Geoff Hansen

In her children's literature periodical *The Guardian sof Education* (1802), Sarah Trimmer was the first writer to recognise the existence of 'young adulthood', thus creating a new category of readers, separated from those of children and adults. She defined readers from the age of 14 to 21 as 'young people'. Trimmer's primary aim was to recommend her readers books that seemed most suitable, according to the needs of their age. Anyhow, for both children and teenage readers, she promoted the kind of fiction that would shape well-mannered, submissive, and innocent young people (Talley 2011, 229). Sex was carefully excluded from Trimmer's reading list.

As opposed to Trimmer's suggestions, in recent years there has been a change in the way children's and young adult literature interacts with sexual issues. Despite the fact that until World War Two, writers banished sexually explicit content, and represented children only according to the stereotyped idea of innocence and sexual inexperience, some contemporary novels discuss sexuality, while addressing a young readership. This is happening despite the frequent criticism by many adult readers.

As Kimberley Reynolds asserts in her *Radical Children's Literature*, in the wake of the age of 'sexual liberation', also witnessed by the growing spread of the contraceptive pill, since the 1970s children's and adolescent literatures recognise that their young readers are interested in sex. Thus, literature also turns into a written testimony to those social changes that challenge the heteronormative lifestyle, exploring a wide variety of non-conventional experiences and sexu-

al orientations (Reynolds 2007, 115). This new approach is supported by the idea that, in an age dominated by a widespread discussion of sexual issues and pornography, to which even the youngest ones can access through internet, children's literature must carry out the task of sexual education, and provide accurate instructions that can make children and teenagers sexually aware (Reynolds 2007, 117).

Although children's literature and young adult fiction relate to sexual contents in different ways, the cultural construction of 'childhood' and 'youth' are similarly limited by the adults' dual approach of sexualisation and repression. Whereas the 'child' is considered as a gender-less and sex-less creature, with an immature, yet sexualised body, young adults are provided with a mature pubescent body, but are not considered as mentally mature enough to control it. As a practical example, in her analysis of girlhood, Shauna Pomerantz suggests that girls are construed in popular culture narratives as subjects with potential agency – as in the famous slogan "Girl power" –, as well as clueless creatures in need of adult surveillance for their own good (Pomerantz 2009, 150).

Therefore, despite the new trend in using literature to discuss sexual contents, most of the books addressing a young readership still tend to protect children's alleged innocence, by dissuading young people from experiencing their sexuality, and by maintaining the association between sexual act and exemplary punishment (Reynolds 2007, 115). In fact, most of the novels addressing a children's readership and discussing sexuality still focus on the problems resulting from direct sexual experiences, such as unwanted pregnancies.

The way these two antithetical attitudes coexist in the collection *Barbie Unbound: A Parody of the Barbie Obsession* (1997) by Sarah Strohmeyer is particularly interesting, and provides the case in point. Through the literary technique of parody, Strohmeyer wishes to highlight the limitations and false statements embedded in our social and cultural conventions. Thus, using a toy as a sexual token, the book works as an unconventional guide to sexual education, also promoting discussions on topics of current interest, such as the free choice of abortion, and the homosexual identity. Yet, at the same time, in her literal interpretation, Strohmeyer is unable to overcome the limits set by biased adults when representing preadolescent and adolescent sexuality. Hence, in the collection, sex is also depicted from a perspective that is at once conservative and sometimes punitive.

As clearly suggested by the title, *Barbie Unbound* consists of a series of parodic adventures that present the famous Barbie doll, her inseparable friend Midge, and her faithful partner Ken as the main characters. Barbie, marketed by Mattel since 1959, is the most famous fashion doll in the world (Mattel Global Brand Communications). The toy achieved such a success that, over the years, its supply has been enriched with several fellow dolls – including Midge and

Ken –, with fashion accessories matching any possible lifestyle, vocation, and career, and trans-medial adaptations and spin-offs, such as photo romances, books, animated films, and videogames.

However, over the years, Barbie's commercial success has incurred a series of criticisms about the socially unpleasant ideas this doll suggests, although being marketed specifically for a children's audience. The term 'Barbie' has often assumed the disreputable meaning of a 'pretty, but superficial and substantially stupid girl'. Moreover, the body of the doll was accused of promoting an anatomically unrealistic feminine image, with the consequent risk that girls would aspire to achieve that kind of body, bringing them to eating and psychophysical disorders. For this reason, since 1997, Barbie's body has been moulded in order to have larger hips, and recently Mattel has developed new models that take into account different physical features and aesthetic criteria, thus creating the new versions "Tall", "Slim", and "Curvy" Barbies and Kens.

In addition to this, Barbie and other Barbie-like dolls are highly sexualised. As suggested by Lisa Cunningham, the same specific qualities Kincaid had identified as common characteristics of children's innocence and sexually desirable femininity are also frequently shared by dolls, in the way they are represented and advertised (Cunningham 2015, 209). In fact, these dolls have an over-emphasised feminine body and are too sexy for the young girls who are their commercial target. This detail has raised great concern, as recent studies have shown that dolls are a constant reference model for children in the way they perceive the world, construct their identity and socialise (Hains 2012, 122). This way, the main aim these toys seem to suggest to their young owners is to 'be seen', and, even worst, to 'perceive themselves as sex objects', thus endorsing children's sexualisation, and adults' dual attitude, at once supportive and repressive.

Inspired by the criticisms incurred by Barbie as an unsuitable toy despite her constant updates, Strohmeyer created a collection that depicts the adventures of this doll in a realistic setting. No longer in her typical high-gloss and muffled world, Barbie has now to face the ordinary experiences every woman faces during her lifetime, in different geographical and historical environments. Whereas the setting is realistic, Barbie's nature is still characterised by the stereotypes that define her identity – naive, absent-minded, and unwillingly sexualised –, thus producing surreal and amusing results.

With great wit, and using supplementary tools – explanatory illustrations such as clever photographs, instructions for use, and discussion questions –, Strohmeyer intends to stimulate an intergenerational discussion on contemporary society and culture, transforming Barbie from the emblem of consumerism and unattainable beauty into a feminist teaching instrument.

Regardless of the serious topics discussed in it, the collection addresses at once a children's, young adult, and adult readership. The asterisk-ed subtitle "for grown-ups" must not mislead the readers. In fact, in the "Introduction" to the collection, it is clearly stated that *Barbie Unbound* wishes to involve both parents and their young "Barbie–obsessed daughter[s]" (Strohmeyer 1997, 2) into an intergenerational discussion. Indeed, Barbie's universal success makes her an icon, easily recognisable by a crossover audience. Yet, it also interesting to note that the parody of some cultural peculiarities in *Barbie Unbound* might fail in being decoded and understood by its younger readers. Indeed, as stressed by both Sandra Beckett and Sue Walsh when discussing children's literature and irony, although today's children are more proficient readers and viewers of parody than their peers were in the past, they still have a narrow repertoire of allusion they are able to recognise (Beckett 2001, 176). Then, parodies with multiple coding in Strohmeyer's collection are used in order to provide different levels of complexity and entertainment for its cross-over audience.

It is possible that the multiple readerships addressed by *Barbie Unbound* are the reason why sexual subjects are depicted in such a contrasting manner in the collection. On the one hand, the text aims at stimulating a critical, yet theoretical, discussion about different approaches to sexuality in contemporary society. On the other hand, the collection suppresses every practical desire by constantly referring to the tragic consequences children and teenagers would face if they ever decided to adapt to the sexual freedom promoted by the doll.

1.2 *Barbie Unbound* and Sexualised Gender Stereotypes

Barbie and Barbie-like dolls are usually charged with accuses of instilling gendered stereotypes in children and young girls. Thanks to Strohmeyer's wit, and to Geoff Hansen's hyper-realistic photographs, Barbie in *Barbie Unbound* seems to overcome this limit. In the collection, Barbie leaves her traditional world behind, and experiences real life in several societal, historical, and geographical contexts. The real Barbie doll has always enjoyed many social roles and working careers. Strohmeyer takes this aspect to the extreme, so that in the collection Barbie becomes an isolated and overweight high-school girl, a pregnant teenager, a hippie who lives in a feminist community, and the manager of a sweatshop. On the occasion of the fortieth-birthday of the Mattel doll, Barbie is even depicted as a woman in menopause, who fights the signs of aging with plastic surgery – after all, Barbie is entirely made of plastic. In addition to this, in the collection, Barbie also puts herself in the shoes of famous women of the past and of the present, role models and antimodels to which any girl might refer

to: Joan of Arc (1412-1431), the queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1793), Marie Curie (1867-1934), Eva Braun (1912-1945), and even the former candidate to the US presidency Hillary Clinton (1947-). By developing the features of Barbie through so many different characterisations, Strohmeyer intends to define the many facets by which the feminine gender is characterised in reality, thus overcoming the stereotypes by which women and Barbies have always been imprisoned. Indeed, in the "Introduction" to the collection, the author writes:

> Barbie Unbound is here to the rescue. After nearly forty years in her pink plastic prison [Barbie] is on parole, exploring the roles REAL women have assumed for years. And, with this guide, she will take you with her. (Strohmeyer 1997, 2)

In *Barbie Unbound*, Strohmeyer intends to overcome gendered stereotypes, also when applied to sexuality. It is interesting that, among the many realities experienced by Barbie in the real world, she is also called to walk a mile in the shoes of some gay characters; this way, Strohmeyer supports the concept that homosexuality is nothing more than another legitimate aspect of individual identity.

As noted by Kimberley Reynolds, the theme of sexuality has become so frequently examined in children's and young adult literature – albeit with many limitations and conservative conventions –, that now novels describe its less traditional aspects, such as dating with more than one partner and same-sex relationships (Reynolds 2007, 127). In the latter case, novels turn mostly into "problem novels" in which homosexuality is represented as one of the main traits of the character's identity. Thus, such stories pay great attention not only to the sexual implications of the character's life, but also to his/her intimate reflections, and to the consequences in a wider social context, such as accepting one's own homosexual nature, and the fear of the coming-out (Flanagan 2010, 35).

Barbie Unbound represents several gay celebrities: Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Alice B. Toklas (1877-1967), Ellen DeGeneres (1958-), and K.D. Lang (1961-). The episode "Barbie Stein and Midge B. Toklas and their Paris Salon" deals very superficially with homosexuality, mostly referring to trivial anachronistic stereotypes about the gay community, while focusing mainly on the literary and intellectual authorities to which the names of the two dolls refer. On the contrary, the episode "midge d. lang and Barbie DeGeneres: A Love Story" discusses the difficulties of self-identification as a homosexual doll.

After an unsatisfactory heterosexual experience, Barbie DeGeneres draws the conclusion that she is gay. This wise self-analysis does not diminish her self-esteem or her doll identity. Barbie DeGeneres only starts worrying about her sexuality when she must confront the rest of the world. Having obtained the immediate support

of her friend midge – a symbol of Barbie's most intimate acquaintances –, the doll fears that she might be discriminated at work:

> "midge, I know 10 percent of Barbies are lesbians and I am one of them", [Barbie DeGeneres] sobbed. "But if I let everyone know that, Mattel will throw me back in the closet. They'll accuse me of causing market losses and of being inappropriate for family viewing". (Strohmeyer 1997, 46)

However, Barbie DeGeneres's worries are completely unmotivated. As Strohmeyer suggests, the Mattel Board Directors, who have always been more than mindful about the commercial implications of the behaviour and the nature of each of their Barbies, support her homosexual orientation, because their marketing studies have revealed that there is a sizable niche for a gay doll.

The unexpected conclusion of the episode, in which the acceptance of homosexuality is subjected to market laws – as it happens in the real world –, is depicted in the text with such irony that it cannot diminish the real message Strohmeyer wishes to discuss. When Barbie DeGeneres fears that she might be branded as an "inappropriate toy", her friend midge immediately reminds her of the overly sexualised clothing provided to official Barbies. In addition to this, in the "Discussion Question" at the end of the episode, the author suggests an intergenerational debate on homosexuality, by asking

> Which is more morally offensive – a 'well-developed' doll that over stimulates a young girl's prepubescent sexual curiosity while closing her mind to alternative female images or a doll who prefers other dolls? (Strohmeyer 1997, 47)

Hence, Strohmeyer underlines Barbie's real limits as a toy: not her possible queer sexuality, but her identity as a projection of men's desires.

This way, accepting Barbie DeGeneres's homosexuality symbolically implies celebrating Barbie's 'Unbound-ness', or, in other words, the freedom of the doll from all the gendered stereotypes that have influenced her perception since her first appearance in 1959. Finally, Barbie, depicted in the less conventional feminine aspects – slave-driver, teenage loser, lesbian icon, and Nobel-Prize awarded scientist –, turns into an "ultimate feminist teaching tool" (Strohmeyer 1997, 2).

1.1 *Barbie Unbound* and Rape: Children's Sexuality Must Be Punished

In her *Disturbing the Universe*, Roberta Seelinger Trites analyses the way rape is described in children's and young adult literature. According to Trites, adults perceive sexuality as a source of power. Consequently, in literature, young people's sexuality is usually repressed and punished. In most teenage novels depicting rape episodes, the victims express an increasing sexual desire before the violence takes place; thus, rape becomes a symbolic tool to limit and punish a kind of sexual desire, which is opposed to children's presumed innocence. This tendency is so deeply rooted that even when an author describes a teenage sexual relationship, intending to praise a girl's sexual freedom, the event is still depicted in an implicitly repressive way (Trites 2000, 116). In "Rape Scripts and Rape Spaces", Aiyana Altrows considers the representation of rape and its physical and psychic consequences in four novels aimed at a young readership. She argues that all the texts examined offer a practical representation of social control on the female body: the novels punish female sexual desire and insist on gendered social rules, connecting teenage sexuality with alluring clothing and eating disorders (Altrows 2016, 53). A similar narrative dynamics is depicted in Strohmeyer's collection when discussing Barbie's sexuality.

Barbie Unbound deals with sexual violence on several occasions. The episode "Anita Hill Barbie" is inspired by a sexual scandal of the 1990s. In 1991 the Afro-American lawyer and university professor Anita Hill accused Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment. At the time, Thomas was a US Supreme Court nominee, and he had been her boss at the US Department of Education and at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. According to Hill, during her two years employment as Thomas's assistant, after her refusal of dating him, Thomas used work situations to discuss sexual subjects (Fassin, Swenson 2002, 132-9). A controversy took place; although several witnesses and proofs testified to Hill's credibility, Thomas's supporters claimed she was only seeking revenge and questioned why she had followed him on a second job and had met Thomas on various occasions after they no longer worked together.

In *Barbie Unbound*, Strohmeyer creates a Barbie-version of Anita Hill, and supports her pleas stating that, because of sexist blames, nobody believed her charges to be true. Anita Hill-Barbie is accused of being "too much of a Barbie, despite her Yale law degree" (Strohmeyer 1997, 112), thus some Senators and Ken Thomas's supporters think she is just seeking revenge because she has not married a Ken yet. In the "Discussing Questions" at the end of the episode, the author even suggests that a social reflection might arise from this sad event. This way, Strohmeyer wishes to stimulate an intergeneration-

al debate on the role of women in contemporary society. In fact, she asks her readers:

> What's the point of working hard, getting a scholarship to college, a degree from a prestigious law school and a job as a law professor if, in the end, society will think of you only in terms of being a sexual object? Now do you see why Barbie skipped all that tough stuff and went straight to the sexual object part? (113)

Yet, despite her clear support to the victim, Strohmeyer insists in describing Barbie's sexy clothing, suggesting that they might be the actual reason why she was molested, and might even be a justification for the violence she had to face. In her episode, Anita Hill-Barbie seems to be aware of the sexualisation she expresses through her attire. She does not bother being considered a sexual object, as long as nobody says it clearly.

> Even Barbie knows that while boys are supposed to notice pretty dresses, they're not allowed to talk about them (Ken never does). That's called sexual harassment and it's a violation of Barbie's civil rights. (112)

The situation is not limited to this episode. Barbie's body- and clothing-shaming is a recurring subject in the collection. For instance, the episode "Let's Go Navy! Barbie Gets Her Tail Hooked" represents another sexual outrage of the 1990s: the Tailhook scandal. In 1991, during the 35th Tailhook Association Symposium in Las Vegas, more than 100 US Navy and United States Marine Corps aviation officers were alleged to have sexually assaulted their female colleagues. This time, Strohmeyer creates a Barbie-version of Lieutenant Paula Coughlin, the whistle-blower who reported the events of the Tailhook conference in 1991, thus contributing to the start of the investigations. Regardless of her bravery in accusing her colleagues and superiors, Lieutenant Coughlin resigned from the Navy in February 1994, stating she had to face abuses in retaliation for her allegations.

In *Barbie Unbound*, Lieutenant Barbie Coughlin attends the Tailhook convention and becomes the victim of the indecent conduct of her colleagues. Although supported by Strohmeyer, Lieutenant Barbie fails in gaining the emotional help of the characters inside her story. The supervisors to whom she reports the atrocious event do not take her seriously because of her sexy attire:

> 'Was that a mini-skirt you were wearing?' the Pentagon investigators asked, their lower jaws dropping in shock. 'Now how could these men have pulled down your underwear when Barbies don't wear underwear?' (14)

Barbie's charges are not taken into consideration because her clothing is perceived as a legitimation for the violence she has had to face. Her rape seems less credible because of her attire. In the end, Barbie is the only one who is punished for the scandal, and she is fired. Literally, a children's toy is condemned for being so intrinsically sexualised.

In the episode "Teenage Pregnant Barbie", Strohmeyer states that the adolescent Barbie is unintentionally dressed for sex. This is the reason why she becomes an easy sexual target for "Hormonally-Overcharged Ken". The young Barbie has never received a proper sexual education, inasmuch as, whenever she dared asking questions about it to her creators, she only got tips on keeping her legs closed, and remarks that Barbies do not have sex nor can get pregnant. Consequently, Barbie does not understand what Ken is after; she spends the night with him, does not take precautions, and gets pregnant. Ken seems nowhere to be found.

Addressing children's, adolescent, and adult readerships at once, this episode alludes to the importance of sexual education as a form of prevention against unwanted pregnancies. This idea is also expressed in "Safe Sex Barbie", when the author stresses the importance of the condom as an indispensable tool in the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Yet, despite the laudable didactic intent of the episode, when the news of Barbie's pregnancy spreads, instead of feeling sorry for the consequences of Barbie's naivety and sexual inexperience, the other dolls blame her attire.

> Meanwhile, the American Girls dolls started pointing their pudgy fingers at her. 'That's what you get for parading around in those clothes,' sniffed Felicity Merriman. 'Twentieth century slut'. (10)

Once again, Barbie's sexualisation is condemned by focusing on her sexy attire.

In addition to those remarks, the association between sexy and showy clothes and sexuality is not limited to Barbie's character. Ken's apparel is questioned in "Safe Sex Barbie":

> And how come he was so concerned with his tan and what about those clothes? Matching faux leather loafers and briefcase, please! But when [Barbie] confronted him about his experimentations in the seventies, Ken was mum. He just lay there with that stupid grin on his face. (22)

The allusion to Ken's homosexuality in *Barbie Unbound* can remind readers of the scandal-provoking release of "Earring Magic Ken" by Mattel in 1993. The updated look of that male doll included blonde highlights in its traditionally brown hair, a queer outfit consisting of a purple open-work t-shirt and a lavender faux-leather vest, an ear-

ring in its left ear, and a 'curious' necklace, inasmuch as it looked like a sex-toy (Savage 1993). Due to its peculiar apparel, "Earring Magic Ken" was sold in record numbers among the gay male community, becoming the best-selling Ken model ever produced. The clothing displayed by Ken in "Safe Sex Barbie" conforms to that worn by the "Earring Magic Ken", both bearing a resemblance to stereotypical gay men in the 1990s.

Thus, Strohmeyer's statements support the association between sexy clothes and sexual experience. Although her repeated use of this dichotomy might be read as a parody of the 'asking for it' argument, it seems unlikely that Strohmeyer's younger readers will be able to get the irony embedded in her humoristic description of the issue. Hence, this meaningful connection testifies to the opposite dynamics of children's sexualisation and repression. Even in Ken's case, the sexuality of young people – and their toys – cannot exist without terrible consequences: whereas Barbie is seduced and dumped, or becomes the victim of sexual harassments, Ken risks his health. In this episode, in fact, Strohmeyer suggests that a male-doll, dressed in such a showy fashion, must have had a controversial and transgressive sexual behaviour, a kind of behaviour that fails in sticking to the image of innocent child, and to the conventional adult sexual norms. Ken must be punished for his experience; thus he is likely to be infected with several venereal diseases, including AIDS.

2 Conclusion

As already expressed in the theories offered by Nodelman, Kincaid, and Faulkner, contemporary culture and literature share a schizophrenic conception of childhood, where innocence and inexperience contrast against strong implied sexualisation. Like in other similar texts, the style in *Barbie Unbound* must consider the dual cultural approach between transgression and politically correct, when relating children and sexual topics. Supporting the widespread discussion of sexual issues in children's and adolescent fiction, the over-sexualised Barbie in *Barbie Unbound* seems to educate the young audience on sexual matters. The collection discusses with great irony and wisdom subjects of current interest, such as the acceptance of homosexuality and sexual prevention; thus, it provides an unconventional education on sexual issues, while entertaining its young readers at the same time. By representing Barbie in different realistic backgrounds, the collection seems to overcome the doll's stereotypical limits of 'shopaholic and superficial bimbo', thus turning the dull toy into a useful societal teaching tool.

Yet, Strohmeyer connotes her sexual instructions in a positive way only in those episodes in which sex stays unexpressed and theoret-

ical. In fact, it is interesting to note that the positive connotation of Barbie DeGeneres's sexuality does not contradict the repressive attitude with which children, adolescents, – and their toys – and sex are usually associated. Although revealing herself as a lesbian, Barbie DeGeneres never expresses her sexuality in a practical manner: she merely shares the room with midge d. lang, and walks naked on the back porch, but only during the weekends.

Through her parodic descriptions, Strohmeyer reveals socially deep-seated moral values and their dual interpretation according to gender. Barbie doll, standing for a (post)teenage girl, is punished for her sexy clothes and fails in gaining the support of the other characters in the stories, including female characters, who seem to perpetuate the biased moral judgements amongst each other. When Ken wears sexy clothes, his masculinity is questioned, suggesting he might have had gay experiences, and he is punished just as Barbie is.

By representing in a satirical fashion a famous icon of children's and teenagers' material culture, such as the Barbie doll, Strohmeyer draws her readers' attention to the conservative and sometimes punitive perspective on the 'difficult' association between young people and sex. She seems to support an adult male heteronormative perspective when discussing sexual issues, but this biased view contrasts with her satirical tone and witty comments. Yet, as suggested by Walsh, young readers might not be able to decode all of Strohmeyer's satirical allusions, inasmuch as the author provides different levels of complexity and interpretation to her cross-over audience. Whereas adult readers are satisfied with her parodic description of contemporary culture and morality, children and teenage readers will presumably read *Barbie Unbound* in its literal meaning. Hence, the dual description of Barbie's relationship with sex (tolerated when theoretical, punished when put into practice) testifies to the adult writers' schizophrenia when discussing young people and sexuality.

Her transgressive approach does not succeed in its intend; indeed, it seems that it conforms to the most conventional dictates of political correctness. Along with an apparently instructive attitude, Strohmeyer winks at her adult readers, maintaining a conservative and repressive approach that allows the continuation of the idealistic representation of children's innocence. Following the widespread association between juvenile sexuality and exemplary punishment as suggested by Gubar and Trites, Strohmeyer's dolls are always damaged by their promiscuity. Barbie Anita Hill and Lieutenant Barbie Coughlin become victims of sexual violence; Teenage Pregnant Barbie turns into an adolescent single mum. Even Ken, a male toy, is likely to contract AIDS for his excessive sexual experience. Hence, *Barbie Unbound* becomes a written testimony to children's sexualisation and adults' opposition to it.

However, it is useful to reflect on the evolution of culture and society, and the way in which this process has a significant impact in

literature; this impact is even more relevant when applied to children's literature, considered its prominent role as a teaching instrument for real-life dynamics. We may consider a linguistic example. Reflecting on the racist vocabulary in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, Jan Lacina suggests that the use of censorship on the very frequent N-word would be an unjustified simplification, inasmuch as children need to learn the historical context in which a book from the past was situated.

The collection *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (1994) by James Finn Garner offers an exasperation of this censorial approach by proposing an updated version of the most famous fairy tales, rewritten in a politically correct fashion according to both lexis and content. The result is highly humorous: for example, in Little Riding Hood, the young main character goes to her grandmother by virtue of an instinct of female collaboration; the wolf who devours her grandmother and wears her clothes, simply demonstrates tendencies to transvestitism in opposition to the heteronormative precepts on gender; finally, the hunter who intervenes to save the two women endorses the stereotypical representation of a white man and is obviously pushed away: "Sexist! Speciesist! How dare you assume that womyn and wolves can't solve their own problems without a man's help!" (Garner 1994, 4).

Thus, following this line of thought, we can suggest an approval of the ways in which *Barbie Unbound* manages the dichotomy between transgression and politically correct, and children's literature in general nowadays. Until the advent of the sexual revolution in the 1970s it was almost unthinkable to address young readers about 'scandalous' topics in a direct manner. Yet, following the new social evolution, both culture and literature have adapted, opening to broader discourses, also including sex and sexuality. Maybe the future hides new possibilities: Strohmeyer moves in small steps in this innovative direction, waiting for new books for children, which might be finally free to be transgressive.

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John Boyne's Representation of the Shoah in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*: A Paradigm of Transgression and Linguistic Uncertainties

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Abstract This article argues that transgression provides an illuminating critical category to examine the narrative construction of John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006). Boyne's decision to entrust his testimonial narrative to Bruno, the son of an SS commander, produces a representational uncertainty that is reminiscent of Theodor Adorno's claims on post-Auschwitz aesthetics. Bruno's fictional testimony is marked by a difficulty in conceptualising experience via language, which reveals voids in his cognizance of reality. This epistemic modality, however, is transgressed by the interaction of words and images in the film version of the novel.

Keywords Children's literature. Shoah. Discourse studies. Cognition. Cultural memory.

Summary 1 The Shoah and Children's Literature: A Controversial Debate. – 2 Breaking the Taboo of "Unspeakability": Discursive Uncertainties. – 3 Transgressing the Constraints of Verbal Language.

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1 The Shoah and Children's Literature: A Controversial Debate

The search for a paradigm fit to reconcile ethic concerns with aesthetic demands in the representation of the Shoah has been the object of extensive scholarly debate. The best known, and certainly the most frequently quoted statement on the issue is Theodor Adorno's claim, at the end of the essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1949), that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno 2003a, 162). Adorno's sentence has often been assumed to imply an insurmountable loss for words after the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. However, the matter at stake was – and still is – far more complex, and it has not so much to do with whether art *may* or *may not* represent the tragedy of the Shoah. The issue, as Adorno clarified in a later essay, titled "Commitment" (1962), is for the artist to mediate between aesthetics and ethics so as to safeguard collective memory while avoiding the risk of validating the cultural values that perpetrated such atrocities. If "suffering", Adorno states, "demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids",

> [t]he so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. The morality that forbids art to forget this for a second slides off into the abyss of its opposite [...]. When even genocide becomes cultural property in committed literature, it becomes easier to continue complying with the culture that gave rise to the murder. (2003b, 252-3)

Aesthetic representations are meant to arouse feelings of pleasure in readers and spectators, even when these feelings are mixed with other responses, fear and sadism included. Thus, when the subject matter is inhuman or barbarous, the risk is to elicit a morbid, voyeuristic effect, and to bring forth a response based on feelings of tolerance and compliance. Implicit in Adorno's concerns are also the constraints of language – verbal and non-verbal alike – in representing the Shoah in such a way as to safeguard the ethical imperative of testimony without commodifying the barbarity of history. This is a crucial point in order to protect collective memory against oblivion, and to institutionalise it, through the commitment of writers and artists, into cultural memory.[1] Still, this tension was often believed

1 I am referring here to the distinction between 'collective' (or 'communicative') memory and 'cultural' memory as outlined by Maurice Halbwachs and Aby Warburg, and later theorised, among others, by Jan Assmann. Whereas 'collective memory' might be in-

to be inherently irresolvable, and 'committed' art was for a long time viewed as the privileged locus for silence.

In the decades following the end of World War II, an orthodox interpretation of Adorno's writings, coupled with a sense of rigorous deference, led to an intense debate on silence as a respectful response to what was considered to be 'unspeakable'. George Steiner, for example, admitted the impossibility for language, and therefore for literature, to voice the inhuman:

> [t]he question of whether the poet should speak or be silent, of whether language is in a condition to accord with his needs, is a real one. […] Has our civilization, by virtue of the inhumanity it has carried out and condoned – we are accomplices to that which leaves us indifferent – forfeited its claims to that indispensable luxury which we call literature? Not for ever, not everywhere, but simply in this time and place, as a city besieged forfeits its claims to the freedom of the winds and the cool of evening outside its walls. (1986, 53)

Steiner accepted silence with resignation, in the belief that the Shoah was something unspeakable – at least *hic et nunc*, which for him coincided with the post-War period. Indeed, the representation of the Shoah has for a long time been 'muffled' in British culture – suggested, hinted at, or patently evoked, yet never fully voiced – and this is especially the case with children's literature.[2] A paramount example was the publication of Ian Serraillier's *The Silver Sword* in 1956, which narrates the story of three Jewish children, Ruth, Edek and Bronia, who wander around the streets of the Nazi-besieged Warsaw after their parents have been deported. In 1957, the BBC broadcast a TV series based on the novel, and the production was met with general indignation. As Jane Serraillier Grossfeld recalls in her afterword to the 1993 edition of *The Silver Sword*,

> many people wrote to the head of BBC children's television protesting that war was not a suitable subject for children – that it was not right to show them this terrible chapter of human history. (Quoted in Hope 2008, 295-6)

tended, in its simplest form, as the mnemonic heritage shared by a community, 'cultural memory' implies its socio-political, and therefore cultural, institutionalisation through 'symbols' and other 'mnemonic institutions'. These include libraries, archives, and museums, but also cultural productions, such as art and literary works (see Assmann 2010).

2 Even though my primary concern here is with British children's literature, the issue is certainly wider. For instance, Patey (2005) focuses on drama to examine the difficulty of British culture in coming to terms with the Shoah; more to the point, Patey connects the reluctance of British drama in voicing the horrors of the Nazi regimen with the indifference to the politics of the Third Reich that characterised Churchill's government.

Chronology, however, poses a serious threat – the substitution of silence with the indifference induced by oblivion. The publication of classics such as Serraillier's *The Silver Sword* and Judith Kerr's *Out of the Hitler Time* trilogy (1971-87) in England,[3] and Joseph Joffo's *Un sac de Billes* (1973) in France, has progressively asserted the right for children's literature to speak. Children no longer need to be 'spared' from the horrors of history, and conflicts and genocides may and should be explored in books addressing young audiences because of their educational and testimonial function (see Bosmajian 2002, xi-xxvi; Kokkola 2003). But while the ethic imperative 'to speak' has been safeguarded, aesthetic issues remain cogent, and often have to do with the constraints of verbal discourse.

In his discussion of the Shoah and unspeakability, Trezise introduces a further critical category into the debate, that is, the concept of "transgression".[4] If the Shoah is a delicate but suitable subject matter for artistic representation, the pursue of ethics in art, Trezise suggests, may be compared with "the feelings inspired by taboo" (2001, 43). From this perspective, artistic and literary representations of the Shoah identify a moral transgression, but they are nonetheless legitimised on moral grounds due to the ethical imperative to keep memory alive. Against the claim of unspeakability, representing the Shoah might be viewed as an act of transgression, a taboo that children's literature ought to break for its pedagogical function and its contribution towards creating an institutionalised form of collective memory.

In this sense, I suggest that transgression provides an illuminating critical category to examine the narrative construction of John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Fable* (2006) and its memorial function.[5] Although the novel proved to be a commercial success when it was published,[6] it was also met with mixed critical reception. Detractors especially criticised its historical inaccuracies

3 The trilogy, which may be read as Judith Kerr's fictional autobiography, includes *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (1971), *The Other Way Round* (1975, reissued as *Bombs on Aunt Dainty* in 2002, and *A Small Person Far Away* (1987). On the testimonial function of Kerr's work see Canani 2014.

4 Trezise, like several Anglo-American intellectuals, refers to the Nazi exterminations of the Jews as "Holocaust", a term that originally identified a burnt sacrifice offered to a god. Although I have retained Trezise's own words in the quotation, throughout the article I use the word "Shoah", which is the Modern Hebrew equivalent for "disaster" or "catastrophe".

5 In the United States, the novel was distributed by Random House with the American spelling, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008).

6 The novel sold over a million copies in the United Kingdom alone and topped *The New York Times* bestseller list; besides having been adapted for the cinema in 2008, the book has been translated into over fifty languages. For an overview of the reception of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* see Gray 2014.

as well as the protagonist's innocent gaze, which provides a somehow sugar-coated version of what actually took place in the concentration camps (cf. Gray 2014). My contention, instead, is that Boyne's novel breaks a double taboo. At a diegetic level, nine-year old Bruno progressively discovers the inhuman reality of Auschwitz insofar as he transgresses parental authority and disobeys the order not to explore what lies beyond the limits of their house. Moreover, the protagonist of Boyne's testimonial narrative is the son of a commander of the *Schutzstaffel* – that is, a representative of the criminals rather than of the victims. Embodied in Bruno's fictional testimony, and related through a third-person narrator, the language of Boyne's novel reveals a difficulty in conceptualising the tragedy of the Shoah that exposes the gap between child and adult addresses. Mediating between silence and the need to speak, the narrative fabric of the novel, it is my point, presents facts without fully *re*-presenting them insofar as it tests and transgress the boundaries of what can be expressed through language. This epistemic modality, which is key to Boyne's narrative, is ultimately transgressed in the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008),[7] which may therefore be read as an appropriation, rather than an adaptation, of the novel.

2 Breaking the Taboo of "Unspeakability": Discursive Uncertainties

Following his father's promotion to Camp Commandant at Auschwitz, nine-year old Bruno leaves Berlin and relocates with his family to the notorious Polish *Konzentrationslager*. Sad about leaving his friends and grandparents, the boy struggles to get accustomed to his new life and spends his days between Herr Liszt's ideologically rife lessons on the glories of "The Fatherland" and minor quarrels with his elder sister, Gretel. The key element of the plot, however, is Bruno's secret friendship with Shmuel, a Polish child that has been deported to Auschwitz with his family, and whom Bruno meets when he disobeys his parents' orders and gets close to the wired fence that separates his house from the concentration camp.

The subtitle of the novel, *A Fable*, clearly hints at Boyne's fictional employment of historical facts, following in the footsteps of a novelistic tradition whose cornerstone is Edgar Hilsenrath's account of the Armenian genocide in the fairytale-like *Das Märchen vom letzten Ge-*

7 *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008). Directed and produced by Mark Herman. BBC Films, Heyday Films, and Miramax Films. UK and USA, 94′, colour. Like the novel, the film was released as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* in the United States.

danken (1989).[8] Leaving aside issues of historical accuracy and unreliability, which have been examined extensively by Gray (2014), transgression provides the only possibility for Bruno not to get bored, but also to escape from the uncertain narrative that surrounds the reason why his family left Berlin. The boy is unable to conceptualise his new life, as his inability to pronounce the name of the place, which he naively calls "Out-With", reveals. This difficulty depends on his young age, but it is also the result of the obscure rhetoric that shapes his mother's explanation. When Elsa informs Bruno that they are going to move because of his father's promotion, the boy finds her "twisting her hands together nervously *as if* there was *something* she didn't want to have to say or *something* she didn't want to have to believe." In an attempt to satisfy Bruno's curiosity and answer his concerns, the woman's only reassurance is that "if *anything* it's going to be an adventure" (Boyne 2007, 1-2, 3; emphasis added).

Boyne replicates a recurring *topos* in the literature of the Shoah, that is, the difficulty that refugee children face in conceptualising their status. However, he represents the son of a German SS-Commander as if he were a deported child or a refugee. In that it blurs the customary, clear-cut distinction between victims and executioners, between Jews and Nazis, this decision is in itself an act of transgression. At the same time, it also enables Boyne to test the limits of verbal language against unspeakability and silence, and this attempt results into a rhetoric style that is grounded in indeterminacy. Bruno's questions are followed by tentative, incomplete answers that can only hint at reality, but inevitably fail to represent it. The repeated use of indefinite pronouns such as "something" and "anything", coupled with the use of the subjunctive ("as if…"), questions received assumptions on the representational function of language, and the idea that one's cognition of the world largely depends on the exposition to linguistic signs.[9]

The narrator's comments and the incomplete answer provided by Bruno's mother are consistent with the woman's claim, later in the novel, that "[w]ar is not a fit subject for conversation" (69). This statement has multiple implications concerning the possibility, but also the limits of verbal language to represent the Shoah in a way that might be suitable for children, and thus to combine ethical concerns with aesthetic demands. Boyne, who declared having been inspired

8 Written in the form of a fairy tale, Hilsenrath's novel tells the story of an Anatolian village and, retrospectively, of the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Turks between 1915 and 1916.

9 On representational theories of language see Kalmykova 2012.

by Serraillier's *The Silver Sword*,[10] commits an act of transgression in his decision to present young readers with the horrors of the concentration camps, and in so doing he intentionally breaks the taboo of unspeakability. Bruno's experience, however, validates his mother's claim insofar he struggles to conceptualise what is happening beyond the fence that limits his house. The boy's thoughts, like his mother's words, expose the gap that separates his knowledge of reality from his ability to process it and express it through language. The connection between language and its representational function is repeatedly denied; language can only approximate the reality of "Out-With", but cannot completely depict it.

When he looks out of his bedroom window for the first time, Bruno struggles to make out what he perceives in the distance. Even in this case, his reaction is reported through an indefinite pronoun, which confirms his difficulty in understanding what he sees. The boy, the narrator remarks,

> put his face to the glass and saw what was out there, and this time when his eyes opened wide and his mouth made the shape of an O, his hands stayed by his sides because *something* made him feel very cold and unsafe. (20; emphasis added)

Significantly, this uncertainty also shapes his sister's response when, prompted by Bruno, she looks at the human silhouettes that the boy assumes to be children playing in a farm. Echoing their mother's uneasiness, Gretel's reaction is expressed by a combination of indefinite pronouns and the subjunctive mood:

> *something* about the way he had said it and *something* about the way he was watching made her feel suddenly nervous. Bruno had never been able to trick her before about *anything* and she was fairly sure that he wasn't tricking her now, but there was something about the way he stood there that made her feel *as if* she wasn't sure she wanted to see these children at all. (28; emphasis added)

Gretel is a teenager, and her gaze is less naïve that Bruno's. The girl is aware of the existence of concentration camps and their role in the so-called "Endlösung der Judenfrage." She has imbibed most of the Nazi rhetoric, as her diligent answers to Herr Liszt's questions, and her crush on Lieutenant Kotler suggest. However, when she is faced

10 Serraillier's novel, as Boyne wrote in the *Independent*, is "a great children's classic – [it] was my first introduction to the Second World War in fiction, to the horrors of the Nazi era, and the fear that capture could instill in the minds of its young heroes" (Boyne 2012).

with its actual implications she is at a loss for words that might enable her to conceptualise the reality of Auschwitz. When Bruno urges her in his search for answers, the repeated use of modal verbs fulfilling an epistemic function further testifies to Boyne's quest for an aesthetic paradigm fit to represent what remains unsaid – in other words, what the writer finds it hard to express within the boundaries drawn by language. As Gretel tells Bruno, what he sees from the window "*mightn't be* the countryside", as he wrongly assumed, "[w]hich also means that ["Out-With"] *probably isn't* our holiday home after all" (35; emphasis added). At the same time, this indeterminate rhetoric, coupled with the epistemic function of the modal *must* in the following example, is also indicative of Gretel's own uncertainty. This is the case when the girl tries to explain to Bruno – as well as to herself – what adult readers understand to be a death march:

> 'It *must* be *some sort of* rehearsal', suggested Gretel, ignoring the fact that *some* of the children, even *some* of the older ones, even the ones as grown up as her, looked *as if* they were crying. (37; emphasis added)

In *Holocaust Representation* (2000), Lang challenged the negative rhetoric that surrounds the debate on possibility for the Shoah to be represented, and denied its foundations on ontological grounds:

> [w]e hear [the Shoah] referred to as unspeakable, and we usually hear afterward a fairly detailed description of what is unspeakable, that description intended, of course, to prove that the designation was warranted. (Lang 2000, 18)[11]

Representation, Lang concludes, is always an act of transgression – a transgression of what is possible, but also of what is imaginable. If one accepts the assumption that artistic representation always implies a selection of what can be *presented* and *re*-presented, these limits are inevitably trespassed by any cultural production, whatever its subject matter (Lang 2000, 55-6). In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, the transgression of the limits traced by possibility and imaginability – what may or may not be represented, and what can or cannot be imagined – creates a rhetoric of indeterminacy that tests, rather than accepting, discursive and linguistic boundaries, a tentative quest that begins by breaking the double taboo of silence and unspeakability.

Replicating the paradigm typical of pagan and Christian narratives staging the quest for knowledge, transgression is the only way for Bruno to trespass the limits to cognizance set by his family. Sig-

11 On this point cf. also Trezise 2001, 41-2.

nificantly, his encounter with Shmuel takes place alongside the barbwire that delimits the concentration camp. Bruno's knowledge develops insofar as he approaches the line that he is forbidden to cross, and this progression is mirrored in the narrator's words, which anticipate, through a climactic series of coordinate and relative clauses, the boy's enlightenment:

> a small dot appeared in the distance and he narrowed his eyes to try to see what it was. […] [H]is feet were taking him, step by step, closer and closer to the dot in the distance, which in the meantime had become a speck, and then began to show every sign of turning into a blob. And shortly after that the blob became a figure. And then, as Bruno got even closer, he saw that the thing was neither a dot nor a speck nor a blob nor a figure, but a person.
>
> In fact it was a boy. […] Bruno slowed down when he saw the dot that became a speck that became a blob that became a figure that became a boy. (104-6)

Bruno's exploration of the area he is interdicted to corresponds to his exploration of what he is forbidden to know. His escape from a narrative in which words cannot fully represent reality coincides with his transgression of parental authority, and his cognitive emancipation is embodied in the way he progressively brings Shmuel into focus. Interestingly, Boyne's compenetration of visual and verbal aspects brings to the fore the need for another form of transgression, that is, the necessity to overcome the representational limits of language for cognizance to occur. As Kalmykova remarks, representational conceptions of language inevitably collide with cognitive voids that indicate the discrepancy between what can be said and what actually is. As much as it is intentional, language is essentially self-referential. As such, it entails blanks in knowledge of the world which need to be filled by integrating action into the experience that is communicated via linguistic signs (Kalmykova 2012, 105-6). This is precisely what Bruno does, and in so doing he transgresses a limit that is both real and metaphorical, physical as well as cognitive.

Bruno's friendship with Shmuel prompts him to question what he knows about Germany's hurt pride, the Jewish question, and the reality of "Out-With". Moreover, the boy's transgression undermines his sister's certainties, which are based on the education she has received, and hence on the Nazis' linguistic construction of the 'Jewish peril' rather than on the knowledge of what exists beyond the fence. For both Gretel and Bruno, the Shoah has only ever existed *in absentia* – that is, as a narrative shaped by a dominant rhetoric, circumscribed and delimited by linguistic boundaries that are ideologically constructed. When Bruno asks his sister if they are Jews – a question that indicates his attempt at defining why he would be different from

Shmuel –, Gretel's answer is peremptory: "'No, Bruno', she said. 'No, we most certainly are not [Jews]. And you shouldn't even say something like that" (182). Still, the girl must admit to herself her uncertainty, and process the existence of cognitive blanks that the Nazi rhetoric is unable to fill:

> "We're…" began Gretel, but then she had to stop to think about it. "We're…" she repeated, but she wasn't quite sure what the answer to this question really was. "Well we're not Jews", she said finally. (182-3)

Like in all mythological transgression narratives, Bruno's disobedience results in his tragic end. In an attempt to search for Shmuel's father, the boy slips into a hole in the fence wearing a uniform provided by his friend – a "striped pyjamas" – and both children meet their fate in what adult readers clearly understand to be a gas chamber. But Bruno's brief experience of Auschwitz is also the chance for the boy to discover the hiatus between what he *heard of* and what actually *is*. His impressions are related by the narrator, who resorts to the epistemic function of the modal *might* to foreground the boy's cognitive gaps: "all the things that [Bruno] thought might be there – weren't" (207). The abrupt juxtaposition of a conditional verb with the simple past "weren't", however, is also an indication of Boyne's belief in the role and the power of the written word. The issue is not whether to remain silent or to speak, but to test the possibilities of language to represent the Shoah and its horrors in such a way as to make it intelligible, and respectful of history and memory, even for the younger audiences.

3 Transgressing the Constraints of Verbal Language

Against the danger of silence, testing the power of words implies coming to terms with the boundaries set by language, and the limits imposed by discourse. Boyne's narrative style often hints at what may not be fully voiced – it isolates and represents fragments and cues whose interpretation is ultimately left with the readers, who are invited to integrate the blanks left by language with their experience of the world. Precisely insofar as it is crafted around a pattern of linguistic uncertainty, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* reveals the gap that separates children from adult readers. "If you start to read this book", the blurb in the back cover states, "you will go on a journey with a nine-year-old boy called Bruno. (Though this isn't a book for nine-year-olds)". This is a well-known issue with children's literature, which always implies a triangulation between adults – the author and the parents who select what children should read – and

children. However, this statement also implies a further act of transgression, the one committed by children who read a novel that explicitly claims it has not been written for them.

As proof of the extent to which transgression and language boundaries are key to Boyne's narrative, it should be pointed out that there is one limit that the novel does not trespass – that is, the representation of death. In *Probing the Limits of Representation* (1992), Saul Friedlander argued that the Shoah is "an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories". Insofar as it is "an event at the limit", Friedlander rightly suggested, the threat of banalisation and distortion demands that artist bear in mind that "there are limits to representation *which should not be but can easily be transgressed* (1992, 2-3; emphasis in the original). When Bruno and Shmuel meet their fate, the narrative abruptly comes to a standstill, implicitly suggesting that death remains a taboo not to be broken. It is at this point that Boyne's rhetoric of discursive indeterminacy approaches silence. When Shmuel is worried because his father has been missing for days, adult readers easily infer the reason of his absence, and so they understand the end that awaits the two friends in the dark room they are led to with tens of other prisoners.

The ending of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, however, is *un*represented, except for the concise assertion that "[n]othing more was ever heard of Bruno after that" (Boyne 2007, 214). Death, in other words, is presented only *in absentia*, it is silenced from the narrative. Still, its presence is blatantly audible, confirming Henri Lefebve's claim that silence is "'another speech than ordinary saying' (*un autre Dire que le dire ordinaire*), but it is meaningful speech nevertheless" (Steiner 1986, 53). Following a rhythm that might be compared with an asymptotic line, one may argue that Boyne presents death, but does not *re*present it. In so doing, this rhetoric strategy reveals the existence of a limit in the English language, the difference between the concepts of *Darstellung* (which means representing, in the sense of 'putting *there*' or 'producing') and *Vorstellung* (which means representing, in the sense of 'putting *in front*') that is central to Arthur Schopenhauer's debate on aesthetics in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818-19). Bruno's death is not *vorgestellt* – that is, it is not presented *before* the eyes of the readers – and yet it is *dargestellt*, it is 'laid there' for the readers, at least for the adult ones, to sense and interpret it. Death is the ultimate taboo that Boyne's language is unable to transgress in an attempt to reconcile the testimonial function of literature with the aesthetic limits that representing the Shoah implies. The linguistic indeterminacy onto which the novel is grafted, however, is in turn transgressed by the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.

Released in 2008, the movie was criticised for providing a watered-down depiction of the extermination of the Jews, or, as Linda

Grant wrote in *The Guardian*, a "Disneyfication of the Final Solution" (Grant 2008).[12] This is probably because the film overemphasises Bruno's point of view, his naivete, and his feelings. Insofar as his household, his relationship with his family, and even the relational dynamics between his parents are given prominence, the film makes Boyne's 'original sin' more visible. Consequently, the boundary between murderers and victims is far more difficult to perceive than in the novel. However, I argue that the movie also transgresses one of the key points of Boyne's narrative, that is, his attempt at testing the discursive incertitude that surrounds the discourse of the Shoah.

Precisely because it is the product of verbal language, the representational uncertainty that shapes Bruno's experience is filled by the interaction of words and images in the film. This is certainly due to the specificities of literature and the cinema, but I would also suggest that the film appropriates, rather than simply adapting, the novel. As Julie Sanders claims, adaptation and appropriation are two distinguished processes. More to the point, appropriation rests not only on a perceivable relationship between the source and the target text, but also on the acclimatisation of the original text so as to fit the culture to which the final product is addressed (cf. Sanders 2006, 26). Sanders specifically refers to texts – literary, visual, or otherwise – that are transposed from a cultural system to another, as the cyclical appropriation of the Shakespearean canon, across time and place, suggests. Still, the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* may be said to appropriate Boyne's novel in that it transposes it into a new cultural production – in other words, into a movie, with all the aesthetic demands, but also the constraints, that such a medium implies.

When Bruno and Shmuel are caught in the death march that is shown in the final scenes, the director swiftly shifts to Bruno's father's office, where the Commander is proudly showing the map of a new crematorium to two soldiers. It is precisely at this moment that Elsa tells him that their child is missing. As Stephanie Rauch rightly observes, the ending of the film provides "a Hollywood-style race against time" that is absent from the book, and alludes to a number of other Holocaust movies, including Oskar's race to avoid Itzhak Stern's deportation in *Schindler's List* (1993)[13] (Rauch 2021, 83). From

12 Like the novel, the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was met with mixed reception. *The New York Times* criticised the way it "trivialized, glossed over, kitsched up, commercially exploited and hijacked" the Shoah, staging "a tragedy about a Nazi family" (Dargis 2008). A number of critics and scholars, however, have extensively praised its educational function. For an overview of the critical reception of the film see Gray 2014, 113-21 and Rauch 2021, 81-3.

13 *Schindler's List* (1993). Directed and produced by Steven Spielberg. Amblin Entertainment and Universal Pictures. USA, 195′, colour and b/w.

this perspective, the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* amplifies the original transgression of the novel, giving relevance to the tragedy that falls on the family of the SS-Commander at Auschwitz rather than to the inhuman reality of the concentration camp.

However, the film, like the novel, depicts the Shoah *in absentia*. Even if images compensate for the cognitive voids left by language, what happens beyond the fence delimiting "Out-With" is never clearly made visible. In this sense, the narrative fabric of both the book and the film version of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is also reminiscent of Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (1997).[14] In Benigni's film, when Guido is deported to a concentration camp with his son Giosuè, he persuades the child that they are participating in a competition. In so doing, Guido uses language to construct an alternative reality, even if this manipulation is morally acceptable in that it is meant to protect Giosuè from the tragedy that they are living. The visual and the verbal collide in a story that is presented to viewers, like Boyne's novel is presented to readers, as "a fable".[15]

The final scene of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* certainly provides a more dramatic epilogue than the novel in that the interaction of words and images reduces the ambiguities of the original. When the family begins to search for Bruno, the boy, Shmuel and a multitude of other prisoners are led into a dark room and forced to get undressed. The lights fade out among the prisoners' cries, and the scene is only briefly illuminated from above. Hiding behind a gas mask, a soldier opens a window in the ceiling to drop a few mothballs into the room – tablets of Zyklon B, the pesticide infamously used by the Nazis in order to kill Jews by fumigation. A close-up of the crematorium's locked door, followed by a slow, backward tracking shot that shows the loosely hanging, empty uniforms, suggests what is indirectly confirmed a few moments later, when the camera focuses on Bruno's mother to foreground the desperation in her face, and his father finds Bruno's clothes near the fence. The naked bodies of the prisoners, who look like animated corpses in the dark, their cries, and the claustrophobic atmosphere are reminiscent of Dante's *gironi infernali*, and provide a visual representation that leads viewers towards death without indulging in morbid, voyeuristic effects. Thus, despite the differences, a core element of Boyne's novel, and possibly of his commitment as a writer, remains perceivable. Death, the

14 *La vita è bella* (1997). Directed by Roberto Benigni, produced by Elda Ferri and Gianluigi Braschi. Cecchi Gori Group, Melampo Cinematografica. Italy, 124′, colour.

15 At the beginning of *La vita è bella*, the voice of Giosuè, who is now an adult, informs the viewers that "[q]uesta è una storia semplice, eppure non è facile raccontarla. Come in una favola c'è dolore, e come in una favola è piena di meraviglia e di felicità" ('[t]his is a simple story, yet it is not easy to tell. It is painful, as fables are, and like a fable it is full of wonder and happiness'; transl. by the Author).

ultimate boundary that may not be transgressed, is still there, as a reminder of the artist's responsibility when aesthetics and ethics need to be reconciled.

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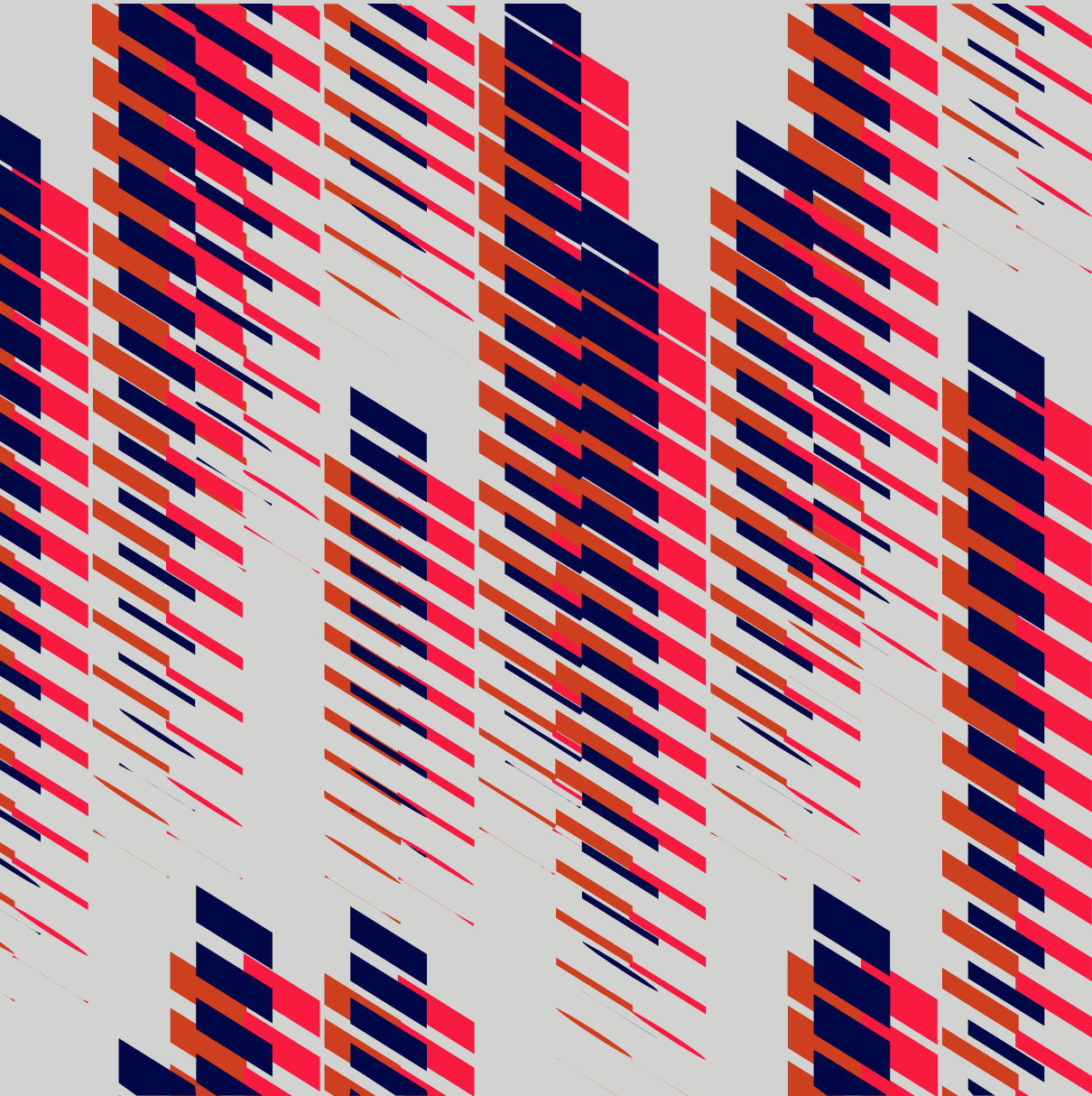
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