



Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e
Postcoloniali

Generalizing Suffering

A Taxonomy of Character in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Relatore

Prof.ssa Pia Masiero

Laureando

Leonardo Bevilacqua

830683

Anno Accademico

2013 / 2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction - What does it mean ‘to be a (fucking) human being?’	p. 5
Chapter 1 – Figurants: Flat Characters Never Change	p. 25
Chapter 2 – Personifications: ‘You Speak to Yourself, Inventing Sides’	p. 45
Chapter 3 – Protagonists: ‘Failing Ever to Be Really Seen’	p. 67
Conclusions - The Impersonal: ‘There’s Something Incurrigibly Dark in Your Personality	p. 89
Appendix – Future Research Trajectories: Direct Characterization and the Unrepresentable	p. 97
Bibliography	p. 109

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DOES IT MEAN ‘TO BE A (FUCKING) HUMAN BEING’?

The debate over the end of “postmodernism” – whether it has ended after all, and when – is constantly fuelled by the still-ongoing critical reception of the works of art and literature of the Twenty-First Century. That is, there is a shared feeling in the vast community of critics and artists broadly defined that postmodernism is no longer a term adapt to describe our current cultural situation not only because some of the traits that we are used to associate with it no longer persist, but also, and crucially, because something has developed out of it that is distinct and yet inextricably linked to our recent past. The present condition in the history of thought allows us to reconsider poststructuralist conceptions of the relationship between language and reality - and yet not repudiate them as if their powerful critique of our society had never taken place, but rather fully acknowledge their importance and take them into account. Since the advent and then climax of Critical Theory in the world of academia, a number of diverse responses to what was perceived as a repudiation of formerly vastly shared notions of humanism have arisen. Some of them were mere nostalgic complaints concerning the supposedly superiority of a cultural period that looked at what is universal in mankind over their zeitgeist’s cultural relativism and fragmentation. But some were authentic re-evaluations of the ideas of humanism and the human – together with their ethical and political implications – and they were founded upon a dialectical engagement with the work of such philosophers as Derrida, Foucault and Lacan.

Clearly, literature is one of the most privileged fields in which to observe such a difficult, exciting and defining period in the Humanities: it is made out of language, that most powerful and distorting tool, and it cannot but dramatize the quandaries of human or human-like beings. In the field of the American letters, the work of David Foster

Wallace constitutes yet another privileged spot to observe this tendency towards a renewed humanism in contemporary fiction: critical consensus has already gathered around his central role as the most influential American writer of his generation, one that has attempted to lead the novel out of its perceived communicational impasse and back into an ethical and political relevance. Wallace declared his commitment to a kind of fiction that is preoccupied with existential questions with remarks that are now very well-known:

Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be. (McCaffrey 131)

Wallace's vagueness about what it is that makes us 'fucking *human beings*' is precisely what makes his assertions both powerful and resonant. His remarks should then be taken as *symptoms* of the contemporary tension towards a new humanism, rather than a formulation of it. But then what does it mean, for Wallace, to be a human being?

The obvious territory in which to look for an answer should be his fiction. To what extent he has succeeded in overcoming the traps of Theory is still a matter of debate, and the very intriguing and powerful fuel of the recent wave of scholarship that goes under the name of Wallace studies. And yet any sweeping claim on Wallace's new humanism – one which is a synthesis of poststructuralist theory - should follow the critical analysis of how and whether he achieved it, rather than precede any such assessment. It is now common ground among many literary scholars that the last decade or so of critical engagement with the writers of Wallace's generation has pointed at their overcoming of postmodernism without any consistent or detailed account of what sort of new literary techniques – if any - they had to formulate in order to escape the poststructuralist cage. Marshall Boswell is referring to a set of publications which include a great deal of articles and book chapters on Wallace when he complains that

‘for the last decade or so, we’ve heard a great deal of inconclusive talk about the ‘post-postmodern era’ and the ‘post-ironic’ novel’.

There is some serious danger implicit in reading the novels of the fiction writers which are usually brought up in this critical conversation – the list constantly evolving, yet often including the likes of Wallace, Franzen, Powers, Eugenides and Safran Foer. That is, it would be a mistake to ground the assessment of the work of these authors purely on the image of themselves which they have contributed to shape through their non-fictional writings – intentionally or not. The work of Wallace is a case in point, since it is particularly hard now *not to read* in light of his two major critical works, after almost two decades of both academic and non-academic critical writing that made of “E Unibus Pluram” and his canonical interview with Larry McCaffrey the very cornerstones of his critical reception. If the attempt to link an author’s critical perspective with the ideas at stake in his fiction is both a necessary preliminary task on the part of the critic – and also an understandable point of departure for any early-time reader left to ponder an oeuvre as portentous and complex as *Infinite Jest* – then it is also clear that we cannot leave our evaluation of Wallace’s work to be limited and potentially distorted by Wallace’s writings themselves. The same goes for his contemporaries – with the obvious advantage, on both parts, that they are still here to participate to this broad conversations, by means of both their fiction and their other prose. The starting point of poststructuralist thought, in fact, is the incommensurable distance between language and what it is meant to represent: it would be extremely naïve, therefore, to take for granted Wallace’s own words on his fiction after the famous “death of the author” was proclaimed in the 1960s. Sure, his comments and opinions offer an excellent starting point for the critical assessment of his oeuvre, but they are not to be confounded with the thing itself: what is significant for us to discuss today is

whether he achieved *as an author* the ethical and aesthetic ideals that he had set for himself as a critic.

Moreover, there is very good reason not to take for granted the idea that his fiction is consistent with the sort of post-humanism his essay and interview seem to envision. Fiction, Wallace famously declared, is about ‘what it is to be a fucking human being’ – and that was intended as a strong response against the sort of postmodernist fiction that constantly aims at demonstrating that language is a far less reliable means of representation than most of us realise. Surely, we should not expect a tout court rejection of Theory¹ from a writer so well-versed in it. And in fact Wallace’s prose shares most of his peculiar features with the work of his postmodernist masters – Barth and Pynchon above all. Thus the pervasive presence of hyper-mediating language is a constant in *Jest*. This is a sort of narrative language that is meant to attract a lot of the reader’s attention to itself alone, rather than function as a transparent window onto the world of the characters. But then what part does the human element play in the novel, when it seems to be submerged by the babble of excessive and redundant information which inform it? *Infinite Jest* in particular, when compared to other works by the same author, stands out as a novel with a more than Dickensian cast of characters: if Hal Incandenza, Don Gately and a few others can be considered its main ones, the narrative space that is dedicated to them is constantly fragmented and alternated with the conjuration of a plethora of minor and secondary peers, many almost indistinct among an aura of white noise. Indeed, James Wood was on to something significant about some of our contemporary fiction when he described it as “hysterical realism”². The term is meant to indicate novels that were so obsessed with the social and individual

¹ Hereafter I will use the term ‘Theory’ as an umbrella term for the various schools and currents that Peter Barry identifies as ‘Critical Theory’, 1995, pp. 24-53.

² Wood’s term, which is now widely used, was coined for a 2000 article that appeared on *The New Republic* and was entitled “Human, All Too Inhuman”. Significantly, the title highlights what Wood perceived as a tension between the quantity of characters on the one hand and their mimetic credibility on the other.

differences of their human elements that seemed to centrifugally expand in countless narrative strands, one for each of their several protagonists. Thus, if it is true that the proliferation of characters and subplots does not necessarily involve a thematic focus on their social and cultural interdependence, it surely takes space and concentration away from a more detailed explorations of the main characters' interiority.

But it is not only the quantity of *Jest*'s characters that makes its texture and atmosphere less warm and humane than we would expect from Wallace's poetic statements – it is also their “quality”. In his use of character Wallace's work is both in continuity and disruption with his postmodern forebears: if it is true that what is said of these people has a lot to do with their existential predicaments (and is therefore linked to their human qualities), yet there are some traits of Wallace's technique that remind us of the flat characters of most of the works of Barth and Pynchon. Consider the vast number of characters that populate the parallel universes of the Enfield Academy and the Ennet House: they are far from reading like characters in realist novels, their individuality often left less than sketched. The likes of Kate Gompert, Michael Pemulis and Randy Lenz do not correspond to the ideal of psychologically realistic characters for three reasons: first, their personalities are far from complex and determined by one or two main traits; secondly, they read a lot less than plausible, and could not be mistaken for real people in our non-fictional world, since their respective biographies contain more than one episode that seems to be the parody or exaggeration of a real person's life; and finally, their perceived independence as autonomous entities is constantly undermined by the narrative voice, one which seems not to miss a chance to make itself heard.

All these features contribute to the sense that these belong to the latter category of Forster seminal opposition between round and flat characters in *Aspects of the Novel* ([1927] 1985): ‘flat characters [...] are constructed round a single idea or quality’ (67),

far less complex and organised than the literary creations of Flaubert and James. If it is true that Forster's distinction is vague, then *Jest* is a good example of how a theoretical distinction based on less than solid ground can function as a heuristic term for underlying a certain quality of a literary work. Again, what is striking about the field of Wallace studies so far is precisely the intention to read Wallace as he wanted to be read. Thus, with regard to the use of characters in *Jest*, Jon Baskin affirms that 'Bart, Pynchon, DeLillo [...] all sought to demonstrate how culture subsumed subjectivity. In place of characters, they presented mechanised or commercially determined automatons' (2009). Sure, *Jest* testifies to a profound interest in human suffering and subjectivity. But there is no demarcated rupture as the one that Baskin postulates: what is peculiar (and ignored, so far) about these characters is precisely the extent to which they remain 'mechanised [...] automatons'. This is one more index of the fact that Wallace does not reject the lesson of his masters: he elaborates upon it.

But Baskin is right on one fundamental thing: a writer's use of character is undistinguishable from her representation of the human subject. Narrative progressions force us to make judgments on the protagonists of a given work in order to understand the plot and appreciate the significance of its twists, and these judgments are necessarily based on both the similarities and differences that we perceive between the characters on the page and the people we know in the real world. And *Infinite Jest* makes it clear to us, as much postmodern fiction does, that we are dealing with fictional representations of real people, and that we should not forget about this level of mediation. The perceived lack of freedom of these character is due, as we have said, to the form by which they are conjured on the page – but it also finds its objective correlative in the themes of the novel. By infusing these characters with such immense doses of suffering – and of a kind that is universal precisely because it is common – onto characters that are this flat, Wallace is dramatising the opposition between liberal humanism and

poststructuralism on all of the three dimensions of the literary character: the mimetic, the thematic and the synthetic³.

The question which *Infinite Jest* poses as a novel is precisely what it means to be a human being in an age that is characterised by a lack of trust in the autonomous subject. What is there to know or empathise with in these “flat characters”, beyond their being stereotypes? Even more importantly, is there *anything* to them that is more personal and peculiar than the mere being a young athlete completely enslaved by the ideology of success or a drug-addict whose entire adult life has been determined by the physiological craving for a given substance? If Wallace has chosen to populate his story-world with sketchy and sometimes cartoonish characters the reason is precisely that perceived lack of freedom and individuality are part and parcel of the postmodern condition, as Barth and Pynchon had realised and dramatised in their own times. What remains to be fully appreciated is what kind of subject Wallace manages to represent, among all these threats to the subject’s very existence. Thus what is peculiar and significant about *Jest* is that it constitutes an attempt, on the part of its author, to negotiate between opposite poles of the conception of the subject and negotiate a new idea of it.

It is this negotiation between antithetical values – the postmodern “death of the subject”⁴ and the Subject celebrated by liberal humanists – that makes *Infinite Jest* both a symptom of its time and a rich and complex contribution to it. The questions of freedom and unity of the subject that the novel reflects on both the formal and thematic levels are those which define the various attempts to elaborate a new form of humanism in our present cultural situation. The central questions around which this debate is being articulated is this: can we still postulate an essentialist conception of the human subject,

³ See Phelan (1987) for the distinction between these three dimensions: ‘[...] just as characters are possible persons *and* carriers of ideas they are *also* artificial constructs’ (284).

⁴ For an informed and concise account of ‘the death of the Subject’, see James Heartfield’s *The ‘Death of the Subject’ Explained* (2002).

one which would allow us to define our own relationship with other human beings in universalistic terms of brotherhood, despite the many differences in culture, religion and ideology which fragmentise a potentially cosmopolitan community? Or would such a concept merely constitute yet another imposition of a particular group of society upon another? The emergence of Critical Theory, in the second half of the Twentieth Century, constituted a response to the tenets of the political and philosophical position that used to dominate the Western world at that time – liberal humanism.

In the eyes of Marxist critics, soon followed by structuralists, poststructuralists and all the other infinite strands of Critical Theory, what needed to be debunked was a system of beliefs that was based upon the notion of the “Transcendent Subject”. In this conception of the human subject, ‘individuality’ - the “essence” of our own identity – ‘is antecedent to, or transcends, the forces of society, experience, and language’ (Barry, 2002 18-19). What follows is that we are fundamentally free and our own identity precedes all the eventual constraints which engage us. Biomedical conditions, ideology and life-experience all influence us “from the outside” – that is, they are “other” than us, as opposed to directly constituting and determining our own self. So-called theory sees this set of ideas as a metanarrative, an ingenuous reliance on the “metaphysics of subjectivity”. Thus the “death of the subject” is an expression that includes and summarises all those critical stances that see the Subject (any individual subjectivity, as well as the general concept of transcendental subjectivity) as dependent upon a form of discourse. There is nothing outside ideology.

These alternative conceptions of subjectivity constitute the roots of most of the intellectual debates that have characterised our culture at least since the 1960s: all numbers of ethical and political questions arise from where you stand on this debate. Once we accept the lesson of Critical Theory and realise how much we are influenced by culture, ideology and experience, where shall we posit the ground on which our

future actions in this world are based? Clearly, one of the dangers implicit in deconstructing the tenets of much of our Western culture is to undermine any sense of freedom and responsibility in the individual. If the subject (at any level – from the individual to an entire society) is neither free nor transcendent, what does it mean to claim that it is granted with any kind of agency and power?

THE GENERAL AND THE PARTICULAR

These questions have characterised each and every corner of the academic and intellectual world, and not only the purely philosophical sphere. The so-called Ethical Turn – a renewed interest in the overlapping of ethics and literature in contemporary academic culture – reflects, in its fragmentation, the philosophical struggle to come to terms with matters of freedom and agency in the age of Theory. As the literary critic Andrew Gibson notes, the two main strands that have characterised the Turn – the poststructuralist and the liberal humanistic – tend to reveal their respective standpoints from the very choice of texts they tend to analyse. Thus each of these two strands claims to articulate an ethics of fiction that is inherent to the category of literature itself, while in fact choosing as the natural terrain of their own explorations primary texts which already reflect the same theoretical preoccupations. On the one hand, poststructuralist theory tends to apply to postmodern texts, which are characterised by formal and thematic innovations that are an implicit response to the age of theory. On the other hand Martha Nussbaum, probably the contemporary philosopher who is the most representative of the neo-Aristotelian and liberal humanistic strand of the Turn, bases key concepts of her theory on the works of Henry James and Lionel Trilling – “perceptive equilibrium” being a case in point here. These traditions are in constant dialectical engagement, in a constant struggle to synthesise their theory and practice.

But their conclusions seem strikingly similar it is because they do not disagree on what constitutes “the ethical” in our age.

Thus Gibson is wrong when he asserts that Nussbaum and the entire Neo-Aristotelian tradition to which she belongs do not take into account the many lessons and insights of Theory. In fact these traditions are based upon notions that seem to perfectly overlap. The first is that they both found their ethical quandaries upon *epistemological* questions. Whether they articulate their thought in terms of the Levinasean disruption of Western ontology and the metaphysics of comprehension or less theoretically-grounded questioning of any unexamined preconceptions, philosophers on both sides of this divide see the necessity to constantly shape and re-evaluate our system(s) of thought. As Mary Midgley has pointed out, Western thought has a tendency to reduce any kind of diversity and experience into a rationalised system. And, particularly after Second World War, the negative implications of this tendency are clear to everyone: the comprehension (in his two-folded meaning of understanding and physical inclusion) of what is radically different from the self into a system of thought is necessarily a form of oppression.

In this sense, Nussbaum and most of the critics in her tradition are far from being as ignorant of the developments of Theory and nostalgic of a pre-theoretical (and therefore ingenuously ideological) past, as they are depicted by Gibson and others. Both currents are aware of the dangers implicit in any totalising and fixed system of beliefs, and since there is no such thing as absolute freedom from ideology, they both seek the solution to this apparent impasse in a constant confrontation of the Subject with the Other. And it is in the way this relationship between Self and Other that poststructuralists and liberal humanists find yet another point in common, their second. It is the *particularity* of what is radically different to me that, if I am willing to fully encounter it, letting the obnoxious pretension to ‘comprehend’ it before I actually put

myself in relation it, compels me to re-assess my system of beliefs. Particularity and its disruptive force are the only, provisional, way out of the intrinsically oppressing – yet necessary – power of my reason and understanding. Thus if different terms apply to the specifics of different philosophers, the concepts of alterity and particularity highlight similar conclusions in both of these thinkers. Any form of rational thought, any form of internal representations of the external being of the world, represents a reduction of what is irreducibly other to a third term between the observing individual and its other – i.e. a conceptual representation. Any preconceived idea prevents me to see the world in its infinite particularity and variety. The problem with ontology (which is Levinas's term for the all-including force of Western reason) is that '[its] work [...] consists in apprehending the individual (which alone exists) not in its individuality, but in its generality'.

These are the philosophical assumptions that have influenced and characterised most postmodern literature. Since this post-theoretical ethics is an epistemological quandary at heart, it is only natural that the fiction that arose in the period of its climax has inherited this tendency as a problem which demanded new formal solutions for the novel. As Gibson notes in his seminal *Ethics, Postmodernism and the Novel* (1996), 'in the context of an ethics for which ethical and epistemological questions are inseparable, distinctions between modes of narration are also the crucial ethical distinctions' (??). The quest for the innovation and problematization of form has usually led, in the literature that has been produced since the 1960s, to an always more and more radical dismantlement of any ingenuously transparent form of mimesis. Any sort of narrative technique that can be said to be metafictional aimed at making the reader aware that what she had at hand was not a spotless and perfectly transparent window on a piece of the real world – rather, no signified, no actual human being, was there behind the signifier of the fictional character. For most of the writers that Gibson takes into

consideration the question seem to be when to stop representing: the mimetic effect of any form of narration is based on the epistemologically untenable premise that comprehension of what is other to us is possible, that it really is possible to see the reality outside the window. Thus the duty of the postmodern writer is to constantly point to the necessary failure of her own work as a representation of something that in fact precedes the event of writing. Many postmodern novels choose to represent the presence of the “unrepresentable” – of something their own language cannot quite grasp – through the quandaries of a narrator that explicitly dramatizes this difficulty. All aim to undermine their own representational powers, thus making it clear that the particular always exceeds comprehension.

If one looks at the seminal texts of Nussbaum’s tradition, one will find both thematic preoccupations and formal solutions that are very much similar to the set of typically postmodern texts to which Gibson refers. The Chicago philosopher has articulated most of the ideas concerning the intertwining of ethics and literature in her seminal essay “Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory”, included in *Love’s Knowledge* (1992). When poststructuralist critics prefer authors such as Beckett and Coetzee, Nussbaum develops her theory of the ethics of fiction on Henry James’s dramatization of the quandaries of the writer in *The Ambassadors*. Thus Strether, James’s protagonist and – to some extent – alter ego, spends a great deal of his time thinking about his role as an external observer and recorder of the reality that surrounds him.

The importance of particularity is stressed by Strether’s difference from another character in the novel, the old spinster Mrs Newsome. Her perspective on life is said to be based on Kantian morality: the dimension of the ethical precedes any confrontation with experience. What is other and dissonant to the preconceived system of values must therefore be confronted with it, ultimately incorporated or rejected. Thus ethics is purely

rational and a priori. Emotions and the particular are excluded from it. But Strether sense a fundamental incompleteness of this take on life: his role as a writer of fiction is precisely that of being inspired from life to appreciate the infinite diversity of reality, and bring a new-found sensitivity and nuance to the world he represents on the page. His aim as an artist is the “perceptive equilibrium” Nussbaum refers to in the title: ‘an equilibrium in which concrete perceptions hang beautifully together, both with one another and with the agent’s general principles’ (183). Here the affective dimension is brought into play and added to the qualities that the genuinely inquisitive person must bring to his search for the meaning of a well-spent life: an equilibrium must be found both between different modes of perception on the part of the subject (the rational, the affective) and between the categories that inevitably shape one’s attitude towards life and the predisposition to encounter alterity and be changed by it.

Particularity is here, as in postmodern ethics, the solution to the oppressive primacy of the intellect. What makes Strether’s way of living radically different from Mrs Newsome’s is not their common necessity to found their agency in the world upon some abstract, theoretical ground: clearly any form of freedom would be impeded by incessant re-evaluation of the tenets on which the exertion of that freedom is based. But Strether is able to open himself to a process that eventually reforms his perspective, shaping a new equilibrium that re-incorporates the particular into the general. There is no limit to the necessity of disrupting and re-constituting the equilibrium, only an infinite – and ethical – willingness to undergo the process.

These points of convergence between the diverse traditions of the Ethical Turn should not lead to the conclusion that there is no reason to maintain any distinction between them. Indeed, if the ethical discourse explicitly articulated by Derrida and Levinas on the one hand and Nussbaum on the other revolves around similar themes and conclusions, it is among the implicit assumptions on which that discourse is based

that we find irreconcilable differences. The work of Dorothy Hale, a Berkeley UC literary critic, sees the fictional character as the main locus in which the two strands find a point of divergence: ‘that the reader’s ethical experience of alterity begins with the encounter with the literary character is an aspect of poststructuralist ethics that provides a powerful link to James’ (2012 203). What Hale seems not to notice or take into due consideration is that it is precisely here – at the conjunction between character and the particular conception of subjectivity which it underpins – that poststructuralists and liberal humanists diverge.

Nussbaum and James depict Strether as an autonomous subject: sure, he is not completely self-determined and free, but *he is*, in fact, the ultimate agent of his always-renewed perspective equilibrium. And his freedom is based on a conceptualisation of how one represents ideas and people to himself – through language and ideology – that is far less radical than the unbridgeable loss of meaning of poststructuralist systems of signification. Thus “perceptive equilibrium”, in the concrete terms of James’s novel, is articulated as an ideological confrontation between two individuals – Strether and Mrs Newsome. But James is not the only authoritative figure of the past through which Nussbaum articulates her theory of the ethical value of literature.

Lionel Trilling is the critic that most vividly incarnates the values which she expresses, and his relevance to the contemporary discourse over ethics and literature is made clear by the number of articles and monographs that set out to re-evaluate his work and summarise his achievement. Adam Kirsch, in his *Why Trilling Matters* (2011), makes it clear that this New York Intellectual saw the dichotomy between the general and the particular in terms of the socio-political and the ethical-individual. In “The America of John Dos Passos”, Trilling confronts the political perspective of the Popular Front, and their belief that ‘the fate of the individual is determined by social forces’ (as quoted in Kirsch, 42). As Kirsch notes ‘it this emphasis on the collective and

the progressive [on the part of the Popular Front], Trilling argues, that makes Popular Front liberalism deleterious to literature, especially the novel, which is necessarily subversive of collective values and primarily interested in the individual' (43, emphasis mine). Thus, the 'essential imagination of variousness and possibility' (quoted in Kirsch, 43), according to Trilling, can be attained only through a confrontation with the particular in the shape of another *individual*.

And Hale's take on fictional character as the ultimate locus of synthesis of what she calls "the New Aesthetics" is revealing of her inclinations towards a perspective that has more to share with some version of liberal humanism than with more genuinely post-theoretical positions. The concept of alterity is not necessarily linked to characters (and, by extension, individuals) in the fiction which Gibson chooses to articulate his quintessentially postmodern literary ethics. He identifies the ethical dimension of these works in their prompting a 'disenchantment of subjectivity'. The kind of subject Nussbaum and James seem to appeal to is untenable on the poststructuralist theoretical grounds even once it revisits itself in a constant encounter with alterity: this is because, according to Derrida, the Subject does not exist at all if not in the relationship with the Other.

As James Heartfield points out in his most useful summarise of the "death of the subject" in Critical Theory, 'Subject and Object are not opposed, but mutually supportive terms' (23). 'In the beginning', Heartfield reconstructs

it was not immediately clear that the implications of the theory called first 'post-structuralism' and later postmodernism were hostile to subjectivity. Indeed the opposite appeared to be the case. The postmodernist were first and foremost charged with an excessive subjectivity that jeopardised objectivity. To scientists and conservatives the hallmark of these new ideas was their scepticism towards a singular objective truth. The charge of relativism was made against postmodernists. [...] Where metanarratives reduced complexity to self-sameness, the method of deconstruction restored the fundamental difference of things. [...] But for Derrida, difference, or *différance*, comes before the Subject. To ask what or who differs assumes the prior existence of Subjects who differ. Derrida is insisting on the priority of difference over the Subject. The implication is that the

Subject, too, cannot be assumed to be a unitary whole without difference, but rather, must in turn, itself be deconstructed. (25)

This conceptualisation of the relationship between Self and Other does not allow for the kind of intersubjectivity that Nussbaum seems to recognise in *The Ambassadors*. Strether's sharpening of sensibility presupposes a Subject that originates it and a Subject to which it returns once contaminated by alterity. What postmodern fiction attempts to highlight by its formal innovations is that, as Gibson writes, 'the subject must rather be understood as always in relation in the first instance' (27).

A GENERALISATION OF SUFFERING

The conceptual category of particularity, as we have seen, does not directly depend upon the Subject or Object of a certain perceived particularity. The ethical and epistemological imperative remains the same in both currents of the Ethical Turn: generality is a necessary evil, which must be counterbalanced by a periodic confrontation with particularity. Both Nussbaum and Levinas associate the intellect with generalisation: it is only through an affective encounter with the Other that the autarchy of cognition can be broken. And the opposition with emotion and cognition does not merely equate a dismissal of the latter: 'it is the affective experience and not the breaking down of the movement of cognition', Gibson argues, 'that appears to be the key to the ethical encounter itself' in Levinas's thought (30). It is only the affective dimension that allows the subject to put itself into a relation with the other, and therefore be epistemologically available to observation.

It is at this point – the recognition of the value of the emotions over cognition – that, I argue, much postmodern fiction fails to comply with the tenets of poststructuralist theory. "E Unibus Pluram" has often been criticised by literary scholars as to simplistic an overview of the various aims and achievements of the likes of Barth, Pynchon and

DeLillo. If it is difficult (and risky) to use “postmodern fiction” as an umbrella-term for a range of fiction and poetry which is much diverse and scattered through decades and countries, yet here the way in which Wallace himself depicts and conceptualises the literature that preceded him is relevant – if not accurate. Wallace’s manifesto is significant inasmuch as it gives voice to the way postmodern fiction *felt* to a person belonging to his generation at the beginning of the 1990s.

It is easy to read Wallace’s essay as the symptom of a decisive moment in the development towards the completion of the ethics of postmodernism as Holland outlines it: the most recent postmodern offspring is perceived as cold and nihilistic, self-repressed in a current of negative irony that makes it impossible to affirm anything meaningful or authentic. The important fact about “E Unibus Pluram” is that it articulates a feeling: postmodern fiction has come to a dead end because it undermines any genuine empathic feeling towards anything. If the content of cognition is constantly questioned, there remains nothing one can sympathize with. The starting point to the reconciliation of these apparently contradictory tendencies – flatness of character and the intention to give a truthful account of what it means to be a human being – can be found in his famous 1993 interview with Larry McCaffrey: ‘since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of *generalization* of suffering’ (italics in the original). Pure empathy with the suffering of others is impossible, Wallace argues, but we might find relief from our loneliness in being reminded by works of literature that our personal struggle with life is shared by others. The experience is necessarily ‘vicarious’, and the picturing of other people’s interior lives is then ‘a *generalization*’ – i.e. a simplification based solely on what we know to be true of each and every human being. Hence Wallace’s innovative formula for a

fiction that is both ‘morally passionate, passionately moral’ and distinctively *post*-postmodernist (as opposed to *anti*-postmodernist).

The main chapters of this work will constitute a taxonomy of the characters in the novel. This will be organized into three main categories, each corresponding to a kind of characterization that involves both formal and theoretical questions about the status of the human subject and the fictional character. The first chapter will consider the ones among the character in *Jest* that might be considered the flattest - i.e. the plethora of minor characters that populate the backdrops of the Enfield Academy and the Ennet House. Arguably, these characters are nothing more than stereotypes of the young athlete and the drug-addict, respectively. They are always the subject of description, rather than the agent of some significant plot-development, and this impacts their perceived autonomy. In fact, their voice is heard only through the lens of a narrator that more often than not appears to deride or patronize them. Readers are thus constantly reminded that these are representations of people that are conjured up through the laborious mediation of language.

Chapter 2 will deal mainly with those sections in the novel that stage Marathe and Steeply’s overnight conversation. These two characters cover some sort of middle ground between absolutely flat and round characters: they both express points of view that are representative of certain ideological positions, but are not limited to these. Here the relevant opposition is that between the use of character as the personification of an abstract idea and a more nuanced and particularised depiction of the attitudes and ideals of a certain individual. As many in the field of Wallace studies have already noted (Kelly [2012] above all) Marathe and Steeply’s sections include and summarise famous philosophical arguments on the nature of freedom. A comparison between these sections in *Jest* and the text of Isaiah Berlin’s famous 1952 lecture “Two Concepts of Liberty” will show how the excessive complexity of a character’s ideas can compromise

his or her own mimetic dimension. Chapter 3 will further the discussion of the correlated themes of freedom and empathy through a reading of those narrative strands whose protagonists are, respectively, Don Gately and Hal Incandenza. These two are the closest things to a round character one can find in *Jest* - with a few caveat. They both experience trauma and important events, and their respective background stories are explored throughout the novel. Also, they seem to be able to exert at least some degree of freedom – Hal’s kind being mostly verbal⁵, Gately’s approaching actual resolution. And yet, their role in the novel is such that the reader is left pondering whether their actions should be considered authentic exertions of freedom or rather the mere playing out of narrative functions imposed on them by the structural necessities of the novel.

The final chapter will revisit the opposition between the general and the particular in the terms that Wallace’s narrative progressions pose for the understanding and empathic reading of the characters in *Infinite Jest*. This study will conclude by re-reading its premise under the light of the textual data brought through the exploration of the three categories of characters: Wallace’s ideal of a generalisation of suffering will be linked to the idea of the impersonal, a key term in the thought and writings of the philosopher Simone Weil. The affinities between Wallace and Weil have not been completely ignored⁶ but have not been given due attention either. My final contention will be that the category of the impersonal has helped Wallace overcome the limits of what was fundamentally an ideological impasse at the heart of the entire Ethical Turn – the cult of particularity as what is most constitutive of the individual. It is only through the impersonal dimension of his characters – their flatness and its seemingly contradictory combination with dramatic significance - that Wallace can assimilate the lesson of Theory and proceed to the elaboration of his own, renewed, humanism.

⁵ With the only exception of the excerpts from his father’s autobiographical writings, Hal is the only character in the novel who is allowed to speak for himself and function as a narrator.

⁶ The first and only writer (that I know of) to suggest the connection so far is Zadie Smith, in her eulogy of sorts: “*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace*”, from *Changing My Mind* (2010).

CHAPTER 1

FIGURANTS: FLAT CHARACTERS NEVER CHANGE

Among the myriads of Wallace-related and *Jest*-inspired curiosities one can find on the web, one of the most appealing is certainly Sam Potts's character-diagram⁷ of the novel. The quantity of lines and dots alone would suffice to discourage potential readers (or, at least, a certain kind of reader): more than two hundred characters populate this gigantic work of fiction - a lot more than you would find in your average Victorian novel. As satellites would, they all gravitate around one of the three main communities in *Jest*: the Enfield Tennis Academy, Ennet House and Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollent. True, the book itself, as an object, is large and intimidating. But still, one of the first questions a potential reader might ask herself is: is it really possible to include these many fictional people in a 981-page novel and actually manage to allocate each of them enough story-time so that they can be given at least a bit of credible personality? Is there anything more to them than the name alone? Certainly, the answer is no for a lot of the small dots in Potts's diagram. Yet it is remarkable how many of those which in another novel would normally be considered "minor characters" are provided, in *Infinite Jest*, with entire sections dedicated to them, a description of their identifying traits and their background story. The experience of reading this book is indissolubly linked to the effort of remembering names and facts, connections and relationships between this myriad of little satellites.

Thus when, after more than 800 pages into the novel, the wraith of James Incandenza describes his own artistic endeavor as an attempt to give narrative dignity back to 'the myriad thespian extras' that populate the backgrounds of most films and TV-series, it is easy to assume that Wallace is using this character as a mouthpiece for

⁷ The .pdf file is available at <http://sampottsync.com/ij/>.

his own poetics. In particular, what is interesting about the wraith's remarks about his own Art, is that he explicitly connects its formal aspects with the mimetic rendition of characters, and the latter with the ethical dimension of the work as a whole. Speaking to Don Gately about their favorite TV-shows, the former director asks

does Gately remember the myriad thespian extras on for example his beloved 'Cheers!,' not the centre-stage Sam and Carla and Nom, but the nameless patrons always at tables, filling out the bar's crowd, concession to realism, always relegated to back- and foreground; and always having utterly silent conversations: their faces would animate and mouths move realistically, but without sound; only the name-stars at the bar itself could audibilize. The wraith says these fractional actors, human scenery, could be seen (but not heard) in most pieces of film entertainment. (834)

The wraith's question (can Gately remember?) is similar to that of our potential reader: is it really possible to do justice to so many characters, when the structural necessities of *any* narrative always tend to be centripetal? Because if a narrative is genuinely centrifugal, then, does it really make sense to consider it unitary? *Infinite Jest* does present itself as a whole, however fragmentary. In fact, its plot and main action revolve around a very limited number of elements: a terroristic threat that involves a cartridge mysteriously referred as 'the Entertainment', which most of the characters have something to do with. Will they be given their own individual consistency or will they just serve as many pawns at the service of plot-development?

The more we hear the wraith talk about his own films to Gately, the more we realize that we too, in the course of our reading of the novel, have unconsciously seen the connection between the synthetic and mimetic dimension of character he is referring to. There are two tensions at play in his description of this 'human scenery' ('*figurants* the wraith says they're called' [835]). The first is structural, and corresponds to our initial doubts. Will novel and plot actually absorb and accommodate so much narrative material? So much 'scenery'? These extras, according to the wraith, are 'a concession to

realism' – the story needs them to be there, in order to result credible. But then the concession always has to be negotiated, for the elements of the story must preserve some sort of hierarchy: hence the necessity for some sort of limiting convention, with their mouths that open and let no sound come out. They are '*trapped* and encaged' in their 'mute peripheral status'. The image itself is disturbing, and it leads us to the second tension, which has to do with the 'human' part. We feel that characters are not narrative elements at the same level of plot twists, digressions and lyrical descriptions – i.e. expendable. The human element, we have known all along, is constitutive of our interest in narrative and the necessary premise to the attention we pay to its other, secondary, features. And that is why the phrasing 'human scenery' sounds so terribly offensive. Another look at Potts's diagram and we start wondering whether there is anything inherently wicked in packing so many human voices inside the limited space of a single work. Surely, their own individual stories must be solar systems of their own. The mimetic dimension – the roundness and verisimilitude of these characters – clashes and succumbs to the synthetic one. They both concur for narrative-space, and their balance always involves loss and compromise on both parts.

But the wraith (and Wallace, along with him) adds an important element to the picture: choice and artistic intent. Because what the presence of these mute figurants really reveal, he says, is 'that the camera, like any eye, has a perceptual corner, a triage of who's important enough to be seen and heard vs. just seen'. The wraith's own films, as a director, intentionally attempted to make this perceptual angle more just and unbiased. His work 'wasn't just the crafted imitation of aural chaos: it was real life's egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment' page number missing. James Incandenza's artistic efforts, then, were ethical and political at their heart. He wanted to reassert in the dimension of the work of

art a sort of structure (or lack of it) which he saw in the real world: the story of billions of people constantly intersect each and every day, and no one of them is inherently more important than any other. Incandenza, in other words, saw narrative focus and hierarchy as yet another form of oppression and power and he aimed at cleansing his camera's lens of it. What is implicit, moreover, is that the ethical function of the work of art is a change of perspective on the part of the audience. After all, the film to which Incandenza had dedicated the last three months of his life was meant to 'make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life' (839). His project was meant to carry his audience away from the cult of the central protagonist and back into a split and fragmented perspective more in line with the appreciation of 'real life's [...] figurantless crowds'. In a nutshell, what Incandenza was after was a kind of 'complete unfigured egalitarian aural *realism*' (836, my emphasis). No more *concessions* to realism, but the thing itself – the claim at the core of every variety of "reality-like" form of representation.

Clearly, it is impossible to claim with certainty that here Wallace is using the wraith to make his own (Wallace's) statement of poetics. The only thing we can do is ponder whether we think the quantity and quality of his cast of characters might in fact correspond to this sort of aural realism. Even though many critics have seen this connection⁸, I think the answer is no, and for two reasons. The first is that the tension between the general and the particular – i.e. the tension between any kind of determinism on the one hand and the idea of a transcendent personality on the other – does not allow for reading *Jest* as an unequivocal celebration of the latter. Mary K. Holland disagrees with my assessment, and it is worth considering why. In arguing that the novel does not correspond to the aesthetic ideals of the wraith, she claims that it

⁸ See for example Thomas LeClair (1996) and Catherine Nichols (2001).

does *not* in fact focus on crowds at all, ‘for it asks readers to make of the sequential multiplicity a coherent story by paying attention to *individual* voices at individual moments, to recognize unique human stories within the linguistic fray’ (2013 61). It is the particularity of these characters, then, that drives the narrative progressions of *Jest*, according to Holland. But this is a lot less divergent from the wraith’s poetics than she seems to realize. For in the crowds of his films every individual is ‘the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment’ – precisely an ‘individual voice’ with its own individual story. What strikes us as suspicious in the wraith’s words is rather his use of the word ‘entertainment’. He is the author of the *lethal* Entertainment, after all. Throughout the novel Wallace is intensely critical of those activities that takes us away from ourselves and into a dimension in which we are not required to pay active attention to our own choices. Thus his use of the word here suggests that to conceive of one’s self as the ultimate protagonist of one’s own life might be ultimately encaging, a sort of voluntary isolation from the infinite multiplicity of the world. So if it is true that, like any other narrative, *Jest* requires us to follow the vicissitudes of a bunch of protagonists – Hal Incandenza and Don Gately, above all – it is not the case that we are only required to pay attention to the centre alone and not the periphery.

Holland’s remarks help me clarify also the second reason why I see discrepancies between the wraith’s and Wallace’s poetics. The innumerable narrative strands are not, as Holland maintains (61), a mere occasion to test the reader’s capacity for concentration and the filtering of relevant information. They offer a perspective on themes such as drug-addiction and the drive to success which is panoramic, and therefore intrinsically and necessarily non-individualistic. So can we really say these are ‘unique human stories’? Quite the opposite, in fact. Not even Hal and Don, as we shall see in Chapter 3, are exempt from a kind of characterization that resorts, to a large extent, to generalization. Wallace’s figurants are fundamentally stereotypes: most of

their traits can be attributed to an entire category, and little is said of them that transcends their flatness and allow us to pay attention to their own ‘*individual* voices’. The three black areas in Potts’s diagram clue us into this schematic quality of the novel. However numerous may the characters be, they all belong to one out of three main worlds or communities. Each of these categories is defined in part by its own solution to the problem of individual autonomy. Thus members of Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollent conceive of themselves mainly as tools at the hand of their nationalist cause; athletes at E.T.A. concentrate on a kind of self-abjection whose ultimate target is individual realization; and the ex-addicts at Ennet House brood over their total passivity and subjugation to drugs. The questions and preoccupations of these individuals are those of their entire group, and so much narrative-space is taken by the exploration of what constitutes these communities as such that it is hard not to see that the novel requires to pay attention to the general, rather than the particular. *Jest* does not tell us what it means to be LaMont Chu or Poor Tony Kraus as such. It demands us we see the suffering involved in being, respectively, a young athlete manipulated into regarding immense personal success as the only meaning to his life and a long-time drug-addict forced into early withdrawal.

Sure, to see the general over the particular is in part what each and every single work of fiction does. What is Emma Bovary but one out of infinite possible instantiations of a bored housewife? And what is Othello but a jealous and irrational husband? The fact of participation into a category does not imply, per se, *reductio ad unum*. Both Flaubert and Shakespeare, we know, made of their characters a realistic representation of human beings by providing their two characters with such detail and sophistication that we are led to believe there is much more to them than what gets on the page. That is, we are brought to infer. We may not know how Emma would react to a certain event, but we are confident we know her well enough that we could imagine it.

And that is because we unconsciously assume that her existence (which is a function of the mimetic qualities of this character) is independent from the words on the page (its synthetic dimension). Here is the difference and the peculiarity of Wallace's technique in *Infinite Jest*: he invites us to empathize with his characters, but lets us not forget that there is nothing more to them than what actually gets on the page. How does he achieve such effect? How can we simultaneously care about someone and be reminded all the time that they are not real? Wallace is able to induce us into this paradoxical state of attention precisely by recurring to generality.

Consider the words of the wraith quoted above: they inspire compassion in Don Gately, and yet he has to admit he, like everyone else, passed on those figurants as if they were 'human furniture' – the characters he remembers are those around which the plot of 'Cheers!' revolved. Here, furthermore, lays the difference between Wallace's and the wraith's aesthetics: the former chooses not to eliminate the clunky and disturbing convention of having them speak while no sound exits their mouths. The wraith wants them all to be protagonists, Wallace aims at making them worthy of our empathy even though they are not depicted as autonomous and particular subjects. The wraith wants to eliminate the perceptual corner of the camera, Wallace embraces it: it enlarges the picture until we see the very pixels it is made of. Pointillisme with an ethical function.

And it is not participation to generality alone that foregrounds these characters' synthetic dimension, but rather the fact that their actions never undermine their status as stereotypes. There is, in this novel, no character-development as such. Other novels might exploit a character's representativeness to show how he or she is able to transcend it in the course of the narrative-time. The dichotomy of generality and particularity implicit in any representation of a human being can be put to countless thematic effects, and might very well serve the writer's need to dramatize social and political

oppositions. What good did it do Jimmy Gatz to climb the social ladder in *The Great Gatsby*? Was he really able to transcend the limitations imposed upon him by fate and nurture or was he just deluded he could do so, as Tom maintains? Thus the general works as the background which allows some traits of individuality to stand out. But there is no character, among the minor and peripheral ones to which *Jest* asks us to spend so much time and attention for, that even attempts to overcome the limitations of their general predicament. To this end, Wallace offers another clue, along with the wraith's words, that might help us clarify this aspect of his technique. It has to do with Mario Incandenza and the way he is characterized by the narrative voice. Mario is, in a sense, the flattest among these flat characters: born with all kinds of deformities, he is not at all pitied by the people who know him⁹, but rather idealized as 'basically a born listener' (80). And yet his capacity to listen to what his confidants have to say is described in somewhat ambiguous terms: 'One of the positive things of being visibly damaged is that people can sometimes forget you're there, even when they're interfacing with you. [...] It's almost like they're like: If nobody's really in there, there's nothing to be shy about' (80). Is he a good confidant because of his good nature or rather by virtue of his being a non-Subject, as silent and impersonal as a statue? The narrative voice gives some credit to these suspicions when, later on, it says that 'Mario never changes' (590, my emphasis). That is, he does not stand out against his generality.

The same ambiguity applies to the figurants: is the fact of being completely defined by one's own participation in a category a debasing quality to attribute to a fictional character? Does the technique by which they are represented imply that the figurants are non-Subjects, and therefore not deserving the same consideration and understanding that we save for our peers? We realize that these questions have all sorts of implications the minute we consider the social spectrum covered in *Infinite Jest*. On

⁹ With the possible exception of Avril, his mother. But for many different reasons she is represented as a reprehensible character, and therefore her judgment reinforces rather than undermines the overall genuine affection that the novel elicits towards Mario.

the top of the E.T.A. hill reside the rich and the privileged, those who are put in the conditions to succeed. At its foot, those who are used to a kind of periphery that is not only that of the wraith's camera. Most of the guests at Ennet House come from families and backgrounds that make their stories of drug-addiction appear like an almost inevitable conclusion. And yet we do not want to pay too much attention to this kind of conclusions, which are based on simplistic and reductive notions of social determinism. Sure, personal history does play a part in one's own life, but what room is there to practice individual freedom? Moreover, what should we try to empathize with, when we encounter people (or characters) that were so totally influenced in their lives by a story of abuse and drug-addiction? Is there anything *particular*, inherently personal, left in them? The gap in social class between the two groups¹⁰ expands the wraith's preoccupations with an egalitarian form of art to a territory which is constitutively political. In so doing it raises the stakes of Wallace's use of characterization in the novel, and this is why in what follows I will limit myself to an exploration of those figurants in *Jest* that belong to the universe of Ennet House. It is in their case that the question of whether one can or should really overcome the dimension of the general is the most urgent: can these characters change, after all?

A FAILURE IN MIMESIS OR SYNTHESIS?

The section in which the wraith visits Don Gately at the hospital has something to say about the novel as a whole in yet another respect. Gately has been intubated and cannot speak, yet he manages to interact with the wraith because the latter seems to be able to read his mind. As Incandenza himself explains,

¹⁰ The boundaries of the two micro-cosmos are a bit more permeable than I maintain here, mainly for the sake of brevity. There are important exceptions to the rule that E.T.A. is the realm of the privileged and Ennet House that of the working class. Above all, consider the examples of Michael Pemulis and Geoffrey Day.

a wraith had no out-loud voice of its own, and had to use somebody's like internal brain-voice if it wanted to try to communicate something, which was why thoughts and insights that were coming from some wraith always just sound like your own thoughts, from inside your own head, if a wraith's trying to interface with you. (831)

As Toon Staes has pointed out in his "Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach", one of the interpretative strategies that the hospital section encourages is that of reading the entire novel as the relate of a single narrative voice, the wraith's. Staes does not directly endorse this interpretation, but he includes it among the possible choices that we face when confronted with the problem of the attribution of the narrative voice. If we assume it is one and unitary¹¹, then the text authorizes us to make just a couple of guesses. The first is that the content of the entire novel is narrated by Hal, as a long explanation of sorts about how and why he found himself at the University of Arizona unable to speak. The other guess is that the wraith has not limited himself to Gately's head, but has been influencing the novel's twists and digressions from the very beginning. If that is true, then we would be able to read many passages that describe the figurants' circumstances and attribute whatever perspective and 'perceptual angle' they might reveal to James Incandenza. And this interpretation is solid because it can be supported by a lot of textual data, as we shall see.

But the wraith's explanation is not only a good key to a better appreciation of the novel, it is also an unsettling one. For if the role of the narrator is that of *creating* rather than representing a character's 'internal brain-voice', as Incandenza maintains, then it does not really matter whether an author is capable of bringing to the screen (or the page) 'real life's egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds'. If the origin of that babble is the single mind and intention of the director, then the work itself will only have the pretence of representing life's pluralism and diversity. Figurants never get to say a word

¹¹ Which is already an arbitrary choice: see Staes (28-35).

of their own, and the apparent elimination of any perceptive bias will be nothing but yet another imposition hidden behind and appearance of obviousness and necessity. The scene at the hospital connects these issues with the gap in social class between the former-addict Don Gately and the late legendary tennis prodigy, scientist and avant-garde director. At some point the wraith starts pirouetting around Gately's room with incredible speed, to the effect that

into Gately's personal mind, in Gately's own brain voice but with roaring and unwilling force, comes the term *PIROUETTE*, in caps, which term Gately knows for a fact he doesn't have any idea what it means and no reason to be thinking it with roaring force, so the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape. (832)

Here the sense of creepiness and violation is connected not only to the imposition of a single narrative voice over a number of supposedly independent characters, but also to the idea of propriety of language as an instrument for social prevarication. All through *Jest* the narrative voice adopts a patronizing tone which more than often trespasses into outright mockery at the figurants' solecisms. For the most part it translates their internal voices into correct, readable English. But then, every now and then, it will seem to take quite a lot of pleasure at leaving the figurants' mistakes right where they are, thus enhancing their comical effect. And it does so even when the narrative matter is serious and moving. Thus relating Gately's difficulties at school and his gradual subjugation to drugs, the voice candidly tells us that

the Athletic Dept. pointing out to [Don's English teachers] that Gately had an especially challenging domestic situation and that flunking Gately and rendering him ineligible for ball would eliminate his one reason even to stay on in school – these were to no, like, avail [*sic*]. English was his sink-or-swim situation, what he then termed his 'Water Lou' [*sic*]. (905)

Indeed, one does not know whether to laugh (especially at 'Water Lou'!) or feel offended. Is the narrative voice really *that* insensible?

Clearly, to imply that a character's personal tragedy should not be considered in all seriousness means to dismiss his or her importance as a human being – and, therefore, as a Subject. Crucially, whether it is the wraith or not, the narrative voice displays a range of registers and tones that makes the gap between the figurants and itself all the more apparent. Moreover, if Wallace wants us to notice these little interpolations and consider the voice almost as if it were a character-narrator, then it makes sense to ask ourselves what other elements of the narrative should be attributed to it. That is, if it chooses the very words of these characters' 'own brain voice', does it also select the parts of their story that actually make it onto the page? Does it take decisions regarding the content too, or the form alone? We are led to believe the former hypothesis is true, and that is because, with clear disregard for verisimilitude, these stories all seem to repeat the same pattern. All of these recovering drug-addicts have a single "origin": a story of familial abuse that is presented as if it univocally explained their subsequent miseries. This is yet another dimension in which the narrative voice manages to undermine the mimetic credibility of the figurants, and this is true for three distinct reasons. The first is that the recourse to a traumatic childhood in order to account for a life of struggle is in and of itself a sort of filmic and literary commonplace – i.e. a stereotype. The fact that it is scientifically proved that lack of affection and intellectual stimulation does have a huge impact on real children's future lives is irrelevant here. In fact it only reinforces a sense of triteness for the narrative convention that originated from the sociological truth. The second reason is that the representation of a character with at least some degree of mimetic depth would require a larger number of formative events. Surely, the complexity of a credible personality cannot be reduced to a single cause-effect relation. And thirdly, these "origins" – where the term is intentionally borrowed from the world of comic books – are always rendered with a

tone that is a mixture of tragedy and comedy, the saddest events always inflated and ridiculed to the effect of parody.

Bruce Green's and Randy Lenz's origin-stories are both representative examples of this trend. While the two of them walk together at night 'Lenz consumes several minutes and less than twenty breaths sharing with Green some painful Family-Of-Origin issues' (575). Mrs. Lenz, we learn, was 'was so unspeakably obese she had to make her own mumus out of brocade drapes and cotton tablecloths', and she was the source of constant embarrassment to her little son. What follows is a grotesquely comical farce in which Lenz complains about her lack of affection for him with the words and arguments of a little child, while the narrative voice ridicules both him and his mother at the same time. Suffice it to say that after an incident on a bus that was in part due to her own body size, she receives from the Commonwealth Highway Authority for psychiatric trauma 'a morbidly [*sic!*] obese [*sic!*] settlement' (576) which she almost entirely dilapidates in pastries. Again, it is the narrative voice's comical ability that complicates our reaction to Lenz's terrible childhood, together with its stereotypy and the suspicion that in narrating his mother's story to Green he is in part trying to justify himself for his own turbulent life. As for what concerns Green himself, the voice belittles him by implying he would not be able to tell his own story at all:

The searing facts of the case of Bruce Green's natural parents' deaths when he was a toddler are so deeply repressed inside Green that whole strata and substrata of silence and mute dumb animal suffering will have to be strip-mined up and dealt with a Day at a Time in sobriety for Green even to remember how, on his fifth Xmas Eve [...] (578)

What is baffling is that here the narrative voice explicitly recognizes the 'mute dumb animal suffering' involved in the figurants' narratives, and yet this realization does not prevent it from making countless jokes in the telling. Since the voice's comical verve has a lot to gain from the tragic implausibility of the *content* of these narratives, we ask

ourselves whether it is not intentionally impinging on it. Do these characters exist at all before the voice's eloquence conjures them up? By this peculiar mixture of tragedy and parody Wallace invites us to believe they do not, thus further compromising their mimetic effect.

Furthermore, Lenz's (and others') apparently self-defensive use of their family issues is criticized even on the thematic level in the novel. The question of the mimetic autonomy of these characters is in fact the formal counterpart of the issue of whether they are able to exercise any kind of personal responsibility in spite of their intellectual modesty and drug-abuse inclinations. At the meeting of the Boston AA, each member is required to stand up at the podium and share with the audience the lowest point of his life, which is generally the one that convinced him or her to surrender to the evidence of their dependency and ask for help. The section that goes from p. 376 thru 379 adds yet another painful and unrealistic story to *Jest's* repertory, while it also explores the underpinnings of AA therapeutic method of sharing. When the section begins the narrative voice makes a few comments about the speaker that has just left the podium, which we do not get to hear directly: 'It's not like Boston AA recoils from the idea of responsibility, though. Cause: no; responsibility: yes. It seems like it all depends on which way the arrow of presumed responsibility points' (376). Thus, it is implied, the latest speaker was nowhere near the point of genuine recovery because she 'had presented herself as the object of an outside Cause'.

Conversely, the follower person to share her experience seems to have acquired a higher degree of self-awareness: 'Here is no Cause or Excuse. It is simply what happened. This final speaker is truly new, ready: all defenses have been burned away' (378). For a person that has had her own entire life wracked by drugs and the consequent surrender of any sort of freedom, it is only the acknowledgment of one's own responsibility for their own actions that offers any chances of a better future. The

reason why AA vehemently condemns those personal narrative that are build on the principle of causality is that, by implication, they make the Subject even less free than it was under the effect of drugs. The first speaker chooses to exchange a subjugation to substances with a subjugation to events that were out of her control (her family issues, for example) thus falling back into yet another state of passivity. Thus once we consider the affinity of the theme of self-narrative and responsibility with the formal implications of having one short “origin” for each of the figurants, we stumble upon another aspect of the voice’s narration that aims to diminish them as autonomous Subjects. The same slight perplexity that Lenz’s story arises in us can be extended to all of these former drug-addicts. With the difference that, in his case, our reservations are licit, whereas the others cannot be blamed for trying to escape their own responsibilities, because they are not the ones to mention their past circumstances. Consider Green: again, he could not relate the vicissitudes surrounding his parents’ death even if he wanted to! And yet it is the fact itself of repeatedly presenting us with these background-digressions that seems to imply that we should read them in terms of causality – and therefore, as pathetic excuses. And these brings us to reconsider the question we had asked ourselves regarding the content of the figurants’ stories: do these characters exist independently of a voice that is so explicitly their foe? In light of the above we are led to reconfigure the question in the following terms: to which of the dimensions postulated by Phelan should we attribute the defectiveness of these characters? Specifically, are they a failure in mimesis or synthesis? If the former alternative is true they are weak in and of themselves, “authentic” non-Subjects. Human shapes *à pois*. But if the *latter* is true, then the voice is failing us and them at the same time.

We would commit a mistake if we automatically assumed that the question is unanswerable. Because, if the terms themselves turned out to be confusing, a close look at their implications will settle the matter. But first, in order to ponder such

implications, we need to consider the issue of character-distribution in *Jest*. The comparison drawn between Wallace's flat characters and the two strands of the Ethical Turn, in fact, is particularly interesting when seen through the conceptual lenses elaborated by Alex Woloch in *The One vs. the Many – Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. This is because Woloch's entire critical methodology, in this book, is based on a *simultaneous* conceptualization of the literary character as both a mimetic representation of a real human being *and* a textual artifice, the product of synthesis. Readers, the critic maintains, are naturally inclined to keep in mind this two-fold nature of characters as they proceed through narratives, and this is why the structural features of a narrative text have both ethical and political implications. Woloch's study, as it is already clear from the title, takes as its primary field of inquiry the distribution of character-space: it is on the relative importance granted to the various members of the character-system that the medium of the novel is most adept to dramatize the conflict between the opposite ideals of egalitarianism on the one hand, and the strict hierarchy that is the necessary and inevitable chore of any organized system on the other. His methodological assumptions are remarkably solid, but the choice of the texts on which his work is based (all of which are Nineteenth-Century realist novels) prevents him from developing a terminology that be applicable to Wallace's figurants. 'Narrative flatness,' he claims, '[...] maintains a disjunction between "personality" and "presence," dissociating the full weight of interior character from its delimited, distorted exterior manifestation' (24). But, as we have just seen, the problem with *Jest*'s peculiar variety of flat characters is that there might not be any disjunction between their personality and their presence – or at least Wallace invites us to entertain the possibility.

Moreover, Woloch's taxonomy of the possible outputs in characterization that have historically arisen from the perception of said disjunction is limited to just 'two

dominant forms: the *engulfing* of an interior personality by the delimited signs that express it and the *explosion* of the suffocated interior being into an unrepresentable, fragmentary, symptomatic form' (emphasis in the original). In the latter case, Woloch is referring to the category of the '*eccentric*' character (his term): one who is 'fragmentary' and plays 'a disruptive, oppositional role within the plot' (25). In both instances, Woloch concludes, the free relationship between the surface (of synthesis) and the depth (of mimesis) is first affirmed and then immediately negated: the configuration of form and content implies that these minor characters have as full a personality as the more central ones in the plot, and yet that there is not enough room, in the intricate and exigent mechanism of the narrative, to bring it to the fore. Woloch is right in noting that, by a few nuances in the discourse, the realist novel is able to conduct a metafictional reflection upon itself. But he also fails to grasp the arbitrariness and historic situatedness of the assumption underlying his distinction between narrative conventions: that *all* of the characters must necessarily have as full a personality as everyone else – from which follows that when this personality is not fully accounted for, the fault is of the representational medium. That is, in explicitly liberal humanistic terms, it is a corollary of the human essence that we all share that each and every one of us has as meaningful and complex an interior life as everyone else. In Woloch's analysis, the more or less explicit dramatization of the disjunction between the depth of character and the surface of the page was functional, in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, to the development of an increasingly democratic and egalitarian mentality – one which was already reflected in the content of realist and naturalist novels, with their *focus* on social class and matters of social justice.

Thus we need a different conceptual framework – one which be not based on the depth/surface model – to aptly describe the effects which Wallace achieves in *Infinite Jest*. This is because his technique is an implicit response to social and political

conditions that are radically different from those in which the genre of the novel flourished a century earlier. The poststructuralist notion of the (Dead) Subject is a reaction to the wave of oppressing Individualism that, in Western countries, has the merit of having contributed to the progressive dismantlement of a rigid and impermeable class-system and other similar forms of power. In Wallace's United States – but not in Dickens and Balzac's Europe - social mobility is unanimously celebrated as a value, if more often than not suffocated in practice by all sorts of cultural and economical privilege. And Wallace's prose registers precisely this inversion of values: the status quo to oppose is now the same ideological reliance on the Transcendent Subject that Realism had so dutifully worked to establish. Wallace's minor characters do not correspond to either of Woloch's alternatives because they are minor in a structural sense only: that is, they are hierarchically *peripheral*, but not provided with as little character-space as the examples drawn by the critic. *Infinite Jest*, thanks to both its length and fragmentary quality, is structurally flexible enough to grant a reasonable amount of space to a vast number of its characters. As we have seen, many of these addicts and athletes are provided with long and elaborate enough physical descriptions and background stories. It is true that space and complexity are always relative qualities - and in fact Woloch defines "minor characters" simply as those who are subordinated to the protagonists, with no specification regarding the amount of pages that would grant a character a less subordinate position. But the passages he uses to support his argument are brief and self-contained, sometimes just a few lines in length. Wallace's stereotypes, conversely, are often introduced to the reader in dedicated sections (which may correspond to their "origin" or not), delimited by means of a blank line between the portions of text that precede and follow them. And nevertheless their interiority is never celebrated – never, that is, represented in terms that aim to render these characters free,

lively and intense - as the democratic ideals underpinning a certain kind of Realism would demand.

Where do we stand in relation to all this? Certainly, Woloch's analysis of what there is at stake in the distribution of character-space can help us to clarify to ourselves why the two most important questions we have posed so far are indissolubly interconnected. Ultimately, the issue of whether the representational flaws of these characters should be attributed to their own insufficiencies or rather to the narrative voice is just a re-proposition of the issue of whether they *can change*. Yes, we have ascertained that they can't. But is it because they are not able to or because they are not allowed? As soon as we formulate the question in such clear terms, we spontaneously lean towards the latter option. The wraith's prevarications, its linguistic pride, and its classism are simply unacceptable. There is no need to take position with the dispute over the autonomy of the Subject, for what we care for is not really an affirmation of these character's *freedom*, but rather of their dignity. To return to the wraith's metaphor for the figurants, we know that their lines are already written in a script, and yet their frustration at not being able to speak arouses our compassion. Here, we choose to recur to the interpretative principle of charity. That is, we understand the figurants for what Wallace and the narrative voice made of them – stereotypes – and yet decide to assume that the people that participate to their own category in real life *can* be different. And this is radically different from Woloch's attribution of interiority, which is based on the disjunction between presence and personality, and for two reasons. First, the dimension in which we practice the principle is that of the characters' representativeness of existing human categories. The interpretative axis to which we are paying attention is that between the figurants and the real-life drug-addicts, and not the one that connects a character's synthetic consistence to its mimetic dimension. Secondly, we are *consciously* applying the choice: Wallace constantly reminds us of the alternative, rather

than encouraging to take mimesis for granted. Thus, our own empathy for these characters have nothing to do with their personality.

Chapter 2

PERSONIFICATIONS: 'YOU SPEAK TO YOURSELF, INVENTING SIDES'

Infinite Jest is characterised by a constant fragmentation of its narrative content. In fact scenes are scattered around the novel with little regard for the unity of time and place of the single chapters. The dialogue between Marathe and Steeply takes place on the night between the 30th of April and the 1st of May of the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment in Tucson, Arizona and yet is divided in fourteen sections, which are distributed throughout the novel: the first begins at page 87, the last ends at page 648. This is the only scene in *Jest* that takes more than one section to conclude: the conversation takes the space of a single night in the story-time, but the reader will need to go through more than five hundred pages before she actually gets to the end of it. Thus, by splitting a single night in Arizona in fourteen sections that keep appearing and then being submerged by the other narrative strands, Wallace provides Marathe and Steeply with a structural importance which is unique in the novel. The recurrence of the time and setting compels the reader to consider it as also indicative of the *thematic centrality* of the content of the conversation between the two of them – i.e. opposing conceptions of freedom. As in Greek Tragedy, this chorus of sorts highlights and at the same time establishes the significance of a single theme for the entire work.

As Adam Kelly as noted in “David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas”, the two opposing arguments strikingly resemble the terms of Isaiah Berlin’s famous 1958 lecture, “Two Concepts of Liberty”. Marathe summarises the differences between his nation’s outlook on life and the American way of life that Steeply represents with the following:

Your freedom is the freedom-*from*: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is the meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress. [...] But what of the freedom-*to*? Not all compulsion comes from

without. You pretend you do not see this. What of freedom-*to*. How for the person to freely choose? [...] How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose? (320)

The same distinction applies to Berlin's reflections on the evolutions of the two distinct conceptions of liberty that characterized the main political oppositions of his time, that of the Cold War. On the one hand, the 'negative' freedom of the liberal democracies of the West, which were mainly preoccupied with granting the individual the possibility to develop according to her own ideas and capabilities, with no coercion from the outside. On the other hand, those ideologies that, descending from the philosophers of 'Objective Reason', conceived of freedom as the possibility to fully realise one's self according to the values dictated by the faculty of Reason. Since rationality is universal, there will be just one true way of being (both for the community and the individual) and that will be fully explicated and then enforced by the State. Empirical selves, in this conception, do not matter, because they do not know what is best for themselves, as human beings. 'Positive freedom' consists precisely in the ability to transcend one's own pernicious tendencies and accept the lessons of rational thought. Thus, Berlin concludes, proponents of either kind of freedom do not give themselves different answers regarding what the essence of liberty is, but rather ask different questions: liberals are mainly concerned with the area of control, their opponents with its source (2002 7).

One reads the text of Berlin's lecture after *Infinite Jest* (or vice versa) and cannot help but feel that the attribution of these world-views to Marathe and Steeply to some extent undermines their autonomy (roundness, if you wish) as characters. Are they represented as self-conscious beings, able to critically reflect on their own ideas, or rather as *personifications of ideas*, totally and univocally determined by them? Here, as with the stereotypes, the gap between mimesis and synthesis re-emerges, with Wallace inviting us to consider his own characters as mere automatons, or constructs that are

functional to his own literary aims. This time it is the *thematic* dimension of character that is foreground, thus compromising the realistic representation of Marathe and Steepley as individuals. On the level of characterization, Wallace uses them as an occasion to explore the opposition between thematicism and psychologism. It is ironic that these two characters are secret ‘agents’, as the word itself reflects the tension between a freed individual and a spy that is a simple functionary of the state.

There are three elements that contribute to this perceived lack of autonomy. The first is the content itself of the conversation between these seemingly dialectical characters. As Berlin himself notes in the lecture, ‘conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man’ (10). We can now see that in the scenes with Marathe and Steepley Wallace dramatizes the opposition between the Transcendent Subject and the Sub-ject on two distinct levels: on the purely thematic, in which the opposition takes the form of a conversation on the value of liberty, and on the mimetic-thematic axis, in which the thematic function of a character’s ideas can potentially undermine its mimetic dimension. And each level reflects and alludes to the other: Steepley seems to lay claim to his ‘freedom-from’ any structural or thematic necessity in the economy of the novel of which he is part, while Marathe is ready to willingly *subject* his own self to the wider picture. His function – in the A.F.R. as in *Infinite Jest*, is what guarantees his self-realization.

The second element in their characterization that contributes to make them ‘flat characters’ is the obviousness of the thematic association, respectively, of Marathe with ‘positive freedom’ and Steepley with the negative one. A more sustained degree of credibility of character would require each of the two characters to develop or reveal, in the course of the narrative, a more nuanced or at least ambivalent relationship to their own ideas. One would expect their own *particularity* – their own innate predispositions, together with the burden of the experience they have already acquired in life – to have

the upper hand over the *general* validity of their ideas. As we shall see, Marathe does in fact contradict himself by betraying the cause of the A.F.R for the love of a woman – while he had previously condemned Rodney Tine for doing precisely the same thing. But in the course of the conversation with Kate Gompert, he is also able to re-inscribe his apparent contradiction into coherence with his creed: he *did* sacrifice his own inclinations for a cause that was larger than himself – only, that cause was the survival of his deformed wife. Thus Wallace’s personifications are constructed upon ideas that are far more complex than the single traits of his figurants, but still do not amount to a credible interiority.

The third reason for the emergence of flat characters is the fact that the divergence between the two characters is articulated in terms that are so recognizably the same used by Berlin. Any reader who is familiar with the text of the lecture will read the dialogue in *Jest* as a long quotation of sorts. As we shall see in Chapter 3, Wallace is well-aware of the echoes of other works of literature in *Jest*, and he uses them to create certain expectations in the reader. This is the case with Hal and the way his characterization is reminiscent of *Hamlet* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. The same happens here with “Two Concepts of Liberty”: the almost explicit references to the lecture make Marathe and Steeply read as puppets that are acting out a dialogue which has already been written. Consider, as an example, Berlin’s metaphor for the freedom of the ascetic: if I wound my leg and there is no possible cure, I can always choose to get rid of the pain by cutting off the leg. ‘If I train myself to want nothing to which the possession of the leg is indispensable, I shall not feel the lack of it’ (10). What is the initiation rite of the A.F.R but the first-step in such training? The legless Marathe reads like a clunky epitome of Berlin’s metaphor. Moreover, how credible is it that two secret agents so inescapably involved in the prevailing ideology of their nations have so clear a view of the philosophical implications of their diverging opinions? And yet no critical

perspective? One would take for granted that the clarification of the assumptions which underlie a certain set of ideas would lead to more awareness, and therefore a less demarcated opposition of values. Instead, Marathe and Steeply manage, unrealistically, to be both articulate and monolithically entrenched in their respective opinions.

Wallace puts in the mouth of these two characters arguments in favour of their own status as free and independent subjects. Steeply identifies his own “true self” with that part of himself that manifests itself in his preferences and inclination; Marathe conceives of himself as the person that he manages to be *despite* his temptations. We, as readers, are invited to take into consideration both sides of the argument, and yet another contradiction arises precisely when we choose to do so. This time the contradiction seems to be on Wallace’s part: is there anything more to these two characters – that clearly aspire to liberate their and express “true selves” than the ideas they express concerning liberty? The relationship between the thematic and the synthetic sphere is not only that of a reciprocal parallelism but also of circularity. The general – here, the power of ideas – and the particular – the two individuals who voice them – recursively invoke one another, leaving us with a strong sense of the conflict between ideology and what one conceives as his own “true self”. The opposition between poststructuralist theory and liberal humanism re-emerges in these characters as the opposition between the particular, empiric self and his or her own abstract (and therefore general) ideas and values.

Between Steeply and Marathe, it is the latter that better embodies the contradictory relationship of an individual with his or her own ideas. Ideas are often systematised into an ideology – a perspective on life and the world which usually belongs to a community of people, rather than to a single person. Thus, their general validity is precisely what makes them a means of participation of the individual into a larger group. Loneliness and solipsism are two of the central themes in *Infinite Jest*. The

dimension of the community, with its own set of constitutive ideas and values, should therefore constitute a positive alternative to the suffering of the encaged self. Instead, the communities represented in the novel – AA, Ennet House and their jargon, the ethos of the Enfield Academy, and the numerous nationalistic cells that compromise the stability of the O.N.A.N. – all contribute to a sense of entrapment and reduction of the particularity of the individual to the flatness and generality of their ideology. At the same time, in return for the participation to the life of the larger group they promise a full-realisation of the individual who chooses to be their member: self-discipline and success for the young athletes, salvation from a life of misery and addiction through the 12-Step programme of the AA, and participation to an historical movement of liberation for the A.F.R. and others. More than anything else, participation in a group promises relief from loneliness.

Marathe and Steeply incarnate, respectively, individualistic and communitarian ideals. This is apparent in the third section of their dialogue (105-108), which reports their diatribe over the subject of love and choice. Marathe clearly connects these two dimensions with the nature of one's own Subject: 'You are what you love. No? You are, completely and only, what you would die for without, as you say, the *thinking twice*' (107). If you are what you love, Marathe consciously chooses to be a citizen, a member of a community that is larger than the Self and therefore able to provide it with meaning: 'Your nation outlives you. A cause outlives you'. As an individual, he is willing to realise himself by serving the nation of Québec. In order to do so he must choose to respect a law of sorts - that of the ideology that unites and constitutes the group, which in this case is the A.F.R. That he shares the outlook on life and politics that he inherits from his 'nation', as Marathe calls it, is necessary in order to be part of it. Yes, ideals are chains of sort – they compel the individual to overcome his own selfish inclinations, 'but the chains are of my choice', Marathe explains (781).

Steeply's objection is that one's own nature cannot always be submitted to an abstract ideal. 'But you assume it's always choice, conscious, decision', he replies. 'This isn't just a little bit naïve, Rémy? You sit down with your little accountant's ledger and soberly decide what to love? Always?' (108). In other words, one is already limited by one's own predispositions, and it is not always the case that they should be transcended. Here Steeply is expressing a liberal humanistic conception of the Self, one in which one's own personality is a given and should be developed, rather than being sacrificed to a higher principle. 'What if sometimes there *is* no choice about what to love? What if the temple comes to Mohammed? What if you just *love*? without deciding?'. Significantly, here Steeply does not refer to the love for an ideal, but to the concrete and romantic love for another person. 'You just *do*: you see her and in that instant are lost to sober account-keeping and cannot choose but to love?'

Marathe's reply is indicative of the enormous significance that he places on ideals as the constitutive element of a community:

Then in such a case your temple is self and sentiment. Then in such an instance you are a fanatic of desire, a slave to your individual subjective narrow self's sentiments; a citizen of nothing. You become a citizen of nothing. You are by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself.

In Marathe's opinion not to respect a general rule of conduct equates to loneliness. Steeply's individualism, from this perspective, represents the senseless celebration of the specificity of the individual – one which ends up isolating him because there is no common ground on which the community can be founded. As Berlin makes clear more than once in his lecture, the question of freedom is also a question of how one relates to his peers, and not only to one's self and his own limitations. Moreover, the concept of 'positive liberty' defended by Marathe is one that is grounded upon the idea of rationality and therefore universality: whereas Steeply insists on the irreducible peculiarity of circumstances and individual inclinations ('you see *her* and *in that instant*

[...]’), Marathe implicitly claims that the existential necessities that he has recognized in himself are those of each and every human being. Self-discipline towards an end that is bigger than the self, he implies, is the only way to fully realise the Self, any Self.

Yet we feel we are invited to read Marathe’s words with suspicion. His defence of ‘positive liberty’ is certainly appealing in abstract terms, particularly when compared to the masses of lazy and self-centred individuals Steeply is defending. We know the excesses of neoliberalism and the way it has pervaded the West since the late seventies, and we know that Wallace is critiquing that kind of consumerist and media-driven society which he depicts so prone to drugs and passive entertainment. However, Marathe is a terrorist and an ideologue, and therefore a character we cannot fully sympathise with, no matter how inspiring his words might sound. Moreover, his celebration of citizenship sounds promising on the one hand, insincere on the other. Surely, we assume, even though the individual is ready to surrender some quota of his freedom to the rules of the community, he will be able to express himself and contribute with his own personal characteristics to the well-being of the community. The active participation and sense of service that the idea itself of ‘active freedom’ promotes should involve the possibility that any general rule can be subject to revision, when the majority of the members requires it.

In other words, a genuine participative community needs abstract and general principles to be discussed by empirical individuals in all their particularity. Dialogue, in this sense, is both an end in itself and necessary to a life spent among peers: it allows individuals to relate to one another while establishing for themselves the rule of conduct of their community. But the conversation between Marathe and Steeply, in this sense, is sterile. From the first to the last of these sections, no middle ground is found between the perspectives of the two agents. Nor is it looked for. Interestingly, Wallace chooses not to represent the conclusion of their meeting. The last section in which they appear

together ends with further, stubborn disagreement. Steeply recalls the last stages of his father's addiction to a TV-series, describing him as empty, 'as if he were stuck wondering':

'Misplaced. Lost.' [Marathe suggests.]

'Misplaced.'

'Lost.'

'Misplaced.'

'As you wish.' (647-648)

We never get to know when and how they descended the hill-top they had their conversation. Thus all we are left with is their long series of arguments and counter-arguments, something that resembles more a couple of intertwined monologues than an actual dialogue.

The interesting fact here is not that two persons engaged in a conversations might not be really open to genuine debate. Indeed, this might actually contribute to the verisimilitude of the scene. The point is the implication of Marathe and Steeply's inflexibility when we consider them for their thematic dimension. As we have said, they serve the purpose of delineating some of the most important thematic opposition in the plot, that between alternative conceptions of freedom. What does it mean, then, that they are not even able to see one the point of view of the other as a possible and viable possibility? One of Marathe's rebuttals to his interlocutor has echoes that are in part meta-narrative, and can help us clarify the problem:

This is what happens: you imagine the things I will say and then say them for me and then become angry with them. Without my mouth; it never opens. You speak to yourself, inventing sides. This itself is the habit of children: lazy, lonely, self. I am not even here, possibly, for listening to. (321)

It is easy to read these words as if they were the reproaches of a puppet to its puppeteer: the puppet accuses the puppeteer of violating its individuality while acknowledging that it would not even exist if he had not been created.

The narrative voice that mocks and patronises *Jest*'s figurants is hardly present in Marathe and Steeply's sections, which are characterised mainly by direct speech. Nonetheless, however we think of the mind that has given the novel its structure we feel now its oppressive presence. We can call it 'implied author' or identify it with one of the possible overall narrators that have been suggested¹². Surely, we entered this narrative with the implicit agreement that we were to follow the vicissitudes of its *characters* with empathy and interest, and we are now considering whether that assumption was appropriate or, rather, naive.

As soon as we see Marathe and Steeply as the mere mouthpieces for contrasting ideologies, and therefore as elements that are *functional* to the workings of the novel, rather than autonomous from them, we start asking ourselves questions about the nature of their conversation. What happens to the ideas in a novel when they are expressed by characters that are not credible as complex and self-conscious individuals that represent and incarnate those ideas with the weight of their experience and personality? Wallace's claims about the role of fiction – that of making us feel less lonely by representing characters whose suffering is very similar to our own – are somewhat undermined by the realization that Marathe and Steeply could be merely reading out aloud an adaptation of "Two Concepts of Liberty". Marathe's mouth 'never opens', and he is not there 'for listening to' because he is not there at all, as if he were just a gear in the mechanism and not a person. It is the thematic dimension of these characters that undermines their mimetic qualities. With these two personifications – as well as with the other two categories of characters in *Jest* – the way the character is represented points to a certain conception of the Subject, and vice versa. Even in a "novel of ideas", if the opposition between contrasting ideals is not represented by credible characters, all we are doing is 'speaking to [ourselves], inventing sides'. There is no community

¹² See Staes (2014) for an overview of the critical discussion concerning the status of the narrative voice.

without confrontation, and no real opposition between ideas if they are not defended by Subjects we recognise as our equals.

This way of looking at the Tucson, AZ, conversation is diametrically opposite to Adam Kelly's reading of it in "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" (in Boswell 2014). In this book-chapter Kelly argues that Wallace's use of dialogue is consistent throughout his career. His three novels all include a section in which a couple of characters (or more, in the case of *The Pale King*) debate some of the most important themes of the work as a whole. Marathe and Steeply's conversation, then, constitutes in *Infinite Jest* one more example of Wallace's propensity for philosophical discourse. 'If there do exist such things as novelists of ideas,' Kelly argues, 'then David Foster Wallace was surely one. To begin with the obvious, Wallace's novels consistently show specific ideas wielding formative dramatic power in the minds of principal characters' (3). Surely, Kelly's consideration is valid if we consider the two only characters that can really be defined as 'principal' ones in *Jest*, i.e. Hal Incandenza and Don Gately. When we think of them we do think of a number of specific ideas – anhedonia, loneliness, drug-addiction, to name just a few – but these ideas wield 'formative dramatic power' precisely because they are not statically represented by them, but rather *dramatised*. Thus Hal is afraid he does not have a personality of his own, and yet his academic and sportive achievements seem to demonstrate a certain character. And Gately is able to transform himself from the slave of Demerol to a person that is capable of enduring incredible pain rather than assume any kind of narcotic.

But as soon as we consider the case of Marathe and Steeply, which are the focus of Kelly's analysis of *Jest* as a novel of ideas, we realise that they have very little 'dramatic power' per se. All in all, their actions in the novel lead up to just minor plot-developments. Hugh Steeply enters the other strands of the narrative as his alter ego Helen, and is always functional to Wallace's exploration of a certain character or

situation, rather than developed for the sake of characterisation. At first he uses his cover as a journalist as an excuse to interview Orin Incandenza, thus allowing us to hear his answers to the very specific questions Steeply asks about his family. Later on in the novel (pp. 673-682) he speaks with prorektor Thierry Poutrincourt, and their dialogue is one more occasion for reflecting upon the ethos of the Enfield Tennis Academy. Marathe, on his part, participates to the killing of the Antittoi brothers, but has just a secondary role in that scene. Later we see him at the Ennet House, where he is trying to locate both the master-copy of the Entertainment and Madame Psychosis, aka Joelle. Even though he finds her (and passes the information on to Steeply's cell) it is important to note that this entire series of events does not lead to any kind of resolution: not even Joelle knows where the master-copy is, and therefore her interrogatory is just a narrative expedient to give further details about her relationship with James Incandenza.

Indeed, one has the feeling these two characters really do nothing but speak, and the idea itself that they have any kind of 'dramatic power' is almost ridiculed by passages such as the following, which is fairly representative of the tone and atmosphere in which Marathe and Steeply are immersed:

Now Steeply had his pack of Flanderfumes cigarettes and his finger of pinkie in the pack's hole, evidently trying to gauge how many were left. Venus was low in the northeast rim. When Marathe's wife was born as an infant without a skull, there had been at first suspicion that the cause was that her parents smoked cigarettes as a habit. The light of the stars and moon had become sullen. The moon had not yet set. [...] Time was passing in a silence. Steeply was using a nail to extract slowly one of the cigarettes. Marathe, as a small child and with legs, had always disliked persons who made comments about how much others smoke. Steeply now had learned here just how much he must stand to keep the match alive. Some wind had died down, but there were scattered chill gusts that it seemed came from nowhere. Marathe sniffed so deeply that it became a sigh. The struck match sounded loud; there was no echo. (429)

The lines of the Tucson, AZ dialogue are often spaced out by this kind of descriptive paragraphs. The 'dramatic power' of Marathe and Steeply's ideas is very much

weakened by the mixture of irrelevant descriptive minutiae, reminiscences of the past and lyrical renditions of the landscape. These three elements are intertwined in the texture of the paragraph as three different strands in a tapestry, with almost exact alternation: Steeply's going about small quotidian business, then the ambient ('Venus was low') and, only at that point, Marathe's memories.

The discourse lingers on long descriptions of the present and background details, thus diluting the story-time. Passages such as this read almost as a mocking counterpoint to the sustained tone and content of the conversation and make the silence and chill of the outcropping sound as far less than dramatic. Conversely, Kelly claims that 'what is immediately noteworthy is the importance of physical elevation in those scenes in Wallace's novels that address wider thematic concerns through dialogue' (4-5). Elevation, he maintains, symbolises both the abstraction involved in the characters' reasoning and the moral significance of their thoughts. But he does not consider those elements in Wallace's characterisation of Steeply and Marathe that make them appear both childish and pretentious, and which therefore significantly reduce the perceived importance of the environment in which they act and speak. Consider one of the first descriptions we are given of their outlook:

Their specular perspective, the reddening light on vast tan stone and the oncoming curtain of dusk, the further elongation of their monstrous agnate shadows: all was almost mesmerising. Neither man seemed able to look at anything but the vista below. [...] Their speaking without looking at one another, facing both the same direction – this gave their conversing an air of careless intimacy, as of old-friends at the cartridge viewer together, or a long-married couple. Marathe thought this as he opened and closed his upheld hand, making over the city Tucson a huge and black blossom open itself and close itself. (91)

The image of their 'monstrous agnate shadows' gives equal cue to Kelly's reading and mine. If you choose the celebratory mode, they read as the symbol of Marathe and Steeply's powerful ideas, with consequences and implications that reach far beyond themselves.

But the ‘careless intimacy’ evoked by Marathe sounds a little out of place in the context of a meeting between a secret services agent and a terrorist. If agreement on the subject of freedom is something they never achieve, intimacy is even more far-fetched, and the comparison to an elderly couple or a couple of teenagers watching television contributes to the comical effect of Marathe’s thoughts. The last sentence in the quote goes even further in de-legitimising the two characters as possible successors to the protagonists of Plato’s dialogues: proud and excited as a child could be, Marathe enthusiastically celebrates his influence over the light and shade of the underlying city of Tucson, as if real power corresponded to the movements of his hand. Even the syntax of the sentence contributes to this sense of combined grandeur and self-delusion: the verbs ‘open’ and ‘close’ are first referred to the upheld hand, and then recur identical in the latter segment, with the difference that this time the pronoun is repeated each time. ‘Open itself’ and ‘close itself’, with a sound as pounding as the ticking and clacking of a needle. The repetitive pastime of a child, rather than the momentous reflections of a philosopher.

Also, Marathe’s comparison help us move on to another reason why Kelly’s unambiguous celebration as a novel of ideas is superficial, when it is not counterbalanced by an appreciation of Marathe and Steeply’s puppet-like qualities. What is usually said of a long-married couple is that they do not need to *talk*, because each already knows what the other means. Even less communication takes place between two people being entertained and absorbed by a TV-programme, particularly if we consider that isolation through absorption is one of the recurrent themes of *Infinite Jest*. Here Marathe and Steeply speak ‘without looking at one another’, and in further scenes they won’t be able to do it even if they wanted to, as the sun sets and the day fades into the night. These details have strong implications for Kelly’s definition of this and other scenes as ‘dialogic dialogue’. ‘By bringing a range of voices into his texts’, he

contends, 'Wallace can also make those texts a forum for competing ideas, and can explore these ideas in dialogic context' (5). According to this interpretation, Wallace is here bringing new life to the model of Socratic dialogue, as Dostoevsky had done before him.

Kelly borrows the opposition between 'the rhetorical or monologic speech genre' and the Socratic dialogue from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. The former mode corresponds to a mere affirmation of an established truth, in which the information is merely passed on to the interlocutor, and his or her response is not required. The early Socratic dialogues of Plato, on the other hand, are grounded on the premise that, in the words of Bakhtin, '[t]ruth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction' (as quoted in Kelly 6). Thus the sort of truth that characters aspire to, in a novel by Dostoevsky, participates of three main qualities: it is inter-subjective, it is not pre-established and it is always liable to revision. Moreover the dimension of the 'dialogic dialogue' does not exclusively pertain to those scenes in which a conversation between two characters is represented, because Bakhtin's definition also includes the moral conflicts and uncertainties that are internal to the consciousness of a single individual. Within the story-world, this kind of dialogue can be rendered convincingly only when its participants are represented as 'thinking, self-conscious being[s]'. If they are any less than that, the validity and significance of their ideas is critically undermined.

In Bakhtin's model, which Kelly chooses to make his own, the mimetic consistency of character is the necessary premise to its thematic relevance. But the constant allusion to the synthetic dimensions of the characters in *Jest* does not allow for the kind of conclusions that Kelly draws from episodes such as those featuring Marathe and Steeply. Theirs is not Socratic dialogue at all. Quite the opposite, in fact: after

reading Bakhtin, we would rather associate the vehemence and self-assurance by which they affirm their respective points of view with the ‘monological speech genre’. As we have seen, they are far from being unequivocally represented as ‘thinking, self-conscious being[s]’. As it was the case with Mario and the other figurants in Chapter 1, the most appalling feature of these two characters seemingly in conversation with one another is that they never change. That is, they never really “encounter” the other, and therefore never modify their perspective accordingly. The particularity of their personalities is completely flattened by the general and untested quality of their ideals, and this prevents them from really establishing any meaningful relationship. As parallel lines do, they never see one another because they are ‘both facing the same direction’ – i.e. the abstract validity of their own ideology.

This compromises Kelly’s argument on yet another level. There is another dimension of Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevsky that the critic applies to Wallace, and that is ‘the notion of dialogue as an end in itself’ – an occasion for connecting to other people. Wallace was particularly fond of the idea that this redemptive dimension of language also applied to fiction – and therefore to the communicative axis between the author and his audience. ‘What makes good fiction sort of magical’, [Kelly quotes from *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*], ‘is the way the separate agendas of reader and writer can be mediated by the fact that language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming, remedy-ing’ (7). In Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevsky the mimetic credibility of the characters was not an end in itself, but only guarantee that the reader could actually take position within the thematic opposition the writer presented her with. When Dostoevsky represented the point of view of an atheist, the depth and roundness of the character ensured that the reader could choose to agree with him or not, irrespective of the author’s position. That is because when the speaker of a certain

proposition is depicted as a ‘thinking, self-conscious being’, the proposition itself acquires the dignity of a legitimate opinion.

But do we really feel free to sympathise with High Steeply’s conception of freedom as fundamentally ‘freedom-from’? Some of the points he makes in the course of the conversation are a lot more easy to agree with than others – see for example his comments on the improbability of really being able to choose what to love. But overall, we are led to read in his aversion for a commitment that transcends the self the same solipsistic absorption that his father had manifested by succumbing to the entertainment of M*A*S*H. Crucially, Kelly’s remarks on this point are ambiguous: ‘In *Infinite Jest*, the importance of giving Steeply’s argument its fullest articulation is that the faults readers may find in it as a prescription for the present day will only serve to place greater emphasis on the technologically dystopian world Wallace is depicting throughout the novel’ (12). Kelly might as well substitute ‘may’, the modal in his sentence, for ‘will’. Because even though there might be some empirical readers ready to side with Steeply, those who are willing to converse with the author in the way that Wallace hoped they would will have to ask themselves questions about the overall perspective that the novel invites us to take. And most of these readers will agree with Kelly that Steeply’s ideals are to some extent consistent with *Jest*’s ‘technologically dystopian world’.

It is in this dimension, external to the story-world, that Marathe’s reproaches to his puppeteer resonate with the most disturbing echoes. So far we have read his words on two levels. On the first he is a person replying to another, on the second a character commenting on his own submission to the necessities of the novel. What if he were also voicing our own discontent as readers? Our discontent at not being made part of a conversation, but rather being left to decipher and interpret the encoded messages of someone who has already found his own, definitive, truth and now only wishes to

impose it on somebody else? If Marathe does not really engage Steeply in a real dialogue, is Wallace doing the same with us? When we are denied the possibility to agree with an actual individual, rather than a mere synthetic character, our mouth is shut, 'it never opens'. We are 'not even here, possibly, for listening to', because what use could we put that listening to? 'You speak to yourself, inventing sides'. Sure, because without actual well-rounded subjects to validate them with their own experience, these ideas are mere abstract oppositions. The logic unraveling of a single thought. 'This is the habit of children: lazy, lonely, self'. Wallace's dread of solipsism here takes the form of a self-accusation.

The accusation, however, is well-founded only if we limit ourselves to the consideration of the dialectic between positive and negative freedom as it is represented in the Tucson, AZ scenes. Instead, *Infinite Jest* allows another kind of ultimately undecidable opposition to take place and, as we have seen, undecidability (conceived as the well-articulated and impartial representation of antithetical values) is the quality that makes for authentic Socratic dialogue with the reader. The real locus of the antagonism is not the outcropping, but the psychological torment of Marathe over his betrayal of the A.F.R., which he confesses to Kate Gompert in his last appearance in the novel (774-782). After his visit to the Ennet House, Marathe thinks he knows where Madame Psychosis is hiding, and therefore the moment has come to choose whether to be faithful to the cause of his own nation or rather pass the information on to Steeply's Office of Unspecified Services. As Marathe knows, helping the O.N.A.N.ite secret services out on this case will ensure him healthcare for his beloved wife. Marathe is stuck between opposing and irreconcilable values – the same delineated on the outcropping: dedication to a cause or seemingly irrational love for a single individual. It is in the depiction of his suffering at having to make a choice that Wallace grants him the depth of a well-rounded literary character. The real dialectic can take place only when it is supported

and problematized by the experience of a particular individual. In his last appearance, the thematic function of Marathe is no longer that of being the mouthpiece for a monolithic creed. He is hesitant and in pain, and his uncertainty calls for empathic understanding on the part of the reader. Needless to say, the blurring of the fields of the intellect and the emotions calls for a more nuanced and attentive reading than the clear-cut oppositions of Marathe and Steeply's dialogue.

True, Marathe is not talking to himself, expressing his grief in a monologue of sorts. He is talking to Kate Gompert, whom he has approached in a bar because she reminds him of his wife. But both of them are drunk, and Kate on this occasion is just the sideshow to Marathe, asking only those questions that allow him to better explain himself. Indeed, what he proposes is to tell his own story, rather than having a proper conversation: 'Katherine, I will tell you a story about feelings so bad and saving a life. I do not know you but we are drunk together now, will you hear this story?' (776). His story is about the existential anxiety he had felt as a young man, when he thought that his nation had no hope to rebel against the annexation to the O.N.A.N. This anxiety had brought him to a painful and complete isolation from the outside world: 'I feel [the present tense here is due to Marathe's imperfect English] I am chained in a cage of the self, from the pain. Unable to care or choose anything outside it. Unable to see anything or feel anything outside my pain' (777). Even as self-absorbed as he is at this stage, when he sees a woman about to get killed, he cannot help but attempt to save her life.

The woman turns out to be dramatically deformed, her life constantly in danger. It is at this point that Marathe's use of the word 'choice' – and the ideas that he associates with it – reveals itself as far less consistent than we could intuit from the scenes with Steeply. Because he admits that he had tried to abandon the woman after the rescue, and continue with his own life. But he had also realized that without some sort of commitment that was external to the self, he would have gone back to his previous state

of painful solipsism. 'I had to face: I had chosen. My choice, this was love. I had chosen I think the way out of the chains of the cage. I needed this woman. Without her to choose over myself, there was only pain and not choosing, rolling drunkenly and making fantasies of death' (780). Kate underlines the contradiction by bursting out at him: 'This is love? It's like you were *chained* to her'. Even though he does not fully realize it, Marathe is here caught in a philosophical argument that he is not able to resolve. He needs to have his personal, particular existential needs acknowledged at the same time that he affirms that he was capable of transcending them and make a *free* choice. As in the dialogue with Steeply, this is a question of freedom, and therefore – as Berlin suggests – a question of what kind of a Subject he is.

Confronted with Kate's comments, Marathe almost implores her to recognize his capacity to practice freedom and therefore validate him as a free subject:

This is what is hard to tell. To ask any person to see. It is no choice. It is not choosing Gertraude over the A.F.R., my companions. Over the causes. Choosing Gertraude to love as my wife was necessary for the others, these other choices. Without the choice of her life there are no other choices. [...] This choice, Katherine: I made it. It chains me, but the chains are of my choice. The other chains: no. The others were the chains of not choosing. (781)

Wallace does not solve the conundrum: Marathe is here able to give full articulation to the existential problems of individual freedom and societal determinism. The dichotomy that is so dear to both strands of the Ethical Turn, that between the particular and the general, does not correspond to the thematic distinctions that *Jest* invite us to reflect upon. Marathe is a free Subject inasmuch as he is thinking and self-conscious. Yet, his freedom and independence is certainly limited by all kinds of boundaries: the ideology of his terroristic cell, the love for his wife, his anxieties, the structural necessities of *Jest*, and so on. By recurring to a kind of characterization that makes his creature both flat and round, at the same time, Wallace is inviting us to let the opposition drop and look at the universal desire for recognition as a Subject that these characters express. It

is no coincidence that 'the search for status' is one of the crucial ideas in "Two Concepts of Liberty". Berlin re-conceptualizes one's own understanding of himself as a Subject as a societal enterprise: 'I am a social being in a deeper sense than that of interaction with others. For am I not what I am, to some degree, in virtue of what others think and feel me to be?' (22). What Wallace's technique asks us to do, in conclusion, is not to decide between the particular individuality of these characters and the general validity of their ideas. Rather, we are invited to consider them as equals, in virtue of their own suffering.

Chapter 3

PROTAGONISTS: 'FAILING EVER TO BE REALLY SEEN'

Both figurants and personifications, we have seen, asks us to be considered as our own equals. *Jest*'s peculiar mixture of suffering and flatness requires us to be proactive in the process of empathising with the characters: their structural role in the narrative is a constant distraction from the mimetic credibility which, we are used to assume, is the necessary premise to genuine identification. But is there someone we can effortlessly empathise with, in the novel? Anything close to a well-rounded character – a set of predicates that be vast and varied enough to encourage us to (willingly) surrender to the illusion that there is a real person behind them? The connection between empathy and mimetic complexity is not the only notion about narratives we are taking for granted when following this line of thought. Surely – we ask, rhetorically – will those characters that are at the centre of the unfolding plot be provided with a more detailed and nuanced personality? In other words, we tend to look for a *protagonist*, a character whose very centrality can help us sort out and interpret the incommensurability of the narrative data we are presented with. Yes, we might realise, this definition is circular, because there is no way you can attribute centrality to a character in a film or book with no clue whatsoever regarding the work's general structure and themes. But we are fairly confident our notion of the protagonist will prove heuristically fruitful, if not technically accurate. And thus, yes, *Infinite Jest* includes two characters that can be said to be *central*, and in more than one sense: Hal Incandenza and Don Gately. Above all, we could advance at least two reasons to look up at them as representatives of *Jest* as a whole. First, they are the two characters who receive the most narrative-space, with a conspicuous number of pages that are exclusively dedicated to the description of their own respective actions and point of view. Secondly, each of them belongs to one of the

fundamental character-clusters of the novel: Hal lives and trains at the Enfield Academy, which was founded by his own parents, while Don is a member of Staff at Ennet House. Needless to say, the symmetry alone of this character-scheme invites an entire series of speculative comparisons.

Moreover, we sense that Hal and Gately are predominant with regard to figurants and personifications also because of other dimensions of their structural importance. Consider the distribution of the elements of the story: *Jest* opens with Hal, and closes with Don. If perfect mirroring calls for attention, then binary oppositions such as these ones do not compromise but actually reinforce our belief that we should pay attention to the interdependence of structure and themes. Should we interpret the respective situations of Hal at the beginning and Gately at the end as correspondent to the opposition of conflict and resolution? If we choose to, then the remainder of Hal's and Gately's vicissitudes will have to fit into the picture we have just outlined. Also, consider the distribution of personal connections between the characters. It is reasonable to assume that the more we see a character interact with other people, the more we will learn about his own personality. And Gately, thanks to his role as mentor and father-figure at Ennet House, provides Wallace with multiple occasions to describe the inner-world of the AA figurants and Don's own. Hal is in an even better position, in this sense: many of the most important characters in *Jest* – James, Avril, CT, Mario, Orin – are *relatives* of his. That means that we have the possibility to link the state of mind he displays in the story-now to the past of his family, and the particular problems of these characters. Thus it is only natural we speculate whether Hal's sense of not knowing who he is has anything to do with his own mother's obsession with the achievements and well-being of her sons, and his consequent anxiety to meet *her* expectations, instead of his own. Also, a notable difference between Hal and every other character in the novel is that he is the only one to ever perform first-person narration. Sure, the narrative voice

does use first-person pronouns every now and then¹³, but the impossibility of attributing any definite identity to them makes the fact irrelevant for our present matter. And the narrative voice (be it the wraith or a cluster of unnatural narrators¹⁴) does not relate its own experiences, but those of other people. Conversely, Hal speaks for himself in ten different sections in the book. His own direct speech provides us with a perspective that is radically different from that which is granted to us by the voice's prevailing recourse to direct characterization. We are not directly told, unequivocally, what he knows or feels, but rather we gather facts and opinions that are already mediated by his own consciousness. And even though this may seem at first as less direct an access to his own personality, the truth is that the more indirect clues we are given, the more we are naturally led to *infer*. Thus the opposite generally turns out to be true: we can picture a more complete representation of a character precisely because we are led to postulate that he is as complex and credible as a real individual.

For all these reasons, then, we are right to believe that Hal and Gately are, in fact, the protagonists of *Infinite Jest*. Let us now revise our first assumption, which regarded the relation of direct correspondence between structural function (that of the protagonist) and mimetic credibility. Because all of the elements which we have identified account for the centrality of these two characters, but not, necessarily, for their consistency. The number of pages and circumstantial information do not amount to the complexity of character, as we have seen in Chapter 1. Figurants, in *Infinite Jest*, are dedicated entire sections, often more than one, and yet the form of their narrative always points to a lack in particularity. Similarly, the exploration of a protagonist's personal

¹³ See for example its comments regarding the nonsensical hunger of success that many experience at E.T.A: '[...] since *we* (who are mostly not small children) know it's more invigorating to *want* than to *have*, it seems. Tough maybe this is just the inverse of the same delusion' (694, the emphasis on the pronoun is mine). It also contributes to the sense of a unified narrator that the voice begins the passage by clearly stating the matter at hand, as a lecturer would do for her own audience: 'And re Ennet House resident Kate Gompert and this depression issue: [...]' (692).

¹⁴ From "Unnatural Narrative", in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*: 'An unnatural narrative violates physical laws, logical principles, or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge by representing storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces that could not exist in the actual world.' Available at <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/unnatural-narrative>.

relations or the fact that he is able to narrate his own story should, we sense, lead to a greater sense of his personality, but this seems not to be true, especially in the case of Hal. Does *he* read like a realistic character? We are left free to speculate about his interior life, and therefore recognize him as structurally and qualitatively different from figurants and personifications, and yet we are given *too little*, we feel. Upon finishing *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, we might feel relatively comfortable inferring about the possible writing career of Stephen Dedalus, but that is because we have a basis on which to ground our hypotheses. It is not the same with Hal. The minute we start wondering whether he will eventually leave E.T.A. for college or instead make it to the Entertainment, we are reminded of Bertrand Russell's famous argument on the sense of reality¹⁵. We are free to speculate about Napoleon's motives, Russell argues, but should not be tricked into the illusion that we can do the same with Hamlet¹⁶, which exists only in the predicates that Shakespeare conferred him. The reason why questions such as the above sound sterile with regard to Hal is that his (explicit) role as a protagonist, together with his (and our own) fundamental uncertainty about his personality, make for a jarring contrast that only highlights his synthetic dimension.

Indeed, the critical discussion over the possible causes of his apparent seizure at the University of Arizona testifies to the impenetrability of his character. It is not at all obvious how and why he ended up in that state, and that is because there is little we know for sure about him, really. Crucially, as we have seen, these are in part the same problems he himself accuses. The words of the wraith, who is visiting Gately at the hospital, can be useful in charting the relationship between Hal's mimetic, thematic and

¹⁵ See Russell, "Descriptions", in A.W. Moore, ed., *Meaning and Reference* (Oxford University Press 1993), pp.46-55.

¹⁶ It is probably no coincidence that Russell chose a character as lacking in resolution as Hamlet as an example of a textual entity which is totally determined by its creator and master, the author. Nor is it impossible that Wallace chose Hamlet as a model for Hal in part because he was familiar with Russell's seminal essay.

synthetic dimensions. This is precisely because he thinks like an artist, and is constantly preoccupied with problems of representation:

[...] he, the wraith, when alive in the world of animate men, had seen his own personal youngest offspring, a son, the one most like him, the one most marvelous and frightening to him, becoming a figurant, toward the end. [...] The wraith says it mars the memory of the end of his animate life, this son's retreat to the periphery of life's frame. [...] He says Just imagine the horror of spending your own [...] boyhood trying unsuccessfully to convince your father that you even existed [...] failing ever to be really seen [...] only to find, near the end, that your very own child had himself become blank, inbent, silent, frightening, mute. I.e. that his son had become what he (the wraith) had feared as a child he (the wraith) was. (837-838)

We should not forget, at this point, that the late Incandenza's reaction to his son's 'retreat to the periphery of life's frame' was the filming of the *Infinite Jest* cartridge, which is the one element around which all the different narrative strands of the novel unfold. And that is significant because it makes Hal's 'empty self'¹⁷ and flatness as a character at the very centre of *Jest* as a whole. Thus he is the protagonist not *despite* the fact that he is 'blank, inbent, silent, frightening, mute', but precisely because of these qualities. Or rather, this lack of (positive, affirmative) qualities. The wraith is convinced Hal resembles him by 'failing ever to be really seen', and we feel we know what he means, because we have some difficulties seeing him to. Surely, we do not *know* Hal Incandenza the way we feel we know Elizabeth once we get to the end of *Pride and Prejudice*. By putting these words in the mouth of the wraith, Wallace is pointing to the fact that this lack-of-character is not only an informed stylistic choice, but also a theme of the novel, whose implications we are meant to reflect upon.

The same is not true of Hal's counterpart. Do we ever *see* Don Gately? Here the matter is more complicated, since in his case there is no explicit discussion of him as a person to undermine our sense that he is a credible character. And yet he does

¹⁷ I borrow the term from Nicoline Timmer's analysis of Hal (2010 151). She in turn adapts the concept from Philip Cushman's "Why the Self is Empty", from which she quotes extensively.

participate to a distinct category – that of AA and Ennet House – and we are left to wonder in which sense our experience of Gately as a character we are more than willing to empathise with is different from our reading of Randy Lenz and Kate Gompert, for example. After all, he is no less a stereotype than them... or is he? It is hard to say for sure, and that is precisely because the opposition between the general and the particular is dramatised throughout *Jest*, and the class of the protagonists makes no exception. Elizabeth Freudenthal well summarises our own uncertainty when she says that Gately is so likable *despite* ‘the clichéd contradictions of working-class identity defining [him] – his sweet naiveté and brute, bearlike strength, his wide-ranging, deep insight and lack of formal education, his ability to get the uptown girl despite his downtown background (2010 191). Do these clichés constitute the entirety of Gately’s personality as a character? If that was so, we would be right in asserting that we do not see him, because – exactly as the figurants – he is entirely determined by his own biographical circumstances, with no room left for the transcendental subjectivity that we still tend to look for in our experience of reading fiction. And, as in the case of Hal, Gately’s apparent lack of particular individuality seems to be at odds with his function as one of the two main characters. In both cases, in fact, it is the disjunction between the role of the protagonist and a full personality that compels us to reconsider what we had taken for granted about roundness of character and structural relevance.

This disjunction is also the constitutive element of the third category in our taxonomy of the characters in *Jest*. The peculiarity of this category when compared with the other two is that it is, as we shall see in a moment, bipartite. What was true of Bruce Green was also true of Randy Lenz. The same goes for Marathe and Steeply. Here, instead, we are invited, by virtue of symmetry, to focus on the differences between Hal’s and Don’s different ways of being a protagonist. But then again, what is a protagonist? We now realise that our initial definition does not allow us to appreciate

the differences, but only the similarities between these two characters. This is why I propose to recur to a new and more complex definition of the term, however tentative it might be. I suggest we conceive of the protagonist as a character that simultaneously participates of the following four attributes: whole, rhythm, hierarchy and network¹⁸. And each of these four attributes, in turn, is associated with either pole of a set of three oppositions, the ones by which we have articulated the problem of the main characters in *Infinite Jest*: 1) either Hal or Don; 2) either the general or the particular; 3) either stasis or agency (and, alternatively, either loneliness or connectedness). My argument proceeds from the premise that Gately and Hal are opposed by a different amalgam of these four attributes. In the economy of the novel, each of them incarnates the role of the protagonist by tending towards different formal alternatives. Thus, in brief, Hal is representative of the *whole* of the novel, and in this sense participates of its generality. *Jest* being a novel about depression and addiction, it is not difficult to see why this aspect of his role makes him a static character, rather than one developing in the course of the narrative. He is also preponderant in the *hierarchy* of the novel, above all others for a number of formal questions, some of which we have already hinted at. By differentiating himself from the others in this sense, he manifests his particularity, which will be reflected, in thematic terms, in his persistent state of loneliness. Conversely, Gately is a protagonist by virtue of his participation to the narrative *rhythm* of the book – i.e. its narrative progressions, from addiction to abstinence – in which it is not only his (capacity for) agency to manifest itself, but also his own particularity. His own generality is affirmed in positive terms, those of the *network*, because he is able to recognise himself in other people and act accordingly. My hope is that through this conceptual framework we will be able to really take a look at these two characters, ‘ever failing to be seen’.

¹⁸ I have elaborated this heuristic, provisional definition taking the cue from the title of Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015), but I am not familiar with the content of the book – not as yet.

HAL: 'THE CENTRAL AND ARTICULATE PROTAGONIST OF HIS OWN
ENTERTAINMENT'

As explained in the Introduction, this entire taxonomy rests on Phelan's distinction of the three dimensions of the literary character: the mimetic, the thematic and the synthetic. Thus if we need to verify whether Hal can actually be said to be representative of the novel as a whole, we will need to establish connections between each of his three dimensions and those of the other characters. With the necessary caveat, at this stage, that every attribution of uniformity to a work of art is necessarily arbitrary, always a matter of paying attention to one strand and exclude another. However, the examples that follow are weighty and numerous enough to allow us to generalise and focus on the whole rather than the difference. This is surely the case with Hal's thematic dimension, especially in the first scene in *Jest*, when, following his application to the University of Arizona, he is supposedly being interviewed. As it is always the case with novels, the facts and words of our first encounter with character and plot contain motifs and themes that will resonate throughout the entire work. We learn from Hal himself that he is not able to speak, and that his uncle and his tennis coach are trying to help him through the interview by answering the questions in his place and pretending he is merely worn out by the recent tennis match he has played. As soon as the academic staff at the University begin questioning his intellectual capabilities, Hal complains:

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

'I read,' I say. 'I study and read. I bet I've read everything you've read. [...] My instincts concerning syntax and mechanics are better than your own, I can tell, with due respect.

‘But it transcends the mechanics. I’m not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. [...] I’m not just a creatus, manufactured, conditioned, bread for a function.’ (11-12)

To lay claim to one’s own complexity and independence, we know, is a constant in *Infinite Jest*. In Chapter 1 we have seen as the peculiar mixture of comedy and tragedy in the figurants’ origins obliged us to see their suffering at not being able to determine their own self, constricted as they were by the influences of family history, drug abuse and a patronising narrative voice. Marathe, as a personification of ideas, is himself confused by the abstract opposition of (moral) necessity and (emotional) contingency, and begs Joelle to recognize his status as a free and independent Subject.

However, in both of these cases, the ‘search for status’ is neither explicit nor self-conscious. These characters do in fact suffer from a lack of perceived autonomy, but they do not (necessarily) know it. Marathe believes he was in fact able to ground his life upon a choice that was fundamentally his own, and not influenced by chance and circumstances. And the figurants of AA and Ennet House do not know how their own stories are represented by the narrative voice: the mocking and belittling takes place at a narrative level to which they have no access. Conversely, Hal is not only able to articulate their shared discomfort, but even pre-empt possible implications in the academic staff’s remarks. He claims that he is not a machine, and expands by giving a negative definition of the constitutive liberty of the Subject. Re-reading his words after our consideration of the mimetic and synthetic status of figurants and personifications, it is easy to see that Hal is here attributing to himself an anxiety that will actually be felt, at some point or another, by most of the other characters: he does not want to be a ‘creatus’, as Marathe does not want to be a mere mouthpiece to an entity that speaks to itself, ‘inventing sides’; he does not want to be ‘manufactured’, as we do not like the idea of the central story of each of the minor characters in *Jest* being made-up on the spot by a unsympathetic narrative voice; he does not want to be ‘conditioned’, as we

might feel Randy Lenz is conditioned to kill by the structural necessities of the novel and for the sole purpose of firing up the series of events that will lead up to Gately's hospitalization; and, finally, he does not like the idea of just passively carrying out a function that someone else has assigned him, precisely as Marathe and Steeply would be horrified to discover that in Tucson, AZ they are faithfully, if unwittingly, reading out aloud entire sections of a lecture by Isaiah Berlin.

Thus there are two elements in the passage above that make of Hal the only character that summarises and represents the predicament of the others, and prevent us from seeing the obvious convergences between him and them as merely reciprocal. Hal is 1) himself aware of the cause of his own suffering and, consequently, 2) capable to express his anxiety through first-person narration. This makes his complaints the ones that prompt us to identify similar symptoms in other sections of the book; the one correspondence that unlocks the entire matrix. We establish his representativeness not by proceeding from the many to the one, as we would generally assume. Rather, the opposite is true: the position of the passage within the novel and the fact that it is narrated in first-person encourages us to interpret the rest of the cast of characters according to Hal's (and Wallace's) own words. And when we look at other aspects of the work as a whole, we see that the same holds true for all of its other major themes (the idea of liberty, anhedonia, loneliness, the empty self). Thus, if it is true that the attribution of uniformity is always arbitrary, then the form, content and collocation of the first scene in *Jest* makes Hal's representativeness a solid and well-grounded interpretative choice. And Hal's centrality is not only thematic, but also synthetic. That is, its characterisation participates of the features that we have seen in both the figurants and the personifications of ideas. As for what concerns the first category, its most defining qualities are 1) the recurrent use of an "origin", which I have defined in Chapter 1 as the foundational story of a given character, the single narrative that

accounts for his present self, and 2) the mixture of comedy and tragedy. As for the former characteristic, there is no obvious candidate for the role of the defining event that caused his anxiety and sense of emptiness. However, it is interesting to note that an episode from his childhood is represented very early in the novel, as an intermezzo to the opening scene at the University of Arizona. Thus, by virtue of its very position, the anecdote is implicitly posed as explicative of Hal's impossibility to speak in the course of the interview.

Questioned by the University academic staff, Hal cannot directly reply to them, but his reasoning capabilities seem not to be compromised, and in fact he is able to describe what happens in real time. 'I cannot make myself understood, now', he tells the reader, and then adds: 'Call it something I ate' (10). Thus it is only natural to assume that the following section, which is in fact about something Hal *ate*, when he was a child, is not there just to enhance our knowledge on his past and his personality. As a small child, he confessed to his mother that he had just eaten a patch of mould that came from the family house basement, and his ultra-protective mother had almost suffered a nervous breakdown of sorts, by consequence. This is posed as revelatory, indicative of the origin of the physical or psychological problem that prevents him from speaking and opens the novel with an initial conflict. It is, in other words, presented as an "origin", analogous in tone and function to the background stories of the figurants. The fact that Hal's childhood and familial environment is explored in the novel in much greater detail does not diminish the importance that Hal himself, as a narrator, and Wallace, as an author, provide this passage with. Furthermore, the "origin" narrative in question stands out against the passages it is preceded and followed by for yet another feature it shares with the figurant stories: it is narrated from the perspective of someone who is not able to personally recall the events as they occurred. The narrative voice, obviously, always narrates in third person. Here Hal maintains his own perspective, but

cannot do anything else than repeat Orin's version of the anecdote, because, as he himself acknowledges, 'it's funny what you don't recall'. He was too young a child to remember with clarity. Thus what we actually get is Hal telling what Orin said happened back then to Hal himself. Hal is *given* his own defining story, just like all of the figurants, and this makes him less credible as a thinking, self-conscious character. His authority is also questioned by the fact that, even though he is the narrator in both scenes, he does not make any explicit connection between the two. Indeed, we are not even sure he means to narrate them one after the other in quick succession. And we can't be sure of whether he participates of the same time-continuum in which we read them, either. The mould episode is isolated from the text in which it is framed by two blank spaces. Do they indicate a shift in the focus of Hal's thoughts during the interview? Since this possibility is not even hinted at in the text, it is much easier to attribute the hiatus to the choice of the author, or of the overall narrator of the novel. Thus even when Hal speaks for himself his synthetic dimension, his status as a character rather than a real person, is constantly emphasised.

Moreover, Hal's section participate of the stylistic whole of the novel insofar as they are often characterised by the same mixture of comedy and tragedy as those of the figurants. This is especially true in another of Hal's memories, the one concerning the finding of his father's body. After James Incandenza's suicide, Hal is encouraged by his mother and uncle to attend psychoanalytic sessions. They are afraid he is experiencing difficulties in recovering from the trauma, particularly because it was Hal himself to find his father in their family home, after tennis training. He had killed himself by putting his head inside a microwave, with obvious yet terrible consequences. Prompted, as usual, by an extreme and irrational desire to please his mother, Hal starts learning all he can about trauma therapy and theory, so that he can provide his psychologist with the "right" solution and have his mother reassured. Thus he fashions his version of the

episode in a gradual crescendo to be performed in the doctor's office, the climax at the description of his own reaction to the smell that came from the kitchen in which his father had just died:

“‘That something smelled delicious!’” I screamed. The force of my shriek almost sent the grief-therapist over backwards in his leather chair. A couple credentials fell off the wall. I bent over in my own nonleather chair as if for a crash-landing. I put a hand to each temple and rocked back and forth in the chair, weeping. It came out between sobs and screams. That it'd been four hours plus since lunchtime and I'd worked hard and played hard and I was starved. That the saliva had started the minute I came through the door. That golly something smells *delicious* was my first reaction!’ (256)

The gap between atmosphere and content, in passages such as these, reveals itself in all its magnitude every time we are asked to briefly describe the plot of *Infinite Jest* to people who have not read it. Is there anything more inherently tragic than finding a beloved one's body after he or she committed suicide? With his brains splattered all over the walls and ceiling? Yet the scene above does not have a fraction of the dramatic power of, for example, *Saving Private Ryan*. There are several elements that concur to make it farcical: the scream itself, when we are aware that Hal is acting out here, reciting something he has rehearsed at home; the cartoonish and stereotypical reaction of the therapist, with the credentials falling off the wall and him leaping backwards on his chair; the implausible and comical insistence by which Hal reiterates that he was ‘starved’ and that his father's brains smelled ‘delicious’. A few lines after, we smile with scorn at the doctor's ingenuity, and his taking the bait at the boy's ‘grief-therapist-textbook breakdown into genuine affect and trauma and textbook ear-splitting grief, then absolution’. Also, would anyone realistically plan to commit suicide by putting his head into a microwave? The ridiculous and implausible meet the grotesque, with the effects I have described in Chapter 1.

But Hal is not only as flat as a figurant, he is also, at times, as ‘conditioned, bred for a function’ as Marathe or Steeply. Consider, as an example, the ‘little buddies’

scheme, and Hal's role as a mentor in it. When Ken Blott complains that he 'see[s] seven or eight years of unhappiness every day and day after day of tiredness and stress and suffering stretching ahead, and for what, for a chance at a like a pro career' (109), he is pointing to the inherent contradictions in the ideology of personal success at all costs which is so pervasive at E.T.A. Hal's reply – that this shared sense of unhappiness and loneliness is what unites them all – does not amount to anything more than a succinct and simplistic interpretation of existential pessimism. The idea he expresses floats pure and simple in a void of characterization, a blank space in which matters such as whether it is reasonable to assume he really believes what he is saying, and what that tells us about his own state of mind at that point, are simply not relevant. The thematic function behind his words is simply too obvious not to attract our attention as to something distinctively artificial.

Thus in all these senses, Hal gathers together formal and thematic characteristic of *Jest* as a whole, but with the necessary distinction that he is not on the same level with the other characters. The variety of different gradations of synthesis and mimesis employed in his characterization includes the entire stylistic range of the novel, and this places him higher above in the structural hierarchy of this cast of characters. In this sense he is 'articulate', as the wraith would have liked him to be. And for all his lack of character, his flatness, he is still granted with more mimetic credibility than the rest of them, thanks to first-person narration and an entire constellation of characters that describe him and his past as the narrative unfolds. He is also considerably smarter than anyone else in the book, and it is this characteristic above all others to constitute his *particularity*, the one and only quality of his that transcends the general categories of *Jest*. In conclusion, Hal, in his participation to the whole of the novel, epitomizes the impotence and constriction that all of these addicts share – they are enslaved by drugs, the power of ideas and the obsession for success. And yet those of his qualities which

stand out against the human landscape of the novel do not provide him with any salvation from his existential impasse. Quite the opposite in fact: he feels as lonely as only a protagonist in a story-world of figurants would be. In a book as inclusive and fragmented as *Jest*, we feel, all the characters are struggling for attention and narrative-space. And the fact that Hal, despite his position in the mimetic, thematic and synthetic hierarchy of the character-system, still is ‘blank, inert, silent, frightening, mute’ has a lot to say about the ethical dimension of the narrative form in *Jest*. He is like a stylized figure on a piece of paper claiming in a loud voice: ‘I am in here’ (3). Hal’s words are revelatory in this sense: ‘We’re all on each other’s food chain. All of us. It’s an individual sport. Welcome to the meaning of *individual*. We’re each deeply alone here. It’s what we all have in common, this aloneness’ (112). It is easy to read this passage as a remark about the implications of character-distribution. Thus yes, we might say, ‘suffering *unites* us’ (113), as flatness and constriction unite all of these characters. But we are naturally inclined to seek a solution out of our given condition. Hal does not find one for himself, and in fact ends up being *literally* mute. In this sense, his thematic function is completely schematic¹⁹: he is consistently presented as different from Don Gately, his dialectical counterpart in the role of the protagonist, and the gap between the two of them is never filled. Hal is a representation of the failure of escaping the existential problems of *Jest* – an anti-hero just like his literary model and predecessor, Hamlet.

¹⁹ ‘The dialectical account of structure itself takes two basic shapes, one schematic, the other sequential. In the schematic reading [...] the basic opposition of two ideas is reflected at various levels and in various elements of the text [...] and this opposition is consistently resolved the same way’ (Phelan 289).

DON: 'HE HAS NO IDEA HOW HEROIC HE LOOKS'

If Hal is a protagonist and anti-hero, the opposite seems to be true of Don Gately: he is an accomplished hero that one would never call a protagonist. He is not particularly intelligent, nor is he undefiled. Conversely, our first encounter with him is the scene in which he murders a Canadian VIP while burgling his apartment. As the narrative voice says, 'drug addicts driven to crime to finance their drug addiction are not often inclined toward violent crime' (55), and in fact the murder is accidental: DuPlessis dies by suffocation caused by the kitchen towel which Gately meant to silence him with. So he is not even presented as a serious criminal, but nothing more than a rogue or a poor devil. However, unlike his counterpart at E.T.A., Don displays, in the course of the novel, not only the desire, but the actual ability to change. He is described entering Ennet House in early withdrawal, only to become a live-in Staff member just a few months later. He is diligent and scrupulous in his devotion to the tenets of AA and the 12-Step Substance Abuse Recovery, and he is also a kind and compassionate tutor for the new guests at the House. When Randy Lenz and the Canadians who are after him put into danger the recovering addicts under his supervisions, he is able to sacrifice himself and heroically fight against them, and he is wounded in action. But his real act of heroism, it would be easy to argue, is his persistence in refusing to take any narcotic painkillers at the hospital, despite the terrible pain he is suffering. Narcotics represented his own constriction and surrender of the self, we know, and therefore it is only natural to interpret his abstinence under these circumstances as a success. It is in this sense that Gately sets in motion the *rhythm* of the novel, the single most important development from the initial conflict between Self and addiction. However, the last scene in which he is mentioned, which is also the conclusive section of the novel, does not exactly correspond to a celebration of the hero that we would expect in this case. He regains

consciousness after having being tortured, ‘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). If he really is represented as a hero, we realize, he is an ambiguous one, to say the least.

Mary K. Holland is the one critic I know of with the strongest argument against *Infinite Jest* as a novel that offers any kind of solution – and, therefore, of heroism. Even though I disagree with her conclusions, it is worth taking her negative assessment of Gately’s achievement in order to clarify the ambiguity of his role as a protagonist. Holland sees the novel as fundamentally flawed, irreparably compromised by a recursive loop of narcissism that no character really manages to escape. Thus ‘Don Gately’s final narrative experience’, in her interpretation, ‘illustrates the threat posed by this ultimate drug, even in the face of heroic attempts to oppose it’ (2013 78). Sure, she concedes, his refusal of painkillers and preoccupation for the people back at Ennet House is indicative of a radical change in his habits and personality. ‘But, stealthily interwoven with these acts and thoughts of personal growth and caring for others runs the thread of infantile desire.’ And this ‘infantile desire’ is the central problem that she has identified in the rest of *Jest*, the one malady that afflicts all of the characters. Her analysis draws heavily on Christopher Lasch’s 1979 classic *The Culture of Narcissism*, which associates the implacable rise of consumerism with a widespread perception of a loss of self and identity in American society. As soon as people start to doubt their own self-sufficiency and independence as Subjects, Lasch argues, the only reality they will be forced to acknowledge is their own frailty and infantile craving for total fulfillment. Thus Gately’s memory of the drug that he was forced to take on the day of Fackelmann’s death would be revealing of his own relapse into solipsistic narcissism. And that is because, according to Holland, ‘rather than recalling the drug indignantly, as the source of his inability to come to his associate’s aid, Gately remembers it as “delicious” and “obscenely pleasant” (979, 981), a welcome escape from the horror

being staged around him' (79). It is for this reason, she maintains, that in the last couple of lines Gately is represented as fragile and needy as a child would be: by positioning that image at the very conclusion of the novel, Wallace fails to make of Gately a positive alternative to Hal.

There is more than one reason not to accept such reading as a valid account of how *Infinite Jest* concludes. For one thing, we should keep in mind that the narrative structure of this novel is circular: the events that are the last to take place in chronological order are the ones described in the very first pages. This considerably reduces the symbolic importance of the conclusive scenes, because the disposition of the narrative material necessarily points at what will follow – i.e. Hal's interview in Tucson. Also, the novel is fragmentary, and leaves to the reader many important gaps to be filled, as many critics have noted. Most importantly, we never get to know whether Gately finally made it out of the hospital, and whether he ended up being administered narcotics or not. Thus we are left to our own devices when it comes to interpreting the significance of that final couple of lines. If we decide to read Gately as a credible human being, a realistic character, then I am sure most of us will agree that a former-addict's indulgence on the mere *thought* of the substance that enslaved him for years is hardly a reason to disapprove of him. If anything, the opposite is true: the persistence of the physiological craving for it testifies the greatness of the effort involved in quitting. It is precisely the distinction between the merely physiological and the psychological that Holland fails to acknowledge, and since her (and Lasch's) argument rests upon the observation of a mass psychosis in American society, its solidity is inevitably compromised by a more empathetic reading of this last scene. But more importantly, the conflict between the general and the particular which we have identified across all of the categories of our taxonomy of characters discourages us from framing the question in Lasch's terms. For in his analysis, paraphrased by Holland, 'the increased and

destructive socialization of every facet of American life' is destructive for the reason that it directly impinges on 'individual power, authority and so selfhood' (66, the emphasis is mine). Lasch's words alone, it is important to note, would not necessarily constitute a reactionary complaint against the diminishing currency of the ideals of liberal humanism: the crisis in the conception of the Self is precisely what defines the postmodern era and to recognize this is not tantamount to mourning the Transcendent Self. But it is Holland that betrays a certain nostalgia for the idea of the Transcendent Self, for her critique of Gately relies precisely on the affirmation of the 'individual power' and 'authority' he should be able to exert. And these notions are part of a conceptual framework that has long lost any currency in the context in which Wallace positions himself – that of Theory and postmodern fiction. A former addict and a simpleton, Gately is 'manufactured, conditioned' just like the rest of them.

And yet Holland, however disputable her argument, is pointing at something significant in the characterization of Gately. She mentioned his craving for the drug in order to negate his capacity to overcome the pervasive narcissism in *Jest*, and in so doing she has helped us to realize that Gately does, in fact, transcend his own condition – that of being, fundamentally, a figurant. But the reason why he reads like a different character, and an authentic protagonist, is not that he *succeeds* in not accepting the prescribed painkillers. Because we cannot be sure about it. All we have, in place of an actual conclusion, is the last couple of lines, which after our discussion of Holland's argument we are ready to re-consider. Yes, the image of him 'flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand' is not heroic, but rather humbling. And yes, his state of absolute abandonment and necessity brings to mind that of an infant. But, as opposed to the figurants, the personifications and Hal he is not passively enduring his inadequateness. His physical and psychological suffering is of his own choice. It is important to remember that Gately has already gone through the difficulties of

withdrawal and abstinence, and he is now facing a greater challenge, one that he is not forced to accept by necessity and circumstances (as it is the case with Poor Tony Krause, for example). He would not even have to justify himself in front of his peers and mentors because, as the medical staff informs him, the consumption of mild narcotics would not be considered an abuse, but just a reasonable precaution against the increasing pain provoked by his wound. Gately's refusal represents the closest point of convergence between Wallace's use of characterization and the liberal humanistic faith in the autonomous, self-sufficient, Subject. And yet this should not be read as a contradiction, or a concession to a merely pre-theoretical stance, because the general, universal dimension of Gately's suffering is what is actually represented on the page. As we have said, the novel does not include any certain victory: we are never told for sure that he is really capable of controlling himself, but only that he wishes it, and tries with all his will-power.

It is now worth considering *why* he is the only one among these characters that manages to sustain so extraordinary an effort. What is the difference between Gately and Hal? Here we need to recur to the notion of the *network*, the constellation of people that surround each of these two protagonists. I have argued that Hal's position in the hierarchy of characters is preeminent also because some of them are his own relatives, and can offer us precious insights into his familial situation. But this is not to say that Hal entertains good or meaningful relationships with any of them (with the possible exception of his older brother Mario, whom he adores but seems not to take in due consideration). He appears to be scared of his mother, and diffident of his brother Orin. The same goes for his uncle C.T. and his relationship with his own late father. And his addiction to drugs is indicative in part of his inability to openly communicate with others: 'Hal 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' (49). That is, he does not want the people around him to

know what is going on inside him, and it is this inclination for secrecy that constitutes the core of his loneliness. In this sense he is precisely as his father was preoccupied he would be: 'failing ever to be seen'. Conversely, Gately owes much of his determination to change to the people around him. He links his first moment of awareness with the fact that he was a real addict, rather than a simple consumer, to the events that led up to the death of his friend: 'It bothered Gately that he could empathize with Fackelmann's desire to hide and blot out, but in retrospect of memory now it bothers him more that he didn't lie there up next to the comatose girl being bothered for more than a few minutes before he felt the familiar desire that blots out all bother', i.e. his own substance of abuse (932). And 'that was the first time it really ever dawned on him in force that a drug addict was at root a craven and pathetic creature: a thing that basically hides'. This epiphany of sorts will lead to his acknowledgment that he needs help, and subsequent recovery within the AA community. And also the reason why he finds himself semi-comatose at the hospital has to do with his ability to genuinely care about others: he has defended the members of his own community risking his own life. The scene in which Joelle visits him at the hospital goes a long way in explaining the fundamental difference between Gately and Hal:

He feels self-conscious with her, Joelle can tell, but what's admirable is he has no idea how heroic or even romantic he looks, unshaven and intubated, huge and helpless, wounded in service to somebody who did not deserve service, half out of his tree from pain and refusing narcotics. (855)

His altruism and disregard for himself, so out of Hal's range of affects, allow him to be really *seen* by his fellow characters and by readers. It is important to note that his self-consciousness is misdirected - 'he has no idea'. Thus the only character in Wallace's *magnus opus* to represent some sort of escape from solipsism is also one of the very few not to constantly reverse their attention to their own selves.

CONCLUSIONS

THE IMPERSONAL: ‘THERE’S SOMETHING INCORRIGIBLY DARK IN YOUR PERSONALITY’

The more we know about the biography of a writer, the more we are tempted to interpret his or her fiction accordingly. And that is surely the case with the public reception of the works of David Foster Wallace: most readers know about his life-long struggle with depression and various kinds of addiction, and most of them are naturally inclined to account for his suicide by making references to themes and characters of his novels and short stories. Sometimes, this tendency can appear to be both limiting and presumptuous. Presumptuous because, for all the amount of biographical information we have access to, the core part of an individual’s suffering will always necessarily remain shrouded in his or her own privacy – it would be ingenuous, on our part, to think that we *know* what it meant to be Wallace. And this tendency is also limiting because it drives us to read *Infinite Jest* and the rest of his fiction as nothing more than many romans à clef, little autobiographies in disguise. “Good Old Neon”, one of the stories included in *Oblivion*, is paradigmatic in this sense: “causal” readers and professional writers alike have often read it as an encoded suicide letter, a manifesto of sorts for Wallace’s existential discontents. And yet, even though I find such readings excessive, I think they are indicative of a perceived urgency which is, in and of itself, not only natural, but admirable – the urgency of reading as if something *vital* were at stake in the words. And that often means that, as we read through the pages of a given work, we are constantly trying to link the general validity of the ideas expressed in it with the particularity of the writer’s circumstances.

Thus, redundantly, what was Wallace’s personal take on the subject of the Subject? And what was his relationship with his own Self? From what we know from

his own interviews and his only biography to date, Wallace was well-aware of his own narcissism, and yet could not help but keep sinking back into it. His comments about *wallace-l*, the online discussion group started in 2003 and entirely dedicated to his work, are those of a person who seems to be afraid of personal success: ‘You know, for emotional reasons and sanity I have to pretend this doesn’t exist’ (quoted in Quirk 2013). He used to call the image of himself that he saw reflected in media ‘the statue’ – something that he had intentionally contributed to build and yet found repellent, a dangerous concession to his own omnivorous egotism. He treasured his own achievements and intellectual versatility, and yet was sure that to pay too much attention to them implicitly meant not to see the personal value of those around him, and therefore to remain fundamentally lonely. We recognize ‘the statue’ of the interview quoted above in the ‘carrot’ that is worshipped at E.T.A. (693): a token for a kind of self-realization that is nothing more than self-exclusion from any sort of meaningful relation with other people. Clearly, Wallace saw this problem as a product of his own time, and therefore a problem in which all layers of American society were involved: ‘The idea that achievement doesn’t automatically confer interior worth is, to [the students at E.T.A.], still, at this age, an abstraction, rather like the prospect of their own death’. That is, pernicious Individualism is not the territory of protagonists alone, but of countless little figurants as well.

But Wallace’s critique of American Individualism goes further than a mere condemnation of the ideal of success at all costs. As his use of character demonstrates, he does not seem to locate any special worth or intrinsic importance on the idea of personality itself. After all, as we have seen, these are *flat* characters, however in different gradations. But it is not only through form that *Jest* demonstrates a certain impatience with the category of the personal. The narrative content itself, we know, reveals a never resolved tension between the attention that every individual character

deserves and a lack of interest for his or her own specifics. Once again, the scene of the hospitalization of Gately turns out to be almost explicitly calling for metanarrative interpretation, a metaphor of sorts for the mode of operation of the entire novel. For Gately is immobilized and cannot speak – that is, he cannot express *himself*. Those who can speak, and do so all the time, are the Ennet House guests visiting him: they sit next to Gately's bed and start giving voice to their own personal problems. These confessions of sorts could potentially constitute occasion for genuine interactions between two people, as the narrative voice appears to ponder: 'It seems like Don G.'s gotten way more popular as somebody to talk to since he's become effectively paralyzed and mute' (828). The sore point is that these characters seem to have no interest in whether he is conscious and able to listen to them or not, and we know he too senses this, for when the wraith makes his entrance in his dreams he asks himself 'for fuck's sake what was this, now even in unpleasant fever-dreams now somebody else is going to tell him their troubles now that Gately can't get away or dialogue back with anything about his own experience' (831). Thus *self-expression* (the complaining variety, at least) is here counterposed to authentic dialogical interaction.

Tiny Ewell is the first person to visit Gately, and Wallace makes this section an occasion to explore this peripheral character's background for a number of pages. Surely the tone and content of his personal story do not make for a nice casual chat with the newly hospitalized Gately, and Ewell himself seems to realize that too strong an emphasis on one's own personality might be dangerous. Lately, he has had some time to think about the past, and things that he had long forgotten have been reemerging. One of them, a memory of the bitterness of his failed marriage, includes a term and a definition that he will keep referring to for the rest of his time in the room with Gately: 'My wife's personal term for soul is *personality*. As in "There's something incorrigibly dark in your personality, Eldred Ewell, and Dewars [sic] brings it out"' (810, emphasis in the

original). Ewell expands on this by relating his childhood adventures as the leader of a baby-gang in which he was the only one with brains and always surrounded by blue-collar kids that, in his own words, ‘were nothing but malice and muscle’ (812). But it turns out that it was him in fact to be the one with most malice, as he was secretly stealing not only from the gang’s victims but from its members as well. Part of the excitement of it, he knows, was the money itself and what he could afford with it. But more than that, it was the fact of being *able* to perpetuate the trick. You would say that Ewell, as a smart, skinny, bespectacled boy, should never have crossed the tougher kids’ path. Instead, thanks to his rhetorical mastery, he managed not only to lead them but to *cheat* them. As we have seen in the previous chapters, propriety of language is one of the few personal qualities that keeps surfacing everywhere in *Infinite Jest*. It is often configured as the symptom of intelligence itself. And intelligence (at least in the case of Hal, the wraith and the narrative voice) is always posed as the defining quality of the Self, and an immense source of gratification. Thus Ewell’s words acquire a particularly dark tone when he describes his reaction to the idea of being discovered by the other boys in the gang: ‘I lived only to feed the dark thing in my personality, which told me any consequences could be forestalled by my gift and grand personal aura’. But once he tried to stop stealing from his own peers, Ewell recalls, he realized that ‘[his] personality’s dark part had grown leathery wings and a beak and turned on [him]’ (813).

Personality is here conceived as the set of empirical characteristics of a human being. And in *Jest*, often, these characteristics are highly-specialized skills and intellectual interests. Let us take another look, for example, at Hal’s defense of himself as a Subject in the opening scene:

I’m not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you’d let me, talk and talk. Let’s talk about anything. I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated. I believe Dennis Gabor may very well have been the Antichrist. I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption. I could

interface with you guys right under the table [...]. I'm not just a creatus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function. (12)

As soon as it is implied that he might be something less than a mere athletic prodigy, 'a machine' – and, in this sense, a non-Self – Hal recurs to name-dropping. Surely, his personal culture amounts to more than a couple of reading-lists from class, and yet by the end of the novel we cannot help feeling sorry for his excessive reliance on his own intelligence. In *Infinite Jest* the intellect is depicted as a cage in more than one instance. Boston AA's term for obsessive self-scrutiny is "Analysis-Paralysis", and characters like Hal, Ewell and Geoffrey Day epitomize it to the letter. And excessive self-consciousness is not only a cage that prevents them to actually socialize with those around them - it is also a trap, in that it gives them the rhetorical tools to convince themselves that further analysis is necessary, infinitely perpetuating the same path of inaction. So why is it that Hal and others insist on considering their personal intellectual skills as the foundation of their own Selves? The passages above, and its immediate context, make it clear that for these characters their brains and their personality are the only qualities which they associate with the idea of their own *particularity*, the one and only locus of individual worth. If he did not have an opinion about Kierkegaard's influence on Camus, Hal seems to believe, they would be right in calling him a machine. And this goes a long way to explain why, in *Infinite Jest*, the flattest of characters are always the ones who have not even the slightest idea who Kierkegaard was.

As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, lack of particularity is not conceived as a shortcoming in Wallace's poetics. Conversely, the fact that his characters are not granted the occasion to give full expression to their own individual personality constitutes an occasion to empathize with them. If we link these two questions - the diffidence towards personality and the fascination for the 'generalization of suffering' - then we can start mapping the affinities between Wallace's art and the thought of the

French philosopher Simone Weil. It is difficult, at this stage, to know for sure whether the author of *Infinite Jest* was familiar – and to what extent – with Weil’s work, and particularly because she tends to be widely read in the context of continental philosophy, but not as much among analytic philosophers and the American academia in general. But some of the points of convergence are just too apparent not to be noted, and in fact I am not the first to see them. Zadie Smith, in her famous essay on *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, notes that

‘[Wallace’s] stories repel the idea that a just society can come from the contract made between self-interested or egoistic individuals, or that it is one’s “personhood” that guarantees one a bigger slice of the pie. And in a few extreme cases, Wallace’s stories go further, lining up behind a quasi-mystic such as Weil, who, like the Buddhists, abandons “Personhood” entirely’ (2010 423)

Smith then quotes directly from “Human Personality”, Weil’s most thorough and concise critique of French Personalism: ‘What is sacred in a human being is the impersonal in him... Our personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin. The whole effort of the mystic has always been to become such that there is no part left in his soul to say ‘I’ (from *The Simone Weil Reader* 313). “Personhood” – the quality of protagonists, we know – is precisely the source of most ‘error[s] and sin[s]’ in *Infinite Jest*, and the participation to the generality in what is human – the ‘impersonal’, in Weil’s terms – is the one grace which is conferred to Gately and the other figurants in the narrative background.

As Cristopher Hamilton notes, Weil’s objection to Personalism was fundamentally two-fold: first, her engagement with Marxists thought led her to conceive of individual personality as something that is socially constructed and mediated rather than transcendental; and secondly, she thought that the nature of human suffering was such that it could not be completely understood with reference to one’s own empirical qualities (2005 188). It is in suffering that all humans are equal and therefore impersonally sacred, because what unites them all is the insuppressible expectation that

no harm will be done to them (190). Thus Weil's two objections do not only correspond to the two *moments* of her critique of Personalism (its *pars destruens* and *pars costruens*, so to speak), but perfectly coincide with the two poles of Wallace's famous definition of fiction: 'a generalization' – because genuine particularity is untenable – 'of suffering', the one and only dimension of human life that can be generalized without losing any of its urgency. Interestingly enough, Weil's two objections help us clarify the peculiarity of Wallace's position with regard to the great divide between the two strands of the Ethical Turn, and thus answer one of the fundamental questions which we had posed in the Introduction. For Weil, like Wallace, holds as true a conception of the Subject that is fundamentally poststructuralist, in that it denies any transcendental essence and yet she does so without rejecting the category of the general, but rather embracing it. Both liberal humanists on the one hand and poststructuralists on the other saw literature as one of the most important occasions for the encounter with the Other in its particularity, however discordant were their respective notions of said particularity, as we have seen.

In this sense, Wallace's use of characterization constitutes a new and original solution to an old problem, and a solid and genuine contribution to the contemporary debate on a new, re-defined cosmopolitanism for the Twenty-First Century. For in empathizing with his characters, we demonstrate a willingness to hold on to values such as respect, compassion, pity and comprehension even in an age that has relativized everything. And this willingness does not add up to a retrograde fascination for the ideals of liberal humanists, because we were able to exert all of these qualities even at the presence of so many 'dead Subjects' – addicted and self-obsessed individuals that have given up on the notion of their transcendent Self long ago. After theory, we *choose* to exert empathy, aware that it is not a given, a universal value, but one we *can* make our own. And Wallace's technique reminds that we do want to be able to make that kind of choice, as not to leave any figurant and personification at the mercy of the

unsympathetic narrative voice, nor Gately with his effort (and not necessarily his achievement) unacknowledged.

APPENDIX

FUTURE RESEARCH TRAJECTORIES: DIRECT CHARACTERIZATION AND THE UNREPRESENTABLE

My study of Wallace's use of characterization has, for the most part, revolved around those aspects of his fiction that are inherently structural – the distribution of character-space, the narrative functions assigned to each of the characters, and the their relationship to the thematic and mimetic dimensions of *Infinite Jest* as a whole. Yet it remains to be determined how the aesthetic ideal of the impersonal in fiction can be represented on the *discursive* level. What sort of narrative technique responds to the necessity to create a character on the page and yet maintain it 'impersonal'? However stylized, Wallace's characters still have feelings and opinions that are attributed to them alone, and thus contribute to at least a minimal, illusory sense of particularization. The form of fiction itself cannot completely abstract from the presumption of individual agency that the very predicates of language constantly reaffirm. The problem that Wallace is facing in this respect is that he has to deny his characters a personality, and yet convincingly provide them with an interiority worthy of empathic attention. In these next few pages I wish to provide a provisional answer to these questions by taking into consideration the so-called "Kate Gompert section" – that of the character's first and major appearance in *Jest* (68-78). In so doing I have two hopes: first, I wish to provide my reader with a hint of the complexity of the matter at hand, which is an authentic challenge in contemporary aesthetics; and secondly, I would like to formulate the initial premises of my further research. The provisional answer which I will sketch in this appendix is that Wallace overcomes the impasse in which he finds himself by a combination of direct characterization and respect for the typically poststructuralist category of the unrepresentable.

Kate Gompert is one among many characters in *Jest* that are born in the space of a single section in the novel. Later scenes in which they appear usually do not further their characterization or shed new light on it, thus preventing them from really changing, as we have seen is the case with Mario. In Kate Gompert's first scene all the elements that contribute to the broader themes of the novel are already present and linked to her condition, the single idea that constitutes her as a character: clinic depression. She is visited by a young medical doctor, just a few hours after her umpteenth hospitalization under suicide watch. In having the scene described (in part) from the point of view of her doctor, Wallace creates the opportunity to dramatize one of the fundamental dichotomies on which his technique revolves: that of the said (the represented) and the unsayable (the unrepresentable). In fact, the entire conversation among the patient and her doctor revolves around the fact that pain is uncommunicable – one can only hint at it, sure that there is no hope to fully describe its impact on one's life. In this scene Wallace also explores how the formal implications of the opposition between direct and indirect characterization impact the possibilities of his text at the boundary between what is actually on the page and what gets only alluded to but eludes representation – the force and magnitude of psychic suffering. That is, the narrative voice makes it constantly clear to us readers that what she says of its subjects is not (and cannot) be epistemologically founded. As it is often the case with postmodern literature, matters of style and narrative content are explicitly linked.

Andrew Gibson dedicates a whole chapter of his *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* to the idea of the unrepresentable and the ways in which postmodern writers tried to come to terms with this concept. As it is the case with many of the philosophical

points of departure in his book, the idea of the unrepresentable derives from Levinas. Much contemporary criticism, Gibson claims, is based upon the assumption that the ethical dimension of a work of literature is inextricably intertwined with what it *represents* – the subject matter and the form deployed to render it (1996, 54). In both Derrida's and Levinas's thought, however, the written word acquires quite a secondary and derivative place to that of the spoken word. Derrida's "logocentrism" amounts to much the same as Levinas's "ontological imperialism": once language is fixed on the page and made independent of the particular context of a determinate event, it loses its capacity to be constitutive of a 'saying' (a relationship between two interlocutors), only to become a 'said' – the infinitely reductive representation of alterity. Hence Levinas's distrust of Art as a means that deceives by claiming it *stands for* something else – the represented – which instead always irremediably exceeds representation. Gibson reads Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a paradigmatic example of a kind of fiction that points at its own limits: while Kurtz, the colonialist par excellence, incarnates the arrogance of Western Metaphysics, 'Marlovian discourse deconstructs Kurtzian discourse' by 'indicat[ing] the finitude of ontological discourse, its lack of purchase on the real' (78). Ontology is not destroyed (it is necessary to human interaction, in fact), but it is shown in its representational partiality.

The initial Kate Gompert section (*Jest*, pp. 68-78) reads at first as a convincing – if somewhat schematic – dramatization of these twin concepts of representation as reduction and allusion to the unrepresentable as the ethical dimension of language. The Medical Doctor – abbreviated in M.D., in accordance with Wallace's fascination with acronyms and technical jargons – needs to observe and evaluate the person that is front of him, his "Other". The metaphor of the relationship between patient and doctor is apt on more than one level: the two main facets that constitute it, diagnosis and prognosis, perfectly correspond to the two dimensions of the encounter of the Self with the Other

as theorized by Levinas – the epistemological and the ethical. In order to choose the best treatment for her, the M.D. must talk to Kate Gompert and *understand* what she feels like and what might lie behind her condition. Understanding, inevitably, constitutes a categorization of the particular – a comprehension in both senses of the world, a conceptualization that is also an enclosure. At a first reading of this section the narrative voice seems to faithfully represent the point of view of the M.D., and all of the medical jargon and method by which he approaches his patient. Conversely, the interiority of Kate Gompert is never directly accessible to the reader – who is invited to share the perplexities and preoccupations of a scrupulous diagnostician.

That we are witnessing the approaching of an object of study on the part of a subject is made clear from the very first lines, which set the tone for the entire passage. The M.D. is well aware that he must be careful in approaching the patients on the fifth floor of the hospital – the psych ward – because they are emotionally drained and likely to be susceptible at any involuntary display of cheer. Here, that ‘would amount to a kind of gloating’, and

this is why a hospital M.D. – who’s usually hale and pink-cheeked and poreless, and who almost always smells unusually clean and good – approaches any psych patient under his care with a professional manner somewhere between bland and deep, a distant but sincere concern that’s divided evenly between the patient’s subjective discomfort and the hard facts of the case. (68)

Here the colloquium between Gompert and the M.D. is presented from the very start as the encounter between two stereotypes. In this particular situation, we are told, there is nothing more to the personalities of these two characters than their role in the clinical and professional context of the hospital. Throughout the passage he is merely ‘a hospital M.D.’, and we never get to know either his name or any detail of his personal life.

Interestingly, we are told that he has his name sewn on his white coat, but we do not get to know what the name is. Gompert, too, will be nothing but a ‘psychic patient under his care’, always mentioned (by the narrative voice, but not in direct speech) by both her first and second name, ‘Kate Gompert’. We learn of her personal tragedy – her umpteenth suicide attempt – by a sentence that seems to deny even further any sense of intimacy with her: ‘almost died twice, this time, Katherine Ann Gompert’ (70). Her complete name, the way it would appear on a death certificate – or on a medical record. Clunky as it is, this redundancy makes the distance between us (the readers and the M.D) who are watching even more apparent and insurmountable.

The M.D. displays ‘a professional manner between bland and deep’, and this deepens our impression that he does not see his encounter with Gompert as more than a simple, and detached visit to a patient – a kind of situation that comes with its own precise rules – one more example of a recurrent pattern in his everyday life. Here, his concern with the patient is ‘sincere’, but must nevertheless remain ‘distant’ – in what follows etiquette and deontology will be respected, as the conversation will not go any further than the ambit of the condition’s etiology. Thus, Kate’s report will be investigated inasmuch as it serves a clinical purpose, and not for its intrinsic value as the expression and sharing of human emotions. The M.D. is not going to converse with Kate as with another human being, sharing thoughts and feelings, but rather use her as his own source for the investigation of a clinical condition that in a sense he sees as other from her – the general which applies to her particular situation. In fact, when natural feelings of embarrassment and self-doubt arise during the procedure, he knows perfectly well how to react and behave in front of a patient, having had ‘all discomfort at being stared at by patients trained right out of him’ (74). Also, his occasional outbursts of ‘intense clinical excitement’ (74) are revealing of the kind of interest and attention he is paying to Kate.

The scientific and methodical approach of the M.D. provides Wallace with the opportunity to exemplify our eternal inclination towards the generalization of the particular, our necessity for reducing it to pre-established categories. Medical science, and in particular the study of clinical depression, offers one way to approach the unfathomable experience of another subject – the *physical* description of causes and effects of a given condition, which precede the specific case. But here this *reductio ad unum* is presented in a negative light, and this is because it is founded upon a distinction – that between the physical and the psychological – which in the case of the M.D. seems to be posed deliberately to ignore and subsume the dimension of suffering on the part of the individual. He is delimiting the field of his own inquiry when he is said to be thinking of his manner as ‘a distant but sincere concern that’s divided evenly between the patient’s subjective discomfort and the hard facts of the case’. Here feelings and suffering are not denied – but the dichotomy here posed by the M.D. makes it easier to ignore them by confining them to a foreign territory.

Thus, in the passage, his methods are presented as based on his following ordered pairs, in which the first element is the one and only object of the medical inquiry: the knowable vs. the unknowable; the representable vs. the unrepresentable; the physical vs. the psychological; the objective vs. the subjective; the exterior vs. the interior. Clearly, as all scientific research aims at the rule which underpins the empirical datum, these are all oppositions that are linked to the categories of the general and the particular. The idea that what pertains Kate Gompert’s interiority is out of reach – indescribable, and therefore impossible to understand for anyone but her – is precisely the single feature that distinguishes the M.D. methods of representations – epitomized by the notes on the case he takes during the conversation – from Wallace’s methods in *Infinite Jest*. Psychological suffering, which is the burden of experience, is the fundamental element of the community of readers that Wallace envisioned in the McCaffrey interview: one

that is based upon the recognition that that kind of suffering is a universal experience. Wallace's "generalization of suffering" is a way to achieve the representation of interiority, not to ignore it. Thus it is significant that the apparent objectivity of the narrative voice gives way, little by little, to Kate Gompert's direct speech. She never really takes the stage, but the fact that she has the possibility to describe herself – rather than to be described from the outside – together with the appalling quality of the psychic pain she describes make her presence rhetorically sounder and easier to empathize with than that of her interlocutor.

The turning point, the moment in which the text as a whole shifts from a celebration of the objective partiality of the M.D. to a more hopeful conclusion, takes place when she directly engages the doctor in conversation, asking him to make a comparison with his own experience in order to get closer to her own feeling: 'Listen,' she says, 'have *you* ever felt sick?' (74, my emphasis). Before this moment her own remarks had been either characterized by sarcasm and other signs of irritation or a description of her 'feeling' that sounded more like a soliloquy than the actual response to the questions of the M.D., when in fact 'it was not clear whether she was responding to the doctor or not' (73). By transforming the clinical observation of a patient into a conversation in which both parts are called into creating the emotional meaning and significance of her own suffering, Kate puts the M.D. (and the readers with him) in a position that is different from that of the unbridgeable epistemological doubt which the narrative voice had contributed to delineate. Up to that point Wallace had surreptitiously brought to us to believe that the most sympathy we could grant Kate Gompert was the M.D.'s 'kind of bland compassion, the expression of someone who was compassionate but was not, of course, feeling what she was feeling, and who honored her subjective feelings by not even trying to pretend she was. Sharing them' (74).

A change of perspective seems to correspond to Kate Gompert's request of thinking about one's own suffering in order to empathize with hers. For the most part of this section, the narrative voice aimed at representing the M.D.'s skepticism at the possibility of any authentic sharing of subjective experience. Each and every one of Kate's contributions to the conversations with her doctor are questioned by the very form of the sentences in which the M.D.'s reaction to them is described: 'Katherine Ann Gompert *probably* felt that [...]'; 'This was *probably* because she did not understand' (71, emphasis mine). If it is true that for most of this section the narrative voice's insistence on Kate's unreliability when expressing herself – because she is a patient talking to her therapist, a depressed person, an aspiring suicidal – can be traced back to the M.D.'s own doubts about her, then the *choice* of focusing on these doubts rests on the shoulders of the voice alone. And the change of perspective that follows Kate's plea is of the narrative voice alone, thus establishing a distance between itself and the mere account of what goes on inside the doctor's head.

This shift takes place after Kate reveals she is dependent on weed. She is preoccupied that the M.D. will think of her abuse of a substance many consider innocuous as funny, but he immediately reassures her. 'I'm not laughing at you, Katherine,' the doctor said, *and meant it*' (76, the emphasis is mine). What is different here from previous attributions of thoughts and emotions to the doctor is that here the narrative voice implicitly makes a judgment concerning the *sincerity* of what has just been said. It is only the narrative voice, rather than the character, who can validate sincerity and authenticity – the epistemological preoccupations give way to judgments that are arbitrary and yet necessary. As we have seen, the dimension of subjectivity on which the idea of sincerity rests is precisely the dimension that the M.D. and the voice with him have previously tried to exclude from the field of their inquiry. From now on the perspective of voice and character, which had so far perfectly overlapped, start to

diverge. The doctor, continues to deny the possibility of empathy with her patient because ‘[her] expressions made it clinically impossible for [him] to determine whether or not she was entirely sincere’ (76).

But on the other hand there is a narrative voice that takes more than one epistemological leap and overcomes undecidability. To the first break in the epistemological wall that had been established as the section’s most characteristic feature follow other perfectly arbitrary – and formally ingenuous – attributions of reality and sincerity on the part of the narrative voice. The form, little by little – and at traits, never really taking over the overall tone of the section – indulges in what would be considered ingenuous and contemptible reliance on the forms of literary realism. These attributions are often juxtaposed to the doctor’s expressions of skepticism, thus posing themselves as a liberating counter-voice to his implicit and oppressive denial of any form of authentic intersubjectivity. After a long paragraph in which Kate describes her addiction to ‘Hope’, as she calls it, her moving confession is abruptly interrupted by a much shorter paragraph – just two lines long – which undermines her account: ‘The young woman’s face and eyes were going through a number of ranges of affective configurations, with all of them seeming inexplicably at gut-level somehow blank and maybe not entirely sincere’ (77). To which the narrative voice reacts by stating, a few lines later: ‘Kate Gompert finally took a *real breath*’ (my emphasis). Real because genuinely caused by her emotional distress and difficulty at relating her own story. By the very use of the adjective, the narrative voice attributes a subjective significance to one of the physical symptoms to which the M.D. pays so much attention, and in so doing it also breaks the conceptual dichotomy on which his method rests.

The form of representation that had characterized the section up until Kate’s plea was indirect characterization: except for minimal physical description, the characters’ main features were conjured up by “showing” their behavior on the page – rather than

commenting on it. Conversely, the attribution of correspondence between an act of speech and the intention behind it belongs to the formal realm of *direct* characterization, which is more usually than not associated with Nineteenth-Century Realism. Here direct attribution of intention is necessary in order to counter-balance the problematization of sincerity and representation that the section had dramatized through the focalization on the M.D. Seen from this perspective, Wallace's use of form would seem to align him with neo-Aristotelian critics and their insistence on a transcendental subject which can effectively and sincerely express itself in a language that perfectly enacts this intention. If this were the case, Gibson would be right to account for the use of such traditional forms of representation to 'the extent to which [the criticism of Nussbaum and Rorty, among others] ignored all the various problematizations of narrative and narrative 'form' – problematizations that have been very precisely postmodernist [...] – in novel theory from the 1960s onwards' (11). One just needs to translate these accusations from the field of literary theory to that of the craft of fiction to see how Gibson's remarks can easily constitute a critique of naively realist fiction – one which does not take into consideration the Linguistic Turn and its implications.

Thus according to this interpretation, direct characterization in the Kate Gompert section would amount to a surrender to the force of language and representation – yet another victory of ontological imperialism on the exceeding quality of what is unrepresentable. Wallace's use of direct characterization would then be all the more reactionary, given that it progressively emerges from a section in which epistemological and representational problems are put in the foreground. My contention is that the M.D.'s doubts and skepticism need not be interpreted as a sort of critique or parody of postmodern narrative form. They are so often present in *Jest*, and so profoundly linked to its themes and preoccupations, that they constitute in fact one of the lenses to which the novel proposes us to see the world. Epistemological doubt – in the novel as in this

passage – is not overcome or discredited, but brought back from a theoretical ground to the level of human interaction, in which agency constitutes a necessity. The cyclical alternation of ideology and critical thought is a common feature of both poststructuralist theory and liberal humanism. Both of them acknowledge the necessity to fix the purely ethical (i.e. theoretical) and perpetual interrogation into morals – that is, prescriptivism – provided its theoretical foundations will then again be subjected to further encounters with alterity. However, Levinas's distrust of Art has much to say about his consideration of the Other as both sacred and perpetually exceeding knowledge and examination.

Wallace's reversal to direct characterization – crucially, at the end of the Gompert section, as if it were a response and a solution to the problem which the M.D.'s point of view posed – can easily be read as a reaction against the idea that any sort of ethical representation of the human subject in fiction should perforce be an implicit critique of representation per se – always defective and yet oppressive, giving too much and too little at the same time. The effort to represent human subjectivity – and its experience of suffering – is the very foundation of Wallace's artistic endeavor, because it is only empathic confrontation with an alterity which *is* on the page (rather than exceeding from it) that allows us to feel less alone. Thus the sense of loneliness and incommunicability that characterizes the section is due to a two-fold denial of subjectivity: the opposition between the physical (which is the proper field of inquiry of medical science) and the psychological echoes poststructuralist theory's fundamental assumption that the true essence of one's self can never be confined to any one form of representation. Therefore, theory (and the way it is deployed in fiction, at least in the texts chosen by Gibson to exemplify his analysis) rejects the psychological alterity of the individual not by denying its existence but by *confining* it to the realm of the unrepresentable. In so doing, theory represents an ideological position that is as

pervasive and oppressive as the most reductive forms of humanism that it was born to criticize.

Significantly, it is with an assertion of sincerity that the passage concludes. The force and meaning of the last paragraph are determined by the patient's plead to her doctor: she asks to be treated by electroshock. Her choice of treatment fundamentally represents a request of having her suffering acknowledged and responded to: the urge to closure and agency arises out of the absolute necessity of "the Other", that the M.D. has in front of him. Understanding, here, is far from being conceptualized as a threat to particularity, but is actually invoked and demanded as a necessary response to it. Thus fiction – as much as in any figurative non-abstract art – would still be considered the realm of the ethically unrepresentable, because it precedes presence and agency in this world. But clearly Wallace was not in the position to accept this for two reasons. First, it is one obvious implications of his desire to write fiction that is passionately moral that writing and representation do constitute ethical agency in this world. Secondly, the value of narrative as an act in the world is constituted by the power to make the reader empathize with the predicament of characters. That is, the point of closure – that in which perpetual reconsideration and encounter with alterity are suspended in order to let synthesis and morals intervene – takes place in representation for the writer. The conjuring up of other human beings in fiction is his act in the world. It is the reader's duty to consider their suffering, and choose whether they are reliable and sincere or not. But in order for the reader to be able to actually make this choice on their own, the writer needs to give his representations a determinate shape under the layers of narrative and epistemological doubt. The use of stereotype is Wallace's way of presenting his reader with the actual necessity of evaluating a possibly real person's suffering, while preserving the epistemological warnings of contemporary theory and ethics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Babb, Genie. "Where the Bodies are Buried: Cartesian Dispositions in Narrative Theories of Character." *Narrative* 10, no. 3 (2002): 195-221.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Manchester University Press, 1995.
- Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion." In *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984. 62-76.
- . "The Literature of Replenishment." In *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984. 193-206.
- Baskin, Jon. "Death is Not the End: David Foster Wallace: His Legacy and his Critics." *The Point* 1 (2009): 33-45. Online access. 1 January 2015.
<http://www.thepointmag.com/archive/death-is-not-the-end>
- Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty". In *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969. 23-52.
- Boswell, Marshall. *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2003.
- Brooks, Neil and Toth, Josh. *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*. Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007.
- Burn, Stephen J., 2009. *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*. 2nd edn. New York: Continuum, 2012.
- . "Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing: *Infinite Jest* and the Science of Mind." In Boswell, Marshall and Burn, Stephen J., eds. *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

- Cameron, Sharon. *Impersonality: Seven Essays*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Cohen, Samuel. *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009.
- den Dulk, Allard. "Boredom, Irony and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self." In Boswell, Marshall ed., *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*. London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury 2014. 43-60.
- Eskin, Michael. "Introduction: The Double 'Turn' to Ethics and Literature?" *Poetics Today* 25.4 (2004): 557-72.
- Evans, David H. "The Chains of Not Choosing: Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace." In Boswell, Marshall and Burn, Stephen J., eds. *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Freudenthal, Elizabeth. "Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification and Identity in *Infinite Jest*." *New Literary History* 41: 1 (2010): pp. 191-211.
- Frow, John. *Character and Person*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Gibson, Andrew. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Giles, Paul. "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace." In *After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction*. Hoberek, Andrew, ed. Special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007). 327-44.
- Green, Jeremy. *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

- Hale, D., 20xx. "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century". *PMLA*
- Fludernik, Monika. *Introduction to Narratology*. Abingdon: Routledge 2009.
- . 'Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary: from Metadiscursivity to Metanarration and Metafiction'. *Poetica* 35 (2003): 1-39.
- Hale, Dorothy J. "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century." *PMLA* 124.3 (2009): 896-905.
- Hamilton, Cristopher. "Simon Weil's "Human Personality": Between the Personal and the Impersonal. *The Harvard Theological Review* 98:2 (2005). 187-207.
- Harris, Charles B. "David Foster Wallace: "That Distinctive Singular Stamp of Himself." *Critique*, 51:168 (2010). 168-176.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*." *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 675-97.
- Heartfield, James. *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press, 2002.
- Herman, David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Hoberek, Andrew, ed. *After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction*. Special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007).
- . "The Novel After David Foster Wallace". In Boswell, Marshall and Burn, Stephen J., eds. *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

- Holland, Mary K. *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language & Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*. London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury 2013.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1988.
- Jannidis, Fotis. "Character". In *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Online access. 14 September 2014.
- Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- . 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy'. *Narrative*, 14.3 (2006). 207-236.
- Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas". In Boswell, Marshall ed., *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*. London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury 2014. 3-22.
- . "David Foster Wallace: the Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline." *Irish Journal of American Studies* 2 (2010). 47-63.
- . "Beginning with Postmodernism." *Twentieth Century Literature* 57.3 (2011). 391-420.
- . "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction". In Hering, David, ed. *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010.
- . "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace". In *Post45*. Online Access. 15 January 2015.
- Korthals Altes, Liesbeth. "Sincerity, Reliability and Other Ironies – Followed by Some Notes on David Egger's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*".

- In *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel* (eds. Elke D'hoker and Gunther Martens). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- LeClair, Tom. "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace." *Critique* 38.1 (1996). 12-37.
- Letzler, David. "Encyclopedic Novels and the Craft of Fiction: *Infinite Jest's* Endnotes." In Boswell, Marshall ed., *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*. London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury 2014. 127-148.
- Lipsky, David. *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*. New York: Broadway Books, 2010.
- McCaffery, Larry. "An Interview with David Foster Wallace." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2 (1993). 127-150.
- McLaughlin, Robert. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *Symploke* 12.1-2 (2004). 53-68.
- Nichols, Catherine. "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Critique* 43.1 (2001): 3-16.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Phelan, James. "Narrative Ethics". In *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Online access. 14 September 2014.
- . "Character, Progression and the Mimetic-Didactic Distinction." *Modern Philology* 84:3 (1987). 282-299.
- Rawlings, Peter. *American Theorists of the Novel: Henry James, Lionel Trilling, Wayne C. Booth*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

- Sayers, Philip. "Representing Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*". In Boswell, Marshall ed., *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*. London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury 2014. 107-126
- Schneider, Ralf. "Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction". *Style* 35:4 (2001). 607-640.
- Scott, A. O. "The Panic of Influence." *The New York Review of Books* 47.2 (2000).
- Smith, Zadie. "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace." In *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009. 257- 300.
- Staes, Toon. "Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach". In Boswell, Marshall ed., *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*. London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury 2014. 23-42.
- Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Turner, Nick. "Character in Post-Millennial Fiction". *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st Century Writings* 2:1. 105-120.
- Vermeule, Blakey. *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* The John Hopkins University Press, 2011.
- Waldstein, Edmund. "Freedom and Necessity in David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen." *Academia.edu*. Online access. 15 January 2015.
- Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993). 151-94.
- . *Infinite Jest*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1996.
- . *Oblivion: Stories*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2004.
- . *Consider the Lobster*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2005.

Weil, Simone. "Human Personality". In *Simone Weil Reader*. New York, NY: Moyer Bell, 2007.

Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Wood, James. "Human, All Too Inhuman." *The New Republic* (July 24, 2000).

Zunshine, Lisa. "Richardson's *Clarissa* and a Theory of the Mind." In Richardson, Alan and Spolsky, Ellen, eds. *The Work of Fiction: Cognition, Culture, and Complexity*. Aldershot, Hampshire, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004. 127-46.