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Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

BEYOND IRONY: THE CULT OF SOPHISTICATION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Supervisor
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this doctoral thesis titled as "Beyond Irony: The Cult of Sophistication in Contemporary American Literature" has been written by myself in accordance with the academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that all materials benefited in this thesis consist of the mentioned resources in the reference list. I verify all these with my honour.

21/10/2013

Işıl ÖZCAN

ABSTRACT

Doctoral Thesis

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Beyond Irony: The Cult of Sophistication in Contemporary American Literature

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The purpose of this study is to read creative nonfiction and fiction of Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace within the context of topics surrounding recent literary criticism about new directions after postmodernism and offer a new outlook on contemporary literature. The basic premise of this study is that when considered in light of the newly emerging schools of the so-called ethical turn and the oft-mentioned end of postmodernism and the re-birth of realism, the selected works demonstrate another vista for contemporary literature that tends towards re-establishing literature's ethical inquiry into the human element before all else.

The analysis of the creative nonfiction and fiction of these four contemporary American writers present new theories of reading for contemporary literary scholarship. The selected works are all, in their own particular ways, symptomatic of a recent aspiration for ethical treatment of certain social and cultural issues and a commitment to the human. In charting the manifestations of these symptoms as evidences of a new movement in contemporary literature, this study bears witness to the common anxiety of these writers who move toward the truthful representation of the human, of reality. The selected works of creative nonfiction and fiction account for contemporary American literature's various conflicts and dilemmas as well as searches for revitalization.

Keywords: Contemporary Literature, Contemporary Literary Criticism, Post-Postmodernism, Irony, Ethical Literary Criticism, Creative Nonfiction, Fiction, Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Safran Foer.

ÖZET

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Bu çalışmanın amacı Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, ve David Foster Wallace'ın kurmaca dışı ve kurmaca eserlerini son dönem Amerikan edebiyat eleştirisinde öne çıkan eleştiri akımları bağlamında incelemek ve öne sürülen postmodernizm sonrası arayışlar, yeni bir gerçekçilik tanımı, ve yeni gelişmekte olan etik edebiyat eleştirisi tartışmaları açısından değerlendirmektir. Son dönemde öne çıkan bu eleştiri akımları çağdaş edebiyat eleştirisinde yeni ufuklar açmışlardır ve söz konusu yazarların yenilikçi, etik, ve entelektüel girişimleri ile birlikte ele alındığında, yeni bir kuramsal yapı ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Yazarların kurmaca dışı ve kurmaca eserleri incelendiğinde, çağdaş edebiyat eleştirisinin ihtiyacı olan yeni tartışmaları sundukları söylenebilir. Yazarların kurmaca dışı eserleri kendi başlarına birer edebiyat eleştirisi olarak okunabilir ve yazarların kurmaca eserlerini de aydınlatan kuramsal öneriler getirdiği öne sürülebilir. Bu dört yazarın eserleri stil açısından büyük farklılıklar gösterse de, hepsinde ortak olan kaygı, edebiyatın insanı ve insan hayatını şekillendiren olayları, duyguları, ahlaki çatışmaları en geniş kapsamlı ve doğru şekilde yansıtmasıdır. Ortak amaçları, bir önceki nesilden devir aldıkları postmodern, ironik edebiyat geleneğindeki eksiklikleri gidermek, edebiyatı yeniden en önemli meşgalesiyle, insan ile, buluşturmak, ve içinde bulunduğumuz tarihi dönemecin gerektirdiği şekilde sorumlu ve yapıcı çözümler önermektir. Bu şekilde bakıldığında, bu yazarlar çağdaş Amerikan edebiyatında yeni bir döneme işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çağdaş Edebiyat, Çağdaş Edebiyat Eleştirisi, Post-Postmodern, İroni, Etik Edebiyat Eleştirisi, Kurmaca Dışı, Kurmaca, Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Safran Foer.

BEYOND IRONY: THE CULT OF SOPHISTICATION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, American fiction was undergoing a major revolution that was to have lasting influence on the fictional consciousnesses of many generations of writers to follow. In responding to the war in Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement and other cultural upheavals, the fiction of the 1960s was "marked by a spirit of avant-garde revival. The techniques grew random, styles mixed and merged, methods became increasingly provisional."[1] Although the literary output of this era is now called the first wave of postmodernism, there are other labels that denote the fiction of the 1960s, such as, "beat writing, black humour, aleatory art, bop prosody."[2] With, for instance, Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963), John Hawkes's *Second Skin* (1964), John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), the American novel began to experiment with form while depicting "the anxieties of the post-war age after the Holocaust, the rise of the Cold War, the growth of military technologies, smart weapons and systems, conspiracy theories, confused and often troubled national images, and damaged myths."[3] Either a late flourishing of modernism, or the true burgeoning of postmodernism, the 1960s initiated a new phase in American literature.[4] Until the late 1990s, the spirit of postmodernism continued, or so it would seem, because as millennium approached and those writers born in the 1960s came of age, American literature sought to re-define itself. Meanwhile, death notices for postmodernism that has turned into dead-end self-reflexivity came in tandem with the claims for a reborn realism that would undo the damages of postmodernism.

According to R. M. Berry and Jeffrey R. Di Leo's introduction to *Fiction's Present: Situating Contemporary Narrative Innovation* (2008), there is doubt about the usefulness of contemporary fiction. They explain,

> *[m]any feel that recent military, economic, and environmental threats demand more direct forms of verbal intervention, for example, essays, polemics, autobiographies, journalistic accounts, critiques, and treatises. The war in Iraq, the September 11, 2001, attacks, the rise of globalization, resurgent*

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[1] Malcolm Bradbury, **The Modern American Novel,** Oxford U. P., Oxford, 1992, p.198.
[2] Bradbury, p.198.
[3] Bradbury, p.238.
[4] Frederick Karl, **American Fictions, 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation,** Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p.xi.

> *neoconservatism, and ubiquitous religious conflicts all hold the potential to energize or enervate literary practice, transforming fiction's present from a natural juncture of past and future into a question: To be present, what must fiction now* do*?*[5] *Should the novel engage the politically and economically pressing issues of the day, in this way hoping to secure its relevance, or will fiction's effort to mirror contemporary history absent itself, dispelling what has made fiction distinctive?*[6]

This sense of confusion is shared by many critics and writers. As Camilla Nelson observes, after September 11, 2001, writers have responded with feelings of entrapment. In "The Voice of a Lonely Crowd" (2002), Martin Amis, for instance, argued that after the attacks "all the writers on Earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation."[7] Besides Amis, almost "everybody in the world of western letters was scrambling to offer their interpretation of an event," including Paul Auster, Ian McEwan, and Andrew O'Hagan, which they thought was "more significant and alarming than anything that has happened previously on the world stage."[8] In contrast to such bedazzlement, Nelson offers another point of view, articulated by the critic Jason Cowley. According to Cowley, "such reactions merely typified the sort of 'hysteria' in which the West has come to 'specialise,'" and he disapprovingly notes that the tone of the writers' response to the attacks "was catastrophist—eschatological anxiety and an unconvincing sudden seriousness, as if human nature itself changed the day the towers collapsed."[9] Alternatively, "it was merely that we in the relatively benign, affluent west had forgotten that the world has always been a spectacular carnival of suffering."[10] This nicely formulated criticism takes literature to task for having forgotten to depict human suffering, if not understand it with a historical consciousness.

A nice comparison to offer here in terms of this notion of "suffering" in the context of Berry and Di Leo's problematization of "fiction's present" at this particular historical juncture would be Catherine Morley's observation of a "retreat" after the attacks:

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[5] All emphases in quotations are from the original text unless otherwise noted.
[6] R. M. Berry and Jeffrey R. Di Leo, (Eds.), **Fiction's Present: Situating Contemporary Narrative Innovation,** State University of New York Press, New York, 2008, p.2.
[7] Camilla Nelson, "You Can't Write a Social Novel after September 11", **New Writing,** Volume:5, No:1, 2008, p.57.
[8] Nelson, p.57.
[9] Nelson, p.57.
[10] Nelson, p.57.

> *At the time, many writers lamented that they had lost impetus, or lost confidence in the power of the pen, in the face of terror, and certainly there seems to have been something of a retreat from the national and the large-scale into the domestic and the local, with prominent examples including Jay McInerney's* The Good Life *(2006), Claire Messud's* The Emperor's Children *(2006), Ken Kalfus's* A Disorder Peculiar to the Country *(2005), Updike's* Terrorist *(2006) and DeLillo's* Falling Man *(2007). As for Roth, meanwhile, he too has turned inward to the decomposition of the self and the rotting edifice of the human body; in this respect,* Exit Ghost *(2007) might be compared with Cormac McCarthy's novel* The Road *(2006).*[11]

Then, it would be possible to say that a distinctive fictional energy, albeit enervated, began to flow toward the micro and away from the macro. Perhaps, many heard the echo of Theodor Adorno's 1949 remarks about the Holocaust: "After Auschwitz to write even a single poem is barbaric."[12] Yet considering the seismic events from history not far from the present, such as wars, genocides, unspeakable atrocities that not only changed the course of history but also created revolutionary literary movements, that is, modernism and postmodernism, it would seem a great failure on the part of much current literary imagination to not shake grounds in literary endeavors.

One way to understand this situation might be a consideration of the mostly negative reception of postmodernism around the attacks, a negativity focused especially on relativism and irony. Could there be an underlying sense of dissatisfaction, or resignation, about literature's potential to respond to such a catastrophe? If there is, what could its connection be to postmodernism? Although literary postmodernism had been declared dead for some time by 2001, as will be discussed below, ruthless attacks to postmodernist irony and nihilism as culture's dominant characteristics after September 11 seemed far too ambitious, and dangerous in what they revealed. A month after the attacks, Stanley Fish observed the illogicality of the endemic propensity to announce September 11 as the marker of the end of postmodernism. In his article on the *New York Times,* Fish referred to the frenzy of the media, especially of cultural commentators and critics writing at widely circulated newspapers and magazines, to declare an "end to postmodern relativism"

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[11] Catherine Morley, **The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction: John Updike, Philip Roth and Don DeLillo,** Routledge, New York, 2009, p.106.

[12] Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society", **Prisms**, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1967, p. 34 quoted in J. Hillis Miller, **The Conflagration of Community,** University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011, (Conflagration), p.ix.

as a direct result of the terrorist attacks.[13] Fish found it "bizarre that events so serious would be linked causally with a rarefied form of academic talk" and detected a problem with the passionately defended argument that "the ideas foisted upon us by postmodern intellectuals have weakened the country's resolve." [14] Against the idea that "postmodernists deny the possibility of describing matters of fact objectively, they leave us with no firm basis for either condemning the terrorist attacks or fighting back," Fish asserted,

> *[p]ostmodernism maintains only that there can be no independent standard for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one. The only thing postmodern thought argues against is the hope of justifying our response to the attacks in universal terms that would be persuasive to everyone, including our enemies. Invoking the abstract notions of justice and truth to support our cause wouldn't be effective anyway because our adversaries lay claim to the same language.*[15]

The solution Fish offered is that rather than denouncing postmodernism in order to "gras[p] the empty rhetoric of universal absolutes to which all subscribe but which all define differently," Americans "should [instead] invoke the particular lived values that unite us and inform the institutions we cherish and wish to defend."[16] Because, after all, "it's not really postmodernism that people are bothered by. It's the idea that our adversaries have emerged not from some primordial darkness, but from a history that has equipped them with reasons and motives and even with a perverted version of some virtues."[17] In its inward bend to identify an enemy to attack, American culture chose the easiest target. For Fish, however, an attack on relativism is a form of "reduction" and a dangerous adherence to "false universals" which "stand in the way of useful thinking."[18] In what comes close to establishing a parallelism between the notions of relativism and empathy, Fish explains,

> *if by relativism one means the practice of putting yourself in your adversary's shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might want to wear them, then relativism will not and should not end, because it is simply another name for serious thought.*[19]

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[13] Stanley Fish, "Condemnation without Abstracts", **New York Times**. 15.10.2001, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/15/opinion/15FISH. html, (12.09.2011), n. pag.
[14] Fish, n.pag.
[15] Fish, n.pag.
[16] Fish, n.pag.
[17] Fish, n.pag.
[18] Fish, n.pag.
[19] Fish, n.pag.

Fish, of course, is talking about a refined form of postmodernist relativism that is not synonymous with anything-goes eclecticism and morally vacant critical pluralism but something that in fact defines empathy. In his definition, postmodernism stands close to its first manifestation in the 1960s, which shall be mentioned in detail below.

If we continue with the cultural reception of postmodernism in order to establish a context for the implications of that reception for contemporary literature, we could turn to R. Jay Magill for an analysis of irony in the context of September 11. In *Chic Ironic Bitterness* (2007), Magill offers an impressive analysis of the mistakenly negative reception of irony—both as a mode of social criticism and a literary trope—in American social and cultural criticism at and around the turn of the twenty-first century. In Magill's account, the debate over irony can be seen as another front in the so-called Culture Wars[20] of the 1990s between the Left and the Right with regard to cultural, social, moral, and political matters. The debate gains momentum and a new context with "the outburst of anti-ironic sentiment following" the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001.[21]

Simply put, "conservatives"[22] hold irony responsible for "moral relativism and hedonism that is corrosive to clear decision-making and ethical behavior" while "secularists" consider irony as nothing but a proper response "to a postmodern world[23] filled with contradictions, threats to integrity, rampant skepticism, and dubious political speech and behavior."[24] Among the items on the list of grievances

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[20] Samuel Cohen's 2009 book *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* considers the culture wars a national adaptation of the Cold War's international ideological antagonisms (Graham, 2011, p.2). For discussions of the culture wars, see James Davison Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991), Mary E. William's (Ed.) *Culture Wars: Opposing Viewpoints* (2003), Roger Chapman's *Culture Wars, An Encyclopedia of Issues, Voices, and Viewpoints* (2009), and Irene Taviss Thomson's *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* (2010).

[21] R. Jay Magill, **Chic Ironic Bitterness,** The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2007, p.196.

[22] Magill explains, "[a]mong the tracts in the 1990s vying for a return to basics were Robert H. Bork's *Slouching towards Gomorrah* (1996), Stephen L. Carter's *Civility* (1998), Robert Bellah and company's *Habits of the Heart* (1985,1996), Amitai Etzioni's *The Spirit of Community* (2004), and Robert Putnam's feverishly discussed *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000)" (Magill, 2007, p.10).

[23] Magill notes that irony has been described as "*the* defining characteristic of the late modern age and the postmodern mind" by various theorists: Hayden White considers irony "a major trope of historiographic representation in the nineteenth century," Slavoj Zizek explains that "cynicism has become the new dominant ideology," and in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1995) Linda Hutcheon "addresses irony's many psychological motivations, among them defensiveness, arrogance, humor, evasiveness, duplicity, hypocrisy, subversiveness, transgression, exclusion, and aggression" (Magill, 2011, pp.56-57).

[24] Magill, p.214.

against irony, Magill is less interested in the conventional conservative assertion on irony's alleged "elitist, selective, dodgy, uncommitted" character than on the ways irony is presented as a source of moral and political negligence of the contemporary American character and for the diminishing quality of American civic life.[25] As Magill explains,

> *in the culture wars of the 1990s, and even more so in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Americans struggled hard to make sense of a national identity fraught with division. Throughout this discussion, many pundits and commentators, particularly in the late 1990s, argued that in order to save our nation, to get the country back on track, Americans had to reject the pithy skepticism nurtured by pop culture and the intellectual elite. This attitude was often associated with a decline in the now-famed coinage, civic trust.*[26]

In this sense, the attack on irony seems an alarming glossing over, a determinedly superficial analysis of, the culture on the part of irony's detractors since irony is in fact a result of

> *a widespread mistrust of politicians and a broad loss of faith in the political institutions they engender, a persistent suspicion toward Enlightenment discourses about rationality and "progress," particularly due to their dehumanizing and totalizing effects on actual humans they have transpired, the renewed fascination with mystical or religious accounts of the world, and a nostalgia for lost innocence.*[27]

Notwithstanding these circumstances, the conservative backlash against irony comes mostly in the form of identifying the cause, the originating impulse, of a perceived social disintegration and moral deterioration in America in the 1990s. Increasing rates of crime, illegitimate childbearing, and drug abuse, as well as excessive individualism and irresponsibility in the public sphere have lead to an attempt to revive "traditional values and family life."[28] Irony was seen to extend liberals' "disdain, contempt, and disparagement of American values."[29] The problem during the 1990s, in short, was "the decline of American society and culture," and the ironic worldview which was dominant throughout the culture and media was both spreading and exacerbating this decline.[30] For the critics who discuss "America's ailing social health, the decline of culture, and the 'devaluing' of America," the

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[25] Magill, p.223.
[26] Magill, p.10.
[27] Magill, p.64.
[28] Magill, p.130.
[29] Magill, p.133.
[30] Magill, p.134.

biggest problem was that "fundamental, Christian institutions— family, church, nation—were being eroded by a liberal, secularist culture and media bent on selling their version of anti-American relativism and a moral free-for-allism" which were "accelerated by the decadent days of the 1960s."[31] The fight against them required "some version of a renewed respect for moral authority and social hierarchy, seriousness of purpose, renewed civic and religious belief, and patriotism."[32] Ironic mentality, in its so-called detached "whatever" attitude, was to blame.[33]

Magill notes painstakingly that the 1960s counterculture was held partly, not fully, responsible for the social malaise of the 1990s. According to some "conservative social critics," the story of "American decline begins in the eighteenth century with the Founders themselves; the sixties were merely the final culmination of all that was radically askew in the philosophical background of American founding principles," namely, "the philosophical concepts of liberty and equality" which culminated in the 1960s in the "apotheosis of individualism and the death of the moral authority."[34] The result has been

> *a world of individuals who held themselves in incredibly high regard, had no conception of their appropriate relations to their fellow citizens, little or no respect for religious or familial authority, few or no limits set to their own personal gratification, and a refusal to submit their own wills and desires to the considerations of the larger community and to God.*[35]

Accordingly,

> *[t]he decades following the 1960s, the general argument goes, were increasingly narcissistic and self-obsessed, materialistic, and continuing along the path of devolution, a loss of values, and an undermining of moral authority. The counterculture of the 1960s moved into the center of commercialism and became a widespread attitude—now the dominant force in American commercial culture. Disconnect from public life and hyperindividualism also come from the hedonism and greed fostered by the culture of the 1980s.*[36]

Magill finds it interesting that ironical worldview has come to embody these attitudes so completely that it eventually acquired unprecedented "effects on political

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[31] Magill, pp.135, 130.
[32] Magill, p.130.
[33] Magill, p.31.
[34] Magill, p.135.
[35] Magill, p.136.
[36] Magill, p.143.

and national identity."[37] He rejects the presentation of irony "as the behooded harbinger of civic Armageddon in the U. S." on the basis of its supposed lack of seriousness, honesty, sincerity, sense of individual duty and responsibility, kindness, and belief and hope in common good.[38] As he takes pains to demonstrate, irony is "a social attitude," and "a form of social critique" rather than a stance of a cynical, hedonist, morally corrupt society.[39] Of course, this is the ideal description of irony. In his opinion, if there is some moral and political situation that requires caring, or careful response, the ironist responds and in responding rather than ignoring, the ironist demonstrates not detachment and disinterest but a sincere act of care and attention.[40] In this sense, ironists are usually "progressives": they show "commit[ment] to social and political change through the long tradition of satire and critique" rather than "retain[ing] the models and forms of citizenship of the past."[41] Put differently, rather than being the cause of the current "selfish, civically unconcerned, hypocritical, self-absorbed" American culture of the millennium, irony exposes the "flaws" of these traits.[42] September 11, 2001, opens a new chapter on the attacks on irony. For some, "[t]he literal dissolution of the Twin Towers heralded a new day, a dispersal of irony into the ether. Patriotism and earnest engagement would rise like so many phoenixes from the flame."[43] For Magill, in contrast, "the shadow of terrorism" created a new American "rhetoric and living conditions," and as "fanaticism of religious groups" grew stronger, "irony as a method of wry, skeptical detachment has thankfully proven itself to be far from dead, as many predicted and some even hoped for."[44]

Following the terrorist attacks, many critics announced the death of irony in the face of a catastrophe that was not only crushingly serious and morally excruciatingly wrong but also one that demanded serious and moral response.[45] It

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[37] Magill, p.ix.
[38] Magill, p.12.
[39] Magill, p.ix.
[40] Magill, p.223.
[41] Magill, p.233.
[42] Magill, p.11.
[43] Magill, p.17.
[44] Magill, p.ix.
[45] Even James Wood, a very traditionalist and serious literary critic, admits "suspicion of all the eschatological talk about how the time for trivia has ended, and how only seriousness is now on people's mind" (Wood, "Tell Me How Does it Feel", n.pag.).

was not possible to continue the detached ironic mentality when what the nation confronted required community spirit, earnestness, and patriotism. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, Roger Rosenblatt wrote in his *Time* column that for the last three decades "the good folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real."[46] For Magill, this was a "fatwa on irony."[47] Similarly, Graydon Carter, *Vanity Fair'*s editor of the time, remarked, "there's going to be a seismic change. I think it's the end of the age of irony. […] Things that were considered fringe and frivolous are going to disappear."[48] Likewise, Taylor Branch, "the esteemed civil rights historian," stated that the attacks on America had "brought the nation to 'a turning point against a generation of cynicism.'"[49] Magill explains,

> *September 11's concrete horror, its piercing reality and unrelenting moral weight, in total effect, its* seriousness*, was supposed to have spelled the end of ironic disengagement in America. Pundits like those above argued that a whole generation of Americans, most notably so-called Generation X, having never felt truly threatened, would now have to shed their cynicism and take life seriously, as had their grandparents of the Greatest Generation. The morning of September 11 was supposed to have shorn Americans of their moral relativism and leniency, reignited earnestness and civic union. It was supposed to have summoned another, sustained, Great Awakening […* because *t]imes of unimaginable tragedy always call for deep, slate-cleaning renewal so that historical causalities of the present do not happen again.*[50]

However, there is something to the matter that easily slips from view: times might as well require seriousness and a tight-knit community, but have the circumstances that have led to the ironic sensibility in the first place gone to ashes along with the Twin Towers? Or, as Magill puts it, "[d]o ironists make civic culture less healthy, or is an unhealthy civic culture, caused by other events and situations, making people ironically detached?"[51]

Understandably, the death of irony is not, or cannot yet be, possible. The obvious reason is the sheer absurdity and wrongness of countering irony with sincerity:

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[46] Magill, p.15.
[47] Magill, p.16.
[48] Magill, p.17.
[49] Magill, p.16.
[50] Magill, p.18.
[51] Magill, p.12.

> *efforts by some pundits to oppose irony and cynicism with sincerity or earnestness have not understood that sincerity of moral vision can no longer, in a cultural moment that so often seems a frightening yet absolutely predictable joke, be spoken literally to have any effect. Moral vision loses its power—for those deeply aware of its recurrent misuse—when it is cheapened by ready-made, cliché-laden, speechwriter-prepared, pedantic literalism.*[52]

In this sense, the attack on irony is both a complete misunderstanding of its centuries-long tradition and its function: essentially without "built-in politics," irony merely needs "some kind of social fuel, a moral situation, a charged existential moment—and a knowing audience."[53] In other words, "because as a form irony is empty, it can only do something 'political' in the hands of its users. It depends upon who picks up its ammunition."[54] Magill asserts that irony, as a "general sensibility," appears "when it sees a dreaded state of affairs passing as normal."[55] In this sense, ironic attitude is "more than a figure of speech" in that it "does something else rarely examined in debates about it in the recent past: it paradoxically and secretly preserves the ideals of sincerity, honesty, and authenticity by momentarily belying its own appearance."[56]

The penchant for irony, especially among the young, continues, and irony "is perhaps now even more widespread on cable television, print publications, and the Web than before that fateful moment in American history."[57] The reason, simply put, is that irony successfully "liberate[s] thinking from deadening social forces, old clichés and stereotypes, stupid biases, hypocrisy and oppressive public mores."[58] Magill declares the ironist "a diehard moralist" and irony "the most honest thing we have going."[59] However, "it has often been conceived as unserious, untrustworthy, insincere, and incapable, fundamentally, of human connectedness or true belief."[60] Being unserious, Magill reminds, requires "incongruity of what is said and what is done."[61] Irony, in contrast, "hides what it means under the guise of its opposite."[62]

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[52] Magill, p.xi.
[53] Magill, p.59.
[54] Magill, p.59.
[55] Magill, pp.63, x.
[56] Magill, p.x.
[57] Magill, p.19.
[58] Magill, p.19.
[59] Magill, pp.155, 9.
[60] Magill, p.8.
[61] Magill, p.168.
[62] Magill, p.147.

Therefore, "it does not morph into what it observes. Oppositely, it resists the forms and demands of any given culture where it finds itself."[63] The fact that the ironist says one thing and means another proves that he or she is "a sworn enemy of hypocrisy—of doing the opposite of what one says."[64] The gift of irony, therefore, lies in the "inverse knowledge" it possesses on the meaning of words, hence, the production and manipulation of meaning.[65] Stated differently, "irony's power, in its own right, beyond its entertainment value, is a kind of talking and expressing that conveys a broader comprehension of social reality, political preferences, and power, all by manipulating the rules of language itself."[66]

Magill's refutation of irony's alleged role on the recent decline in American character is useful to the purposes of this study in the sense that the author defines irony as a useful instrument of sociocultural and political criticism. The "liberating cultural and personal force" of irony, if deployed "wisely, can be a psychological strategy for maintaining personal integrity in the face of a complex and often contradictory world."[67] If there is an oversight in his analysis, it is that he glosses over the current empty nihilism of much irony, especially in literature. Yet his vision of irony refers us back to the fiction of the 1960s which used irony in precisely the positive way he describes.

Despite its usefulness, irony has become so pervasive and so constricting a postmodernist trope in literature that in the last two decades of the twentieth century, young American writers felt restricted by postmodernism. As Robert L. McLaughlin argues in his essay "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World" (2004), many young American writers felt burdened with postmodernism's "wordplay for the sake of wordplay, its skepticism toward narrative as a meaning-providing structure, its making opaque the process of representation."[68] In line with this, McLaughlin proposes that we regard contemporary fiction under the category "post-postmodernism," because young writers "seem to be responding to

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[63] Magill, p.229.
[64] Magill, p.66.
[65] Magill, p.66.
[66] Magill, p.4.
[67] Magill, p.12.
[68] Robert L. McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World", Berry and Di Leo, Eds., p.108.

the perceived dead end of postmodernism, a dead end that has been reached because of postmodernism's detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language."[69] He identifies David Foster Wallace, Rick Moody, Jonathan Franzen, Bradford Morrow, Richard Powers, Cris Mazza, and A. M. Homes, who are trying "to reenergize literature's social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world, to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives."[70] Stephen J. Burn (2008) deploys the same term, post-postmodernism, to describe Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, and Richard Powers's fiction that merge both postmodern and more traditional narrative strategies in their move away from postmodernism. Similarly, Josh Toth and Neil Brooks (2007) propose the arrival of a literature of renewalism after the end of postmodernism, and point at similar writers; Franzen, David Foster Wallace, and Richard Powers, Dave Eggers, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Mark Z. Danielewski, who merge, again, realistic and postmodernist tendencies. These critical efforts that merge two opposite tendencies in defining the new stage in American literature mostly agree on a sense of an end of postmodernism proper due to its nihilistic irony and cultural detachment.

It is to these recent discussions on irony and postmodernism as well as efforts to define new directions for contemporary American literature that this study will respond, especially to the emphasis on the negative effects of irony and literature's efforts to re-connect with referential language. However, this response will also be a problematization of the insistence on the formative effect of postmodernism (or the insistence on the end of it as the driving impetus), or a lingering sense of the apprentice's continuous revolt against the master, or better yet, the problematics of literary patricide. This study privileges four writers born around the 1960s as representative of a new direction in American literature: Nicholson Baker (b. 1957), William T. Vollmann (b. 1959), Jonathan Franzen (b. 1959), and David Foster Wallace (1962-2008). What we see in their works stands apart from what we have seen so far because it is their themes and their notion of literature that informs their styles. Having produced a rich output of creative nonfiction and fiction, these writers

[69] McLaughlin, p.103.
[70] McLaughlin, p.103.

restore to contemporary American literature the timeless task of literature to be redemptive in its ethical treatment of the human and in its portrayal of human despair, and face reality boldly, directly. Indeed, creative nonfiction, a curiously ignored genre in recent debates, proves very much essential in the new direction of contemporary literature that these writers establish. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to describe the ways in which Baker, Vollmann, Franzen, and Wallace produce, in both creative nonfiction and fiction, the new stage in contemporary American literature by explaining their turn to literature as ethical reflection, as an endeavor to face reality, and by discussing their approach to literature as an intellectual venture focused on the analysis of culture as well as the function of literature. In their efforts, they not only reveal what went wrong with literature's and culture's immersion in nihilistic irony but also demonstrate the ways in which literature may overcome such constraints. For instance, in a 1993 critique of irony in an interview, Wallace notes the evolution of irony from the 1960s to the 1980s in the mode of a transformation from a rebellious art form into a conformist commercial trope. He argues that the fiction of the 1960s

> *abandoned a lot of conventional techniques in favor of black humor and a new emphasis on irony. You hadn't seen irony like that, really, since the pre-Romantics. It performs a really useful function by getting rid of a lot of platitudes and myths in America which were no longer serviceable, but it also hasn't left anything to rebuild with besides this ethos of jaded irony and self-aware nihilism and acquisitivism. […] The original urge toward irony and self-consciousness that in the Sixties was young people's way of insulating themselves against the sort of ravening hypocrisy of institutions like the government or advertising has become insinuated in popular culture, and as it's been insinuated in popular culture, popular culture itself has become vastly more efficient and pervasive in American life.*[71]

As we observed above, at least Wallace and Franzen figure in some new formulations, especially those that designate the beginning of a new epoch after the end of the previous one. The impossibility of separating successive movements strictly has proven difficult, if not futile, as we have seen in the modernism-postmodernism debate. This study will not take postmodernism as a strictly defined period whose alleged end marks the beginning of the next epoch. By bringing together previously unaligned writers, this study will rather offer a different reading

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[71] David Foster Wallace, **Conversations with David Foster Wallace**, (Ed. Stephen. Burn), University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, 2012, (Conversations), p.17.

of the new stage in contemporary American literature, one not bound by epochs but by the mission and function of literature. It will be the burden of this study to refrain from making, and adhering to, totalizing descriptions of contemporary literature; the contention is to observe the intersections, or concurrent proliferations, of some unique features of recent works both in fiction and the under-explored creative nonfiction. The blend of social, cultural, literary, and political criticism we find in the selected works demonstrates noteworthy intellectual rigor and moral vision. Bearing in mind the precision of Nick Bentley's words, "[t]rying to identify the defining characteristics of any period of literary history is a difficult task, especially when the period under question is close to us," this study will proceed meticulously while highlighting new vectors that shape new directions in contemporary literature.[72]

Granted, it is possible to consider the possibility of movements that follow postmodernism as reactions to its now oppressing forms/ideas such as uncertainty, fragmentation, ambiguity, alienation, detachment, social aloofness, self-depreciation, world-weary attitude, political disinterestedness, and incommensurability.[73] In fact, irony in itself embodies all these traits. If such forms are harmful to meaningful life and meaningful literature, and if we are to replace a sense of moral progress to our lives, what would be the path to follow? How to answer this question with regard to contemporary literature? This question does not need to accept the demise of postmodernism, although it does seem to have lost some impetus. The more important concern seems to be the options available to writers: to regress ad infinitum and disappear within playful irony without irony's essentially critical function or to find an exit toward a nondescript territory. David Foster Wallace, for instance, devised a theory for contemporary society, sought to cure its ills, and performed his cure through his fiction. He does not replicate postmodernist society in his postmodernist stylistics: he tries to rehabilitate this society by looking for the human, establishing human connection in his writings. In *Rising Up and Rising Down* William T. Vollmann and in *Human Smoke* Nicholson Baker show us that the past is real, its documents can be reached and presented through literature without distortion and we can possibly understand history so that it can guide us in the

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[72] Nick Bentley, **Contemporary British Fiction**, Edinburg University Press, Edinburg, 2008, (Contemporary), p.1.
[73] Magill, p.13.

present and in the future. In other words, for Vollmann and Baker, history is not—as Linda Hutcheon claims in her argument on historiographic metafiction—a fact-making, meaning granting process: it can be transparently represented in its pure form, in all its actualities, facts, and only then can we think about it, make meaning out of its pure representation. Both the world and history can be documented responsibly and transparently. The possibility of transparency, of course, belongs to realistic narrative theory, but what is underlined here is that after postmodernism questioned—and debilitated—the presentation of history, these recent attempts are arguing that textual traces can be verified and represented as purely real.

This study will analyze examples from American literature's confrontation with moral issues in fiction and creative nonfiction since the late 1980s through a selection of works. Although they belong to the era of the postmodernist upheaval in literature, moving beyond the nihilism and ironical distance that characterize much of postmodernist writing, the selected writers in this study re-establish the moral seriousness and the redemptive power of literature by creating narrative worlds that are strikingly human in ethical dilemmas, feeling, and longing for communication presented in technical as well as thematic complexity and intelligence. Almost obsessed with expressing the fundamentals of the human condition in its myriad of sufferings and yearnings, these writers revise the function or form of the novel/literature in the literary contemporary scene. Formally challenging at times, with a load of paratextuality like notes and endnotes and comments, the issues they raise make us uncomfortable. What we learn of the human soul is mostly dark and painful, but the dark-souled, agonized characters open up new worlds to us, new hearts and new minds.

To be more precise, when the first novels of Wallace, Vollmann, Baker, and Franzen appeared in the late 1980s, the literary scene was lively but tumultuous. Having completed their undergraduate studies in literature and aspiring to become good fiction writers, these writers found themselves at a historical junction whose literary output was still called postmodern. Granted, the age a writer grows up may shape his or her aesthetic sensibilities. As contemporary American novelist Rick Moody explains in a 1997 interview,

> *[t]he novelist Robert Coover, speaking of influences in American fiction, once remarked that apprentices of his generation found themselves (in the 1950s)*

> *grappling with two very different models of what the novel might be. One, Coover said, was Saul Bellow's realistic if picaresque* Adventures of Augie March; *the other was William Gaddis's encyclopedic* The Recognitions. *Writers my age (mid-thirties), however, don't have the luxury of choice. Our problem is how to confront the influence of a single novelist: Thomas Pynchon.*[74]

The late 1980s was a controversial period for American literature, especially so for the more avant-garde tendencies. In the concise analysis of literary critic Larry McCaffery, like "the bespectacled ghost of James Joyce" that haunted modernists, "Thomas Pynchon cast an enormous and intimidating shadow ever the generation of American authors who emerged in the wake of his early megaworks *V.* in 1963 and *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973."[75] However, "literature's father figures can only loom, intimidate, and inspire for so long before they must be slain by their offspring."[76] After *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon remained silent until the publication of *Vineland* in 1989, and in the meantime, in his absence, "writers and critics began scanning the horizon for the arrival of someone possessing the right combination of ambition and formal originality to be able to cast his own shadow."[77] The urgency of this literary father-slayer was also necessitated by the

> *the quagmire in which American fiction had found itself mired since the mid-seventies, of scaled-back expectations ("minimalism"), self-distancing ironies and trendy nihilism (the "Brat Pack"), and illusionist game-playing (ghostly simulations of once-radical methods like metafiction and self-referentiality that had become appropriated by the mainstream as empty signs of counter-cultural radicalism).*[78] *And although sightings were occasionally reported—T.C. Boyle* (Water Music), *John Calvin Batchelor* (The Further Adventures of Halley's Comet), *Alexander Theroux* (Darconville's Cat), *Bret Easton Ellis* (American Psycho), *David Foster Wallace* (The Broom of the System) *were all hailed as The Next Big Thing—there was a general consensus that this new generation of post-postmodernist writers simply hadn't yet produced a book like* Gravity's Rainbow*, which blew you away with its vast scope and ambition, erudition, intellectual brilliance, and story-telling skills, while opening up new areas for the novel as an art form.*[79]

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[74] Rick Moody, "Surveyors of the Enlightenment", **Atlantic Monthly**, 1997, http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97jul/pynchon.htm, n. pag. quoted in Patrick O'Donnell, **The American Novel Now: Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980**, Wiley and Blackwell, London, 2010, p.28.

[75] Larry McCaffery, "Introduction", **Expelled from Eden: A William. T. Vollmann Reader**, (Eds. Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson), Thunder's Mouth P., New York, 2004, (Introduction), p.xxi.

[76] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxi.

[77] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxi.

[78] In "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1993), David Foster Wallace formulates the triptych McCaffery mentions here. The essay shall be addressed in Chapter Three.

[79] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxi.

For McCaffery, Vollmann's first novel, *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1987), single-handedly announced the arrival of "the post-Pynchon era of American fiction"[80] because it was "the most startling debut since Pynchon's *V.*"[81] Careful to avoid establishing a direct—if not completely untrue—lineage to Pynchon, McCaffery defines Vollmann rather as "America's most crazed, romantic visionary since Poe and Melville *and* a scientifically oriented empiricist in the Naturalist lineage of Zola and Frank Norris."[82]

The excitement McCaffery feels regarding Vollmann is visible in the general frenzy over naming either the Next Pynchon, or the New Thing that extends well into the next decade. In 1996, Wallace's *Infinite Jest* met a chorus that compared him to Pynchon. Size, scope, inclusiveness, detail, sociopolitical critique all matched between *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Infinite Jest*. It seemed that the father was slain: *Gravity's Rainbow* could fade away now, as *Infinite Jest* now became the fixed variant of every comparison. In Matt Bucher's words, "[e]very lengthy, 'literary' novel that has been published since *Infinite Jest* lives in its shadow. Is Adam Levin the next David Foster Wallace? Marisha Pessl? Zadie Smith? [Jeffrey] Eugenides? Is *House of Leaves* as good as *Infinite Jest*? How does *Freedom* or *Witz* compare?"[83]

In contrast, Wallace refused both a lineage to Pynchon and the label postmodernist, which he not only severely criticized but also diligently mocked. In fact, Wallace is precise in his expectations from literature and sharp on his indictments on the works or schools he criticizes. We could note how he describes his style and his possible affinity with a distinct literary group:

> *Using postmodern techniques, postmodern aesthetic but using that to discuss or represent very old traditional human verities that have to do with spirituality and emotion and community and ideas that the avant-garde would consider very old-fashioned so that there's a kind of melding, it's using postmodern*

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[80] It is noteworthy, though, that Vollmann reads Pynchon much later in his career and in a list of his favorite writers, and lists Tolstoy, Hawthorne (whom he thinks is the best), Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck.

[81] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., pp.xxiii, xxii.

[82] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxx.

[83] Matt Bucher, "Consider the Year of David Foster Wallace", **Fiction Advocate,** 05.05.2013, http://fictionadvocate.com/2013/01/05/guest- post- consider- the- year -of- david-foster-wallace-html, (07.01.2013), n.pag

> *formal techniques for very traditional ends, if there is group […] that's the group I want to belong to.*[84]

In the late 1980s, Wallace was looking more to Vollmann for inspiration. However, Vollmann was publishing incredibly successful, artistically brilliant books in such an unprecedented speed that Wallace developed some "inferiority complex" against Vollmann.[85] Franzen, in turn, was feeling the shadow of Wallace and always felt a rivalry with Wallace. He was also waging a war against the postmodernists in his first novels. As for Baker, he was content with his literary father, John Updike, whom he revered, but moved in a completely different direction than Updike. In fact, their unique ways of moving on with their own literary programs proves Wallace's insight about his generation right:

> *This is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values, and it's our job to make them up, and we're not doing it. And we're being told, by the very systems that the Sixties were so right to fear, that we needn't worry about making up moral systems: you know, that there isn't more to being alive than being pretty, having intercourse a lot, and having a lot of possessions. But the darkly delicious thing is that these systems that are telling us this are using the techniques that the Sixties guys used—by that I mean postmodern techniques like black irony, metafictional involutions, the whole sort of literature of self-consciousness.*[86]

As these writers continued to write prolifically and won prestigious awards, literary scene shifted once more. As we noted above, by the end of the 1990s, death notices for postmodernism became loud and insistent. Today, many scholars in the field of contemporary American fiction posit that postmodernism has ended. Some propose that we are now in the post-postmodernist era of literary productivity while others contend that the move beyond postmodernism has been in the form of a return to realism and Wallace and Franzen figure in some of these preliminary arguments. This study aligns itself with neither position and avoids entering a debate over the course of postmodernism other than engaging with it to the extent that its stylistic and thematic concerns hold significance to the works under scrutiny.

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[84] David Foster Wallace, "Interview", **Le Conversazioni**, 02.07.2006, http://www.leconversazioni.it /index.php?lingua=2&s ezione=programma&evento=1&edzione=2&scheda=19&area=&extra=& page_news=1&page_multi=1, (05.05.2011), n.pag.
[85] David Lipsky, **Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself, A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace,** New York, Broadway, 2010, p.21.
[86] Wallace, Conversations, p.18.

Although there is a background of literary activity in relation to which this study formulates its proposition, the best articulation of a theory for contemporary fiction is written by Vollmann, Franzen, and Wallace in their essays that establish their passion and seriousness about fiction, especially contemporary fiction they are a part of. In other words, their responses to the contemporary literary scene highlight both the state of American literature when they came of age and how they eventually transformed it. Direct responses to postmodernism and contemporary American literature came in their essays: Vollmann's "American Writing Today: A Diagnosis of the Disease" (1990); Franzen's "Why Bother?" (1996) and "I'll Be Doing More of the Same" (1996); David Foster Wallace's "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988) and "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" (1993). Since these works will be considered in detail in their respective chapters, we could note here, for instance, Vollmann's claim that "[w]e need writing with a sense of purpose" because "American scene suffers from a plague of writers careless or even putrid."[87] "We should portray important human problems" Vollmann reminds his fellow writers.[88] He explains,

> *[i]n this period of our literature we are producing mainly insular works, as if all our writers were on an airplane in economy seats, beverage trays shading their laps, faces averted from one another, masturbating furiously. Consider, for instance, the* New Yorker *fiction of the past few years, with those eternally affluent characters suffering understated melancholies of overabundance. Here the Self is projected and replicated into a monotonous army which marches through story after story like dead locusts. Consider, too, the structuralist smog that has hovered so long over our universities, permitting only games of stifling breathlessness. (The so called New Historicism promises no better.)*[89]

Vollmann's discontent with both the academia and what he refers to as "stifling breathlessness," possibly, of self-conscious reflexivity of experimental fiction, is echoed by Wallace. While he respects early postmodern writers from the 1960s, Wallace is highly critical of the contemporary postmodernism of endless ironic nihilism and meaningless debunking of illusions that is guided by an "insatiable hunger for the appearance of novelty."[90] As he characterizes, the fiction

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[87] William T. Vollmann, "American Writing Today: A Diagnosis of the Disease", McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., (Writing), pp.331, 329.
[88] Vollmann, Writing, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.332.
[89] Vollmann, Writing, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.331.
[90] Wallace, Conversations, p.31.

of the 1990s demonstrates a "continual avant-garde rush forward without anyone[91] bothering to speculate on the destination, the *goal* of the forward rush."[92] Vollmann's sense of "purpose" and Wallace's claim for a "goal" could be linked to the state of irony. Wallace is very articulate on this topic:

> *Irony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for. That's what made the early postmodernists great artists. The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets us up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicities. […] Sarcasm, parody, absurdism, and irony are great ways to strip off stuff's mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it. The problem is that once the rules for art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, then what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone. […] Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naïve to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving.*[93]

It is in this sense that Wallace formulates his relationship to his literary fathers, and this we can extend to his contemporaries: postmodernism has bequeathed the next generation with a dangerous heritage that proves both personally and professional blocking, even crippling.

The title of this study's suggestion of a move "beyond irony" is not a direct allusion to, or a re-statement, a paraphrasing, of the common claims of recent criticism on a move beyond postmodernism. Irony, a useful figure of speech that "exposes the supposedly wise as lacking in all insight," has become, as Wallace hints, cynicism at the sight of emotion, sincerity, or sentimentality.[94] Irony has reached a stage where the intended meaning is no longer possible to understand; it has become an aggressive mechanism of self-defense to fend off any revelations of true feelings which might be met with sarcasm. The difficult problem regards the evolution of irony to a point where even its function to imply some kind of a meaning is forgotten. Irony has been transformed into the principal statement of a world-weary mind-set; it has become a *gesture* of speech, so the speak, where being

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[91] As for the university, Wallace scorns at the search of doctoral dissertations for "radical new advances" only to grind them in "mechanisms of commodification" that take avant-garde for granted as a sign of greatness (Wallace, Conversations, p.27).
[92] Wallace, Conversations, p.27.
[93] Wallace, Conversations, pp.48-49.
[94] Claire Colebrook, **Irony,** Routledge, New York, 2004, p.2.

ironic simply means rolling one's eyes, forcing a yawn, putting on a look of boredom and a calculated distance. These gestures challenge and annul, if not mock, the possibility of saying something meaningful, something that rests on a firm belief. In other words, irony seems to have become a body language that speaks for itself, that defies all attempts at saying something earnest and direct.

This study refrains from applying a particular theory to the analysis of selected works. Attempting rather to understand the concerns of contemporary literary criticism and ethical literary criticism as well as how theories of postmodernism and theories related to postmodernism have evolved and how they, if they do, relate to this study's focus on contemporary American literature, the following discussion will try to formulate an outlook that draws its theoretical angle from the shared ethical and thematic concerns of Baker, Vollmann, Franzen, and Wallace. In other words, the selected works, each in its own way, propose new theoretical configurations for contemporary literature, and applying a preordained theory to their explication would have been reductive to the possibilities of reading these works, which themselves suggest new theoretical approaches.

Chapter One tries to identify major trends in contemporary literary theory that may constitute a background to this study's discussions. The chapter's first part looks at recent literary criticism's attempts to theorize contemporary literature and delineates three distinct critical trends. The first regards the problematic surrounding the interchangeability between the terms the contemporary and the postmodern. This quality of interchangeability both enables and hinders talking about these two terms on their own or in conjunction. The second concerns the oppositional relationship between realism and postmodernism that continues to keep its vitality even after postmodernism's great intolerance toward realistic presentation is well established. The third analyzes some representative efforts that try to define the end of postmodernism and some other efforts that try to identify what follows postmodernism. Meanwhile, as this study will bear witness, the debate on postmodernist irony, nihilism, and relativism turns into a rich discussion of culture and literature. These separate strands of arguments tend to overlap, or inform, and in some cases enrich, one another. However, the most useful contributions to these arguments are formulated by Wallace and Franzen in their creative nonfiction.

Therefore, this part's discussion of recent critical discourses and their new approaches to contemporary fiction will help determine the worth and innovation, timeliness and urgency of the works under discussion in Chapters Two and Three.

Chapter One's second part offers a comprehensive analysis of another newly burgeoning strain of literary criticism: the turn to ethical criticism. Although traditionally a humanist pursuit, ethical criticism makes an impressive, interdisciplinary, and rigorous comeback in the last decades, tending us toward perhaps beyond irony, or perhaps toward a sense of literature as extremely powerful in its moral power much contemporary literature seemed to suffer from a lack thereof. Figuring the text as a site of ethical encounter between reader and writer, neo-humanist critics revive the traditional metaphors of books-as-friends as well as holding fiction responsible and indispensable in the formation of the moral character of reader. Postmodernist critics, too, turn to ethical criticism with a strong reliance on Emmanuel Levinas's theory of face-to-face encounter with the other and posit it as itself an ethical encounter when applied to readers and the act of reading. In this sense, ethical criticism takes us beyond the contemplative task in reading; literature becomes an encounter with the other, with life itself. Therefore, ethical criticism becomes a venue for a valuable assessment of not only contemporary literature but also the meaning and function of literature. As Marjorie Garber argues, "[t]he genius of literary study comes in asking questions, not in finding answers."[95] It is in this sense that we can re-claim the original meaning of literature and hence manage to "distinguish it from it from other distinct, though valuable, human enterprises like morality, politics, and aesthetics."[96]

The ethical turn relates to the overall purpose of this study in the fact that through its insistence on literature's aversion to closure and definite answers, this strain of criticism sketches a way for literature to preserve the vitality of reading and thinking, the unending quest of humanity to interrogate life, and the persistent belief in literature as a guide to us if we can remain open to its many answers. These suggestions resonate with this study's investigations of the possibilities of re-establishing the high-cultural meaning and function of literature as well as re-

[95] Marjorie Garber, **The Use and Abuse of Literature**, Pantheon, New York, 2011, p.20.
[96] Garber, p.21.

directing literary study's focus toward more human-oriented concerns and approaches/methodologies. In other words, ethical literary criticism not only restores the fundamental task of literature to have moral value and to adhere to high literary standards, but also reminds the reader the arduous intellectual and ethical demands of reading, qualities that will mark the value of creative nonfiction and fiction the following chapters of this study shall discuss. Their subject matters illuminate both universal and particular truths and represent human life in its many dilemmas and forms. The purpose is to identify the ethical vigor of contemporary literature in "its relation to truth, thematics, structure and uses of literature, power to effect a change in perception, inherent appeal to responsibility, or capacity of discursive subversion."[97] Following Simon Haines's list of some of the moral terms we live by, such as shame, courage, modesty, arrogance, sentimentality, confidence, rudeness, dishonesty, integrity, brutality, and honor, this study will try to show how these terms govern the fictional universes of Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace.[98] The guiding question shall be, what sorts of ethical reflections does contemporary literature offer? And indeed, what does ethical reflection mean in nonfiction and fiction? In what way do the selected works point out a zeitgeist, a shared purpose, and what unites them, historically and literarily speaking?

Chapter Two argues, in three parts, that creative nonfiction is the most fruitful venue for the contemporary writer that turns to literature for ethical reflection. In the first part of the chapter, Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of History* (2008) and William T. Vollmann's *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means* (2003) are analyzed from an angle that draws on their efforts to identify truth in its moral as well as historical dimension through understanding certain historical events and actions. While Baker turns specifically to the tumultuous years that have brought about World War II and invites us to rethink about the so-called "good" and "necessary" war in light of the historical data he provides, Vollmann carries out a comprehensive

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[97] Michael Eskin, "On Literature and Ethics", **Poetics Today**, Volume:25, No:4, 2004, p.576.
[98] Simon Haines, "Deepening the Self: The Language of Ethics and the Language of Literature", **Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory**, (Eds. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p.25.

inquiry into the human potential for violence in landmark events in the history of mankind's propensity for cruelty. Both Baker and Vollmann represent the distinctly responsible voice of the ideal author—historically conscious, morally accountable in the representation in history—after the so-called moral relativism of postmodernism. As Vollmann writes, "[i]f we cannot situate ourselves in history, if we cannot match ourselves against our moral peers now dead and gone, what good is history?"[99] In this sense, these works signal the emergence of a new mode(l) of historical narrative: anecdotal and philosophical, nonfictional historiography that believes in the accurate representation of history by way of ethical treatment of historical data, thereby making it possible to break down metanarratives shaping our outlook on history and human nature. In these particular works, ethics comprises the framework in Baker's and Vollmann's approach to historical narrative. Both books demonstrate nonfiction's ethical commitment to understanding the human in all its complexity and to the responsibility of writing about it; they both focus on motives and contexts of violent acts. While *Human Smoke* re-discovers World War II, *Rising Up and Rising Down* focuses on a myriad of examples without time and space constraints. In this way, both books problematize the ultimate knowledge of past events, the possibilities of ethical reflections of the past, and their responsible presentations.

The second part of Chapter Two proposes the emergence of a visible and powerful strain in contemporary American creative nonfiction that combines the investigation-based endeavors of muckrakers and the New New Journalists (Boynton) in an attempt to attract attention to current social, cultural, political ills with an intellectual and ethical approach. The journalistic methodologies extend into serious discussions in Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (2001) and Vollmann's *Imperial* (2009). In this part, the study makes a very important and necessary exception to its focus on the selected four writers and briefly introduces another contemporary American writer in tandem with Baker and Vollmann for this very particular discussion. *Eating Animals* (2009) by Jonathan Safran Foer, who is also remarkably prolific in both creative nonfiction and fiction, contributes to the argument of this part in that Foer, too, like Baker and Vollmann, treats creative nonfiction as a venue for ethical reflection and relies on research and

[99] William T. Vollmann, **Rising Up and Rising Down**, Ecco, New York, 2004, (Rising), p.46.

responsible treatment of subject matter. What separates the works of Baker, Vollmann, and Foer from being mere instances of investigative journalism is that they emerge from their observations with "an artistic eye" that "combines art with personal testimony to explore the messy details" of life.[100] In *Double Fold*, Baker lays bare capitalist and technological mechanisms en route to the destruction of world's print heritage: libraries discard their historical card catalogues and literally dispense with rare old books, newspaper collections in order to open up space. In *Imperial*, Vollmann explores an imaginary territory that acquires its invented quality based on the paradoxical incongruity between the territory's past and present. Imperial Valley that lies on the border of the U.S. and Mexico is portrayed as site of endless sufferings inflicted on its people, from the irrigation dreams of 1900s to the present's unresolved problems of poverty and illegal immigrants. Vollmann demonstrates the American author's imperative to criticize the empire that is America. In *Eating Animals*, Foer unpacks the hidden realities of factory farms after rigorous research and discusses the personal ethical consequences of our conscious disinterest in modern meat production and consumption. Evaluating the choices we make with regard to what we eat and the stories we invent for our tastes, moods, and habits as belonging to the realm of ethics, Foer invites us to reconsider the stories we tell ourselves about our food, hence our life. The impact of these works of creative nonfiction drive in part from the serious and in-depth research behind them and in part from the deserving importance the writers find in their topics and their responsible and artistic treatment of their topics.

The third part of Chapter Two turns to the essays of Franzen and Wallace. Both writers use the medium of the essay as an integral part of their aesthetic and ideological programs of literature. We find literary manifestoes, elegies for the declining significance of literature, analyses of the ills of American culture; suggestions for readers and writers alike, for the right treatment of the power of literature, reminders for everybody valuing literature that the pervasive influence of culture, technology, and entertainment need not detain anybody from continuing to engage with literature.

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[100] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxiii.

Chapter Three opens with Franzen and Wallace's literary essays that comprise perhaps the best literary criticism of the last decades. While Franzen and Wallace repeatedly diagnose the corrosive effects of postmodernist tropes of detached irony, nihilism, and solipsism, they also propose a new literary agenda to restore the vital functions of literature, such as its inherently redemptive project in portraying the human follies and vulnerabilities, and its attempt at understanding life in all forms of its miseries and beauties. When Wallace criticizes irony, he refers not so much to irony as a rhetorical strategy of saying one thing and meaning another as to irony as an expression of a cynical, nihilistic outlook on life.[101] Therefore, their works go beyond elegies for a fading or failing literature because the authors outline new methodologies for the novel to recover from the negative effects of postmodernism without being stuck in a postmodernism debate. In fact, Wallace's essays "have been significant landmarks for critics of his work in much the same way that T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' or Henry James's 'The Art of Fiction' were for critics of those writers."[102]

The second part of Chapter Three reads Wallace's *Infinite Jest* as a cautionary tale about the consequences of a life lived outside the peripheries of human emotion and connectedness that is instead mired in ironic nihilism and happy/compulsive pleasures of the escape from the self. This warning turns into a lesson on the dangers of the lack of moral terms to live by: dishonesty is in essence the denial of the self's relationship to the other and its dangerous worship of the self; sympathy and empathy are the glue that bind humanity together if not a validation of a single human soul's subsistence; both physical and psychological integrity is impossible where the self's war against itself does not cohere into a form of kenosis (Hassan) that requires self-emptying and connecting spiritually to some higher truth and trustingly give oneself away to it. If Wallace seeks "a cure for human despair," he comes close to achieving that.[103] In this way, *Infinite Jest* dramatizes the importance

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[101] See Allard Den Dulk's "Beyond Endless 'Aesthetic'" for a comparison of Wallace's concept of irony "as an attitude towards existence" with Kierkegaard's critique of irony.
[102] Bradley J. Fest, "'Then Out Of The Rubble': The Apocalypse in David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction", **Studies in the Novel**, Volume:44, No:3, 2012, p.284.
[103] David Foster Wallace, **Consider the Lobster and Other Essays**, Back Bay, New York, 2006, (Lobster), p.59.

of ethical reflection both for serious literature and for each of us. As Wallace remarks in a 2005 interview,

> *[s]erious art is where difficult, complex questions get made urgent and human and real; and the political climate in the U.S.A. right now is so ugly, unreflective, selfish, jingoistic, and materialistic that serious art has probably never been needed more. But serious art makes people uncomfortable—it is meant to—and large portions of our populace seem willing to go to great lengths now to avoid being uncomfortable; and we have elected leaders who are weak and short-sighted enough to be willing to exploit that fact. So these are also very dark, frightening times.*[104]

The third part of Chapter Three turns to the third and fourth novels of Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010). In these novels Franzen investigates the possibilities of becoming an individual in America around the 1990s and 2000s and portrays identity as a site of continuous re-construction with regard to the unceasing conflict between the self's ethical being and its efforts at self-fulfillment. In both *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, doing the right thing and becoming a good, proper, authentic self generate irrational passions of fulfillment, thereby creating a continuous interplay between rationality and irrationality, ethical and unethical, as the defining dynamic of the construction/destruction of the self. By presenting the future of American public life through the inner torments of individual family members, Franzen not only offers a symbolic interpretation of the prospects waiting America in the future but also reminds the centrality of the human element to fiction with his exquisitely drawn characters whose dilemmas, failures, vulnerabilities, follies, vanities, corrections, and freedoms prove the worth of serious and responsible contemporary fiction.

The last part of Chapter Three discusses the under-appreciated fiction of Vollmann and Baker. For all their differences in methodology and subject matter, these writers not only think and discuss their topics thoroughly from myriad viewpoints but they also demonstrate the importance of such endeavors that try to face reality in all its forms. In their fiction, they discover what they do not know about: Vollmann people, the other, and Baker the quotidian existence, the mind's relationship to it, and the self. In the meantime, they offer new perspectives for leading meaningful lives. For Vollmann, being human and having a meaningful life

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[104] Wallace, Conversations, p.153.

is closely related to the self's capacity to know the other, whether he or she be a Mexican from whom his or her rightful water is stolen by an imperial force, or a delusional Vietnam veteran so lonely that he searches for a ghost, or a prostitute with flesh so scarred that her endurance gives a glimpse of the human heart's strength. For Baker, being human requires that the human mind slow down and pay attention to the mundane's, the everyday's importance and understand the self in relation to the seemingly unimportant details of the everyday, understand the self by way of the self's relationship to the everyday, the self as the other, as it were.

As the discussions of the creative nonfiction and fiction of Baker, Vollmann, Franzen, and Wallace demonstrate, there are things that hold the people, the world together: universal values of communication, love, sharing, ethical treatment of others, justice, the intellect, human emotion. These writers show that these values can be reflected effectively and truthfully in literature. The commitment of these writers to literature's ability to convey these central concerns renders them representative of a new direction in contemporary American literature. They believe not only in the redemptive role of representing the human but also in its expression in literature. In their works, we see that the writer's sense of moral responsibility and ambition for ethical reflection is in fact one of the determining characteristics of contemporary American literature's concerns, which this study will attempt at demonstrating.

CHAPTER ONE
THEORIZING THE CONTEMPORARY

1.1. MAJOR TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP

In recent literary criticism's attempts to theorize contemporary literature, three distinct trends, or major areas of interest, can be delineated. First, the permeable boundary between the contemporary and the postmodern both permits and delays speaking of these two terms on their own or in conjunction. Second, the seemingly oppositional relationship between realism and postmodernism continues to keep its vitality even after the rules of the game have been well established. Third, a rigorous set of efforts to define the end of postmodernism and some efforts at identifying what follows it make a strong presence, if not pressure, on the literary scene. At the same time, the debate surrounding postmodernist irony, nihilism, and relativism turns into a rich discussion of culture and literature. These separate strands of arguments tend to overlap, or inform, and in some cases enrich, one another.

1.1.1. Saturations: The Contemporary and the Postmodern

The contemporary and the postmodern share an uncomfortably permeable boundary from which some complexities inherent in the term of postmodernism seep in and create complications. As Ihab Hassan writes in his 2003 article "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust," "postmodernism was born in strife and nursed in contention; it still remains moot. Lock ten of its foremost proponents in a room, and watch the blood trickle under the door."[105] In a way, the continuation of the ambiguity surrounding postmodernism may be taken to escalate the problem of defining the contemporary, which is mostly used synonymously—and not unproblematically—with the avant-garde, the experimental, or in short, as the redundancy goes, the postmodern. The contested meaning and scope, besides value, of what falls under the category of contemporary literature is possibly the most obvious challenge to an investigation of recent literary production.

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[105] Ihab Hassan, "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust", **Angelaki**, **Journal of the Theoretical Humanities**, Volume:8, No:1, 2003, (Beyond), p.3.

In American literary scholarship of the last decades, a controversial issue has been whether the term contemporary should be limited to postmodernist works following World War II. The biggest challenge in this debate is related to an inevitable discrepancy born of the incongruity between such periodization and the quality of the present-dayness of the word contemporary. As Alan Kirby explains,

> *[i]t is true that a generation gap has opened up between the professors teaching postmodernism modules and their students. An undergraduate taking such a module in 2010 is likely to have been born in 1989 or after, and likelier still to be given no primary text to read published in her or his lifetime. This is Mom and Dad's culture. Some professors will nevertheless present it as the latest thing in cutting-edge aesthetics, although it all belongs to the same era as Betamax video recorders, shoulder pads, and voodoo economics (and that is at best; teaching* The French Lieutenant's Woman *recently I found myself having to explain as many of the "contemporary" references as of the Victorian ones to students for whom this novel represented, indeed, their* grandparents' *culture). Postmodern texts try to get to grips with the Cold War and television; today's students take for granted Islamism and the Internet.*[106]

The essential difficulty, then, is the conception of contemporary literature as avant-garde fiction of the last decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, as Kirby admits, these works do not qualify as contemporary in the sense of belonging to the present-day world of references and allusions. Therefore, one major difficulty regarding the contemporary is associating it unproblematically with the literary output of previous decades whose pop cultural references and political agendas do not resonate with the current moment.

Another problem regards the contemporary's exclusionary logic of realist works in favor of avant-garde or experimental works. While some scholars argue that contemporary literature denotes experimental postmodernist works, others contend that the polarization of the contemporary between experimental and realistic works has been superseded with the passing of the high-tide of postmodernism after the 1960s. This debate is illustrated in the 2008 twentieth anniversary volume of the journal *American Literary History* in which two literary scholars, Amy Hungerford and Gordon Hutner, enter a debate on the definition of the contemporary.

According to Yale professor of English Amy Hungerford's article "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," the reach of contemporary American

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[106] Alan Kirby, **Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture**, Continuum, New York, 2009, p.46.

literature has begun to change since the 1990s. On a global scale, important political events such as "the fall of the Berlin Wall, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War seemed to tell us that we had arrived at a moment of genuine historical transformation."[107] Noting that "political watersheds are one thing, but cultural or aesthetic ones quite another," she nonetheless considers the effects of identity politics of the 1990s to have an impact on the range of contemporary fiction. Referring to the identity-based wars in Bosnia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, she writes that "if, in Bosnia, your identity could get you killed, in America, it seemed, your identity could get you published."[108]

The first most visible literary change in U.S. in this period, therefore, is the growing force of multiculturalism which changes the organization of post-World War II literature; "on the American literary scene, pluralism defined the moment," and "scholars of the period since 1945 had the pleasure of a vastly expanded canon, a wealth of well-crafted novels from relatively unknown writers to consider, a few major careers to account for, and the task of defining the second half of the century ahead of them."[109] This meant that contemporary fiction need not depend anymore on a division established between "the 'postmodern' avant-garde and the writing of women and people of color that was so often dismissed, in the academy, as naively realist or concerned more with social issues than with the development of literary aesthetics."[110] (411). In other words, the contemporary's exclusionary logic was superseded.

For Amy Hungerford, the breakdown in the opposition between experimentalism and realism, and in line with this, the recognition of multicultural literature *as* contemporary

> *crystallized an emerging critical consensus that the categories produced both by the literary press and by the academic disputes over the [contemporary] canon produced, at best, a misleading opposition between these two kinds of writing. At worst, that opposition suggested a hierarchy of value in which the writing of mainly white male authors such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, William Gaddis, and Don DeLillo was deemed "literary" whereas the work of*

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[107] Amy Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary", **American Literary History**, Spec. issue *Twenty Years of American Literary History: The Anniversary Volume,* Volume:20, No:1-2, 2008, p.410.
[108] Hungerford, p.410.
[109] Hungerford, pp.410-411.
[110] Hungerford, p.411.

> *writers such as Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, Alice Walker, and Joan Didion was thought to be mainly concerned with the sociological aspects of fiction. This bifurcation of value, a legacy of New Criticism's investment in modernist difficulty, was one of the primary ways that modernist understandings of the literary stretched beyond the moment of high modernist aesthetic production.*[111]

The essence of Hungerford's argument is that since the 1990s, the definition and the scope of the contemporary has undergone major revisions that have had liberating effects on the scholar of the contemporary. She writes that there is a "new generation of critics" whose work is "not confined to those hefty postmodern slabs that formerly sat on syllabi as proof of the difficulty, and thus the worth, of contemporary writing in the academy."[112] This, of course, has not been a smooth change, in large part due to some ingrained sense of associating the contemporary with the difficult, complex postmodern novel. She illustrates her point with a professional anecdote. In 1999, Hungerford takes the liberty, so to speak, of including both a postmodernist novel, Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and a realist novel, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) in her course on post-1945 American fiction at Yale University. Her students react with distaste to her syllabus: *The Crying of Lot 49* is too short, and not even difficult enough to qualify as a postmodern novel while *Blood Meridian* simply does not qualify as post-1945 fiction because it is, simply put, not postmodern. Problems with periodization prove to be very far-reaching in their implications despite revisions the contemporary and the postmodern go through.

While Amy Hungerford identifies a difficulty with the meaning of the contemporary due to its misguided equivalency with difficult and long postmodern novels and states that the academy first established and then corrected this idea, Gordon Hutner maintains that there is another issue to be considered on the matter of the academy's relation to the contemporary. In "Historicizing the Contemporary: A Response to Amy Hungerford" (2008), Hutner reminds that literary historians tend to understand the term contemporary as representative of postmodernist works and

[111] Hungerford, p.411.
[112] Hungerford, p.418.

define it as "a déclassé period."[113] In response, scholars of the contemporary period often feel liable for the "critical resuscitation" of the contemporary.[114] Hutner notes that the academy is usually skeptical on the worth of the contemporary in comparison to classics that seem to demand so much more literary expertise and learning in letters than do the former. In this sense, Hutner argues that the defense of the contemporary, or postmodern, on the basis of the rigor it requires due to complexity that Hungerford mentions, albeit disapprovingly, is in fact a reaction to this skepticism which unfortunately goes unmentioned in Hungerford's analysis.

Hutner too exemplifies his point with a personal anecdote. As a student at Kenyon College in 1970, he remembers that although "a year-long course in Contemporary American Fiction" was offered, the Department of English "would not assign it majors' credit!"[115] He believes that the idea was "that the contemporary was, in a word, too easy, since it did not pose the same sorts of problems of interpretation as reading" canonical works did.[116] In other words, English Departments trained their students as "sentient citizens of the culture," equipped them with the ability to notice "the interest and challenge (if there was one) of the contemporary on their own. […] The assumption went that once students got their mettle tested with Milton and Melville, they would be quite capable of distinguishing for themselves what is worthwhile and what is not in contemporary writing."[117] Hutner dismisses this view and argues this has been an unfortunate instance of "self-serving rationalization" which has caused collateral damage on students by compromising their knowledge of literature.[118] He complains that "years of reading the canon did not fit [the students] for reading anything other than canonical work."[119] For instance, he protests at "the number of younger readers who point to Allen Ginsberg as their favorite contemporary poet—contemporary of whom? Not

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[113] Gordon Hutner, "Historicizing the Contemporary: A Response to Amy Hungerford", **American Literary History**, Spec. issue *Twenty Years of American Literary History: The Anniversary Volume*, Volume:20, No:1-2, 2008, p.420.
[114] Hutner, p.420.
[115] Hutner, p.420.
[116] Hutner, p.421.
[117] Hutner, p.421.
[118] Hutner, p.421.
[119] Hutner, p.421.

the students, nor even their teachers, but their teachers' teachers!"[120, 121] This fact, on its own, attests to a serious problem: "literary academe failed miserably, almost completely, in the one extramural mission entrusted to it that it might have been able to sustain: the creation of a book-reading, book-buying public. Instead, the academy disdained the assignment."[122]

One way to fulfill this assignment, for Hutner, would be through a revision of the role and meaning of realist literature, which brings us to another issue that both Hungerford and Hutner raise. Besides the academy's responsibility in fostering some problematical notions of the contemporary, Hungerford and Hutner also differ with regard to the place of realism in the contemporary. In contrast to Hungerford, who argues that realism has acquired its rightful place within the contemporary in tandem with the increasing importance of multiculturalism in politics and culture, Hutner asserts that "the contemporary literature that now gets left out of academic study is the mainstream writing that could define the contemporary as least as saliently as experimental or avant-garde writing does."[123] In this way, Hutner argues that realistic works are not limited to multicultural works. He even claims that in teaching mainstream realist writers such as Anne Tyler, Russell Banks, Richard Ford, and Jane Smiley "we would merely be attending to the most dominant movement in contemporary fiction of the last twenty-five years, the return to realism."[124] Hutner explains,

> *the benefits of teaching realism as the defining feature of contemporary literature are enormous. One obvious benefit is that students actually read the books and debate their implications. […] Of course, that means taking middle-class culture more seriously as an object of inquiry, but why should that be so hard, since we seem perfectly able to do so in earlier historical periods.*

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[120] Writing in 2008, Hutner questions the still equivocal range of the contemporary which has "le[d] various anthologies to describe the contemporary as post-1950, -1960, -1970, or even post-1980" (Hutner, 2008, p.420). Following the Ginsberg example (1926-1977), it seems that Hutner considers the contemporary as comprised of works by living writers. This is further evinced in his suggestion that contemporary literature anthologies "introduce students not to writers of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s but to those writing in the world into which the students were born" (Hutner, 2008, p.422). We could note here that the seventh edition of the five-volume *Norton Anthology of American Literature* achieves something along this line, albeit in a limited way, in its last volume devoted post-1945 literature, and includes such contemporary writers as Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Richard Powers, and William T. Vollmann, all of whom are writing at the moment at the time of study's completion in 2013.

[121] Hutner, p.421.

[122] Hutner, p.421.

[123] Hutner, p.422.

[124] Hutner, p.422.

> *Teaching contemporary realism enables us to give the fiction of our own time the same urgency and power we find in much older texts, leading us to delve more deeply into our history—the political, spiritual, economic, social, and sexual life of our moment. […] Scrutinizing the writing of our day, we might come to know the contemporary so well that we even have something to say to the populace—not to mention our students—about the books of their time instead of leaving it to Oprah [Winfrey], for then we would be producing readers, not just consumers. And, after all, that is very much our job—and perhaps our most important one—one that we have neglected so lamentably.*[125]

Therefore, the contemporary's problematical relationship with postmodernism leads to further problems with the definition contemporary realist works. While for Hungerford realism is on the rise with the increasing production of multicultural works that counter the so-called difficulty of the postmodern and challenge the perception of the contemporary as limited strictly to the latter, Hutner revises such conception of realism and posits that mainstream realist wiring, as apart from multicultural writing, is in many ways *the* contemporary. These discussions are important in the sense that they extend the debate on the contemporary to the further problematization of the conflict between postmodernism and realism which will be analyzed in the following discussion.

Before moving on to the next section, however, we should note that while Hungerford and Hutner present their reactions to and solutions for postmodernism, they do so as theoreticians. This is not to say that they deal with their topics through abstractions. Rather, their sense of classification or qualification operates by way of the scholar's approach of a systemic categorization. As Jeffrey Karnicky demonstrates in *Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture* (2007), most contemporary literary criticism presents itself as a debate on postmodernism and remains at the level of a "drive to systematize and define."[126] Best exemplified by Fredrick Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984), the postmodernism debate disappears in the loop it creates: criticism endlessly tries to "characterize 'the system' that has produced and is simultaneously produced by postmodern literature."[127] The analyses of the economic, cultural, aesthetic, or stylistic aspects of the system—late capitalism, postmodernism, post-

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[125] Hutner, pp.423-424.
[126] Jeffrey Karnicky, **Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture**, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, p.19.
[127] Karnicky, p.19.

postmodernism etc.—make it impossible for criticism to discuss reading as a theory and as a practice.

Also worth noting is that Karnicky finds no comfort in the fact that Jameson's discussions have been regular "entry points" to most discussions of postmodernism, so he takes Jameson to task for urging "an endless rehearsal" in defining postmodernism that short-circuits much criticism: "Jameson argues that *every* discussion of postmodernism must begin by considering the inevitable tensions and inconsistencies engendered by the use of the word 'postmodernism.'"[128] Considering the fact that the discussion of the contemporary usually entails discussion of the postmodern, Karnicky's insight is valuable in the sense that his argument demonstrates the necessity of separating the discussion of the contemporary from that of the postmodern. Pointing at a dead-end, Karnicky explains,

> *[a] discussion that constantly grounds itself in "postmodernism" inevitably diminishes the singularity of texts that come to be considered postmodern. Every postmodern text becomes an example of the fluidity of the concept. One could easily drown in the proliferation of fluid definitions of "postmodernism," or better yet, "postmodernisms." At the same time, little gets said about the work such fluidity does. Where is this added "s" leading postmodern literary criticism? What's the purpose of opening the debate to a wider and wider field?*[129]

It may seem that there is little hope for closure in the ongoing conversation on postmodern literature whose open-ended, arbitrary, fragmentary, and incomplete nature works against closure or clarification. Yet these qualities, paradoxically, have led to "a proliferation of discourse (no master narratives) that nonetheless strives toward a totalized theory of postmodernism (as incomplete and undecidable)."[130]

At this point, Karnicky attacks the institutional agenda of postmodern literary criticism as "a movement toward both proliferation and control."[131] In his opinion, "the desire 'to name the system' coexists with stated efforts to resist totalizing narratives, even as this resistance serves to create an unspoken closure in the discipline."[132] He explains that

> *[m]ore and more names for the system can be argued as more and more postmodern literary criticism proliferates, just as long as such criticism is*

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[128] Karnicky, p.20.
[129] Karnicky, p.21.
[130] Karnicky, p.22.
[131] Karnicky, p.22.
[132] Karnicky, p.22.

> *"useful and satisfying"—that is, so long as the criticism furthers the body of knowledge known as postmodern literary criticism. Postmodern literary critics must resign themselves to waiting for results as we strive to understand, order, categorize, define, and systematize a resolutely open-ended, fragmentary, and unsystematic postmodern literature. The terms of the debate become the limits of the discourse; the best one can hope to do is produce incomplete, undecidable, and useful narratives about postmodern literature while working toward some debate-ending clarification that always exists somewhere off in the future. [… E]ncountering postmodern literature is not a program geared toward debate and understanding, but is instead a process, a means of producing a different kind of future. The movement toward this future is not a straight line of clarification. Rather, it is a continually fluctuating line of creation.*[133]

Karnicky's sense of this interminable, procedural character of defining postmodernism is also echoed by Ihab Hassan in "Beyond Postmodernism." According to Ihab Hassan the debatable issue of postmodernism can be explained "as a continuous exercise in self-definition. Or perhaps we can simply call it the equivocal autobiography of an age."[134] Hassan hears the "chorus of the moment" in 2003, asking, to no avail, "Who am I, who are we" amid a "limitless anxiety of self-nomination."[135] This fact can be taken to inform recent literary scholarship: not defining, but announcing the demise of postmodernism, and in tandem with it, defining what follows it seems to shape current literary scholarship. It may be useful to look, in the next section, at the arguments of Ihab Hassan and James Wood as well as others with Karnicky's proposals in mind. While they all react to postmodernism from different angles and suggest varying solutions, their arguments focus on narrative possibilities, on ways that theory and criticism becomes more aligned with the human element of literature.

1.1.2. Confrontations: Realism and Postmodernism

Postmodernism's problematization of realistic representation through self-reflexive metafictional techniques has defined the early discussions of the movement. Various scholars suggest that these techniques have now exhausted themselves and

[133] Karnicky, p.22.
[134] Hassan, Beyond, p.4.
[135] Hassan, Beyond, p.4.

something along the line of realism is re-emerging. For instance, echoing some of the arguments discussed above, Lawrence Rainey explains that since the late 1990s,

> *[p]ostmodernism, which had been defined as anything from an arched eyebrow to a fundamental reordering of our perception of ourselves and our place in the world, is plainly waning in prestige. In literature, especially, it has been dismissed as little more than fiction and poetry for overeducated white males. The rise of ethnic fictions has been accompanied by a discernible revival of realism, sometimes labeled neorealism, while interest in postcolonialism has entailed a return to the kinds of systemic issues (globalization, cosmopolitan communities). […] If postmodernism is now a spent force and neorealism is increasingly prevalent (it is certainly true at present that realism dominates all creative writing programs in the U.S.),*[136] *then perhaps a great age of literary experimentalism has simply drawn to a close, one inaugurated and sanctioned by modernism, one extended and finally depleted in postmodernism.*[137]

In contrast to the premises of this argument, we could look at Patricia Waugh's influential discussion of metafiction. For Waugh, the rise of experimental literature has attested to the fact that "the materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists."[138] As she clarifies, "[t]here has been paranoia, on the part of both novelists *and* critics for whom the exhaustion and rejection of realism is synonymous with the exhaustion and rejection of the novel itself."[139] Yet Waugh defines metafiction both as an important stage, a rejuvenating phase in the history of the novel and a response to culture at large. For her, the self-reflexive inquiry of metafiction poses "questions about the viability of the novel itself and its possible future development."[140]

If we are indeed talking about a stage in literature that is done with postmodernism, we should nonetheless take notice of metafiction's possible contributions to literature. For instance, Waugh praises self-reflexivity and formal experimentation for comprising "a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction."[141] At work behind this theory is a necessity: unlike the modernists who found a "creative tension" in their resistance to bourgeois values, postmodernists

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[136] The debates surrounding creative writing programs and literary realism's place in them will be explored in detail in Chapter Three's discussion of David Foster Wallace's essays.
[137] Rainey, Lawrence, (Ed.), **Modernism, An Anthology**, Blackwell, Oxford, 2008, pp.xxvi-xxvii.
[138] Patricia Waugh, **Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction**, Routledge, London, 1984, p.7.
[139] Waugh, p.9.
[140] Waugh, p.60.
[141] Waugh, p.2.

lacked such "clear-cut oppositions."[142] Therefore, the opposition was created "*within* the form of the novel itself":

> *Metafictional writers have found a solution to this [lack of oppositions] by turning inwards to their own medium of expression, in order to examine the relationship between fictional form and social reality. They have come to focus on the notion that "everyday" language endorses and sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently "innocent" representations. The literary-fictional equivalent of this "everyday" language of "common sense" is the language of the traditional novel: the conventions of realism. Metafiction sets up an opposition, not to ostensibly "objective" facts in the "real" world, but to the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality.*[143]

Therefore, the key point that requires consideration is metafiction's, or postmodernist writing's attitude toward realism:

> *Metafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them. Very often realistic conventions supply the "control" in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves. […] Metafiction, then, does not abandon "the real world" for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination. What it does is re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover—through its own self-reflection—a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly "written."*[144]

Thus, recent criticism proceeds from this problematization but continues to create an oppositional relationship between realism and experimentalism. In fact, the opposition between realism and postmodernism has acquired an either-or quality. What David Lodge argues in 1971 still holds true: "David Lodge argued that the contemporary novelist stood at a crossroads in terms of form; in one direction lay realism, whilst in the other was a continued modernist and experimental approach to fiction."[145] The following discussion will try to illuminate how this conflict manifests itself in recent criticism with a focus especially on narrative itself.

It is possible to say that there is patient and constructive argumentation on the topic, such as Ihab Hassan's proposal of a postmodernist aesthetics of realism that relies as much on ethics as on spirituality. There is also harsh criticism as seen in

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[142] Waugh, p.10.
[143] Waugh, p.11.
[144] Waugh, p.19.
[145] Bentley, Contemporary, p.30.

James Wood's attack on some hazardous sense of hyperactivity in the big postmodern contemporary novel's impulse of realistic representation amid incongruent self-reflexivity. Despite its negative tone, however, Wood's arguments make it possible, by way of his specific criticisms, to explore narrative omniscience in contemporary novels through Paul Dawson, as well as to investigate the implications of the big novel within the American literary history through Stefano Ercolino and Mark Greif's analyses.

Ihab Hassan offers a refreshing perspective on postmodernism's relationship to realism meanwhile reconfiguring both postmodernism and realism. Hassan has always been a prominent figure in discussions of contemporary, especially postmodern, literature and theory. His much-anthologized essay "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography" (1971) is one of the earliest defenses of postmodernism, which, Hassan argues, "is not primarily negative, not simply a recognition of the limits of human inquiry" but a "positive and ecstatic" endeavor that follows from modernism.[146] After writing authoritative texts on postmodernism such as *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971, 1982) and *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Practice* (1987), Hassan's influence has continued well into the twenty-first century, albeit with a notable change in his approach to postmodernism. In his 2001 article, "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context," Hassan explains that since 1987 he has been

> *wonde[ring], like others, how to recover the creative impulse of postmodernism without atavism or reversion, without relapse into enervated forms or truculent dogmas, without cynicism or fanaticism. Facile skepticism lacked conviction; ideological politics was full of passionate mendacity. I turned then to the philosophical pragmatism of William James.*[147]

In pragmatism, Hassan finds a "resis[tance to] the hubris of theory, the impatience of ideology, the rage of our desires and needs," qualities which render

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[146] Lawrence Cahoone, (Ed.). **From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology**, Blackwell, Oxford, 2003, p.410.
[147] Ihab Hassan, "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context", **Philosophy and Literature**, Volume:25, No:1, 2001, (From), p.10.

pragmatism a valuable asset for literary theory in general.[148] For postmodernism in particular, pragmatism appears vital primarily due to

> *its intellectual generosity; its epistemic or noetic pluralism; its avoidance of stale debates (about mind and matter, for instance, freedom and necessity, nurture and nature); and its affinities with open, liberal, multicultural societies, where issues must be resolved by mediation and compromise rather than dictatorial power or divine decree—all these make it congenial to postmodernism without acceding to the latter's potential for nihilism, its spirit of feckless and joyless "play."*[149]

These arguments cohere into a new theory of postmodernism and Hassan has been articulating, at least since 2001, the possibilities and necessities of new directions in contemporary literary theory. In four influential essays, "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context" (2001) "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust" (2003), "Realism, Truth, and Trust in Postmodern Perspective" (2003), and "Literary Theory in an Age of Globalization" (2008), we may find the main points of Hassan's proposal of a move "beyond postmodernism," by which he means the establishment of "a postmodernism not of suspicion but of trust"[150] Although these essays may seem repetitive in some sense, each foregrounds a different perspective of Hassan's main idea and it is possible to say that these essays are the preliminary articulations of a new theory on the trajectory of postmodernism. Hassan explains that he hopes to "sketch a pattern, trace the fissures in our thinking about literary theory today."[151] In the process, postmodern theory itself may be of help since "it can become a heightened mode of self-awareness, self-critical of its own assumptions, its own bleached myths and invisible theologies, and tolerant of what is not itself."[152]

Hassan's starting point is the pursuit of "a basis of theory—and by implication art—in a globally fragmented age."[153] He argues that literary theory is "vanishing" under the particular historical, political, and social conjectures of the contemporary globalized world which present great challenges to literary theory: literary theory cannot "find legitimacy in sectarian politics or fundamentalist dogma,

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[148] Hassan, From, p.11.
[149] Hassan, From, p.10.
[150] Hassan, Beyond, p.3.
[151] Ihab Hassan, "Literary Theory in an Age of Globalization", **Philosophy and Literature**, Volume:32, 2008, (Literary), p.10.
[152] Hassan, From, p.10.
[153] Hassan, Literary, p.6.

not in cultural identity or transcendental philosophy."[154] As for postmodernism, we cannot say that Hassan has lost faith in its potential. Yet he believes that it needs to be refreshed, and the pragmatism of Emerson and William James helps Hassan devise a methodology for such refreshment.

For Hassan, the world "seems lost in partisanship and prejudice, abrasive ideologies and slick skepticism."[155] Against this chaos, "sane critics may look for a way out in ideas of pluralism, eclecticism, hybridity, and cosmopolitanism."[156] (Investment in these ideas, however, is futile in the long run because at some point, "these ideas crash on the realities or our time: ethnic violence, economic volatility, and the empires in decline. […] Above all, they crash on the obdurate self, on self-interest without borders."[157] He is critical of the common—and problematic—characterizations of postmodernism with "fragments, hybridity, relativism, play, parody, pastiche, an ironic sophistical stance, an ethos bordering on kitsch and camp."[158] Amid this plethora of definitions, postmodernism has established "a limitless anxiety of self-definition. Who am I, who are we—is that not the chorus of the moment?"[159] For him, this "epochal crisis of identity" may be overcome if we can manage to "discover new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and wholes—indeed, new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centers and centers."[160]

In parallel with this anxiety for identity, another challenge surfaces: one of the biggest challenges to contemporary literary theory is "a collision, not only of styles, values, and expectations, but also of radical assumptions of being. Call it ontological diversity, a clash not of civilizations but of ways of being and breathing in the world."[161] Hassan posits that these problems may be overcome through "pu[tting] certain ideas, certain words, into play, words that we have forgotten in academe, words that need, more than refurbishing, reinvention."[162] These words are

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[154] Hassan, Literary, pp.9, 6.
[155] Hassan, Literary, pp.1, 2.
[156] Hassan, Literary, p.2.
[157] Hassan, Literary, p.2.
[158] Hassan, Beyond, p.4.
[159] Hassan, Beyond, p.4.
[160] Hassan, Beyond, pp.5, 6.
[161] Hassan, Literary, p.3.
[162] Hassan, Beyond, p.6.

"truth, trust, spirit, all uncapitalized, in addition to words like reciprocity and respect, sympathy and empathy."[163] Capitalized Truth pertains to foundations, metanarratives, absolutisms, universalisms that were effectively attacked by post-structuralists. Uncapitalized truth, for Hassan, refers to our experiences in "daily life," and the pragmatic character of knowledge allows us to distinguish truth from falsehood and deception; truth is not universal but pragmatic, based on experience.

In order to emphasize truth's connection to experience in general and to his suggestion of the interconnectedness of truth and trust, Hassan turns to William James whose pragmatist philosophy is based on

> *an idea of* trust: truth rests not on transcendence but on trust. *This fiduciary principle is epistemic, ethical, and personal all at the same time, since our trust must also depend on another's trust, and our faith, James remarks in* The Will to Believe*, "is faith in someone else's faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case." Hence the self-defeating character of radical relativism, of extreme particularism, which denies reciprocity, denies both empathy and obligation.*[164]

Hassan employs the legal term fiduciary to underline the reciprocal establishment of trust between two or more parties and moves on to sketch the contours of a new postmodern aesthetic which he names fiduciary realism.[165] Before moving on to his particular argument on fiduciary realism, we may note the importance Hassan bestows on truth and trust.

If truth can be based on trust, the universality of truth emerging thereof cannot be blamed for pertaining to oppressive and bounding Universal Truths. Any truth stemming from trust will comprise of empiric universals which come in various forms and "abound" in human life such as "languages, human emotions; marks of status; ceremonies of birth, marriage, and death; gods, spirits, taboos and their rituals."[166] The very existence of such universals warrants meaningful, reasonable, and just human life:

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[163] Hassan, Beyond, p.6.
[164] Hassan, Beyond, p.6.
[165] Worth noting here are R. Jay Magill's words: "Trusting behavior should flow outward from the self to larger systems created by institutional and organizational confidence. As citizens we aspire in various associations, groups, civic clubs, corporations, and charities to an ethical relationship, a civility, we hope will hold society-wide, not just in our private relationships. We abstract trust relations from local to national and beyond. To trust is therefore also to risk disappointment and the failure of others to fulfill their responsibility of being trusted. It is to have faith in the ethical reciprocity of strangers, even while knowing the risks." (Magill, 2007, p.49)
[166] Hassan, Beyond, p.7.

> *Pragmatic or "soft" universals need not alarm us; they enable both individual and collective judgments. Without them, the UN Declaration of Human Rights would vaporize; without them, Amnesty International would whistle in the wind; without them, jurists at The Hague would sit in an empty court; without them Greenpeace or the Kyoto Protocols would founder in the Pacific. In short, without qualified generalizations, no appeal to reason, freedom, or justice can stand; no victim can find redress, no tyrant retribution.*[167]

If truth is to be achieved through trust, the specific requirements of trust should be met. Hassan deploys a theological term, kenosis, in order to reconfigure this aesthetic for the particular conditions of the contemporary world. In Christian theology, kenosis refers to eradication of one's own will in order to be completely open to God's will so that not the self's but God's will could take over. Kenosis requires "self-emptying," "self-dispossession," and it is in this sense an acceptance of "void," "nothingness" in place of the self. Likening the process of trust to kenosis, Hassan argues that it is the particular character of trust that enables the achievement of universal truths:

> *more than consensus, trust depends on self-abnegation, self-emptying, something akin to* kenosis*. It requires dispassion, empathy, attention to others and to the created world, to something not in ourselves, but, ultimately, it demands self-dispossession. That is why truth and trust must remain spiritual qualities—not simply psychological, not merely political, but, above all, spiritual values.*[168]

In this turn to religious imagination and the implication of spirituality, Hassan can be seen to join other recent theorists, such as Derrida, who are considered by critics to have turned to religion and other previously rejected/neglected matters such as religion, forgiveness, ethics, justice, and friendship in the so-called aftermath of postmodernism. Yet in Hassan's case, postmodernism is not so much announced dead as declared to be in need of reconfiguration for the present circumstances of the globalized world. In this sense, Hassan only shares a thematic concern with the defenders of the end of postmodernism and is not in agreement with complete theoretical renunciations of postmodernism.

Hassan connects truth and trust to realism in a compelling manner. For him, both trust and realism are based on the same principle of attending "to others, to the

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[167] Hassan, Beyond, p.7.
[168] Hassan, Beyond, p.7.

created world, to something not in ourselves."[169] In his opinion, trust is "a persuasion of mind and heart" and the truth contemporary realism "must" employ "is a truth of trust."[170] Realism, in Hassan's opinion, comprises the effort to understand "the inviolable mystery of mind's relation to the world. It refers us to the enigma of representation, the conundrum of signs, the riddle of language, the chimera of consciousness itself."[171] More to the point, realism "is a convention built on answerable faith."[172] On the matter of postmodernist literature and realism, Hassan is explicitly critical: "I am not sure that certain qualified postmodernists would fail to recognize the price literature has paid in renouncing realism altogether" because it is the novel's bulwark against "falsity and pretence" and the guarantee of truth and trust.[173]

Hassan formulates a relationship between postmodernism and realism through what he calls "fiduciary realism" which he defines as "a postmodern aesthetic of trust."[174] The self-emptying character of trust opens up the possibility of the liberating potential, a renewed sense of "Nothingness," "Void," and "nihilism": "[o]nly through nihilism is nihilism overcome."[175] The nothingness fiduciary realism aims to achieve follows the model of the Emersonian transparent eyeball, which, without ego, claims to be nothing, to see all.[176] Such self-dispossession, in Hassan's formulation, necessitates "identification with Reality itself, dissolution of the distinction between the I and not-I."[177] He considers this distinction an "ancient curse, splitting subject from object, self from world."[178] Realistic representation, "like all modes of representation, assumes a division between the I and the Not-I," yet fiduciary realism proposes "the fading of the subject and object, the spiritual act

[169] Hassan, Beyond, p.8.
[170] Ihab Hassan, "Realism, Truth, and Trust in Postmodern Perspective", **Third Text**, Volume:17, No:1, 2003, (Realism), p.12.
[171] Hassan, Beyond, p.8.
[172] Hassan, Beyond, p.8.
[173] Hassan, Beyond, p.8.
[174] Hassan, Beyond, p.9.
[175] Hassan, Beyond, p.10.
[176] Hassan, Beyond, p.10.
[177] Hassan, Beyond, p.10.
[178] Hassan, Realism, p.13.

of self-emptying and of cosmic reconnection, [and] suggests a larger sense of trust."[179]

It is possible to consider Hassan's not necessarily negative but recovery-oriented ideas on contemporary literary studies as another attempt to establish a more responsible, intersubjectivity-based outlook on contemporary fiction. The fact that Hassan is not negative toward postmodernism but that he looks for ways to enhance it is a valuable standpoint in criticism of contemporary works.

The contemporary opposition between postmodernism and realism becomes a battleground for the novel in British literary critic James Wood's analysis. In his review of his native Zadie Smith's 2000 novel *White Teeth* in the July 24, 2000, issue of the *New Republic*, he declares a new—and very controversial—genre for the contemporary stylistically experimental novel: "hysterical realism." The review is titled "The Smallness of the 'Big' Novel: Human, All Too Inhuman," and as its aggressive diminution reveals, Wood refers to contemporary—and mostly postmodernist—novels as unimportant and trite as well as faulty for a problematical representation of the human—the *sine quo non* of realism. This study will refer to the essay's revised and extended version, which is called "Hysterical Realism"[180] and collected in Wood's *The Irresponsible Self, On Laughter and the Novel*[181] (2004).

Before moving on with Wood's analyses in "Hysterical Realism," we could take a moment to note Wood's place in current literary criticism and establish his relevance to this study's investigations. Wood is an excellent reader and he is very well-learned in his subject matter. He has written celebrated essays on William Shakespeare, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, Anton Chekhov, and many other literary masters as well as recent writers he admires such as Monica Ali and Norman Rush. Along with his in-depth knowledge in Western letters, Wood is also known—rather notoriously—for his directness and harshness. Wood claims, for instance, that Thomas Pynchon's "novels are manic factories which seem alive, but which are

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[179] Hassan, Realism, p.13.

[180] James Wood, "Hysterical Realism", **The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel**, (Hysterical), 2004. ("Hysterical Realism" merges the *New Republic* essay with Wood's 2001 *Guardian* piece titled "Tell Me How Does It Feel?" which continues the debate on the new genre Wood proposes.)

[181] *The Irresponsible Self* was a finalist in the criticism category of 2004 National Book Critics Award.

actually rather static, because they do not move, yes, they move meaning around, they displace meanings; but they do not inhabit meaning. Readers of Pynchon often mistake bright lights for evidence of habitation."[182] He uses a similar tone for Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: "It is a novel babyishly cradled in magic. It is sentimental, evasive, and cloudy. It forces magic and pure rhapsodies on its characters like a demented anesthetist bullying patients with laughing gas."[183] As Garth Risk Hallberg observes,

> *[i]n the early-middle phase of his distinguished career, Wood's nuanced readings and supple prose sat uneasily next to a writerly inclination best described as prosecutorial. On canonical authors, he was very, very good. The essays on Chekhov and Mann in* The Broken Estate *should be required reading for any novelist. Surveying the contemporary scene, however, he had a tendency to yoke his acute brilliances to larger proscriptions—and to choke them off, if necessary. Reviews like "Thomas Pynchon and the Problem of Allegory" and "Julian Barnes and the Problem of Knowing Too Much" succeeded as essays only insofar as they departed from their stated agendas; where they conformed, they amounted to manifestoes by negative example.*[184]

In this sense, Wood's objections to contemporary works may include him in the group of critics who grieve over the diminishing role and function of literature. The reasons Wood presents, however, are not related to the state of the culture or to literature's loss of authority in the face of an increasingly media- and technology-saturated culture: Wood's sole criterion is adherence to some literary standards established by his favorite writers: Saul Bellow, Gustave Flaubert, Anton Chekhov, and Leo Tolstoy. Not strictly elitist, but definitely a selective and biased literary critic like Wood inevitably privileges literature that is refined in literary language, rich in in-depth representation of the human consciousness, and exquisite in narration and plot. Hence, it is understandable that he rejects most self-conscious and experimental novels on the basis of their lack of realistic quality as well as realistic works on the basis of their lack of refinement or quality; John Updike, for instance, has been severely criticized by Wood.

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[182] James Wood, **The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief**, The Modern Library, New York, 2000, (Broken), p.186.
[183] Wood, Broken, 230.
[184] Garth Risk Hallberg, "The One That Got Away: Why James Wood is Wrong About *Underworld* (And Why Anyone Should Care)", **The Quarterly Conversation**, Volume:9, (n.d), http://www.quarterlyconversation.com/TQC9/delillo.html, (23.09.2009.), n. pag.

Despite all this unfavorable prejudice and fault-finding intolerance Wood demonstrates, he could nonetheless be considered to re-enact the Howellsian stance of the literary critic that claims responsibility over the culture's literary sensibility; he tries to function like an authoritative figure in terms of literary taste, sanctioning and disdaining according to the dictates of his personal taste and beliefs in literary worth and quality. His seriousness regarding literary quality and adherence to traditional standards for the novelistic craft may even be valuable despite the far too polemical and scorning tone he uses for a selection of novels.

It would not be wrong to say that neither the substance nor the general tone of "Hysterical Realism" diverges from Wood's trademark disapproval of much contemporary British and American fiction that we have observed above. Since Wood has established himself in the *Guardian* both as an editor and a writer, and then moved to the U.S. and started to write for and edit the *New Republic*, and finally transferred to the *New Yorker* in 2007, he has been writing extensively, and always praisefully, on canonical works. Whenever he touches on more recent literary matters, he is pungent, and unforgiving in his criticisms. He does not hesitate to dismiss important American literary figures like Morrison, Updike,[185] DeLillo, Pynchon, and Franzen. And he receives due reaction for his negative expression. In his *Boston Globe* article, for instance, Christopher Shea calls Wood an "elegant assassin" and writes about Wood's transfer to the *New Yorker* as a step in Wood's "becoming the most feared man in American letters."[186] The *New Yorker* has granted Wood "a much wider audience for his coolly incendiary literary sermons" while creating "an extraordinary stir in literary circles."[187] Shea wonders,

> *what does it mean that the most storied magazine in American history has aligned itself with a critic who essentially rejects the premises of a broad swath of contemporary American fiction? "I think he just doesn't get America," says Lindsay Waters, executive editor for the humanities at Harvard University Press, invoking the argument that a messy, sprawling country demands comparable novels. With Englishmen now installed as prominent fiction critics at the* New Yorker *and the* Atlantic *(Christopher Hitchens), "It's like being in*

[185] As Shea notes, "Updike has had *the New Yorker* as his playground for half a century. Wood has been brutal toward his recent work, indicting him for intellectual slackness" (Shea, n.pag.). One wonders the *New Yorkers*', and the magazine's dedicated readers' stance in the face of this fact.

[186] Christopher Shea, "The Elegant Assassin", **The Boston Globe**, 26.08.2007, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/007/08/26/the_elegant_assassin, (09.11.2012), n.pag.

[187] Shea, n.pag.

> *America in 1830, before Emerson arose. We still need to declare our independence." John Leonard, a book critic at* Harper's *and television critic for* New York *magazine, said in an e-mail that while he's determined not to start an intramural sniping session among critics, given the market pressures hurting literary criticism as whole, he is also "temped to suggest that not appreciating either Don DeLillo or Toni Morrison suggests that maybe you are tone-deaf to the American language as [it] is written.*[188]

Shea's account of these valuable insider details attests to the fact that Wood is not completely welcome in his criticisms of recent American fiction, especially now that he has moved to the U.S. and writes in magazines that circulate widely.

Wood's derisions of the contemporary novel have culminated in a phrase he coined for a new genre, namely, "hysterical realism" which we mentioned above.[189] In an interview, Wood recounts how upon reading Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* for a review, he "had been completely unmoved. There had been no transformation of feeling" and he decided that he felt this way due to "the central lack" of "character and the human"[190] For Wood, Zadie Smith drowns her characters' interior monologues in her own narratorial voice, which impedes satisfactory accounts of individualized characters. When she writes omnisciently, the exuberance of plot and richness of details further obliterate the reader's access to the psyches of characters. Besides Smith's *White Teeth*, which "lacks moral seriousness"[191] because of the problems with her character sketches, so to speak, other contemporary novels such as Salman Rusdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, Don DeLillo's *Underworld,*[192] David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*[193] lead Wood to wonder, "Was there some kind of genre here in which the cartoonish was

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[188] Shea, n.pag.
[189] James Wood, **The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel**. Picador, New York, 2004, (Irresponsible), p.178.
[190] James Wood, "Conversation with James Wood by Jesse Matz", **Kenyon Review**, 2005. http://www.kenyonreview.org/interviews/wood.php, (12.04.2008), (Conversation), n.pag.
[191] Wood, Hysterical, p.187.
[192] In "Jonathan Franzen and the 'Social Novel,'" which is also collected in *Irresponsible Self,* James Wood holds DeLillo responsible for advancing the idea of the contemporary novelist "as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer, fighting the culture with dialectical devilry" and argues that this idea has been "woefully influential, and will take some time to die" (Wood, Irresponsible, p.201).
[193] After the publication of this essay, Wood admits his haste in including Foster Wallace among the pack of hysterical realists (Wood, Conversation, n. pag.). He even praises David Foster Wallace's literary gift and brilliance and claims that his current importance in American literature would continue well into the next decades.

displacing the real? In which the machinery of plot was also blocking out in some way a greater simplicity?"[194] As he explains in "Hysterical Realism,"

> *[t]he big contemporary novel is a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence. Stories and substories sprout on every page, and these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion. Inseparable from this culture of permanent storytelling is the pursuit of vitality at all costs. Indeed, vitality is storytelling, as far as these books are concerned.*[195]

At the core of Wood's assessment, therefore, is the excessiveness of storytelling, which is troubled from the beginning as these novels possess encyclopedic length, uninhibited bifurcation, irritatingly intertwining stories, and all kinds of word games. According to Wood, storytelling becomes the driving force in these novels, informing their structures and motives. Contrary to the usual charge against the postmodern novel that it lacks reality, this style of writing is overabundant in stories.

Wood includes the word realism in the term he coins because of the bizarreness of some elements and details the novels include for the sake of storytelling and pretentious efforts to make a connection to reality. For instance, in *Infinite Jest*, Wood finds a "caricature"-like quality in "a terrorist group devoted to the liberation of Quebec called the Wheelchair Assassins, and a film so compelling that anyone who sees it dies."[196] In Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, Wood mocks the presence of "a talking dog, a mechanical duck, a giant octagonal cheese, and two clocks having a conversation."[197] These and similar examples lead Wood to conclude that what might otherwise be dubbed as magical realism is in fact hysterical realism, because,

> *[t]he conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, overworked. Appropriately, then, one's objections should be made not at the level of verisimilitude but at the level of morality: this style of writing is not to be faulted because it lacks reality—the usual charge—but because it seems evasive of reality. […] It is not a cock-up but a cover-up.*[198]

Wood seems uncomfortable with the deployment of realism as a mechanism of defense, of concealment, for a huge deficit: self-conscious novels lack the

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[194] Wood, Conversation, n. pag.
[195] Wood, Hysterical, p.178.
[196] Wood, Hysterical, p.179.
[197] Wood, Hysterical, p.179.
[198] Wood, Hysterical, p.179.

representation of the consciousness of fictional characters but abound in stories. In this, they are mistaken in their assumptions about what realism entails.

Wood believes that realism is mistakenly considered a genre, yet far from being a genre, realism is merely "the central language of the novel, the thing that would connect Defoe and Austen to Naipaul."[199] The language of realism serves the novel to represent individual distinction: literary realism is the representation of "human emotions, motives, and secrecies."[200] Hysterical realism, however, drowns the characters in the bifurcating, disconnected stories of plot, in which the human element disappears completely. Perhaps worse, neither the stories nor the characters convince the reader.[201] On a formal level, this seems inevitable: "An excess of storytelling has become the contemporary way of shrouding, in majesty, a lack; […] the human."[202] Characters, "without human depth," become "all shiny exteriority, a caricature."[203] The characters "are not really alive, not fully human."[204]

Although it is difficult for Wood to understand why the novel has been separated from a study of character, he nonetheless believes that "some of the more impressive novelistic minds of our age do not think that language and the representation of consciousness are the novelist's quarries anymore. Information has become the new character."[205] Furthermore, contemporary novel's efforts to carry out cultural and social criticism has turned into a sacrifice of character or "characterological depth."[206] In other words, for Wood, contemporary fiction comprises of

> *books of great self-consciousness with no selves in them; curiously arrested books which know a thousand different things—How to make the best Indonesian fish curry! The drug market in Detroit! The history of strip cartoons!—but do not know a single human being.*[207]

In his opinion, any novel that lacks the pillar of novelistic craft, namely, the representation of the consciousness of the fictional character, or the in-depth

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[199] Wood, Conversation, n.pag.
[200] James Wood, "Tom Wolfe's Shallowness, and the Trouble with Too Much Information", **Irresponsible**, (Shallowness), p.217.
[201] Wood, Hysterical, p.181.
[202] Wood, Hysterical, p. 182.
[203] Wood, Hysterical, pp. 182, 183.
[204] Wood, Hysterical, p.182.
[205] Wood, Hysterical, p.185.
[206] James Wood, "Jonathan Franzen and the Social Novel", **Irresponsible**, (Social Novel), p.201.
[207] Wood, Social Novel, p.202.

representation of the human, is not worth any literary value. The fact that he carries this argument through an attack on postmodernism is telling in the way that postmodernism is considered antithetical to realism, or building characters and telling meaningful stories.

At this point, it would be nice to observe how the very elements Wood criticizes provide a completely different perspective for another literary critic. In his 2012 article, "The Maximalist Novel," Stefano Ercolino replaces Wood's suggestion of the genre of "hysterical realism" with "the maximalist novel" and grants it a new aesthetic called "hybrid realism"—yet another coinage that weds realism with a contemporary sensibility.[208] Ercolino admits that "[t]he literature of the twentieth century was constantly traversed by strong antirealist impulses. From the historical avant-gardes to the neo-avant-gardes, from structuralism to post-structuralism, realism was variously contested as illusion, ideology, convention."[209] Yet he acknowledges that it would not be fair to consider the period "as an entirely antirealist epoch, and all the more because in American fiction of the last thirty years there have been ample, more or less convincing, attempts to return to the tradition of the realist novel."[210, 211]

The most important characteristic of Ercolino's notion of hybrid realism of the contemporary maximalist novel since the 1970s is that "[m]any of the stories and characters we encounter in maximalist novels are implausible, grotesque, or even ridiculous" and among his examples two stand out as Wood also refers to them: "brutal terrorists in wheelchairs" of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and "a group of Islamic fundamentalists with the ridiculous acronym KEVIN operating in North London" in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth.*[212] The similarity may be beyond coincidence, as Ercolino explains,

> *[t]o borrow the words of James Wood, maximalist novels are rich with "inhuman stories" and "unconvincing characters." But, while Wood imputes*

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[208] Stefano Ercolino, "The Maximalist Novel", **Comparative Literature**, Volume:64, No:3, 2012, p.253.
[209] Ercolino, p.253.
[210] Ercolino mentions Alan Wilde's proposal of "midfiction" in *Middle Grounds: Studies in Contemporary American Fiction* (1987). Midfiction defines a new category in current American fiction (in the late 1980s) for works that occupy the middle ground between realist and reflexive works.
[211] Ercolino, p.253.
[212] Ercolino, p.253.

> *such "lack of humanity" to a progressive loss of terrain for the traditional character and a new centrality for information, it is my contention that this is an aspect of the antirealist tendency that traverses the entire twentieth century and that finds considerable development within the postmodern aesthetic, in part due to the strong current of experimentalism that characterizes maximalist narratives. Nevertheless, in maximalist novels there are also elements that recall the tradition of the realist novel. From the social frescoes of* Underworld*,* White Teeth *to the subtle psychological analysis of* Infinite Jest*, from the "round" characters of* The Corrections *to the historical narratives of* Gravity's Rainbow *and* 2666*, the maximalist novel contemplates nearly all the traditional forms of literary realism. The result is a substantially hybrid realism in which mimesis and anti-referentiality end up inextricably fused. […] It is a realism that, in order to be critical, paradoxically has to defamiliarize the real, since in an epoch of diffused unreality the only way to represent the world is to make it almost unrecognizable.*[213]

These arguments more or less remain within the bounds of conventional definitions: postmodernism as experimental writing that is sometimes indifferent to the human element, and realism as accurate and in-depth presentation through linear, orderly prose. Any attempt that brings them together, whether hysterical realism or hybrid realism, works on the principle of highlighting privileged viewpoints or proposing unproblematical merging.

Another possibility of understanding the implications of the contemporary big novel would be through taking note of Mark Greif's article "'The Death of the Novel' and Its Afterlives: Toward a History of the 'Big, Ambitious Novel'" (2009). Greif's title refers to James Wood's derision in "Hysterical Realism" of the contemporary "big, ambitious novel" based on its alleged antihumanism and empty realism. Greif builds an argument around the contemporary novel's so-called excessive size that comprises of illogical plots populated by countless characters all of whom curiously lack proper humanity, at least on the level of representation. Of course, an undeniable characteristic of post-war American fiction regards size. The sheer length of some critically acclaimed novels such as Gaddis's *The Recognitions* and *JR*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, John Barth's *Letters*, and DeLillo's *Underworld* that border on a thousand pages has been attributed, rather disapprovingly, to postmodernist aesthetics of excessiveness and pointless all-inclusiveness. It would not be wrong to say that it has even become a critical commonplace to analyze such novels—which are variously called encyclopedic,

[213] Ercolino, pp.253-254.

"system novels" (Tom LeClair), or "the big ambitious novel" (James Wood)—from within a postmodernist angle that in fact hinders their right to full-fledged analysis by focusing on size as the determining factor in literary/aesthetic sensibility. However, as Greif shows, there is another possibility of analysis that manages to go beyond the stylistic elements of postmodernism, especially the matter of size and length: he outlines a history for such long works—a history firmly rooted in American literary criticism, crucial in the development of the American Novel, and one definitely not circumscribed by postmodernism.

To begin, Greif argues that long novels, or "meganovels" as he calls them, "draw a circle around a particular form of the novel, if not quite genre" that has emerged after 1945 in direct response to "the death of novel" arguments which "existed in modernist discussion before World War II, but its hardening after 1945 changed critical expectations for the major American novel."[214] In Greif's words, "[v]arious deaths of the novel had been proposed in literary culture since the early days of modernism, principally to announce that some new literary rival had already arrived."[215] In the 1920s, figures such T.S. Eliot, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Paul Valery spoke of an end of the novel in the sense of new beginnings made possible with narrative breakthroughs and James Joyce's *Ulysses* singlehandedly inaugurated such "beginning again."[216] The term *annus mirabilis* comes to mind, which was coined to observe the re-birth of the novel with *Ulysses* in 1920.

In contrast to this "deck-clearing statement, a declaration of the irrelevance or imminent demolition of an old form in favor of some particular alternative within sight," the end of the novel in the 1940s had a darker vision.[217] Influential American critic Lionel Trilling's 1948 essay "Art and Fortune," which appeared in *Partisan Review*, announced that "novelists could no longer produce the great works that in earlier periods had revealed and even changed the moral and social character of their ages."[218] Trilling presented three likely reasons for the demise of the novel.

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[214] Mark Greif, "'The Death of the Novel' and Its Afterlives: Toward a History of the 'Big, Ambitious Novel'", **Boundary 2**, Volume:36, No:2, 2009, pp.28, 11, 12.
[215] Greif, p.12.
[216] Greif, p.12.
[217] Greif, p.12.
[218] Lionel Trilling, "Art and Fortune", **Partisan Review**, December 1948, p.1271 quoted in Greif, p.13.

Aesthetically, the novel, as a "genre," was "exhausted" because "everything had been tried," and this idea "rested on a modernist idea of art forms as embodiments of a succession of avant-garde technical innovations."[219] Historically, "the world and its values had changed [so] drastically" that the novel was not anymore a meaningful artistic or creative response to them. This view posited that the novel has risen, *a la* Ian Watt, and ultimately faded away, along with the social changes, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as "changes in class structure and the rise of a bourgeois readership, the turn to secular values, individualism, and romantic love."[220] Third, "although the circumstances to which the novel was a response do still exist we either lack the power to use the form, or no longer find value in the answers that the novel provides, because the continuing circumstances have entered a phase of increased intensity."[221] For Greif, this is a "hybrid technological-sociological view" that points toward "a deeper change in the expectations of mankind" from literature.[222]

In brief, these expectations were created by the horrors and terrors of the World War II which shattered the humanist belief in progress, the decency and integrity of the human potential, thereby endangering the novel's potential to represent and warn against human malevolence. "Trilling believed the novel would now have to do the work of *restoration* of the human," and the novel was charged with the mission of "reconstituting the great former will of humanism."[223] According to Greif, at work in this task is not so much hope for the novel as for the ideological preservation of "Western man" and American ideals and values.[224] As Greif himself puts it,

> *[t]he novel became a chief agent, for critics, of a certain kind of humanism associated with the restoration of "man," reconceived by some as a nationalist or American project. This was the questioning humanism of a range of books and salvos, from Reinhold Niebuhr's* The Nature and Destiny of Man *to Lewis Mumford's* The Condition of Man *to Dwight Macdonald's "The Root is Man." It marked off a philosophical debate, centered on the experience of World War II, which asked whether there existed a fundamental nature worth defending; what the correct construal of the pattern of human history should be; how*

[219] Greif, p.13.
[220] Greif, p.14.
[221] Greif, p.13.
[222] Greif, p.14.
[223] Greif, p.15.
[224] Greif, p.13.

> *"man" might be helped or trapped by faith in ideology or religion; and whether humanity was destined to be altered by technology. Only the United States, it seemed, had the remaining freedom and resources to restore a robust human nature. This enormous crisis was what critics felt the novel—otherwise in its death throes—should be expected to help Americans solve.*[225]

True to the spirit of nationalist agenda of the newly emerging American Studies of the 1950s, literary works of previous generations were brought to the center of criticism. In contrast to previous masters like, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, contemporary works of the 1950s were charged with inability to represent American reality. There was a wide-spread sense of disillusionment with the contemporary works: they failed to represent recent history and in turn could not provide solid ground for the meaning of America in the post-war period.

Faulkner was canonized because in his novels, "Southern decay and nihilism were magically changed in the postwar period into those of indomitable human spirit and American tradition," into "a vast historical and social epic on the values of the South" as well as "on the values of America."[226] The struggles of the many generations of the Compson family of his novels and the social fabric of their homeland Yoknapatawpha County were considered emblematic of the experience of America.

Furthermore, Faulkner himself contributed to the "reconstitution of the will of man" as devised by Trilling. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1950, Faulkner announced his determination not to be intimidated by the atomic warfare or any other modern menace in his search for the established, universal truth. Faulkner declared, "I decline to accept the end of man. [...] I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail" and thus reinforced a "therapeutic turn […] toward 'man.'"[227] Faulkner was reinstating the belief that any achievement, grandness, or success of "man," or "human," automatically referred to the achievement, grandness, or success of the "American."[228]

Greif locates this interchangeability of *the human* with *the American* in the mode of the "crisis-of-man-style humanism" in Hemingway's *Old Man and the*

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[225] Greif, pp.16-17.
[226] Greif, p.18.
[227] William Faulkner, "Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature", **The Portable Faulkner** (Ed. Malcolm Cowley), Viking, New York, 1967, pp.723-724 quoted in Greif, pp.18-19.
[228] Greif, p.19.

Sea.[229] "[A] thoroughgoing will-of-the-man book," the novel portrays the old and lonely fisherman's struggles with "elemental nature and adversity" and his eventual, perhaps inevitable, endurance in a dignified way.[230] Nevertheless, these retrospective affirmations

> *didn't solve the longer-term problem of the vitality of the novel, or, really, the restoration of the will. True, in the rehabilitation of Faulkner the critics had established an American epic, a seeming proof of vitality. The geography of Yoknapatawpha seemed to express the unending ramification of stories and the social reach of fiction. But that "epic," in practice, decomposed into individual novels composed in the twenties and thirties in high modernist style. […] In Hemingway, readers got stoical values and indomitable "man"—will reduced to a kind of single piece of iron. But it was so reduced that one would hardly look forward to a continuing tradition of these little fables; some other breakthrough would have to take place.*[231]

Accordingly, the young novelists of this period, such as Norman Mailer, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and Gore Vidal were discouraged by "the critical demands" of restoration of will that seemed like "a roadblock" to them.[232] Further, critics mostly "ignored new writers" and continued to praise "the old lions."[233] "The 'death of the novel' business quickly became implicated in practical matters of hope and disappointment, expectation and opportunity, and authority and resentment within the literary field itself."[234]

It is in reaction to such critical atmosphere that the big American novel first emerged. "The two major books that reopened a living novel in America, in the postwar period, and came to inaugurate the phrase of the 'big, ambitious novel' in which we still exist, were Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1953) and Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953)."[235] Their genius lies at their grasp and hence their ability to devise relevant creative responses to the principles of recognition as imposed on the novelists by mainstream criticism. In other words, the uncomfortable self-consciousness of the novelists on the proclamations of the end of their practice turned to efforts to prove the novel's vitality. Surprisingly, the first wave of true vitality came through an unorthodox, almost subversive, deployment of "elements

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[229] Greif, p.19.
[230] Greif, p.19.
[231] Greif, p.20.
[232] Greif, p.20.
[233] Greif, p.21.
[234] Greif, p.21.
[235] Greif, p.22.

that managed to crack open the shell of demands for 'man' in himself, for the 'restorations of the will' of an unmarked human figure": through the representation of "racial" issues.[236] Both Ellison and Bellow

> *eluded the fatally generic quality of the "will of man" and the "human condition" by starting their literary investigations from the perspective of, first, "the Negro," and, second, "the Jew." Their novels argued that the identification of these racially marked categories with "the human" was not automatic. For* Invisible Man *and* Augie March*, it remained a question whether there were any such thing as an unmarked, universal "man" or humanity that could be approached, attained, or recognized when one started from the outside positions of the black migration north or the Chicago Jewish ghetto.*[237]

Besides their subversive subject matters for that particular period and their rebellion against "conventional categories," these novels were stylistically innovative, too. Through the excessive yet light-handed allusions of Ellison, and the unstoppable storytelling in Bellow, vitality seemed at hand[238]: "the discovery of an interminability of narration in the postwar decades became essential formal proof that the *novel* was not dead, was still vital."[239]

A new "formal principle" was thus born: "interminability," which "would come to be a feature of many a 'big, ambitious novel' of future decades, whose continuing battle, in part, would always be to prove that the novel was not technologically and socially 'dead' despite no real diminution of evidence to the contrary."[240] As James Wood observes disapprovingly in his 2001 take on what he calls "hysterical realism," "permanent storytelling is the pursuit of vitality at all costs" of the contemporary big novel.[241] That seems, paradoxically, to be the case Greif argues against. For Greif, as long as "the human" is privileged at the cost of other elements, the novel would of course be doomed to failure and death. In other words, such opposition would only further in novelists' urge to write big novels due to "the 'death of the novel' fear, and the need to disprove it."[242] Curiously, this fear has pervaded American creative imagination to such a degree that novelists articulated their pervasive fear in essays dealing with the problem of the death of the

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[236] Greif, p.22.
[237] Greif, p.23.
[238] Greif, p.23.
[239] Greif, p.24.
[240] Greif, p.24.
[241] Wood, Hysterical, p.178.
[242] Greif, p.25.

novel discourse. Greif mentions, for instance, Philip Roth's 1963 essay "Writing American Fiction," David Foster Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" of 1993, and Jonathan Franzen's 1996 piece "Perchance to Dream" as the most representative elaborations of this fear and the American novelist's unceasing effort to preserve the novel.

It is interesting to note that although Greif discusses novels otherwise known as postmodernist, he does not incorporate literary postmodernism into his argument. This may seem surprising, considering, first, that length is usually regarded a stock characteristic of postmodernist works, second, that Greif refers to fathers of American postmodernism outside the context of postmodernism. These may seem intentional on the part of Greif who tries to draft a particular genealogy for long novels in American literary history, one not bound by the postmodernism debate. In fact, he avoids the postmodernist impulse to systematize that Karnicky warns against. In Greif's opinion, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) should be considered the archetypes of a particular form of the big American novel as best represented by William Gaddis's JR (1975), David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), and William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central* (2005).[243] He goes on to claim that the form of "the American meganovel of the decades from the 1970s to the present" could be seen as America's "most significant, though certainly not [the] most plentiful, distinct novelistic form."[244] These works are not only distinguished from other novels on the basis of their voluminous pages; they have "a feeling of spread, multifariousness, or open-endedness. They feel stuffed, overfull, or total; they feel longer than their straightforward story would require, and bigger than other books of similar length or complexity of plot."[245] They try to depict more than "the microcosm of a single family or the allegorization of a single 'problem' within the American scene."[246] On a formal level, "their sentence-level style is not obviously or reliably aligned with previous modes: neither the modernist stream-of-

[243] Greif, p.11.
[244] Greif, p.28.
[245] Greif, p.27.
[246] Greif, p.27.

consciousness or assemblage of fragments, nor the realist well-made sentence and careful control of voice delineate character."[247]

These facts necessitate, for Greif, an analysis of such works not as fruits of Joycean discoveries or 1970s postmodernism but as the direct result of the post-war American literary criticism's death of the novel discourse:

> *The postwar "big, ambitious novel" began when critics, and then novelists, had to negotiate what sort of literature could* count *after high modernism, and after the dramatic break of the Second World War, when a figure of "the human" or "man," still dear today to critics like Wood as the chief object of novelistic attention, came into question and required defense. It arose when a struggle for authority occurred between the critics who canonize finished work and the writers who struggle to make new work within their dictates—as those authors learned in what ways, and to what degree, they must go outside of critical strictures to fulfill them, offering a "vitality" heterogeneous to critics' expectations in order to conquer the threat of "death" and an adequately heterogeneous "humanity" to make critics admit the writers said something new about the status of "man."*[248]

One underlying criticism here regards how literary criticism operates, echoing Karnicky, on the principle of categorization, or the "sif[ting] and sor[ting]" of "new work" which it is ready either "to name" or "disown."[249] For Greif, much new work, but especially long novels, are easily, and rather unprofessionally, dismissed, based, for instance, on size or subject matter, which not only "handicap[s] the chances of new novels in the sweepstakes of cult success and ultimate canonization" but also deems them "disreputable."[250]

Greif demonstrates that the recent "Big, ambitious novel" discourse obstructs the acknowledgement of the true creative impetus behind such works: the representation of the human, no matter how "antihumanistic" their stances are found to be.[251] The fate of humanity may be in the throes of "technological rationality" of warfare as in *Gravity's Rainbow* or in the tight-grip of materialism and capitalism in *JR*, and such "domination of human lives by 'systems' with irresistible, superhuman logics" may condition "the ceaselessness of narration and proliferation of characters and plots," and this on its own comprises the very "element" that "somehow keeps

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[247] Greif, p.27.
[248] Greif, p.27.
[249] Greif, p.11.
[250] Greif, pp.11-12.
[251] Greif, p.28.

the novel vital, as a form, in the face of the death or supersession of its other forms by news, media, or a diminished attention span."[252]

A related discussion may regard the place of realistic narrative techniques in contemporary works. Paul Dawson's insights on the increasingly widespread use of the realistic omniscient narration in contemporary works is a case in point. In "The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction" (2009), Dawson observes that "a prominent reappearance of the ostensibly outmoded omniscient narrator" is "a salient feature, or at least significant trend, in contemporary British and American literary fiction."[253] From the U.K., Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, and David Lodge, and from the U.S., John Updike, Tom Wolfe, Don DeLillo, Rick Moody, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace deploy a variety of elements, albeit with modifications, of "literary omniscience" such as "an all-knowing, heterodiegetic narrator who addresses the reader directly, offers intrusive commentary on the events being narrated, provides access to the consciousness of a range of characters."[254] Apart from Updike, Wolfe, and Franzen—all well-known realists—the writers Dawson mentions are acknowledged practitioners of stylistic experimentation.

Of course, Dawson's argument seems to contradict Roland Barthes' 1968 discussion of the death of the author as an omniscient, reliable narrator, and the primary source of the meaning produced in the text. Yet Dawson does not posit authorial omniscience as the source of the text's meaning at the cost of the meaning the reader could find in a text. Rather, he emphasizes that the reemergence of omniscient narration attests to a belief in the representability, graspability of the external world. In other words, he identifies the realistic impulse of contemporary fiction.

In Dawson's opinion, the revival of omniscience since the 1990s is valuable and almost daring on the part of the novelist, considering "the aesthetic prejudice against this narrative voice which has prevailed for at least a century."[255] Omniscience makes a particular "clai[m] to authority" and has therefore been a

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[252] Greif, p.28.
[253] Paul Dawson, "The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction", **NARRATIVE**, Volume:17, No:2, 2009, p.143.
[254] Dawson, p.143.
[255] Dawson, p.143.

regular "suspect" since modernism.[256] The underlying reason for this suspicion, for Dawson, is the belief that successive literary movements comprise of radical breaks between them, which has made it conventionally necessary for realistic elements to disappear from the novel since modernism augured, evolved into postmodernism, and "the moral and epistemological certainties of omniscient narration" were discarded as tools of totalizing metanarratives.[257] He is also not content with the fact that "surveys of contemporary fiction continue to cast omniscience as an outmoded narrative voice which writers have rejected in favour of more radical experiments with form."[258]

It is possible to recapitulate Dawson's objections in three points. First, he contests the idea of radical breaks between literary movements and argues that "the contemporary revival of omniscience in fact represents a further development and refinement of some of the technical experiments of postmodern fiction."[259] Second, he is not content with the fact that "[e]xisting theoretical accounts of omniscient narration derive largely from the study of classic nineteenth century novels."[260] "Narrative theory," Dawson explains,

> *operates with a synchronic understanding of omniscient narration as a static element, produced by the structural relationship between focalization and voice. A study of contemporary fiction will enable us to approach the category of omniscient narration as a mutable and historically contingent practice of novelistic craft sensitive to historical and cultural contexts.*[261]

In making this comment, Dawson argues, as the third point, that the revival he proposes should be considered as a "way in which authors have responded to a perceived decline in the cultural authority of the novel over the last two decades."[262]

To elaborate on these three points, we could note Dawson's insistence on omniscience as "a trope, a figure of speech" which refers to "a particular type of narratorial performance" rather than positing the narrator as the echo of a God-like author.[263] Put differently, literary omniscience is not, and should not be, limited to a

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[256] Dawson, p.143.
[257] Dawson, p.144.
[258] Dawson, p.144.
[259] Dawson, p.144.
[260] Dawson, p.145.
[261] Dawson, pp.144-145.
[262] Dawson, p.144.
[263] Dawson, pp.147, 148.

"conflation of author and narrator."[264] Instead, the narrator can be seen as "an authorial proxy," the author's substitute self for and in a fictional world.[265] In this way, the author manages to establish "a communicative rapport with the reader in order to rhetorically highlight the value of the narrative to a broader extraliterary public sphere" because the particular historical conditions of the public sphere determine "the modes of narrative authority."[266] In this way, Dawson opens up a debate on the place of omniscient narrative with regard to the issue of "cultural authority."[267] He argues that "the authority of contemporary omniscient narrators is based less on traditional novelistic convention accepted by a unified reading public, than on other extraliterary claims to knowledge or expertise in postmodern culture."[268] He explains,

> *[c]ontemporary omniscient narrators can no longer claim the luxury of being spokespersons of authority, asserting accepted truths on behalf of a general consciousness. The contemporary omniscient narrator can best be described as a form of public intellectual: a thinker and writer who is able to speak to a general audience on a range of public issues from a base of specific disciplinary expertise. […] The formal contingency of omniscient narration results from the fact that its narrative authority relies upon historically shifting literary-cultural conditions which determine the status and function of the novel in the public sphere.*[269]

Some of the conditions that seem to jeopardize the cultural authority of the novel are profit-based policies of the publishing industry which privilege popular genres over the literary work, the pervasive dominance of the internet, and "the proliferation of demotic opinion in public debate via blogs, opinion polls, and reality TV."[270] In light of these extraliterary circumstances, Dawson posits the return of omniscience as a response to these conditions and asserts the necessity of "a narratological approach sensitive to the anxieties about social relevance peculiar to the formal narrative voices employed by contemporary omniscience."[271] These

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[264] Dawson, p.148.
[265] Dawson, p.149.
[266] Dawson, p.149.
[267] Dawson, p.149.
[268] Dawson, p.149.
[269] Dawson, p.150.
[270] Dawson, p.150.
[271] Dawson, p.150.

voices try "to assert the cultural authority of novelists as public intellectuals in the new millennium."[272]

In bringing up the issue of cultural authority and connecting it to the rise of omniscient narration, Dawson bridges a gap between fiction and nonfiction. In his words, "[t]he emergence of contemporary omniscience in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, in fact, is roughly coterminous with the rise of interest in the figure of the public intellectual"[273, 274] Dawson finds it significant that the authors he discusses "have produced manifestoes, essays, interviews or critical works in which their thoughts on the cultural function of contemporary literature are clear, and which seek to establish the conditions by which their work be received."[275] He argues that these works "establish a discursive continuum from narratorial commentary in a work of fiction to critical pronouncements in a work of nonfiction which establish mutually reinforcing claims for an author's cultural capital."[276] For example, Jonathan Franzen's well-known *Harper's* essay "Perchance to Dream" (1999) constitutes Franzen's denunciation of contemporary society's refusal of the novel's authority, and his following novel, *The Corrections*, tries to overcome this through omniscient narration.[277] With this argument, Dawson not only restores the authority of the author destroyed by post-structuralism but also identifies the realistic impulse of much contemporary fiction thereby offering a fine reconfiguration of the relationship between realism and postmodernism.

1.1.3. Redefinitions: Beyond Postmodernism

One of the most significant aspects of the discussion on the alleged end of postmodernism is to witness the pioneering scholars of the postmodern, such as Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale, and Ihab Hassan—who was mentioned above—to join the debate on new configurations of postmodernism and chart new territories for

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[272] Dawson, p.150.
[273] On the subject, Dawson mentions *The Last Intellectuals* (1987) by Russell Jacoby, and *Public Intellectuals: An Endangered Species?* (2006) by Amitai Etzioni and Alyssa Bowditch.
[274] Dawson, p.150.
[275] Dawson, p.150.
[276] Dawson, p.151.
[277] Dawson, p.151.

and after postmodernism. A good starting point in understanding the reconfigurations of postmodernism that is laden with claims to its alleged end would be to note the underlying assumption behind such a claim. According to Brian McHale, any claim to an end to postmodernism is informed essentially by a sense of "historicity" established by postmodernism itself.[278] McHale, who is one of the earliest and foremost theoreticians of postmodernism and whose influential 1987 book *Postmodernist Fiction* distinguishes the epistemological dominant of modernist literature from the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction, expresses the problematics of "historicity" implied in the very term postmodernism. In his 2007 article "What was Postmodernism?," McHale nods to John Frow's 1990 article of the same title and argues that

> *[f]rom the very outset, postmodernism was self-conscious about its identity as a period, conscious of its own historicity, because it conceived of itself as historical, coming after something, namely modernism—a historicity encoded in the very term "postmodernism." Postmodernism periodized itself [… a]nd since it conceived itself as coming after something, it also imagined itself being superseded by something yet to come.*[279]

In this account, the logic of succeeding and preceding, borrowed from postmodernism, is utilized to announce the demise of postmodernism. McHale's argument draws on Frow's insistence that postmodernism "continues to obey the modernist logic of innovation and obsolescence."[280] As McHale qualifies with "the changed tense" of Frow's—and his—article's title, what postmodernism *is* or *was* is in effect a matter of acknowledging postmodernism's relation to modernism, whose greatest dictum, "Make It New" reverberates in the *is* and the *was*: postmodernism "continues to obey the modernist logic of innovation and obsolescence."[281] Postmodernism came into existence as an innovative force, and if it is going to be, or already is, over, this demise will further accentuate its modernist heritage.

McHale suggests that another way of the approaching the contemporary would be releasing ourselves from strictly defined boundaries of literary movements that succeed one another. He explains,

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[278] Brian McHale, "What was Postmodernism?", **Ebr: The Electronic Book Review**, 14.10.2007, http://www.electronicbookreview.com/threadfictionspresent/tense, (23.05.2013), n.pag.
[279] McHale, n.pag.
[280] McHale, n.pag.
[281] McHale, n.pag.

> *there is also compelling evidence of yet another alternative, that of multiple and uneven times, or non-synchronicity. Despite being each other's contemporaries in the everyday sense, we are not all postmoderns; some of us are, but others of us are moderns or pre-moderns; perhaps some of us (or all of us?) are all three at once. Modernisms, postmodernisms, premodernisms, perhaps para-modernisms all co-exist. This approach sharply contradicts certain formidable theorists of postmodernism [such as Charles Jencks and Fredric Jameson]. These theorists seem to hold the view that postmodernism is a sort of blanket condition and that it constitutes a really "big tent," extending right across the whole culture, affecting all genres and media, all disciplines of thought, all forms of practice and behavior in our time. Reading these theorists, you might think that everyone in the world had all joined hands and stepped across the same threshold all at the same time into postmodernity. But this is certainly not the case; just look around you at the unevenly postmodern world in which we live in Europe and North America, let alone the rest of the world, where the further one ventures, the less synchronized and "contemporary" the world seems, despite the inroads of Americanization and globalization.*[282]

McHale's suggestion of approaching the contemporary as comprising a multiplicity of literary movements and aesthetic sensibilities that are contemporaneous yet still different from each other is a valuable assessment not only for understanding the alleged end of postmodernism but also for theorizing the contemporary. The implication, in both postmodernism and the contemporary, of temporal proximity to the present need not be a claim to hegemony, or for that matter, to definite delineations of traditions.

Linda Hutcheon, who is another pioneer of postmodernism like Brian McHale, also comments on the trajectory of postmodernism. Apart from her highly influential discussions on postmodernist irony and parody, Hutcheon's lasting importance to an understanding of postmodernism has been her 1988 definition of "historiographical metafiction," the postmodernist "genre" of novel *sui generis* in its problematization of the representation of the past and "de-naturalization" of historical narrative.[283] Like McHale and Hassan, Hutcheon continues to think and write about postmodernism with timely responses to developments in contemporary literature.

To the second edition of her 1989 book *The Politics of Postmodernism* in 2002, Hutcheon adds an Epilogue whose first part, like Frow's and McHale's

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[282] McHale, n.pag.
[283] Linda Hutcheon, **A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction**, , Routledge, New York, 1988, (Poetics), pp.5, 47.

articles, reads, "What was Postmodernism?"[284] She argues that "[t]he postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first century world."[285] Hutcheon writes,

> *John Frow's 1990 question is just as relevant today, in our new millennium. […] While Frow was already using the past tense, I can't help noticing that I resolutely stayed with the present tense in writing the previous chapters—a reflection, no doubt, of my sense of excitement: the postmodern was in the process of defining itself before my very eyes (and ears). Today, our perspective is inevitably going to be different. Despite attempts to move "the postmodern critique forward," to generalize it into a "theory of the contemporary," or to pluralize it into the more descriptive postmodernisms," the postmodern may well have be a twentieth-century phenomenon, that is, a thing of the past. Now fully institutionalized, it has its canonized texts, its anthologies, primers and readers, its dictionaries and histories. […] For over a decade, diagnosticians have been pronouncing on its health, if not its demise, with some major players in the debate weighing in on the negative side: for people like Terry Eagleton and Christopher Norris, postmodernism is finished, passé; indeed, for them it's a failure. […] Let's just say: it's over.*[286]

She leaves the task to the reader to define the "new label" postmodernism requires for its twenty-first century manifestation.[287] In this sense, Hutcheon acknowledges postmodernism's continuation, albeit transformed, in the millennium. Her assignment is taken up by a student of Hutcheon's, Josh Toth, who builds his argument on the fate of postmodernism by a key word Hutcheon uses, "pass."

In *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (2010), Josh Toth joins the debate on the trajectory of postmodernism with an argument that simultaneously accepts its demise and argues for its "persistence."[288] His starting point is Hutcheon's remark we noted above, "the postmodern moment has passed."[289] Referring to the inherent ambiguity of the word "pass" in Hutcheon's claim, which means "to give up the ghost," among other things, Toth wonders:

> *What ghost? Given? Passed on?—where?, to whom? When, or where, did this passing/giving begin? Is this ghost that postmodernism has "given up," is this*

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[284] It is possible to take this referential triptych as postmodernist in essence, performed by theoreticians of postmodernism.
[285] Linda Hutcheon, **The Politics of Postmodernism**, Second Edition, Routledge, New York, 1989, 2002, (Politics), p.181.
[286] Hutcheon, Politics, pp.165-166.
[287] Hutcheon, Politics, p.181.
[288] Josh Toth, **The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary**, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2010, p.4.
[289] Hutcheon, Politics, p.181.

> *thing that has "passed on," that which Hutcheon claims continues to "live on?" Is it the same thing that lived on after modernism, and therefore lived on (in) postmodernism? […] What is this thing that lives on, moving from host to host?*[290]

In elaborating on these questions, Toth suggests that we see the death of postmodernism "as a passing, a giving over of a certain inheritance" because "this death (like all deaths) is also a living on, a passing on."[291] In this way, Toth maintains a sense of continuity based on a kind of heritage.

In order to discuss the meaning of "pass" and establish its importance to the understanding both of postmodernism and what it is followed by, Toth uses Derrida's notion of the *specter.* In *The Specters of Marx* (1993) Derrida demarcates epochs with his notion of spectral analysis which posits that a ghost, a specter passes on from epoch to epoch, and this ghost is the promise of salvation; a utopia that haunts, or shapes, ideological formations of different epochs. In essence, the specter remains the same; it always offers "emancipatory and messianic affirmation, a certain experience of the promise."[292] Yet each epoch perceives this specter in a different way, act accordingly, and these distinct approaches delineate the aesthetic and ideological differences between epochs. Therefore, epochs are different from each other not in the way they comprise of radical breaks from each other but in their different approaches to the specter.

Toth deploys Derrida's spectral analysis to establish the possible manifestation of postmodernism in the twenty-first century and define its transformations to be informed by a sense of being "*haunted* by […] a type of humanism, a certain faith in historical progress, a sense of justice and/or meaning."[293] Accordingly, Toth asserts that theories on the death, or end of postmodernism prove that this specter "continues to persist, even in the wake of the recent abandonment of postmodernism's formal characteristics."[294] Moreover, without denying "the reality of what we might tentatively refer to as a type of epistemic break with the postmodern," Toth pays attention to the way "this current

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[290] Toth, p.2.
[291] Toth, p.2.
[292] Toth, p.7.
[293] Toth, p.4.
[294] Toth, p.4.

'break' recalls, or reenacts, the postmodern break with modernism—that is, the way in which any such break, or epistemic rupture, can be viewed ironically as both complete and partial."[295] Such sense of completeness and partiality demonstrates, for Toth, that

> *modernism and postmodernism and, now, this newly emergent epoch can indeed be viewed as singular events, or epistemes; they are also, though, epistemological* re*configurations,* re*configurations of an unavoidable relationship with a certain repeating […] a certain inheritance, a certain specter.*[296]

According to Toth, there is a single specter haunting not only modernism and postmodernism but also what comes *after* postmodernism: the ghost(s) of "the basic assumptions of the Enlightenment" such as the certainty of objectivity, unity, universality of truth, autonomy of art, and human progress through reason.[297]

In this sense, Toth considers the "history" of postmodernism another example of "certain spectrologically induced pattern of epochal 'shifts,' or 'breaks'" that requires a revisionary look.[298] Leaving aside the accepted argument that epochs rise in reaction to what preceded them—as seen in the modernist reaction to realist representation, or, postmodernism's debunking of modernist principles—Toth argues that shifts in cultural, aesthetic, and theoretical products be seen as "epistemological reconfigurations" rather than as "complete epistemic ruptures."[299] By epistemological reconfigurations, he means attempts that try to "deal with a certain persistent and ineffaceable specter."[300] Therefore, epochs are not complete breaks from each other but rely on a continuity: "Each epistemic break is always, or *only*, a reconfiguration because its formation is necessarily contingent upon the fact that something (a specter) always and necessarily passes on."[301]

What, then, are the specters of postmodernism that haunt what is following it? What are the ghosts of postmodernism that it failed to take away with it since they seem to be "retur[ning] with ferocity," in need of "new configuration[s]?"[302] For

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[295] Toth, p.5.
[296] Toth, p.18.
[297] Toth, p.23.
[298] Toth, p.5.
[299] Toth, p.5.
[300] Toth, p.5.
[301] Toth, p.5.
[302] Toth, p.21.

Toth, the "ghost" of postmodernism "passed from a narrative stylistic intent on ostentatiously denying the possibility of mimesis to an emergent stylistic that re-enacts the possibility, or the always deferred promise, of mimesis."[303] In this way, he disagrees with literary critics and theorists who announce the death of postmodernism and race to define *the* new emergent period that consists of a radical break from postmodernism through a decisive turn to realism. In his opinion, such claims of a return to pre-postmodern ideology show that postmodernism persists. He wants to demonstrate that "the current epistemological, or cultural, reconfiguration—a reconfiguration that maintains many postmodern 'traits'—betrays the inevitable persistence of what Jacques Derrida might refer to as the 'inheritance,' or 'specter' that animated postmodernism in the first place."[304]

In Toth's analysis, the death of postmodernism seems inevitable, one in a series of epochal changes, giving rise to what he calls "renewalist narratives" that abandon the "nihilistic trajectory of postmodern metafiction while simultaneously and perhaps paradoxically embracing the postmodern rejection of a distinctly modernist form of idealism" such as "desire for meaning, truth, historical progress, and so on."[305] What defines the renewalist works "is their insistence on the possibility of what they paradoxically continue to expose as impossible: meaning, truth, mimesis, telos, communal understanding, and communication."[306] Renewalism assumes "that we must believe in a certain impossible telos, a certain impossible 'Real.'"[307] "What is most significant about this apparent return to realism—a realism, we need to stress, that is informed by postmodern formalism—is that it signals the end of metafiction as a privileged aesthetic style."[308] For Toth, the literature of renewalism can be characterized by "a desire to abandon all aesthetic imperatives," and it should be celebrated for its evasion of becoming "another hegemonic ideal" as postmodernism inevitably became.[309] He argues that

> *[s]ignificantly, these renewalist forms of narrative are not restricted to any one specific style. While many critics have associated the end of postmodernism*

[303] Toth, p.158.
[304] Toth, p.4.
[305] Toth, pp.88-89.
[306] Toth, p.103.
[307] Toth, p.132.
[308] Toth, p.123.
[309] Toth, p.123.

> *with the growing dominance of neo-realism, […] whether or not we call them "neo-realist," the emergent forms of narrative are marked by an overall rejection of past aesthetic imperatives. For the most part, these narratives do indeed seem more "realistic" but I am arguing that such narratives are better defined by the relationship they reestablish with a certain spectral inheritance, a spectral inheritance passed on by postmodernism. Rather than just new "realisms," then, what we see—in the work of writers and/or directors like Leyner, Morrison, Banks, Richard Powers, David Foster Wallace, Lorrie Moore, Danielewski, Lynch, Sophia Coppola, Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, Noah Baumbach, Jared Hess, Maxine Hong Kingston, Nicholson Baker, and Dave Eggers—are narrative forms that renew the realist faith in mimesis while simultaneously deferring and frustrating that faith via the irony and stylistics of a now past, or passed, postmodernism.*[310]

As Toth illustrates, on the matter of what comes *after* postmodernism, the tendency is toward claiming the return of realism as well as an emphasis on community issues and ethics. Toth writes that "in terms of the apparent shift to a type of neo-realism, we might say that some form of mimesis is called for—that is, some type of renewed faith in the possibility of what postmodern narrative has repeatedly identified as impossible: meaning, truth, representational accuracy."[311] In his opinion, neo-realism may "escap[e] the dogmatism of postmodernism by explicitly embracing *and* deferring the possibility of the referent, of mimesis."[312] Still, Toth claims that "postmodernism, to a certain degree, persists" and the shift to realism "is not simply a backlash in response to postmodern narrative production; it is neither a reactionary return to the ethical imperatives of modernism nor a revival of the traditional forms of realism that proliferated in the nineteenth century."[313]

According to Toth, during the distinctly postmodern period of the late 1980s and 1990s, new cultural modes and styles emerged.[314] Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine* (1986), Mark Leyner's *Tetherballs of Bougainville* (1998), Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) are some renewalist works Toth mentions. In his opinion, the "emergent episteme of *renewalism*" is haunted, too, by "the hegemonic certainties of and Enlightenment project," and it tries to evade them as modernism and postmodernism have done.[315] Still, renewalism "attempts to manage its evasion

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[310] Toth, p.133.
[311] Toth, pp.3-4.
[312] Toth, p.123.
[313] Toth, p.4.
[314] Toth, p.34.
[315] Toth, p.60.

by abandoning the hegemonic imperative that the spectral persistence of an enlightenment project *must be* effaced."[316]

What we see in this line of argument is that Toth is critical of postmodernism's denials of meaning and representation that border on being hegemonic themselves. In fact, he goes so far as to assert that despite its efforts at dismantling modernist assumptions (so-called, of course) of elitism and the autonomous subject, postmodernism has in fact re-enacted them:

> *postmodernism's final days are marked by a heightened awareness that postmodernism failed to escape the binaries it sought to subvert, that the books and buildings of high postmodernism are just as 'monumental,' just as 'elite,' as the masterworks of high modernism. Put differently, postmodernism's passing is marked by the pronounced realization that the insistence on groundless self-reflexivity (in architecture, literature, or whatever) ironically became* another *ethical and 'elitist' imperative, an imposing suggestion that 'responsible' narratives* do not *allow a ground to persist.*[317]

For Toth, therefore, what follows postmodernism, what comes after postmodernism is to be understood by the manifestation of the specter of postmodernism in renewalist works, which belong to the period of postmodernism, yet they demonstrate a different manifestation of the very specter that haunts postmodernism. Toth differentiates the emerging renewalist writing from what he calls "high postmodern metafiction" with "a difference in emphasis."[318] While the latter focuses solely on exposing the illusory state of such ideals as communication and mimesis, renewalist texts "acknowledg[e] the impossibility of such lures while simultaneously and emphatically articulating the ways in which they remain necessary to any critical and/or aesthetic enterprise."[319] The way a renewalist text "distances itself from postmodernism proper" is through "overtly embracing the impossible possibility of certain […] promises."[320]

Toth illustrates this "difference in emphasis" by comparing Mark Leyner's *Tetherballs of Bougainville* with postmodernist metafiction in general. The renewalist narrative of Leyner claims to offer an autobiographical account of one day in the life of the narrator called Mark Leyner and makes bold statements on the

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[316] Toth, p.60.
[317] Toth, p.22.
[318] Toth, p.78
[319] Toth, p.78.
[320] Toth, p.77.

limitations of any historical narrative's accuracy. In order to "reverse-scan" our life, for Leyner, we have to trust "our memories, our diaries and notebooks, our videotapes, microcassettes, floppy disks, our photo albums, our evocative souvenirs and bric-a-brac—all the various and sundry madeleines."[321] The narrator explains, "I have tried my best to provide an accurate chronicle of the past and he expresses faith in his project: "if writing this book can help just one kid who's gone through a similar experience […] then it will have been worth it."[322] Besides his intentions on accuracy and hopes of connecting with the reader, Toth emphasizes that Leyner tries to "relocat[e] certain human constants; […] to produce an effect of shared, or communal, recognition."[323] Leyner's narrator believes that the reader "may experience an eerie shock of recognitions [… because] each page is like a mirror, and you've literally never seen yourself so closely."[324]

In making these fictional statements, Leyner is "earnestly engaged in an outright rejection of what is typically understood as the postmodern impulse toward narrative paralysis, or authorial suicide": he "refuses to reject the possibility of communication with the other; [he] refuses, that is, to abandon the impossible *as impossible.*"[325] In other words, Leyner "actively resists the apparent nihilism of postmodernism by identifying the impossibility of certain spectral lures as impossible."[326] Further, his claim to accuracy shows that "for Leyner, it would seem such accuracy, or 'realism,' is a vehicle for shared understanding, the best and perhaps *only* mode of accurate communication."[327]

Here, we should note that Toth makes all these claims by referring to the preface of the novel and regrets the discontinuation "the mimetic project" of the preface in the body of the novel: "the text is almost decadent in terms of its 'postmodern' attributes. Not only is the basic plot utterly improbable, the text is filled with digressions, satirical attacks on mass culture, corrosively self-reflexive statements, absurd dialogue, and temporal incongruities."[328] Nevertheless, Toth

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[321] Mark Leyner, **Tetherballs of Bougainville**, Vintage, New York, 1998, p.11 quoted in Toth, p.77.
[322] Leyner, p.11 quoted in Toth, p.77.
[323] Toth, p.77.
[324] Leyner, p.11 quoted in Toth, p.77.
[325] Toth, p.77.
[326] Toth, p.77.
[327] Toth, p.77.
[328] Toth, p.78.

favors Leyner's novel on the grounds that he "outwardly embraces the impossibilities—that is, the impossibility of communication, of shared understanding, of essential human connections—that the historiographic metafiction of postmodernism worked to expose as dangerous ideological lures."[329] In Toth's opinion, *Tetherballs* "reembraces the impulse toward mimesis that defined the realist mode of the nineteenth century as well as the experimental imperatives of the early-twentieth. Narrative, Leyner seems to be claiming, can be a productive form of social, or public, exchange."[330] For instance, the autobiographical elements of the novel seem to be a play on the illusory quality of the separation of fact and fiction by documenting the 'fake' production of an autobiographical account. In this way, "Leyner's confusion of the factual and the fictional works to reaffirm the fictional as *fictional."*[331] This distinguishes *Tetherballs* from postmodern literature proper, such as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* or Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*:

> *While the latter two texts carefully blur the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, between history and narrative—that is, both texts are focused almost exclusively on the way in which the traumatic 'reality' of World War II is contingent upon narrative filtration, that it exists only as the unstable effect of an eternally shifting chain of signifiers—*Tetherballs *seems to do exactly what its preface claims to do: it offers us the possibility of shared recognition, even if what we recognize is the impossibility of* recognition*. Leyner seemingly embraces the impossibility of mimesis as a portrayable reality in itself, as a way of returning to a type of realist mode of representation. In a manner that speaks to a discernible shift in narrative production—a shift that seems to work the end of postmodern metafictional imperative and that is often associated with the emergence of a type of 'neo-realism'—Leyner reembraces a certain faith in the possibility of the impossible referent. […] Leyner suggests that the one thing we can communicate is the* impossibility of communication *[…] and thus articulates the possibility of communication by stressing the fact that it is an impossibility; he works to communicate the* impossibility of communication *by continually failing to communicate.* [332]

Basically, Toth means that Leyner's novel represents "a still emergent period of 'renewalism' because it works to embrace a certain spectral paradox: the paralyzing knowledge that there can never be an absolutely correct narrative act *and* the animating faith that the certainly right narrative act is, in fact, possible."[333]

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[329] Toth, p.78.
[330] Toth, p.78.
[331] Toth, p.79.
[332] Toth, p.79.
[333] Toth, p.80.

Another novel representative of the renewalist literature Toth proposes is Nicholson Baker's first novel *The Mezzanine*. In Toth's opinion, Baker's works seem to "reestablish the possibility of mimesis and universal understanding while remaining wary of the dangers that postmodernism struggled to expose and move beyond."[334] In *The Mezzanine*, Howie—the narrator—recounts the thoughts he has during a lunch break. We cannot talk about the events of the lunch break in their singularity as there is no plot in this novel. Full of footnotes, the novel "repeatedly draws attention to its own textuality and thus the fragmentary and unstable nature of any narrative reconstruction of the past."[335] Howie's thoughts that dwell on the mundane events and objects of the everyday existence fill the pages, and the novel

> *functions as a conscious acknowledgment of the absolutely private nature of existence. At the same time, though, Baker's text remains outwardly 'realistic'; it is always coherent, straightforward, and accessible. In fact, the absolutely private thoughts of the narrator become a way of drawing the reader into the text, a way of reaffirming community; the narrator's idiosyncrasies speak to our own idiosyncrasies.* [336]

Vox (1992), another novel by Baker, is also a renewalist text. The novel records the telephone conversation of a man and a woman on a dating line. Their need to communicate overweighs their erotic motivations, and their endless chat on the most mundane things attests to "a type of sentimental faith in social experience and communal sharing."[337] In light of this discussion, we see that what Toth considers the lesson of postmodernism is the impossibility, futility of denying the "illusions," or the idealisms of the Enlightenment: "postmodernism often seems to suggest, if only subtly, that such illusions are impossible to abandon" by continuously returning to them.[338]

Another literary critic preoccupied with contemporary literature and its relation to the alleged end of postmodernism is Jeremy Green. In *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (2005), Jeremy Green attempts to categorize contemporary fiction as a revised version of postmodernist writing, which he calls "late postmodernism." Green's purpose in coining the term late

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[334] Toth, p.133.
[335] Toth, p.133.
[336] Toth, p.133.
[337] Toth, p.135.
[338] Toth, p.80.

postmodernism is to define an aesthetic strategy employed by the writers of the 1990s and 2000s, such as Don DeLillo, Richard Powers, David Foster Wallace, David Markson, Donald Antrim, and Jonathan Franzen. This strategy is shaped by "the generative pressures on contemporary writing" that include the cultural and economic forces of the last decade of the twentieth century, such as the rise of television, film, and internet and their marginalization of the printed book; the novel's and the novelist's loss of cultural authority in the face of a culture of entertainment and consumerism; the obituaries for the novel, the reader, and postmodernism itself.[339]

For Green, responding to these literary, social, cultural, and political changes of the period, the writers of the 1990s have produced a rich output and at that they belong to a second generation of postmodernism. The works of these writers, for Green, do not comprise a new writing or a new trend: they have produced works, which, by transforming themselves according to the conditions of the age, refute the death of novel and dispel the clouds of pessimism shadowing the present and future of literature. The novelists Green addresses "have in their own particular fashion made the novel's status as a form of inquiry, representation, cognition, and critique integral to their projects."[340] These works achieve success through restoring the communication between the writer and the reader, rejecting postmodern amnesia through a preoccupation with tradition and cultural memory, assuming a serious readership that has faith in the relevance of literature to the public sphere, and through a "grasp [of] the contradictions and involutions of the new media environment."[341]

Green's approach is valuable in that he refrains from offering a "typology by which new writing might be categorized."[342] In order to understand contemporary writing, he urges us to seek ways that "comprehend the conditions under which literary novels are now written and understood" because

> *these conditions shape the readership, the literary and political ideologies, the self-understanding, and the aesthetic choices available to writers. To make*

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[339] Jeremy Green, **Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium**, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005, p.5.
[340] Green, p.13.
[341] Green, p.18.
[342] Green, p.3.

> *sense of them is to try to present a snapshot of the* literary field *in advanced capitalism. By literary field I mean that ensemble of interlocking practices and institutions, including the publishing industry, the media, and the university, that constitutes, often in unexamined or unconscious ways, the environment for the practice and understanding of literature. Social, cultural, and political changes are refracted through the literary field and face the writer as a set of problems to be addressed at the level of aesthetic strategy.*[343]

His comments on the conditions that shape contemporary writing will be observed in more detail below, thus, it is useful to note here the differences Green identifies between late postmodernist writers and their forebears in terms of their reaction to these conditions. Late postmodernists are faced with problems of "cultural hierarchy and cultural change, of politics and the public/private divide, of memory and tradition."[344] In order to be able to deal with them while ensuring "the survival of literature," these contemporary writers "rejec[t], or at least revis[e], some of the bold pronouncements of the first generation of postmodernism, most notably claims of annealing the divisions of the cultural terrain.[345] While the distinction between high and low, for instance, was determinedly mocked and left behind in the postmodernism of the 1970s, the next generation feels compelled, without succumbing to elitisim, to draw a line of seriousness and literariness between Oprah Book Club's novels and a social realist novel.[346]

At this point, we may take a moment to note Green's insights on the so-called end of postmodernism. According to Green, some critics on the left were relieved when the "academic ideology that grew out of the despair of the post-1968 generation" has expired.[347] The end of postmodernism has meant the possibility of attending to political and intellectual problems without deflection of the problems through "the latest neo-Nietzschean mills flown in from France."[348] History and subject, finally freed from theoretical analysis, were free to re-enter our lives. Neo-conservative critics, too, voiced a similar dislike of the influence of continental

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[343] Green, p.3.
[344] Green, p.13.
[345] Green, p.13
[346] The example regards the controversial issue of Jonathan Franzen's reaction to Oprah Winfrey's televised Book Club and will be discussed later.
[347] Green, p.19.
[348] Green, p.19.

theory because they associated postmodernism with the academy's temporary and not well-grounded preoccupation with the nihilism of continental theory.[349]

Finding fault with arguments on the death of postmodernism on the basis that these "obituaries for postmodernism are attempts to refuse or dismiss one or another aspect of the problems—of culture, period, and style—to which the word, however vaguely and portentously, gestures," Green suggests that the definition of postmodernism should remain elusive while we also "registe[r] its *aging*."[350] He aligns his definition of postmodernism with Fredric Jameson. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson defines postmodernism with a list whose items "might be extended indefinitely": the items range from popular art to photorealism, from the musical collage of classics and popular, commercial and experimental film and other forms of cultural mixing and conflation of high and low cultural values.[351] For Green, such multiplicity of meanings for postmodernism found in Jameson's list fits well with "different kinds of cultural experience, some apparently of wide popular appeal, others of a highly specialized nature" as well as "a variety of intellectual activities, from film and music to criticism and theory."[352] In other words, Green favors a multiplicity of meanings for postmodernism, meanings that can be foregrounded in accord with cultural and intellectual demands.

On the matter of postmodernism's "aging" as he mentions above, Green believes that declaring an end (in the case of postmodernism) excludes ideas on what it will be followed by, for it is a gesture that "tends to freeze historical process, offering up reified categories of thought in a gesture of disavowal and repression."[353] Green asks,

> *[h]ow then are we to understand the desire to be done with postmodernism, to declare it finished and of purely historical interest, a late-twentieth-century phenomenon that can now be jettisoned? What once seemed a new and exciting way of looking at problems has now been absorbed to a greater or lesser extent. How much really has been changed by postmodern ways of thinking—whether the influx of continental theory and the stylistic changes of the last three decades truly represent a paradigm shift, or whether these phenomena are comparatively superficial and not of lasting interest—remains open to debate. Dissatisfaction arises once the weakness and silences of the new model theory*

[349] Green, p.19.
[350] Green, p.20.
[351] Green, p.21.
[352] Green, p.21.
[353] Green, p.24.

> *become gradually apparent, or fail to supply adequate descriptions of the evolving situation. Furthermore, rapid turnover in artistic trends makes adequate description difficult, and postmodernism itself might well be subject to this principle of accelerated obsolescence.*[354]

In this sense, one rather hazardous consequence of declaring the end of postmodernism or the exhaustion of the motives that created it would be the resurrection of what postmodernism supposedly reacted against. For Green, "this is not a return to modernism, but an attempt to bypass the formal challenges that link postmodernism to modernism, to return to transparency and representation, to put aside, once and for all, radical innovation and new stylistic practices."[355] To demonstrate the implications of such return to what preceded postmodernism, Green refers to Wendy Steiner's arguments. Steiner's chapter titled "Postmodern Fictions, 1970-1990" in the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1999) asserts the end of experimental postmodernism and the rising recognition of traditional narratives. For Steiner, the equation of formal innovation with artistic importance has led to a rather excessive celebration of metafictionists, or "High Postmodernists" as she calls them, such as Thomas Pynchon, John Hawkes, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut. Echoing Amy Hungerford's argument, Steiner notes that such celebration occurred at the expense of other contemporary works and criticism turned a blind eye to realist works, not to mention minority and women writers. Further, Steiner considers high postmodernists' exaltation of experimentalism and formal innovation as mere repetition of modernism with insistence on avant-gardism over traditional fiction. Thus, the end of what she calls high postmodernism of the 1960s and 1970s is "the final eradication of modernism, and the rise of a new kind of realism" which was written, in the 1970s and 1980s, by women and minority writers and engaged with neglected matters like gender and race.[356]

Green challenges Steiner on the grounds that

> *by sweeping the formal innovations of the high postmodernists into the single category of metafiction, she greatly simplifies the meaning of antirealism, staking out a dichotomy between metafictionists and realists, the former writing dense, hermetic, and ludic texts, and the latter producing transparent, direct expressions of experience.*[357]

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[354] Green, p.24.
[355] Green, p.25.
[356] Green, p.25.
[357] Green, p.28.

In addition, Green criticizes Steiner's use of the term postmodernism for the purpose of periodizing the rise of realism and the leaving behind of modernism's—hence high postmodernism's—elitism and antidemocracy. "To overcome modernism, Steiner establishes a link between formal difficulty and sociocultural divisiveness."[358]

In order to elaborate on the problematical reception of postmodernism, Green offers a brief history of the literary activity that has provided us with the first definitions of postmodernism. From the 1970s onward, *boundary 2: A Journal of Postmodern Literature,* for instance, as well as the works of critical thinkers such as Ihab Hassan, Gerald Graff, Philip Stevick, and Jerome Klinkowitz have "established the case for a movement in literary fiction that represented at least a modulation of modernist impulses into something distinct, an identifiable body of work that formed the first sketch for a canon of postmodern literature."[359] The attention of critics focused not only on novels, but also on the criticism and theoretical horizons offered by fiction writers such as John Barth, William Gass, Raymond Federman, Ronald Sukenick, and Susan Sontag. In the 1980s, however, Fredrick Jameson's and J. F. Lyotard's works carried discussions of postmodernism into directions that somewhat relegated literary postmodernism into a "subordinate role" within the movement.[360] By the late 1980s, Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon restored attention to the postmodern novel with their discussions of, respectively, ontological skepticism of the postmodern novel and historiographic metafiction as its determining characteristic.

1990s has been crucial for the retreat of postmodernism in another respect: the ever-growing dominance of electronic media begins to seem like a serious threat to the cultural and literary field. In this context, we could refer to W. J. T. Mitchell who illustrates this point nicely by noting that "[i]t has been suggested that the major challenge for the humanities in the coming century will be to determine the fate of literature and to secure some space for the aesthetic in the face of the overwhelming

[358] Green, p.28.
[359] Green, p.29.
[360] Green, p.30.

forces of mass culture and commercial entertainment."[361] Green's approach to this issue is a consideration of postmodernism's relationship to some visible culture shifts, which, in his opinion,

> *inform the ways in which literary works are produced and consumed, evaluated and comprehended. They have altered, in controversial and frequently perplexing ways, the construction and attribution of literary value, the formation and maintenance of canons, the reality and perception of reading publics, and the writer's sense of tradition.*[362]

Perhaps the most important change Green refers to is the corporate control of the publishing industry and the communication media in general. By the 1980s, as information technology advanced in tandem with its industries, giant corporations began to dominate all kinds of media resources. The evident consequences of such conglomeration of the publishing industry include

> *greater editorial control over content; fewer risks with strange or unfamiliar projects; a reluctance to keep slow-selling or backlist books in print; the intensive marketing of books through author appearances; and the emergence of a market in which small, independent publishers find it increasingly hard to survive.*[363]

The literary marketplace shaped under these conditions is not very friendly to serious writing in the sense that it imposes new *values* on non-profit, innovative, and university publishing houses. Green also notes how the emphasis on quantity rather than quality championed by the new literary marketplace has affected higher education. No longer functioning to warrant excellence through knowledge, the university has turned into another "corporate model of production and control" with its new standards: "number of articles published, number of students taught, data from student assessments and so on."[364]

Another way of making sense of cultural shifts regards some theories of postmodernism and cultural studies. Concurring on the elimination of aesthetic values that distinguish high and low forms of cultural experience and production, both postmodernism and cultural studies elevate the mundane (analysis of culture through soap operas or shopping malls), consumerism, and eclecticism, thereby unbounding the study of culture from aesthetic judgment based on tradition, or *some*

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[361] Green, p.31.
[362] Green, p.34.
[363] Green, p.38.
[364] Green, p.39.

criteria.[365] In this way, both cultural authority and evaluative criteria become informed by the consumerism and information technologies, hence making changes in culture, seem hazardous for literature.

In his analysis of the pessimistic responses the rise of new technology elicited, namely, the announcements of the end of literature, Green offers a position that seeks to reconcile change with art. The so-called death/end of literature, announced both by critics and novelists/essayists, was founded on the claims of the disappearance of the print-book in the electronic age,[366] the declining number of actual readers of literature, and "the emergence of postliterary subjects."[367] J. Hillis Miller's *On Literature* (2002), for example, declares that the reign of the print book has ended and claims that "[l]iterature's time is almost up."[368] However, we should mention that Miller's next sentence, omitted in Green's discussion, claims that "literature, in spite of its approaching end, is nevertheless perennial and universal. It will survive all historical and technological changes."[369]

If we summarize what the elegists for literature present as "symptoms of the reduced cultural authority of literature," we could say that they complain about the declining number of readers of serious literature; the disappearance of the Western classics from the university syllabi; the proliferation of non-academic literary pursuit ("academic and general literary culture are disablingly divorced"); television and the internet reduce the attention and the value serious reading requires.[370] In essence, Green thinks that such gloomy statements about the end of literature are "troubling, perhaps even debilitating to the novelist: the novel's future lies at best in survival on the margins of an image-based culture. Any power to shape the larger culture is now or soon will be greatly restricted, as the larger culture turns increasingly to electronic media."[371] Green is critical of the technophobic tone, or the "rhetoric of anxiety"

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[365] Green, p.41.
[366] For example, Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature* (1990), Sven Birkets's *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), and Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1994) elaborate on the losing war of print culture against new media.
[367] Green, p.45.
[368] J. Hillis Miller, **On Literature**, Routledge, New York, (Literature), 2002, p.1 quoted in Green p.45.
[369] Miller, Literature, p.1.
[370] Green, p.46.
[371] Green, p.45.

such "elegists of the book" use.[372] In his opinion, their defense of literature lies in preserving the cultural authority of literature, yet they "imagine a community of minds forged through the reading and discussion of the literary text."[373]

For Green, the cultural pessimism of the elegists overlaps with the neoconservative arguments of the 1980s and the Culture Wars of the 1990s. For instance, according to Alvin Kernan, the English departments at the university "have abandoned their task of perpetuating and safeguarding the Western literary tradition" and have turned to "various brands of militant literary theory" that denounce "hegemonic values."[374] Green calls such claims "caricatures of contemporary critical practice."[375] A more adequate example, however, can be found in Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain.* In a 1975 essay, Roth notes a dangerous regression in the culture that endangers the importance of literature:

> *The evidence is the culture, the evidence is the society, the progression from the movie screen to the television screen to the computer. There's only so much time, so much room, and there are only so many habits of mind that can determine how people use the free time they have. Literature takes a habit of mind that has disappeared. It requires silence, some form of isolation, and sustained concentration in the presence of an enigmatic thing.*[376]

Reasonably uncomfortable with the transformation of culture toward post-literacy, Roth's "trilogy on postwar American history dramatizes the fate of a generation—his generation—subjected to [such] social and cultural change."[377] *The Human Stain*'s protagonist Coleman Silk is the ex-dean of a college where the students are "barely educable," the academy either in throes of political correctness or given in to "the dogmatism of critical theory."[378] The Western classics Silk teaches are as obsolete and out-of-synch with the zeitgeist as he himself appears to those around him.[379] "The powerful, cultivated, intelligent, largely admirable Coleman Silk ends his career in ignominy and can only find solace in the intensely

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[372] Green, p.46.
[373] Green, p.46.
[374] Green, p.48.
[375] Green, p.48.
[376] David Remnick, "Into the Clear: Philip Roth Puts Turbulence in its Place", **New Yorker,** 08.05.2000, p.86 quoted in Green p.63.
[377] Green, pp.63-64.
[378] Green, p.64.
[379] Green, p.65.

private, erotic relationship" he has with an illiterate woman.[380] His disgrace extends to professional and intellectual realms; he suffers a highly personal demise as an outcast in an unintellectual, morally degenerate society that completely misfits him.

Green observes a similar tone in John Barth, one of the most renowned postmodernists, who has written three linked essays that try to refresh and strengthen the vitality of the novel. In "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1968), Barth was mistaken for writing another obituary for the novel, yet he was actually trying to "establish the originality, authority, and pedigree for a new kind of fiction, thus lying to rest the premature rumors of the novel's demise."[381] Barth urges novelists to embrace the achievements of their modernist forebears and warns them to stay away from the avant-gardism of high modernism as well as the confines of realist narrative. His overall intention was to reclaim "credibility for the novel at a moment when its social and cultural space seemed to be under attack from all sides."[382] As a sequel to "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth published "The Literature of Replenishment" in 1980. In the essay, Barth responds to critics like Gerald Graff, Robert Alter, and Ihab Hassan who define postmodernism as the rather weakened continuation of modernism with a heightened emphasis on the latter's self-reflexivity. In defense of postmodernist fiction, Barth argues that it synthesizes both modernism and realism without polemizing over the meanings/functions of both. Authors like Italo Calvino and Gabriel Marcia Marquez, for instance, offer both narrative sophistication and traditional narrative pleasure that masterpieces give the reader. Postmodernist fiction, for Barth, does not rely much on formal properties; overcoming the divisions of elite and popular taste, the academy and the reading public, postmodernist fiction derives strength from popular forms such as the folk tale and myth.[383] In "The Novel in the Next Century" (1990), Barth imagines the status of the novel in 2090 and comes up with yet another announcement of the demise of the print book in the reign of electronic media. Affecting even the "bestsellers," the total marginalization of reading in the age of technology is hazardous in yet another sense: a literate culture, where novels are produced and

[380] Green, p.65.
[381] Green, p.52.
[382] Green, p.51.
[383] Green, p.54.

read, comprises a "participatory democracy, standing for the freedom of the author to market her intellectual property, and for the reader's ability to make informed decisions."[384] In this argument, post-literacy means dysfunctional and undemocratic society, guaranteeing worse problems other than mere lack of reading public.

In a final analysis, Green proceeds cautiously toward defining literature's new territory in and around the millennium, and tries to take as many factors into account as possible in order to explain the emergence of what he calls "late postmodernism." His focus rests mostly on extraliterary factors, and the move beyond postmodernism, in his account, curiously lacks responses to contemporary literature's relationship to postmodernist ironic detachment and nihilism.

Before concluding this part, the discussion will turn to a critical endeavor that manages to move beyond postmodernism without formulating an agenda to that effect. The authors of *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (2011), Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly seem to proceed from the assumption that postmodernism's influence has not been greatly beneficial for the contemporary individual's soul. They observe the equally adverse effects of the Enlightenment on the individual. Without arguing against any literary movement, without making any theoretical claims, the authors focus simply on the human element in literature. Their endeavor would probably classify as a brilliant example of a move beyond postmodernism: focusing on narrative, establishing the vitality of the representation of the human in literature.

Dreyfus and Kelly seek solace from a spiritual paralysis that plagues contemporary culture. Their contention is that history has progressed to a point that gives unprecedented freedom of choice and will power to the individual, which, in their account, has led to myriad forms of lostness and nihilistic and meaningless lives. The role of reason is especially relevant in this account. As Western thought has evolved, the authors argue, the autonomous self of the Enlightenment individual has lost his or her connections to values outside of himself or herself. The Enlightenment has reduced the sacred to a narrow dimension through monotheism; it elevated, or perhaps limited, the human agent's capacity to his or her consciousness, autonomy, and free will. Too much reliance on reason has not only severed man

[384] Green, p.56.

from his spiritual needs but also entrapped him: "The Enlightenment's metaphysical embrace of the autonomous individual leads not just to a boring life. It leads almost inevitably to a nearly unlivable life."[385] The problem, therefore, is not that the gods are abandoned; rather, the possibility of the sacred is forgotten, and we do not have "any sense of what is sacred and inviolable."[386] As Stephen Dowden similarly observes, [i]n a world devoid of a deeper truth, things and events mean only themselves; they do not point to something behind or beyond them. Even the commonplace certainties of daily life—the recording of an official statement, delivering a message, and the like—become mysterious, intractable problems.[387]

This difficulty has more to do with forgetting the existence of sacred things than with abandoning conventional sources of the sacred in a secular world. At its worst, the problem regards the denial of any "force beyond the whim of human self-assertion."[388] In the authors' account, "the pinnacle of human possibility" is not the freedom to provide "no reason to prefer any answer to any other."[389] This is nihilism, which, for Nietzsche, was "a great joy, since it frees us to live any life we choose, but many find it horrifying instead."[390] Dreyfus and Kelly refer to Dostoevsky's remark, "[i]f there is no God, then everything is permitted" and assert that their "view is that nihilism is every bit as closed-minded as fanaticism, and that neither is a sufficient ground on which to base a livable life.[391]

Ihab Hassan, in a similar tone, defends his notion of truth with a pun on Dostoyevsky's words and claims, in a warning tone, that "[i]f truth is dead, everything is permitted—because its alternatives, more than ever, are rank power and rampant desire."[392] He adds, "[t]rue (pun intended), we no longer share an absolute, transcendent, or foundational Truth. But in daily life we distinguish well enough between truth and falsehood, from little white lies to darker deceptions."[393] Similarly,

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[385] Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, **All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age**, Free Press, New York, 2011, p.204.
[386] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.4.
[387] Stephen Dowden, **Kafka's *The Castle* and the Critical Imagination,** Camden House, Columbia, 1995, p.13.
[388] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.11.
[389] Dreyfus and Kelly, pp.12, 21.
[390] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.21.
[391] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.21.
[392] Hassan, Beyond, p.6.
[393] Hassan, Beyond, pp.6-7.

Dreyfus and Kelly posit that in the absence of foundational and predetermined sources of the sacred in the contemporary secular world, human life is to be shaped, if it is to be shaped meaningfully, through rendering the human heart and mind receptive to the wonderful, awe-inspiring details of life and community that flow from outside toward us rather than the opposite.

In an attempt to relocate sacred sources of meaning to the life of the contemporary individual through literature's guidance, the writers re-read Western classics like *Moby-Dick*, *Odysseus*, *The Divine Comedy*, and what they consider a contemporary classic, *Infinite Jest*. Dreyfus and Kelly invite us to imagine a world of things shining with meaning and order that can alleviate the indecision, waiting, expressionlessness, indirection, sadness, angst, characteristic of contemporary life.[394] The malaise of indecision, of uncertainty, is so pervasive that we falter when performers of heroic acts admit they have not hesitated to act determinedly when it was a split second's call to act in an emergency, even at the cost of losing their own lives. We tend to think they have acted in a "superhuman" way, "as though it is ordained by some force beyond the mere whim of human self-assertion."[395] According to the authors, something far more dangerous is lurking underneath the hesitation and uncertainty in the face of choices confronting us "culminating in choices finally made on the basis of nothing at all."[396]

"The burden of choice," as the authors identify it, is the doom the "freedom of choice" has bestowed on us.[397] There is a wide range of choices available to us in this period of history such as "who to become, how to act, with whom to align ourselves," yet the richness of options is not very helpful because "when we find ourselves confronted with these kinds of existential choices, we feel a lack of any genuine motivation to choose one over the other."[398] This burden is "a peculiarly modern phenomenon. It proliferates in a world that no longer has any God or gods, nor even any sense of what is sacred and inviolable, to focus our understanding of what we are."[399] The absence of foundations (sacred or not) that determine the

[394] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.xi.
[395] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.11.
[396] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.3.
[397] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.4.
[398] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.4.
[399] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.7.

fundamental facts of our lives is troubling because in such a life scheme, the freedom of choice brings about unanswerable existential questions. These questions, usually without answers, exacerbate the sense of meaninglessness since the real question cannot be answered: "[o]n what basis should I make this choice?"[400] The task of *All Things Shining* seems, in this sense, almost impossible. How could we, after all, be expected, or even hope, to restore "the fixed certainty" of a world depicted in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and eradicate "the existential uncertainty of our own?"[401]

Similar questions pervade Wallace's remarks in interviews and fiction. Dreyfus and Kelly recognize the precision of Wallace's diagnosis when he claims in an interview that "[t]his is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values."[402] In the same interview, Wallace also notes that "I get the feeling that a lot of us, privileged Americans, as we enter our early 30s, have to find a way to put away childish things and confront stuff about spirituality and values."[403] For the authors, the problem "is not just that we know the course of right action and fail to pursue it; we often seem not to have any sense of what the standards of a good life are in the first place."[404] In their book, they try to provide the reader with an outline of transition points in Western history, philosophy, and literature that move away from fixed certainties toward recent uncertainties. From Homer to Kant, from Melville to David Foster Wallace, they try to chronicle the gradual loss of an openness to the world and the spiritual. They assert that the "hidden history of the West" is "the story of how we lost touch with these sacred practices."[405] In the process, the authors do not turn to religion—gods, holy books or figures—but portray the mundane as the source of the sacred: the everyday, which can fill our lives with wonder and gratitude, is the true source of bliss and the sacred in the contemporary world.

Dreyfus and Kelly devote a chapter to David Foster Wallace and focus on the ways his novels *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* grapple with contemporary nihilism and the burden of choice. They believe that Wallace is "dedicated to showing his

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[400] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.12.
[401] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.16.
[402] Wallace, Conversations, p.18 quoted in Dreyfus and Kelly, p.25.
[403] Wallace, Conversations, p.59 quoted in Dreyfus and Kelly, p.25.
[404] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.15.
[405] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.89.

readers how to live a meaningful life," however difficult it seems to be.[406] On a formal level, Wallace's reaction to indecision comes in the form of a pervasive use of endnotes and footnotes that reveal the unknown prospects of uncertainty: these paratextual devices help him to show that when confronted with the call of decision, we may "qualify," "change," or even cancel the choices we have made by way of further elaboration.[407] In other words, Wallace presents to us the possibility of alleviating the burden of choice through turning the process of decision into a continuous exercise in thinking.

Wallace's fiction demonstrates his belief in the writer's duty "to show the way forward, to offer a vision of the hopeful possibilities available in the modern world."[408] The problematical issues *Infinite Jest* raises, of course, are not easy to resolve and move beyond. In this sense, Dreyfus and Kelly consider *Infinite Jest* "the most sensitive account of the sadness and lostness of the present age," and the novel's title is the most prominent example of the sadness it portrays.[409] The novel features a film that bears the same title, and it is described as "fatally entertaining" and "terminally compelling."[410] The adjectives are not overstatements; they are to be taken on their literal meanings because the film induces a death-like, incurable state of entertainment in the audience. Anyone who starts watching the film surrenders all human functions completely to the compulsive and unceasing desire to watch the film repeatedly in loops that do not allow restroom or food breaks. The film is faultless in its entertaining potential: it absorbs the human absolutely; it distracts the human psyche to the point of its total destruction.

As Dreyfus and Kelly note, the title's allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is vital to an understanding of Wallace's approach to entertainment and distraction.[411] Upon discovering the skull of Yorick who is his former court jester, or entertainer, the prince remarks woefully to his friend, "Alas, poor, Yorick! I knew him Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath born me on his back a

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[406] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.22.
[407] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.24.
[408] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.29.
[409] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.21.
[410] David Foster Wallace, **Infinite Jest**, Back Bay, New York, 1996, (Jest), pp.230, 940.
[411] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.31.

thousand times."[412] The authors read Wallace's allusion as a grim diagnosis of the results of the insatiable need for entertainment. In *Infinite Jest*,

> *the fight to distraction […] ends no longer in the arms of a man of most excellent fancy, a court jester who bears you on his back and lifts your spirits. Instead, the power of infinite jest is sedating; it leaves you congealed, in your special recliner, having wet your pants. Entertainment of this perfect sort takes away our humanity instead of restoring it to us. [The sadness of the novel is that] it depicts our world as devoted to the perfection of an entertainment in the face of which we will necessarily annihilate ourselves.*[413]

If *Infinite Jest* warns against the dangers of infinite distraction and entertainment, Wallace's "final, unfinished masterpiece," *The Pale King* suggests a solution: "crushing, crushing boredom turns out to be the key."[414] The novels have completely different projects:

> *The new novel is not so much interested in the transformation of our distractions, in the way they sedate us, even annihilate us, instead of bringing us back to ourselves. Rather, the new work is interested in the various states that precede and precipitate the flight to distraction: the boredom, the anxiety, the frustration, and the anger that propel us toward any distracting entertainment that offers relief. The spiritual journey of Wallace's IRS examiners consists in learning to live in these prior states—especially the state of boredom—and to find in them redemption and spiritual value.*[415]

Wallace's sense of "redemption and spiritual value" does not come, as would be expected, through "hope" or any divine help.[416] Wallace configures "the strength of the human will" as the only source of meaning.[417] In *This is Water* (2005), his posthumously published commencement speech at Kenyon College, Wallace asserts that the human potential to choose pertains to our capacity to control our thoughts and how to experience particular events. If we can master our thoughts, Wallace claims, we will have control over how we experience negative situations. In a sense, meaning will flow outward from us; the self will be the source of meaning. Dreyfus and Kelly, critical of such "radical freedom," take Wallace to task for suggesting something close to impossible within our human potential "to create meaning […] ex nihilo without some kind of constraints.[418] In their opinion, if we can be open to the

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[412] William Shakespeare, **Hamlet**, Act V, Scene 1, line 185 quoted in Dreyfus and Kelly, p.31.
[413] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.31.
[414] Dreyfus and Kelly, pp.29, 31.
[415] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.32.
[416] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.45.
[417] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.45.
[418] Dreyfus and Kelly, pp.49, 50.

wonders of life, and experience them with awe and wonder, we would not be confined to the individual's "self-contained" reasoning.[419] Literature, in this sense, is a very reliable source of meaning:

> *The job of a work of art is to disclose a world, give meaning, and reveal truth. In this sense, works of art working can be thought of as sacred. They give meaning to people's lives and people guide their lives by them, so people treat them as divine. [… Works of art] are a nonhuman authority that gives meaning and purpose to those whose lives are illuminated by them.*[420]

In a final analysis, the authors posit that although Wallace does indeed illuminate the most vexing issue of the contemporary period, he remains stuck in the contemporary nihilistic loop because he continues to give priority to human will which cannot get over indecision and burden of choice as long as it stays within the bounds of the self.

To conclude this part, it is possible to say that one major preoccupation of recent literary criticism has been with the permeable boundary between the terms the contemporary and the postmodern. The conflation of these terms problematizes, as the discussions of Amy Hungerford and Gordon Hutner demonstrate, the systemic reception, or categorization, of post-1945 American literature, especially with regard to realistic and experimental literary productivity. The effort to define literary realism's position in contemporary literature acquires thematic rather than categorical significance in another visible preoccupation of recent literary criticism. As James Wood's notion of hysterical realism and Ihab Hassan's postmodernist aesthetics of realism illustrate, realism matters to contemporary literature on the basis of the representation of the human and the ethical responsibilities of fictional representation and storytelling. Wood may disdain a hyperactive, compromised realistic storytelling that relies too heavily on experimentation but he nonetheless foregrounds contemporary literature's engagement with realistic narrative. Hassan, on the other hand, tries to rediscover, or rehabilitate, postmodernism with an eye to realism's potential to make central the ethical, truth, and trust. Moreover, as Stefano Ercolino's notion of hybrid realism that weds postmodernism with conventional storytelling, Paul Dawson's discussion of the revival of realistic omniscience in order to illustrate contemporary literature's engagement with realism, and Mark Greif's proposal that the post-1945 American novel is essentially engaged with the

[419] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.139.
[420] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.102.

representation of the human however antihumanistic it may at times seem due to postmodernist narrative techniques altogether illustrate the deep interest of contemporary literary criticism in the intersection of realism and postmodernism.

The final strain in contemporary literary scholarship grapples with the matter of the so-called end of postmodernism. While Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon elaborate on the historicity of the term postmodernism that makes its end viable, other critics try to define what follows postmodernism and come up with historical markers for the contemporary. Jeremy Green defines contemporary literature as "late postmodernism" that tries to restore a communicative basis for the relationship between writer and reader as well as reconnecting literature with its timeless venture of engaging with tradition and cultural memory. Josh Toth offers a notion of "narrative of renewalism" that reconfigures the new stage after postmodernism without so much breaking with postmodernism as foregrounding what it overshadowed: literature's humanistic project of talking about human progress and representation of meaning. If these critics remain too deliberate in their preoccupation with defining some sense of an end to postmodernism in order to talk about a new phase in contemporary literature, Dreyfus and Kelly take it for granted that certain innovations have emerged and perhaps exhausted themselves, leaving us nonetheless with the universal question of literature's potential to represent, and in a way illustrate, meaningful, spiritually satisfactory portrayal of human life.

It is with these multiple approaches to contemporary literature in mind that the discussion now proceeds to take note of a surprising "groundswell" of the contemporary: the ethical turn in literary studies (Buell, "Pursuit" 7). As this part tried to demonstrate, the distinct approaches to the contemporary revolve around the ambiguity of the term contemporary and its problematical relationship to postmodernism, while postmodernism, either declared dead or modified for the millennium, continues its dispute with realism. The ethical turn, in contrast, qualifies and exemplifies, perhaps corrects and enriches, contemporary literature in many ways that are both constructive and enlightening.

1.2. THE "ETHICAL TURN" IN LITERARY STUDIES

1.2.1. The Problem of Definition

Late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries seem rife with problems of definition as well as turns—the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the postmodern turn, and most recently, the so-called ethical turn.[421] As the first part of the chapter tried to demonstrate, postmodernism's indeterminate import bordering on an amorphous set of definitions proceeded to the next century without any resolution other than on its persistent ambiguity. Uncertainty applies as well to the definitions of new fields of interest postmodernism has given rise to, with ethics being the most widely deployed—and frequently contested with regard to its meaning and function, for instance, in cross-disciplinary use in literary studies, philosophy, medicine, and law. In Dorothy J. Hale's words, "[s]ince the turn of the new century, there has been an increasing return to ethical inquiry staged by literary critics."[422] This return has established ethical criticism as a major movement within literary criticism, and it has established its own schools and practitioners: "neo-Aristotelians," or the "Chicago-School ethical theory" such as Wayne Booth and James Phelan, and "new ethicists who are working in and through post-structuralist approaches to literature [like] de Manian deconstruction, Foucauldian sociology, Jamesonian Marxism, and identity politics" such as J. Hillis Miller[423] and Gayatri Spivak.[424]

This study holds that ethical criticism in literary studies is essential for at least two current intertwined reasons that seem to plague on unprecedented scale both literature and humanity. For that reason, before a detailed analysis of the so-

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[421] Another turn that is omitted for the purposes of this study is noted by Katrin Amian in *Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Charles S. Pierce and the Pragmatist Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer* (2008); she mentions a "'pragmatist revival' that has swept across the field of American literary and cultural studies in recent years. Since the mid-1980s, a growing number of scholars have turned to the works of William James, John Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and—to a lesser extent—Charles Sanders Pierce, looking to American pragmatism as a source of critical insight and providing extensive readings of the American literary tradition along its lines" (Amian, 2008, p.2).

[422] Dorothy J. Hale, "Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel", ***NARRATIVE***, Volume:15, No:2, 2007, p.188.

[423] "J. Hillis Miller, a card-carrying deconstructionist through the 1980s, makes an ethical turn within his own career, a path inaugurated by his 1987 book *The Ethics of Reading,* and leading more recently to the 2005 *Literature as Conduct*" (Hale, 2007, p.189).

[424] Hale, pp.187-188.

called ethical turn in literary studies, the discussion will turn to the ways in which the recent interest in ethics may offer a way to alleviate the diminishing importance of "literature" as a serious endeavor and practice.[425] In this particular argument, Marjorie Garber's diagnoses of the current state of "literature" in contemporary American literary scene will be used. The particular use of literature she devises through what she calls its "uselessness" can be connected to the "disinterested interestedness" (Gibson) of ethical literary study.[426] Second, the alarming findings of another newly emerging field called Social Genomics can show how technology is genetically altering the human ability to communicate and the formation as well as maintenance of other interpersonal/social habits. It may be possible to extend the findings of Social Genomics to include other habits and experiences such as literary activity, and in particular, reading habits. A large number of people are becoming less and less inclined to read with changes in habit and limitations of time due to technology, media, and the life-pervading influence of the Internet. Amid such vast changes, literature may save not only culture but by fostering a re-connection with humanity, prevent the possible erasure of human connection to other people and to life.

Marjorie Garber is a Harvard Professor of English and American literature. In her last book, *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (2011), Garber looks beyond statistical results on the decreasing rate of readership in America and diagnoses a much more alarming problem that concerns the use and meaning of literature both private and public, intellectual and social, personal and institutional. Garber talks about the 2004 report of *National Endowment for the Arts* which draws on "the 2002 Census survey."[427] The report announces "an alarming decline of reading in all age groups across the country" and considers this "an indication of a 'national crisis,' one that reflected 'a general collapse in advanced literacy,' and a loss that 'impoverished both cultural and civic life.'"[428] Garber detects a problem with the very meaning of

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[425] Something along this line is mentioned by R. M. Berry and Jeffrey R. Di Leo, who argue that the"recent ethical and political justifications for narrative are themselves not signs of fiction's renewed vitality but responses to its obsolescence, as though comprising a compensatory effort to *make* fiction present" (Berry and Di Leo, Eds., 2008, p.8).
[426] Garber, p.13.
[427] Garber, p.9.
[428] Garber, p.9.

literature in this report and argues that it comprises on its own a big part of the problem the report identifies.

In an attempt to distinguish literary material from nonliterary, the report deploys a distinction between fiction and nonfiction. While fiction is considered literature and seen as an umbrella term that includes everything from popular fictional genres such as thrillers and romances to classics, nonfiction is completely ignored. Garber writes that

> *the decision to exclude "nonfiction," or what an older generation once dubbed "intellectual prose," does seem to undercut a little the [report's] message that "anyone who loves literature or values the cultural, intellectual, and political importance of active and engaged literacy in American society will respond to this report with grave concern."*[429]

Such willful decision to exempt literature from standards of quality indicates for Garber the culmination of a series of confusions about the meaning of literature. "There was a time," Garber writes pointing at the nineteenth century, "when the word literature meant an acquaintance with 'letters' or books—the confident possession, that is, of humane learning and literary culture."[430] Literature was something one *had,* in the mode of "learning, a familiarity with and understanding of words and texts."[431] However, by late twentieth century, literature came to mean profitable labor embodied in the figure of the "man of letters" as well as specialist publications pertaining to particular academic disciplines.[432] Against these meanings that sat atop cultural hierarchy, literature also gained a "low" cultural denotation: it "was routinely used to describe flyers, brochures, and other disposable printed stuff."[433] As for today, "the only meaning current in departments and programs of literature" follows the notion of literature as "literary productions as a whole; the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or the world in general."[434] Garber explains that

> *the meanings of literature as a term have, perhaps paradoxically, moved both "up" and "down" in recent years. On the one hand, it now seems to denote a particular reading, writing, and publishing practice associated with middle to high culture, with the notion of a literary canon, and with English majors; on*

[429] Garber, p.10.
[430] Garber, p.10.
[431] Garber, p.11.
[432] Garber, p.12.
[433] Garber, p.13.
[434] Garber, p.11.

the other hand, it has been co-opted—or universalized—so that it means just about anything professional—or research-based—written in words.[435]

She suggests we "take back the term literature" in its "obsolete," nineteenth century meaning of "personal attribute or characteristic."[436] In this way, both reading and literary study may become "a way of thinking" that is central to "personal, educational, and professional life."[437] The significance of her suggestion is that she proposes a use and meaning of literature based on "uselessness."[438] By uselessness, Garber means the isolation of reading from constraints to provide answers, to illustrate pre-given ideas and values, and states that we should "understand literature as its own practice."[439] She assures that "[t]he genius of literary study comes in asking questions, not in finding answers."[440] It is in this sense that we can re-claim the original meaning of literature and hence manage to "distinguish it from it from other distinct, though valuable, human enterprises like morality, politics, and aesthetics."[441]

Furthermore, she notes how the cross-disciplinary mergings of literature have had negative consequences: "After a spurt of enthusiasm among scholars in adjacent fields like history, anthropology, and philosophy—the so-called linguistic turn of the 1970s and 1980s—literature, literary theory, and literary studies have fallen behind in both academic cachet and intellectual influence."[442] What is important here is how "literature is often undervalued or misunderstood as something that needs to be applied to the experiences of life" such as the uncertain career path undergraduate literary study offers a student, or how literature "is often interrogated for wisdom or moral lessons." [443, 444] Garber asserts that "no interpretation of literature is "final" or "definitive," and that we "flatten" our approach to literature when we expect a single and ultimately true answer because "one of the defining characteristics of literature

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[435] Garber, p.13.
[436] Garber, pp.13, 11.
[437] Garber, p.13.
[438] Garber, p.13.
[439] Garber, p.21.
[440] Garber, p.20.
[441] Garber, p.21.
[442] Garber, p.20.
[443] For an extensive discussion on the university and the quality of education, see Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins* (1996).
[444] Garber, p.20.

and literary study is to open questions, not to close them."[445] This fact renders literature and literary study "useless" in contrast with "problem-solving disciplines like economics, political theory, or even certain branches of philosophy."[446] She also refuses the notion that literature is useful for "social issues" such as moral instruction, ethical concerns, and societal and political advancement because "the uses of literature themselves grow and change as cultures and technologies grow and change.[447] She argues that

> *[w]e do literature a real disservice if we reduce it to knowledge or to use, to a problem to be solved. If literature solves problems, it does so by its own inexhaustibility, and by its ultimate refusal to be applied or used, even for moral good. This refusal, indeed, is disparate, and always changing, the rich possibility of interpretation—the happy resistance of the text to ever be fully known and mastered—is one of the most exhilarating products of human culture.*[448]

The way Marjorie Garber's analysis relates to a discussion of the ethical turn in literary studies specifically and to the overall purpose of this study is the fact that through her insistence on literature's aversion to closure and definite answers, she sketches a way for literature to preserve the vitality of reading and thinking, the unending quest of humanity to interrogate life, and the persistent belief in literature as a guide to us if we can remain open to its many answers. She writes that

> *[a] multiplicity of persuasive and well-argued "meanings" does not mean the death or loss of meaning, but rather the living presence of the literary work in culture, society, and the individual creative imagination. To say that closure is impossible is to acknowledge the richness and fecundity of both the reading and the writing process. The use of literature begins here.*[449]

These suggestions resonate with this study's investigations of the possibilities of re-establishing the high-cultural meaning and function of literature as well as re-directing literary study's focus toward more human-oriented concerns and approaches/methodologies. Her ideas on the value of nonfiction as an intellectual endeavor and a vital part of literature also resonate with this study's claim that nonfiction is highly significant in assessing the state of contemporary American literature.

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[445] Garber, pp.20, 290.
[446] Garber, p.290.
[447] Garber, pp.43, 37.
[448] Garber, pp.37-38.
[449] Garber, p.315.

The second argument we could take note of before moving on with the implications of the ethical turn in literary study concerns an extra-literary development that could nonetheless be connected to literature due to its large-scale impact on humanity in general. It has now become commonplace to note the hazards of technology on human life, yet we seem to stand on an irreversible threshold.[450] The grand human ability to adapt to changing social, environmental, and technological conditions has now moved beyond mere physical adaptability, and quite paradoxically, the amazing human ability to pass on human cultural heritage to the next generations is now the major threat to the human as we know it. Studies in Social Genomics and behavioral neuroscience demonstrate that social factors have unexpected impact on the human DNA. Steve W. Cole, an oncologist in UCLA School of Medicine writes that

> *[t]he conceptual relationship between genes and social behavior has shifted significantly during the past 20 years. As genes have come to be understood as concrete DNA sequences, rather than abstractions inferred from inheritance, it has become increasingly clear that social factors can play a significant role in regulating the activity of human genes. […] Even more striking has been the discovery that the social world outside our bodies influences which genes are transcribed within the nuclei of our cells.*[451]

While Steven W. Cole focuses on social factors such as feelings of social connectedness to other people and the impact of socio-economic status, Barbara L. Fredrickson, a professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina pays special attention to the pervasive use of technology in the mode of staring at electronic device screens in her article "Your Phone vs. Your Heart"[452] (2013). Such prolonged exposure to screens limits interactivity with the world out of the frame, and she argues that this has determining, irreversible role in genetically modifying the human capability to communicate. Fredrickson explains, "experiences leave imprints on our neural pathways" and "any habit molds the very structure of your

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[450] For a comprehensive treatment of the subject see John Paul Russo's *Future Without a Past: The Humanities in a Technological Society* (2005).

[451] Steve Cole W., "Social Regulation of Human Gene Expression", **Current Directions in Psychological Science,** Volume:18, No:3, 2009, p.132.

[452] This *New York Times* piece refers to her article in *Psychological Science*, which was due publication by the time this study was completed.

brain in ways that strengthen your proclivity for that habit."[453] Therefore, she warns, "new parents may need to worry less about genetic testing and more about how their own actions—like texting while breast-feeding or otherwise paying more attention to their phone than their child—leave life-limiting fingerprints on their and their children's gene expression."[454] Her point is that if we do not use certain habits, we are programmed to lose them, and in this particular historical moment, we are on the brink of losing "our biological capacity to connect with other people."[455] If we really lose that capacity, and become addicted to electronic screens, and unknowingly change our DNA which will we will pass on to the next generations, what would become of our relationship to literature, that seemingly imaginary gateway toward other people, toward life? As Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack put it, since "we are finite creatures who come to understand the world through both physical and mental experience, literary experience affords readers with opportunities that their physical lives may not."[456] However, can the fictional survive such change where real interaction loses its customary use and meaning? It is of grave importance that literature has to fight not only against the Internet or changing lifestyles but also has to survive *despite* the human whose DNA is being modified according to the dictates of a life electronic, growing less and less human, less interactive, so to speak, in terms of human intersubjectivity. It is with these developments—that invite ethical consideration—in mind that the discussion now moves on with literary study's own efforts to bring intersubjectivity to focus through its recent interest in ethics.

In light of these facts, it is possible to say that reading and thinking critically about literature may be more important than it has ever been at this historical juncture of, on the one hand, the diminished role and importance in culture of literary works that aspire to high literary standards, and on the other, the massive digitalization of culture, arts, and media. It is possible to hear the voices of novelists, essayists, and critics complaining about the loss of serious literature's authority and

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[453] Barbara L. Fredrickson, "Your Phone vs. Your Heart", **New York Times**, 23.05.2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/opinion/sunday/your-phone-vs-your-heart.html?pagewanted=print, (26.05.2013), n.pag.
[454] Fredrickson, n.pag.
[455] Fredrickson, n.pag.
[456] Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack, "Reading Literature and the Ethics of Criticism", **Style**, Volume:32, No:2, 1998, p.186.

prestige, some of which were noted in the previous part. The voices of complaint often turn into attempts to rescue and revive some neglected fundamentals of literary works such as socially responsible critique, incisive evaluation of cultural and political ills, and thought-provoking presentation of ethical dilemmas. Some of these attempts declare the end of postmodernism, which, for them, prepares the ground for the revivalist mode they are seeking. Ethical literary criticism is one of these revived theories. Although the revival of ethical criticism is not strictly connected to the trajectory of postmodernism, at least its demise appears to coincide with the culmination of literary theories that have gathered enough force around the 1980s. Ethical literary criticism restores not only the fundamental task of literature to have moral value and to adhere to high literary standards, but also reminds the reader the arduous intellectual and ethical demands of reading, qualities and tasks that will mark the value of the selected writers' creative nonfiction and fiction to be discussed in the following chapters of this study.

Traditionally, ethics means the philosophical investigation of right conduct and study of obligations for good life. Literature, if it is one of our most reliable sources for understanding and investigating life and human existence, could never operate without ethics. However, the seeming inseparability of ethics and literature and the organized study of this relation have been contested within literary studies since the 1980s by poststructuralist/postmodern theory for various reasons such as naiveté, pious moralism, and superficiality. Both in response to such reduction and for other reasons, a literary movement, the ethical turn has burgeoned to restore and reinvigorate the legitimate study of the relation between literature and ethics since the late 1990s.[457]

The ethical turn can be seen, on the one hand, as a revival of traditional ethics with a focus on a refreshed concept of intersubjectivity between reader and writer,

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[457] In their introduction to the collection *The Turn to Ethics* (2000), the editors Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz note that the ethical turn is noticeable, besides literary studies, in disparate areas such as the media, the world of technology and medicine, and politics. They note a "startling frequency" in the deployment of "ethical responsibility" in these areas and claim that "we have become inured to the idea that 'ethics' is a kind of moral orthopedics" (Garber et al., 2000, pp.vii-viii). This sense of ethics as "praxis," as "situational and remedial" solution to a "a local and immediate crisis" is manifest in the titles of many a volumes which begin with *The Ethics of* and end with terms specific to finance such as "capitalism," or law such as "divorce," or politics such as "apartheid" (Garber et al., 2000, p.viii).

and on the other hand, as the (mostly retrospective) re-assessment of poststructuralist and/or postmodern theory in the mode of proving its ethical concerns. In the latter case, the character of the turn may seem somewhat paradoxical. As Beverly R. Voloshin writes in "The Ethical Turn in French Philosophy" (1988), ethics has been subject to the "corrosive critique" of postmodern philosophy because it was considered another humanist metanarrative.[458] However, the "skeptical energies of postmodern critique" enabled "a counter-movement within postmodern philosophy to establish an ethics compatible with postmodern philosophy's suspicion about positive or universal claims drawn from the standards of reason, nature, and law."[459] Jennifer Geddes makes a similar argument in her article "Attending to Suffering in/at the Wake of Postmodernism" (2007):

> *By exposing the cracks in seemingly comprehensive totalities and reading authoritative texts against themselves, postmodernism's critiques created space in which previously marginalized and silenced voices were able to speak. What these voices had to say brought to scholars' attention to a whole range of ethical issues, experiences of suffering, and aspects of human experience (including the religious) that had previously not garnered attention. Interestingly, these revelations called for ways of thinking, reading, and responding that exposed the limitations of postmodernism's approaches. In other words, the very delegitimizing of grand narratives by postmodern thought opened up space that allowed and encouraged the particular narratives of those not in power to be told and heard, but that in doing so, this "delegitimizing" gesture has brought forth narratives that describe, express, and protest a range of suffering, injustice, and evil that postmodernism has been ill equipped to respond to–hence its turn to questions of ethics, suffering, and religion.*[460]

It is easy to note that one recent and very frequent argument regarding postmodernism considers its relation to ethical concerns. According to Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack who edited *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (2001), the high tide of theory (which they interchangeably call the poststructuralist era or postmodernity) is characterized by an aversion to any mention of ethical concerns or moral insights in literary studies. This seems "natural" considering the particular historical conjecture that has witnessed "the demise of modern humanism" after the world wars, nuclear weaponry, Auschwitz, as well as the biases of Anglocentrism and Eurocentrism in

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[458] Beverly R. Voloshin, "The Ethical turn in French Philosophy", **Pacific Coast Philology**, Volume:33, No:1, 1998, p.69.
[459] Voloshin, p.69.
[460] Jennifer Geddes, "Attending to Suffering in/at the Wake of Postmodernism," **The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism**, (Eds. Neil Brooks and Josh Toth), Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2007, pp.72-73.

literary production.[461] Nevertheless, "to pretend that the ethical or moral dimensions of the human condition were abandoned or obliterated in the shift to postmodernity certainly seems naïve."[462] Part of the reason for such a misunderstanding is postmodernity's resistance to "the simplistic, uncomplicated prescription of external ethical forces regarding so many different literatures and cultures."[463] For Davis and Womack, the recent turn to ethics in contemporary literary scholarship can best be characterized as the refusal "to return to a dogmatically prescriptive or doctrinaire form of reading."[464] Rather than such return, "ethical criticism appears to be moving, in all its various forms, toward a descriptive mode, a dialogue between what has occurred in the past and what is alive and in process at the present."[465]

What is most interesting about the recent interest in ethical literary criticism is that it goes beyond fostering the long held belief of literature's role in moral formation and education. Some of the recent endeavors in ethical criticism hold that the text[466] is an *other* that the reader is required to respond responsibly. Further, they investigate the kinds of narrative choices—stylistic and narrational—the author makes and the ways in which they inform our ethical judgments. Nevertheless, it is possible to say that the ethical turn is a collective effort that has produced surprisingly disparate approaches and methodologies. Thinkers across disciplines have put forward the necessity of a renewed concern for the ethical in literary studies which has either somehow undermined the relevance of ethics due to a theoretical focus or simply mistook ethics for the political. These thinkers can be categorized in three groups in terms of their differing methodologies of ethical literary criticism: moral philosophers such as Martha C. Nussbaum, Cora Diamond, and Alasdair McIntyre; deconstructionists and postmodern critics such as J. Hillis Miller, Simon Critchley, Richard Rorty, Andrew Gibson, Lawrence Buell, Geoffrey Galt Harpham,

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[461] Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack (Eds.), **Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory,** The University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2001, (Mapping), p.ix.
[462] Davis and Womack, Eds., p. ix.
[463] Davis and Womack, Eds., p. x.
[464] Davis and Womack, Eds., p. x.
[465] Davis and Womack, Eds., p. x.
[466] According to Dorothy J. Hale, "new ethicists" as she calls them,—whether those working within post-structuralism and deconstruction or neo-Aristotelians—single the novel out for ethical worth and value among all literary genres and the novel is used interchangeably with "text," "narrative," and "narrative text" (Hale, 2007, pp.188, 191).

and Jeffrey Karnicky; and humanist critics such as Wayne Booth, Daniel Schwarz, and David Parker. Curiously, both theorists and humanist critics blame theory for its erosion of ethics not only as a field on its own but also as an area of investigation in literary study.

At this point, we may note the variety of suggestions on the circumstances that have lead to the emergence of the ethical turn. One frequently mentioned reason, at least within deconstruction, is the posthumous discovery of American deconstructionist Paul de Man's anti-Semitic writings in a journal in 1987, casting a shadow over deconstruction's ethical commitment, and compelling major deconstructionists to defend the movement's ethically responsible ventures. Geoffrey Harpham makes a playful reference to Virginia Woolf's remarks in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924) on modernism which asserted that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" and declares, with a certain irony, "[o]n or about December 1, 1987, the nature of literary theory changed.[467] Martha C. Nussbaum also refers to the exposition of De Man's Nazism and how this controversy generated serious doubt about deconstruction's ethical stance:

> *It is striking that in the last few years literary theorists allied with deconstruction have taken a marked turn toward the ethical. […] No doubt a part of this change can be traced to the scandal over the political career of Paul de Man, which has made theorists anxious to demonstrate that Deconstruction does not imply a neglect of ethical and social considerations.*[468]

Another recurrent argument regards the ethical turn a product of "a turn to the literary within ethics," that is, within moral philosophy.[469] Michael Eskin writes something along this line and argues that "'ethics and literature went public with *New Literary History'*s pioneering special issue 'Literature and/as Moral Philosophy'"[470] in 1983.[471] Nevertheless, Eskin has some reservations regarding the

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[467] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Ethics", **Critical Terms for Literary Study**, (Eds., Frank Lentricchia and Robert McLaughlin), Second Edition, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1990, 1995, (Ethics), p.389.
[468] Martha C. Nussbaum, **Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature**, Oxford U. P., Oxford, 1990, (Knowledge), p.29.
[469] Jane Adamson et al. (Eds.), **Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.14.
[470] In this issue, Martha C. Nussbaum's groundbreaking article "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy" appeared. The essay will be discussed briefly later in this part.
[471] Eskin, Michael, "The Double 'Turn' to Ethics and Literature?", **Poetics Today**, Volume:25, No:4, 2004, (Double), p.558.

unquestioned acclaim moral philosophy receives due to a duality in the character of the *turn*: the turn in literary studies to ethics as a philosophical discipline and the turn in moral philosophy to fiction. This duality is evident in the variations the ethical turn has taken during the first decade of the twentieth-first century: "'moral turn' (Hoffmann and Hornung 1996), 'turn […] toward narrative' (Rorty 1989, 1999), 'turn to ethics' (Garber et al. 2000), 'ethical turn' (Davis and Womack 2001)."[472] For Eskin, the novelty of the context of this *turn* is questionable:

> *Questions tackled by authors through Ficino, Kant, and Nietzche to Sartre, Adorno, and Levinas—such as that of the good life in a particular community; of self-improvement and moral perfection; of duty and responsibility to the other and to my self; of just and upright speech and action; of truth and lying; of the moral significance of the arts; of the relationship between speech, ethos, and value; of the very meaning of "literature"—continue to resound in the symphony of contemporary buzzwords and topoi, occasionally vague and slippery, such as* alterity, interpellation, call of the other, answerability, ethical responsibility, openness, obligation, event, doing justice, witnessing, hospitality, singularity, particularity*, or the* gift.[473]

Eskin's purpose in drawing a parallel between the traditional and most recent manifestations of ethical concerns in literature is to argue that the ethical turn, although a fruitful venture, is not a particularly new direction in literary analysis. Its novelty lies not in its subject matter but in the ways it responds to the historical milieu with new terms and insights. In other words, the ethical turn is a set of re-readings for specific historical junctures. For instance, in the varying readings of the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac by Levinas and Derrida, Eskin notes the re-shaping of ethical response in accord with period-specific matters and concerns. In his 1976 work *Noms Propres,* Levinas re-reads the story of Abraham and Isaac "emphatically in light of and in response to the Holocaust" and uses it to establish "the prohibition of murder."[474] For Levinas, Isaac is saved because Abraham's "openness to the call of the other […] allows him to hear God's second command *not to kill his son.*"[475] Further, Levinas posits that this story "enact[s] the ultimate ethical

[472] Eskin, Double, p.558.
[473] Eskin, Double, p.561.
[474] Eskin, Double, pp.561-562.
[475] Eskin, Double, p.561.

situation in which the other's murder by me is made impossible in the name of the absolute other (God)."[476] Similarly, In *The Gift of Death* (1995), Derrida

> *revises previous readings of the biblical episode in light of what he perceives to be the ethical-political impossibility of doing justice to and being responsible to and for the other without at the same time not doing justice and being responsible to and for another other and, by extension, (all) other others—a problem particularly pressing in a globalized world, in which "all others" are constantly beamed into my very presence by dint of the media.*[477]

For Eskin, Levinas and Derrida's readings "reshap[e] 'what has always existed'—they do in fact create new texts with unprecedented impetuses geared toward a particular present."[478] And what is referred to as a turn is a "revival," a "resurgence" of topics that have never been forgotten.[479] Besides, Eskin finds a difficulty with the term *turn* and asserts that it is an "overused and historically problematic moniker" and he refrains from calling this trend a *turn* per se since ethics and literature have always been entwined.[480]

This entanglement is most passionately defended by humanist literary critics such as Wayne Booth and David Parker. For them, the ethical turn re-validates literature's moral insight and importance in the face of literary theory that has decentralized almost everything that is essential to their ideas of literature: free agents, traditions, and common values.[481] Their attitude is one of harsh reaction to theory and the interest in ethics takes the form, not of changing priorities and developments in literary theory, but of a retaliation against theory.[482] Yet the

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[476] Eskin, Double, p.561.
[477] Eskin, Double, p.562.
[478] Eskin, Double, p.562.
[479] Eskin, Double, p.562.
[480] Eskin, Double, p.563.
[481] From an opposite angle, Michael Greaney explains in *Contemporary Fiction and the Uses of Theory* (2006): "The terms 'critical theory', 'literary theory', or just plain 'theory' have served in recent years as more or less interchangeable flags of convenience for a very loose coalition of interest groups who have found a common cause in their impatience with the intellectual and ideological limitations of traditional literary criticism. 'Theory' has become a sweeping but indispensable shorthand for the state of permanent methodological revolution that characterizes contemporary literary-critical debate, with its apparently endless supply of new –isms and -ologies: structuralist and post-structuralist conceptions of language, difference and textuality; Marxist and Foucauldian demystifications of state power and ideology; Freudian and Lacanian explorations of desire, subjectivity and the unconscious; feminist critiques of patriarchal reading habits and male-dominated canons; postcolonial challenges to western cultural imperialism; postmodernist questionings of the official post-Enlightenment narratives of culture, truth and value." (Greaney, 2006, pp.1-2)
[482] In *Digimodernism*, Alan Kirby refers to the "supposed death of theory" and explains, "[a]mong the most prominent of relevant texts have been *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll; *Beyond Poststructuralism: The Speculations of Theory and the*

theorists that humanists resent for suppressing ethics are themselves articulate defenders of ethical criticism in literature. Robert Eaglestone, for instance, titles his online *Times Higher Education* article 'We Were Always Ethical Folk" and the plural pronoun refers to his fellow post-structuralists' work that has helped ethics re-emerge in literary theory much more forcefully than humanist critics did. Eaglestone writes that "[e]thics has always been a central concern of post-structuralist thought. However, it is only in the past few years that post-structuralists have become more vocal about their ethical commitments."[483] The growing interest in the ethical focus of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy is a case in point. For Eaglestone, post-structuralist critics should try to demonstrate "the specific relationship" between post-structuralism's interest in ethics which is best exemplified by Levinas and "literature as it is read, taught and studied."[484] Indeed, post-structuralism "has re-enervated the ethical concerns of literary studies" and referring to humanist critics, he claims that "the current active concern shown for ethics represents not the result of a successful backlash against theory but rather the fruition of the ethical post-structuralist project."[485]

It is possible to juxtapose Eaglestone's ideas with those of Steven Connor, who writes, in response to the 1996 international conference titled "Literature and

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Experience of Reading (1996), edited by Wendell V. Harris; *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism* (1999), edited by Martin McQuillan, Graeme Macdonald, Robin Purves, and Stephen Thomson; *Reading after Theory* (2002) by Valentine Cunningham; *After Theory* (2003) by Terry Eagleton; *Life after Theory* (2003), a collection of conversations with Jacques Derrida, Frank Kermode, Christopher Norris, and Toril Moi edited by Michael Payne and John Schad; and *Post-Theory, Culture, Criticism* (2004), edited by Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter. Firming up into a scholarly question in its own right, the issue of post-theory and these texts have been critically assessed by Slavoj Žižek in his *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (2001) and by Colin Davis in his *After Poststructuralism* (2004), as well as in forums such as the "Theory and after 'Theory'" conference held at the University of York in October 2006. More recently, Jonathan Culler's *The Literary in Theory* (2007) summarized the state of play: "Theory is dead, we are told. In recent years newspapers and magazines seem to have delighted in announcing the death of theory, and academic publications have joined the chorus." In this climate, the appearance in 2005 of *Theory's Empire*, an anthology of assaults on theory edited by Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (and including Bauerlein), was greeted by the *Wall Street Journal* as a "sign that things may be changing" in the world of "American humanistic scholarship," though actual scholars were less convinced." (Kirby, 2009, p.28)

[483] Robert Eaglestone, 'We Were Always Ethical Folk", **Times Higher Education**, 1996, http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=90970&sectioncode=26, (07.01.2012), n.pag,

[484] Eaglestone, n.pag.

[485] Eaglestone, n.pag.

Ethics" in the University of Wales, Aberystwyth,[486] that "the word 'ethics' seems to have replaced 'textuality' as the most charged term in the vocabulary of contemporary literary and cultural theory."[487] In contrast to such affirmation, noting the increasingly powerful "resonance" of ethics in literary studies, Lawrence Buell cautiously writes that ethics "has not—at least yet—become the paradigm-defining concept that textuality was for the 1970s and historicism for the 1980s."[488] Part of the reason of this (possible) replacement seems to be the voice of humanist critics rising in reactionary response to literary theory and cultural studies. As Richard Freadman explains, ethical literary criticism has come under severe attack:

> *neo-Marxists have claimed that ethical discourse is intrinsically class-specific and therefore ideological; psychoanalytic critics and theorists have often eschewed ethical inquiry in the belief that human conduct is predominantly determined by amoral unconscious forces; many feminists have argued that traditional ethical discourses are rendered untenable by their 'gendered' histories; poststructuralists, while in some cases wanting to keep ethics on the agenda, have found it disconcertingly hard—even impossible—to conjure worthwhile ethical discourse out of a position which denies the existence of 'centered' moral agents; postcolonialists tend to see Western ethical discourses as culpably ethnocentric.*[489]

A similar notion of the suppression of ethics by theory is noticed by Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz who co-edited *The Turn to Ethics* (2000). In their introduction, the editors define the nature of the *turn* to ethics in literary studies as a reconceptualization, or reformulation, or repositioning rather

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[486] The following were among speakers in the conference: Steven Connor, Simon Critchley, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, Christopher Norris, Leona Toker, Robert Eaglestone, Simon Haines, and Andrew Gibson. The conference lists its topics in the following way: "uses of literature in ethical theory; the ethics of style; moral luck; Levinas; Nussbaum; Putnam; the ethics of authorship and of autobiography; the ethics of queer theory; sympathy and science; blame and blameworthiness; literature and engagement; lying and ethical agency; the ethics of postmodernism and poststructuralism; decadence; evil; the obscene onstage; Plato; Kierkegaard; Derrida; Said; testimony as art; care of the self or care of the other; Thackeray; Hemingway; Cheever; Bellow; Kundera; Klima; Shalamov; Leavis and collaboration; Conrad; Rushdie; Joyce; Beckett; intelligibility and conversation; hysterical reading; Shakespeare; weeping texts of the 1590s; Shelley; Sartre; de Beauvoir; Carlyle and race; philosophy as melancholy; ethical aporias of postcoloniality; sensibility and suffering in Rhys and Nin; the evolution of ethics in post-Darwinian fiction; the ethics of indolence; Tarkovsky; Northern Ireland; Bosnia." Aberystwyth Conference: Literature and Ethics, 1996, http://foucault.info/Foucault-L/archive/msg01774.shtml, (21.07.2012), n.pag.

[487] Steven Connor, "Honor Bound?" **Times Literary Supplement**, January 1996, http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/, (21.04.2012), p.25.

[488] Lawrence Buell, "In Pursuit of Ethics", **PMLA**, Spec. issue *Ethics and Literary Study*, Volume:114, No:1, 1999, (Pursuit), p.7.

[489] Richard Freadman, "Review of David Parker's *Ethics, Theory, and the Novel*", **Philosophy and Literature**, Volume:20, No:2, 1996, p.519.

than a newly emerging field of inquiry.[490] Considering the turn a new phase in the evolution of a discipline, the editors explain that

> *[t]here was a time, not so many years ago, as Geoffrey Harpham reminds us, when "ethics" was regarded in the realm of literary study as a "master discourse" that presumed a universal humanism and an ideal, autonomous, and sovereign subject. To critics working in the domains of feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Marxism, this discourse became a target of critique: the critique of humanism was the exposé of ethics.*
>
> *Things have changed. Ethics is back in literary studies, as it is in philosophy and political theory, and indeed the very critiques of universal man and the autonomous human subject that had initially produced a resistance to ethics have now generated a crossover among these various disciplines that sees and does ethics "otherwise." The decentering of the subject has brought about a recentering of the ethical.*[491]

The editors of *The Turn to Ethics* are not alone in signifying the ethical turn's paradoxical debt to theory. In the same volume, Lawrence Buell's chapter titled "What We Think of When We Talk about Ethics" posits a similar argument in many respects. To begin, Buell notes the "trendline"-like quality of ethics in literary scholarship and states that the word ethics "becomes increasingly fashionable."[492] Statistically speaking, there is circumstantial evidence of a massive interest in ethics, albeit with a "still uncertain magnitude and even more uncertain focus."[493] Buell refers to the impressive number of conferences and symposia held specifically on literature and ethics; Geoffrey Galt Harpham's essay on ethics that appears as addendum in the second edition of Frank Lentricchia and Robert McLaughlin's *Critical Terms for Literary Study* in 1995; the impressive forty-six papers that *PMLA*'s special issue on ethics in 1999 has received—outnumbering those submissions on other special issues such as ethnicity, postcolonialism, and African-American Studies.[494] For Buell, we need to look at "several interlocking influences" if we want to understand "why ethics talk should have flourished in literary studies."[495]

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[490] Marjorie Garber et al. (Eds.), **The Turn to Ethics**, Routledge, New York, 2000, p. viii.
[491] Garber et al., Eds., p.viii-ix.
[492] Lawrence Buell, "What We Think of When We Talk about Ethics", Garber et al., Eds., (Think), pp.1, 3.
[493] Buell, Think, p.1.
[494] Buell, Think, p.2.
[495] Buell, Think, p.2.

To begin, in the 1970s, "the coeval perturbations of the theory revolution and canonical revisionism" have disturbed literature's moral insights. Following this, "currents within high theory itself" somehow "relegitimated talk on ethics.[496] Among these currents Buell notes Foucault's assertion "of care of the self as an ethical project," the arguments that positioned deconstruction as an ethical critical endeavor, and "the emergence of Emmanuel Levinas as a post-poststructuralist model for literary-ethical inquiry."[497] He also refers to philosophers who have turned significantly to literature to reflect on ethical matters, such as the moral philosophy of Martha C. Nussbaum and the "postepistemological pragmatism" of Richard Rorty.[498] There is also "the ethics-in-the-professions movement, which in medicine and law and other fields has turned to literature as exemplum and/or model."[499] The variety of these background influences lead Buell to conclude that the turn to ethics is "pluriform, not singular, and that it is not ascribable to any one catalytic event," such as De Man's alleged anti-Semitism.[500]

According to Buell, ethical literary criticism is characterized by two opposing tendencies represented, respectively, by Wayne Booth and J. Hillis Miller. He leaves out moral philosophers from this configuration because he associates their work with the Booth-school which "identifies ethics of reading especially with the vision of literature as moral reflection" in the mode of a "more traditional mode of ethical reading."[501] For Buell, Booth's arguments can be considered a "revival of the neo-Victorian *via positiva* of reading mediated by the image of the book as companion and friend."[502] Deconstruction, in this formulation, becomes "the *via negative* of rigorous undecidability" and this notion of ethics is favored mostly by "literary professionals."[503] Philosophers, by contrast, adopt the "more traditional ethical mode of reading" when they "turn to what they consider fiction's more supple and full-blooded ethical mimesis as a corrective or counter to formal reasoning."[504] However,

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[496] Buell, Think, p.2.
[497] Buell, Think, p.2.
[498] Buell, Think, p.2.
[499] Buell, Think, p.2.
[500] Buell, Think, p.2.
[501] Buell, Think, p.2.
[502] Buell, Think, p.6.
[503] Buell, Think, p.6.
[504] Buell, Think, pp.5, 6.

for most contemporary literary theorists, there is a problem with conceiving of literature in this mode of thinking which "looks suspiciously like old-fashioned values thematic" where art exists to provide moral insight.[505] For Buell, the source of such reaction "is not so much the specter of rampant moralism as such as it is longstanding reluctance on the part of the many if not most literary scholars to allow the central disciplinary referent or value to be located in anything but language."[506] In fact, the growing influence of Levinas on ethical literary study may determine the course of this emerging field of inquiry: "Levinas may seem the perfect abettor of the ethical turn away from both poststructuralism and Marxism: trumping Derrida with the claim of ethics' priority to epistemology, and preempting political criticism by identifying ethicity with acknowledgement of the other."[507] Andrew Gibson's 1999 book, which will be discussed below, may be a good example to what Buell suggests.

In his outstanding introduction titled "In Pursuit of Ethics" to PMLA's 1999 special issue *Ethics and Literary Study*, Lawrence Buell offers perhaps the most comprehensive background to "the new ethical inquiry."[508] He lists what he considers some of the symptoms of and some of the schools within "ethically valenced literary inquiry."[509] However, he presents his suggestions in a way that both acknowledges and questions the coherence of the movement. Referring to the popularity of ethics within literary studies during the 1990s, Buell notes that "[a]s with any groundswell, particularly when the central term of reference already belongs to common usage, the challenge of pinning down what counts as ethics intensifies as more parties lay claim to it."[510]

Buell identifies six "genealogical strands" in the "pluriform discourse" of the discordant "ethics movement."[511] These strands comprise the symptoms mentioned above; they are different manifestations of the ethical turn in their particular notions of ethics. The first strand concerns "the legacy of critical traditions that have dwelled on the moral thematics and underlying value commitments of literary texts and their

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[505] Buell, Think, p.6.
[506] Buell, Think, p.7.
[507] Buell, Think, p.7.
[508] Buell, Pursuit, p.12.
[509] Buell, Pursuit, p.12.
[510] Buell, Pursuit, p.7.
[511] Buell, Pursuit, p.7.

implied authors."[512] David Parker and Wayne Booth represent this approach. Buell considers Parker's *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (1994) "a subtlitized, relativized updating of" the traditional "conception of literature as ethical reflection" established by Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis.[513] Buell neatly summarizes Booth's oeuvre as one drawing on "ethically oriented theory and criticism" focusing on "narrative rhetoric as moral imagination."[514] Second, Buell talks about philosophers who have re-kindled an interest in literature's moral and social significance. Martha C. Nussbaum, for instance, champions the novel's "richly contextualized moral reflections" and positions the novel as "a necessary supplement to the study of moral philosophy."[515] Richard Rorty, in a similar way, presents "works of creative writing as model embodiments of social values."[516]

In contrast to the rather specific concerns and limited impact of the first two strands, "the shift within deconstruction," especially in the later works of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, has altered immensely the prominence of ethics within literary studies.[517] After Paul de Man's anti-Semitic writings surfaced in 1987, deconstruction underwent a series of reevaluations of its ethical commitments, embodied first in Derrida's later works that focus on social, ethical, and political issues and second in his championing of Levinas's ethics of alterity which asserts "the priority of ethical obligation for the other to ontology, to being itself," defining, in Levinas's words, "ethics as first philosophy" in *Otherwise than Being*.[518] Like Derrida, Foucault has changed focus in his later work and encouraged the recent attention to "subjectness and agency."[519] "In the course of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault shifted from his longstanding concentration on the power-knowledge problematic and on the construction of social selves by discursive macroinstitutions to the care of the self conceived as an ethical project […] 'an aesthetics of existence.'"[520] The importance of this shift in Foucault's approach to ethics paved the

[512] Buell, Pursuit, p.7.
[513] Buell, Pursuit, p.8.
[514] Buell, Pursuit, p.8.
[515] Buell, Pursuit, p.8.
[516] Buell, Pursuit, p.8.
[517] Buell, Pursuit, p.9.
[518] Buell, Pursuit, p.9.
[519] Buell, Pursuit, p.9.
[520] Buell, Pursuit, p.9.

way for "later writers' propensity for deploying a critical vocabulary of 'ethics' in rivalry to 'politics' as a way of theorizing principled social engagement."[521] In other words, if we are to summarize what the turn to ethics in deconstruction means, we can say that it consists of the importance "ethical responsibility for the other"—as well as the self—has gained in increasing momentum after the so-called de Man-affair.[522]

Postcolonial and minority writing also demonstrate recent theory's preoccupation with ethics. Dedicated to "exposing the intellectual reductionisms and moral hazards of the 'out-and-out cognitive skepticism' that supposedly characterized poststructuralism," critics like Satya Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, and Doris Sommer analyze marginalized texts for a kind of ethics that draws on their "resistant, opaque, or elliptical" discourses.[523] They are concerned with "an ethical representation of subalternity."[524]

The final strain of the ethics movement belongs to "professional ethics," where, for instance, in studies of law and business management, "ethical conduct" becomes an increasingly important topic, thus reinforcing the significance of ethics as an interdisciplinary mode of thinking/field of study.[525]

Out of these five threads that symptomatize ethical literary study, different methodological approaches with "distinctive contours" have emerged.[526] In other words, Buell identifies how the above mentioned strains have given rise to some "different emphases" on ethics within ethical literary studies.[527] The fact that he treats the symptoms and the dimensions the symptoms have created separately without matching them seems to be intentional on the part of Buell who emphasizes a certain lack of unity in literary study's interest in ethics. At this point, his criticism extends to the practice of literary theory which seems to suffer from "the relative lack of grounding" in its ethical concerns.[528] Rather than acknowledging "ethics as a subdiscipline and tradition within philosophy," and turning to "major ethical

[521] Buell, Pursuit, p.10.
[522] Buell, Pursuit, p.9.
[523] Buell, Pursuit, p.10.
[524] Buell, Pursuit, p.10.
[525] Buell, Pursuit, p.10.
[526] Buell, Pursuit, p.12.
[527] Buell, Pursuit, p.7.
[528] Buell, Pursuit, p.11.

philosopher[s] from Aristotle to John Rawls," literary theory's interest in ethics remains surprisingly limited to Derrida and Foucault who are not "ethicists in any strict sense."[529] Furthermore,

> *since no specific model for inquiry into ethics is shared by more than a fraction of the scholars working in the various domains of literary theory and criticism, it is more than ordinarily perplexing when, as often happens, avowed practitioners of "ethical" criticism neglect to relate their brand of ethics to its alternatives or to antecedent traditions of moral thematics, the ideology of genre, the deconstructive ethics of reading, the politics of canonicity, and so forth.*[530]

The ensuing "problem of cacophony" surrounding such discrepancy may be overcome by following Buell's sketch of the "distinctive contours" mentioned above.[531] The first dimension of the newly emerging ethical criticism comprises the tendency to recover "authorial agency in the production of texts, without ceasing to acknowledge that texts are also in some sense socially constructed."[532] The acknowledgement of "authoredness" also includes "the figure of the historical author" as an essential factor in interpreting a literary work.[533] Second, the importance of interpretation makes "readerly responsibility" inevitable. Yet the position of the reader in ethical criticism differs from that in reader-response criticism where the reader is free in her responses to the text. In ethical criticism, works of literature are considered *the other* which requires "conscienceful listening" and hence demand responsible, ethical, rather than playful or interpretive community-bound responses[534] This Levinasian sense of otherness establishes a parallelism between "textual encounter" and personal encounter.[535] Buell writes that "the hesitancy with which Booth proceeded a decade ago when reviving the long-dormant metaphor of the book as friend, another version of the general notion of reading as an interpersonal act, now seems less necessary."[536] However, this metaphor must be approached with care because it might result in seeing/marking a reader's "resistance" to a work as "unethical" in the sense of showing "a symptom of

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[529] Buell, Pursuit, p.11.
[530] Buell, Pursuit, p.11.
[531] Buell, Pursuit, p.12.
[532] Buell, Pursuit, p.12.
[533] Buell, Pursuit, p.12.
[534] Buell, Pursuit, p.12.
[535] Buell, Pursuit, p.13.
[536] Buell, Pursuit, p.13.

obtuseness, of insensitivity, of ethical underdevelopment."[537] "Yet the model of reading experience as a scene of virtual interpersonality that enacts, activates, or otherwise illuminates ethical responsibility may nonetheless prove one of the most significant innovations of the literature-and-ethics movement."[538]

The third dimension of ethical criticism is that it focuses on specific narrative genres and their formal aspects, namely, favors the novel's drawing of character, creation of moral dilemmas, and brilliant storytelling over, for instance, that of drama. "If there is a mainstream approach to ethical-critical readings of particular literary works today, this is probably it."[539] Wayne Booth and Martha C. Nussbaum (who focuses especially on Greek tragedy and Henry James) exemplify this "approach to literary texts as arenas of ethical reflection by reason of their formal or generic contours."[540] The fourth dimension of the ethical turn concerns the rather difficult task of making a distinction between ethics and morality. Ultimately inseparable or separable to a degree according to general sensibility (ethics) and a set of rules of conduct (morality), "the fuzzy border" of this distinction brings about another difficulty which comprises the fifth dimension; "the even more vexing problem of the relation or distinction between the personal and the sociopolitical," that is, between the ethical and the political.[541] Buell explains that there is a consensus on the social character of moral conduct, yet "that consensus far from resolves the question of whether and how the ethical does or does not entail the 'political.'"[542] As this study's analyses of creative nonfiction and fiction shall demonstrate, the ethical and the political are inseparable endeavors of literature with the writer and reader responsible parties in fulfilling literature's ethical task.

To conclude this section, the rise of ethics as a major school of literary criticism and the re-establishment of the ethical as an essential aspect of literary practice seem to be noteworthy developments for the scholar of the contemporary. Although still in the process of its development, ethical criticism, despite its various definitions, has already made lasting impact on the meaning and function of

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[537] Buell, Pursuit, p.13.
[538] Buell, Pursuit, p.13.
[539] Buell, Pursuit, pp.13-14.
[540] Buell, Pursuit, p.13.
[541] Buell, Pursuit, p.14.
[542] Buell, Pursuit, p.14.

literature. In its careful forward movement, ethical criticism confronts decades-long practices of theory, and renews with great impetus the centrality of thinking about intersubjectivity in and through reading, defines both author and reader ethically liable.

1.2.2. Neo-Humanists and the War against Theory

The works of neo-humanist critics on the relation between literature and ethics constitutes a major approach within the recent turn to ethics in literary studies. American critics such as Wayne Booth, David Parker, and Daniel R. Schwarz hold that art's inseparability from life renders ethics an uncontestable and timeless approach to literature. With his groundbreaking book *The Company We Keep, An Ethics of Fiction* (1988), Booth establishes himself as the most important figure among neo-humanist ethical critics. He focuses on the centrality of story and narrative, and defines reading as an ethical encounter between reader and writer in the mode of friendship. He also discusses theory's, especially post-structuralism's, negative effects on ethical criticism, and his discussion inspires Schwarz and Parker who follow Booth's examples. Together, these critics delineate the contours of neo-humanist ethical criticism.

It is useful to begin with Daniel R. Schwarz's suggestions on the beliefs that unite neo-humanist critics: the equation between a text's formal elements (narration, structure etc) and its "value system"; the consideration of literature as the "creative gesture of the author" which relies heavily on mimetic representation; the critic's duty to take into account the mimetic principle and to "recapture that world primarily by formal analysis of the text, although knowledge of the historical context and author is often important"; the presence of "an original meaning, a center, that can be apprehended, albeit perhaps not reached, by perceptive reading"; the centrality of human behavior both to works of literature and literary analysis because "although modes of characterization differ, the psychology and morality of characters must be understood as if the characters were metaphors for real people, for understanding

others helps us to understand ourselves."[543] In other words, reading ethically is an intrinsic part of, or life-long duty in human life because "we never take a moral holiday from our values," neither in reading nor in life, and "we can no more ignore the ethical implications of what we read than we can ignore the ethical implications of life."[544]

Ethical criticism, in this account, owes its power to literature's vitality: "our reading experience, if we read actively and with intelligence, is central to life and contributes to the development of the mature personality."[545] In the process of reading, "human readers respond to human subjects presented by human authors within an imagined world that represents—even if only as an illuminating distortion—anterior reality."[546] Inevitably, neo-humanist ethical criticism "sees literature as providing surrogate experiences for the reader, experiences which, because they are embodied within artistically shaped ontologies, heighten our awareness of moral discrimination."[547]

In *The Company We Keep,* Wayne Booth asserts that reading ethically is one of the "most important cultural 'assignments'" for readers, writers, and critics alike.[548] If we can talk and write about the ethical value of stories, narratives, and fictions, we shall also be able to talk equally responsibly about life itself. For Booth, the importance of ethical criticism lies, above all things, in its subject matter: story. Story has existed since "the beginning," and it is through story that "human beings were created and now continue to recreate themselves."[549] We make sense of every mundane event, each "primary experience—that is, events like birth, copulation, death, plowing and planting, getting and spending" through "some sort of mediation in narrative."[550] However, the move from the experience of an event to its narration "is so automatic and frequent that we risk losing our sense of just how astonishing

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[543] Daniel R. Schwarz, "A Humanistic Ethics of Reading", **Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory**, (Eds. Davis and Womack), The U. P. of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2001, (Humanistic), pp.3-4.
[544] Schwarz, Humanistic, p.5.
[545] Daniel R. Schwarz, "Performative Saying and the Ethics of Reading: Adam Zachary Newton's *Narrative Ethics*", **Narrative**, Volume:5, No:2, 1997, (Performative), p.191.
[546] Schwarz, Performative, p.192.
[547] Schwarz, Performative, p.191.
[548] Wayne Booth, **The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction**, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1988, (Company), p.227.
[549] Booth, Company, p.39.
[550] Booth, Company, p.14.

our story worlds are, in their power to add 'life' upon 'life'—for good or ill."[551] That is to say, "we live more or less *in* stories," and it is sometimes difficult to "resist surrendering to what is 'only' imaginary."[552] The noticeably permeable boundary "between life and narrative" along with narrative's inevitable influence on us establishes fiction as "the most powerful of all the architects of our souls and societies."[553] Booth explains,

> *[a]nyone who conducts honest introspection knows that "real life" is lived* in *images derived in part from stories. Though usually our imitations are not highly dramatic, especially once we pass adolescence, everyone who reads knows that whether or not we* should *imitate narrative heroes and heroines, we in fact do. Indeed, our imitations of* narrative *"imitations of life" are so spontaneous and plentiful that we cannot draw a clear line between what we* are*, in some conception of a "natural," unstoried self, and what we have become as we have first enjoyed, then imitated, and then, perhaps, criticized both the stories and our responses to them.*[554]

Then, if we are *storied* selves finding our essence as well as "standards of truth, relevance, and spiritual depth" in stories, how do we interrogate the limits of narrative influences on us?[555] Booth suggests we "reconsider our notions about the formation of 'character'—of self, of soul, of ethos, of personality, of identity."[556] By character, or ethos, he means "habits of choice" in every aspect of life and one major task of ethical criticism is "to describe the encounters of a story-teller's ethos with that of the reader or listener."[557] This encounter is as significant as our encounters with real people in real life and their influences on us. In other words, Booth considers narratives as pivotal as other people are in terms of "influences" that comprise "the very source" of our selves.[558] He wonders whether we can "say any more than that we find our new selves in multiple encounters, hoping that *this* powerful narrative will supplement or correct *that* one."[559] Many roles present themselves as we "move through the field of selves that [our] cultural moment

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[551] Booth, Company, p.14.
[552] Booth, Company, pp.14-15.
[553] Booth, Company, pp.16, 39.
[554] Booth, Company, pp.228-229.
[555] Booth, Company, p.347.
[556] Booth, Company, p.229.
[557] Booth, Company, p.8.
[558] Booth, Company, p.265.
[559] Booth, Company, p.260.

provides," some "good for 'me/us,' some not so good, some literally fatal."[560] To be able to distinguish among them "without falling into a judgmental stance" is the task of ethical criticism, which should be performed by everyone reading novels—our ultimate source to know life, the human, and the ethical.[561]

The subject of influence brings forth a rather complicated matter: the self/other dichotomy. Booth challenges the idea of positioning the "real me," "the un-dividable center," "the authentic self" against "the inauthentic, insincere, alien influences that might deflect the self from its unique, individual destiny" such as the church, family, politics, etc.[562] The self is not "to be found by probing within," through a "search inward for the core of the real 'me'"; for him, the self is what we build "through experience with other characters."[563] At this point, Booth challenges the humanist notion of the unified and coherent self and at the same time seems to offer a way out of the postmodernist understanding of the self as uncentered and divided, fluid and fragmented, almost invisible in identity, always on the brink of disintegration and disappearance. For Booth, having a self entails a "kind of loss of self into others" without "dissolv[ing] in the corrosive acids of surrounding influences."[564] Booth suggests that the self is nothing but its encounters with the other. In ethical criticism, we can recognize "a kind of free-flow in both directions, annihilating all anxiety about boundaries."[565] He writes,

> *[i]f I am not an individual self at all, but a character, a social self, a being-in-process many of whose established dispositions or habits belong to others—some of them even to all humanity—then I need have no anxiety about finding and preserving a unique core for the various characters that in a sense have colonized me and continue to do so. I should be able to embrace the unquestioned ethical power of narratives, in order to try on for size the character roles offered me. I can hold a fitting of various "habits," to see if they enhance or diminish how I/we appear to myself/ourselves. And I should be able to talk with my selves about the strengths and weaknesses I have found—found in one sense in the narrative but in another sense in me/us.*[566]

Here, Booth points at a mistaken generalization about ethical criticism that limits narrative ethics to assessing a work's achievement in "genuine encounters with

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[560] Booth, Company, p.268.
[561] Booth, Company, p.269.
[562] Booth, Company, p.237.
[563] Booth, Company, p.237.
[564] Booth, Company, p.265.
[565] Booth, Company, p.266.
[566] Booth, Company, p.268.

otherness."[567] This view posits that "the distinguishing virtue of literature is its power to lead us to questions rather than to answers; or, to 'open' the reader to new experiences of 'otherness'; or, to wake up the sleepy and complacent by disrupting previous fixities."[568] Booth finds such a "virtue" problematic in at least two senses. First, he writes that "from birth onward our growth depends so deeply on our ability to internalize other selves that one must be puzzled by those who talk about the self as somehow independent, individual, unsocial in this sense."[569] Second, encountering the other is the very basis of reading. "As we try to enter any novel, we all carry the burden of our special situations, our personal incapacities, and our cultural moment," Booth explains, and adds, "[p]art of what it means to 'learn to read well' is to get beyond our local deficiencies in order to achieve a full meeting with something that is 'other,' beyond, larger than, or at least different from, what we bring."[570]

At this point, Booth's argument is directly against modernism and postmodernism which tend to see "the self as individual and essentially private," as an "atomic isolate."[571] The literary representation of "desperate isolates, essentially unable (in theory, at least) to communicate with other isolates, has become almost the norm in 'advanced fiction.'"[572] Against this notion, Booth suggests that

> *if I think of myself not as an atomic unit bumping other atoms but as a* character*—as someone doing my best to enact the various roles "assigned" me—I discover that there are no clear boundaries between the others who are somehow both outside and inside me and the "me" that the others are "in." […] To be* joined*, in other words, is my primary, natural condition. […] To break off from my "others" is to break off parts of my self.*[573]

If we can leave aside the view of the self as an atomic isolate and recognize that the self is a "social character," we may be able to "open up neglected questions about the uses and dangers of particular experiences with narratives."[574] This argument is also an objection to the "supreme principle of individualism: one's true salvation is found

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[567] Booth, Company, p.69.
[568] Booth, Company, p.60.
[569] Booth, Company, p.69.
[570] Booth, Company, pp.439, 440.
[571] Booth, Company, p.239.
[572] Booth, Company, p.239.
[573] Booth, Company, pp.239-240.
[574] Booth, Company, p.251.

in successfully resisting communally imposed norms and finding one's own unique path."[575]

> *As individualists, we often mistakenly refer our moral problems to the same false dichotomy. We talk about political actions as some kind of obligation that we owe, as individuals, to society, to others: we should be* altruistic*, not "self-centered." But if we are characters, social creatures by origin and definition, political and philanthropic actions are not performed out of duty to others but as acts of "self"-preservation; if the others are in me, "altruism"—the service of alterity—and selfishness must either not be contrasted at all, or if they are contrasted the lines must be drawn in new ways. Most of what I value in what I call "me" was conceived in and nurtured by one or another of many societies, as represented in other characters.*[576]

Booth pays considerable attention to "the ethics *of* readers—their responsibilities *to* stories."[577] He argues that "every reader must be his or her own ethical critic," who shall ask, during reading, "What kind of company are we keeping as we read or listen? What kind of company have we kept?."[578] In other words, considering the relationship between reader and writer an example of true friendship, Booth invites both the reader and the writer to fulfill the requirements of honest, full friendship in narrative encounters. The basic premise of his argument is that the communications between reader and writer "rely upon, implant, or reinforce" human virtues, that is, "the whole range of human 'powers,' 'strengths,' 'capacities,' or 'habits of behavior.'"[579] Writers, our true friends, "introduce us to the practice of subtle, sensitive moral inference, the kind that most moral choices in daily life require us of."[580] In return, the reader should offer responsible companionship by responding ethically to the narrative. Yet we should also bear in mind that "the worth of any project in ethical criticism in no way depends on our ability to come to consensus on any one ethical appraisal or to produce a single harmonious scheme of narrative values."[581] As Italo Calvino puts it "[y]our classic author is the one you cannot feel indifferent to, who helps you to define yourself in relation to him, even in dispute with him."[582]

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[575] Booth, Company, p.246.
[576] Booth, Company, p.244.
[577] Booth, Company, p.9.
[578] Booth, Company, pp.237, 10.
[579] Booth, Company, pp.12, 10.
[580] Booth, Company, p.287.
[581] Booth, Company, p.207.
[582] Italo Calvino quoted in Booth, Company, pp.19-20.

The reader befriends a writer and decides to include him or her "among the small circle of […] true friends" in the same manner he or she would befriend a person.[583] In the process, one asks whether the potential friend offers a "pattern of life" that "friends might well pursue together"[584]; whether "our choices are alike in kind, and thus that he or she is our kind of person, practicing 'virtues'—both skills and moral and intellectual powers—that we admire"[585]; whether the time spent with this "would-be friend" would offer a "richer and fuller life than I could manage on my own."[586] When a writer becomes a friend, we may feel the following:

> *To dwell with you is to share the improvements you have managed to make in your "self" by perfecting your narrative world. You lead me first to practice ways of living that are more profound, more sensitive, more intense, and in a curious way more fully generous than I am likely to meet anywhere else in the world. You correct my faults, rebuke my insensitivities. You mold me into patterns of longing and fulfillment that make my ordinary dreams petty and absurd. You finally show what life can be, not just to a coterie, a saved and saving remnant looking down on the fools, slobs, and knaves, but to anyone who is willing to work to earn the title of equal and true friend.*[587]

Turning to the classical definition of friendship, Booth draws a parallel between friendship between people and friendship between reader and writer. Ancient Greeks "made true friendship a primary goal of life, and the study of how to achieve it a center of all ethical inquiry."[588] In Aristotle, "the quality of our lives was said to be in large part identical with the quality of the company we keep. Our happiness is found in a pursuit of friendship, of something more than our limited 'selves'"[589] Furthermore, we tend to feel friendly toward a person that offers a benefit or a gift.[590] The Greek tradition distinguishes three kinds of friendships with regard to the gifts offered: "of pleasure; of profit or gain; and of a kind of company that is not only pleasant or profitable, in some immediate way, but also good for me,

[583] Booth, Company, p.39.
[584] Booth, Company, p.223.
[585] Booth, Company, p.107.
[586] Booth, Company, p.223.
[587] Booth, Company, p.223.
[588] Booth, Company, p.172.
[589] Booth, Company, p.172.
[590] Booth, Company, p.173.

good for its own sake."[591] The third kind of friend is "the best kind" and time spent with that friend feels like "the way life should be lived."[592]

Booth argues that the implied authors of stories offer these three gifts and our response to them determines which writers and books we accept as our friends. At the core of literature lie "gifts that have enhanced our imaginative lives with possibilities that our real lives could never have provided."[593] These gifts may consist, "on the one hand, transmutations of the quotidian into radiance; on the other, revelations of what is absurd or base in our 'normal' practices."[594] We can find what kind of a gift a novel, or any other narrative for that matter, offers in the first couple of pages, or even sentences. Looking at the first couple sentences of five narratives—the Bible, a romance by Barbara Cartland, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and a porn-magazine story, Booth distinguishes their invitations, promises: spiritual salvation, wisdom about life, true love, and sexual thrills.[595] "All of these fictions are like the would-be friends we meet in what we call real life" whose offers we reject or accept on the basis of whether "we think we will get *something* worth having."[596] If we do accept the offer, "we choose our friends and their gifts, and thus who *we* will be, for the duration."[597] Therefore, "[a]ll the art, in this kind of metaphorical criticism, will lie in our power to discriminate among the values of moments of friendship that we ourselves have in a sense created. We judge ourselves as we judge the offer."[598]

In judging the offerings of writers, Booth presents a list of measures, or variables, that determine our responses and "keep us conversing with any narrative, whether it is ostensibly reportorial or fictional, didactic or aesthetic."[599]

> *In our living friends, we find these same variables. Some of them offer a lot of whatever they are good at; others offer precious gems though few. Some dominate the conversation, or try to, while others offer to play an equal role, and yet others ask* us *to dominate. Some open themselves to a bold and potentially healing intimacy, revealing our own depths or depths we never*

[591] Booth, Company, p.173.
[592] Booth, Company, p.173.
[593] Booth, Company, p.294.
[594] Booth, Company, pp.294-295.
[595] Booth, Company, p.177.
[596] Booth, Company, p.174.
[597] Booth, Company, p.177.
[598] Booth, Company, p.178.
[599] Booth, Company, p.179.

> *dreamed of, while others politely preserve our illusions. […] Some wake us up or scare us off by the intensity and pace of their offering, while others are satisfied with a steady or slack pace that may console or bore us. Some are sufficiently coherent to make us feel that we are dealing with a whole person, a solid character, while others feel shallow or devious, flabby or unreliable. Some companions fit our old ways like old comfortable shoes and others are* so *'other' as to shock, shatter, and either destroy or re-mold us. And finally, some offer us only one kind of pleasure or profit while others range over many of life's values.*[600]

The first measure concerns the "sheer amount of activity a narrative invites us to engage in, whether overall or line-by-line."[601] The physical length of a narrative is not binding here, as a long novel and a short story might invite us to long conversation or a chat, and independent of the time we spend in their company, we may endure their friendship after finishing our reading. That is to say, "we feel most gratitude to the friend who offers us most" both during and after reading. The second measure takes a closer look at the nature of narrative engagement and concerns whether the author tries to dominate the reader or asks the reader to reciprocate.[602] On the one hand, we may have authors who may seem like "teachers, gurus, learned geniuses, implying that they are so far ahead of us, in their grasp both of the work and of the life it reflects, that we may never become their equals in energy, invention, learning, or wisdom."[603] On the other hand, we may have authors who consider the reader their equal and "expect and require a full recreative activity comparable to their own."[604] In ideal narrative friendships, the authors seem to be "wholly engaged in the same kind of significant activity that they expect of us," which is "the interpretation of moral character."[605]

The third scale concerns "the degree of intimacy."[606] It is a given that too much personal detail with secrets and confessions may repel the reader, whether in fiction or nonfiction. "Too little, and we judge an author to be cold, 'distant,' 'unimaginative.'"[607] However, by intimacy, Booth has something else on his mind: can the author move us to such a plane of thought that we feel as we are the "real"

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[600] Booth, Company, p.180.
[601] Booth, Company, p.182.
[602] Booth, Company, p.184.
[603] Booth, Company, p.185.
[604] Booth, Company, p.185.
[605] Booth, Company, p.187.
[606] Booth, Company, p.180.
[607] Booth, Company, p.191.

reader rather than the implied reader?[608] In other words, how can we enter the psychology, the mind of the implied author, know his or her inner life? Does he help us out in our effort to connect with him? The first thing that comes to mind in such pursuit of intimacy are

> *stream of consciousness, point of view, the psychological novel, and confessional poetry. Less widely noticed is the peculiarly intimate bonding achieved by authors, ancient or modern, whenever they use figures of speech skillfully. Stream of consciousness techniques give the illusion of entering the soul of the real author. Figures of speech give not the illusion but the reality: maker and receiver can become in many respects identical.*[609]

Here, the seeming contrast between direct utterances and for instance, metaphorical meaning is not a privileging of overt over covert. Intimacy in narrative seems to be about how much we are intrigued by, and how sincerely we are invited to join the thoughts of the author in all their complexity and appeal. If we can discern the author's intentions in employing certain figures of speech, we will be more inclined to understand his outlook on things. "Figurative language will always figure the mind more incisively than plain language," and "[i]f I accept the picture, the energy serves to bind me to the implied author; consciously or unconsciously, I see him or her as my kind of person."[610]

> *In our language of friendship, to re-create a figure will always produce more intimacy, just as to dance with a partner is always a more intimate act than to dance along with someone who is doing another dance and looking into the far distance. The energy I expend in reconstructing the figure is somehow transferred to retaining the figure itself and bonding with its maker.*[611]

The intensity of the reader's engagement with a narrative comprises the fourth measure. The gripping plot of a best-seller may isolate the reader from daily life whereas another novel cannot even offer an absorbing-enough story to distract the reader from the most mundane events. In the fifth scale, we see how the intensity of engagement is sustained through a harmonious, unified work without inconsistencies and contradictions.[612] Like harmony, readers tend to look for the familiar in narratives and on the sixth scale Booth discusses "the degree of distance

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[608] Booth, Company, p.190.
[609] Booth, Company, pp.187-188.
[610] Booth, Company, pp.298, 299.
[611] Booth, Company, p.299.
[612] Booth, Company, p.194.

or 'otherness.'"[613] An author may offer strange and threatening material as well as taking the reader to the reassuring and comforting zones of habit and familiarity. For him, however, there is no such thing as complete otherness: "whatever that might be, would be unintelligible and in consequence totally uninteresting. At the other end of the scale, total familiarity would yield total boredom."[614] It is worth remembering that his whole theory is in a way based on dealing with an *other*. He invites us to think about "what it means ethically to follow a story, to accept and pursue a pattern of desires imposed by an 'other.'"[615] He urges us to distinguish "kinds of otherness" as well as "kinds of familiarity," which requires going beyond superficial evaluations of content as strange and familiar.[616] The ultimate goal of talking about otherness is to see "what the reader is likely to learn about *ways of dealing with* the unfamiliar or the threatening. […] It is not the degree of otherness that distinguishes fiction of the highest ethical kind but the depth of education it yields in *dealing with* the 'other.'"[617]

This brings us to Booth's final scale in assessing the friendship of an author. "Fictions differ radically in the scope of the worlds they offer us. We can often find additional insight about the worth of stories by considering kinds and ranges of interest."[618] If the work's scope of interest is too broad, it might be charged with lack of focus. If it is narrow in subject matter of interest, it might be taken to task for triviality or obsession. For Booth, we could assess the offerings of the author by referring to "the traditional triad: aesthetic, cognitive, and moral—beauty, truth, and goodness—with each of the three offering innumerable possibilities to story-tellers."[619] In other words, the best way to understand the author's friendship would be to judge not in terms the inclusiveness or limitation of a given book's subject matter but in its offering us "beauty, truth, and goodness."

One of the most important arguments of *The Company We Keep* is Booth's determinacy "to restore the full intellectual legitimacy of our commonsense

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[613] Booth, Company, p.194.
[614] Booth, Company, p.194.
[615] Booth, Company, p.196.
[616] Booth, Company, p.195.
[617] Booth, Company, p.195.
[618] Booth, Company, p.195.
[619] Booth, Company, p.195.

inclination to talk about stories in ethical terms, treating the characters in them and their makers as more like people than labyrinths, enigmas, or textual puzzles to be deciphered."[620] He also wishes "to 'relocate' ethical criticism, turning it from flat judgment for or against supposedly stable works to fluid conversation about the qualities of the company we keep—and the company that we ourselves provide."[621] The keywords he uses, "restore" and "relocate," demonstrate his aim to overcome the "decline of faith in ethical criticism" and its "disastrous effects" on "intellectual culture" at the time of his writing.[622] The rise of media, internet, etc., "the intensity of the daily barrage of narrative to which we are subjected" makes the late 1980s culture "the most narrative-centered of all time" and that "heightens the importance of ethical criticism for *us.*"[623]

Throughout *The Company We Keep*, Booth stands up against the belief that considers ethical criticism "passé."[624] He explains that "though most people practice what I am calling ethical criticism of fictions, it plays at best a minor and often deplored role on the scene of theory. It simply goes unmentioned."[625] Even when it appears, it is masked under such labels as Political, Social, Cultural, Psychological, or Psychoanalytic, Reader-Response, and Feminist criticism.[626] He continues,

> *[t]o anyone who considers the history of literary criticism, this contrast between theoretical ostracism and popular practice is surprising. Until the late nineteenth century almost everyone took for granted that a major task of any critic is to appraise the ethical value of works of art, and they saw no reason to disguise that ethical interest under ostensibly neutral terms like "significant form" or "aesthetic integrity."*[627]

What Booth suggests, then, is that we realize "the way in which even those critics who work hard to purge themselves of all but the most abstract formal interests turn out to have an ethical program in mind—a belief that a given way of reading, or a given kind of genuine literature, is what will do us most good."[628] This suggestion clarifies the ethical critic's ideal stance in the scene of literary theory; one

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[620] Booth, Company, p.x.
[621] Booth, Company, p.x.
[622] Booth, Company, p.36.
[623] Booth, Company, p.39.
[624] Booth, Company, p.19.
[625] Booth, Company, p.25.
[626] Booth, Company, p.25.
[627] Booth, Company, p.25.
[628] Booth, Company, p.5.

need not take sides in the opposition between formalist critics and those that value social function in works of art.[629] An ethical critic will "avoid the loaded labels and crude slogans that critics preoccupied with moral effects have too often employed" as well as resisting "the temptation of purists and 'textualists' to ignore the real ethical and political effects of even the purest artistic form."[630] Knowing that ethical criticism is neither "an expression of 'personal moral preference,'" nor "something surely inferior in interest, quality, validity, and relevance," the ethical critic will invite the reader to look at the contents of a narrative without passing moral judgments on them according to his or her personal ethical preferences.[631] After all, when taken to stand for moral values such as honesty, decency, and tolerance, the word *ethical* would only lead to moralizing and banning.[632] The word ethical, in contrast, "must cover all qualities in the character, or ethos, of authors and readers, whether these are judged as good or bad" and the task of ethical criticism is to understand "how the ethos of any story affects or is affected by the ethos of any given reader."[633]

With these arguments, Booth establishes the major tasks of ethical literary criticism. However, when he writes *The Company We Keep* in 1988, the literary scene is dominated by theory, especially post-structuralism, and both Booth and his followers respond to theory's negative approach to ethical criticism. These responses take the form of reaction against theory, and turns into a defense of ethical criticism. In fact, this reaction may even be neo-humanist ethical criticism's trademark approach; not an anxious effort at self-legitimation but an opportunity to declare, with heightened emphasis, the importance of the human question to any and all literary endeavor, in practice or in theory. For instance, in "Deepening the Self, The Language of Ethics and the Language of Literature," Simon Haines writes that "after twenty-five years of confusion and denial, literary criticism in English is starting to rediscover literature as a distinctive mode of thought about being human, and to regain confidence in itself as a manner of attending to that thought."[634] His

[629] Booth, Company, p.7.
[630] Booth, Company, p.7.
[631] Booth, Company, pp. 25, 36, 37.
[632] Booth, Company, p.8.
[633] Booth, Company, pp.8, 11.
[634] Haines, p.21.

reactionary defense is also a celebration: the recent interest in ethical literary criticism is a proof of literary study's recovery from the theoretical period and a historic moment for the return of the question of the human to literary inquiry.

For another example of this defensive reaction, we could look at David Parker's *Ethics, Theory, and the Novel* (1994) which is a direct response to post-structuralism. In Parker's opinion, post-structuralism has cut literature's intrinsic tie to ethics. In his turn to ethics, Parker turns to Western classics such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. He tries to demonstrate how these works, which have been cast aside by theory for being "the repository of conservative value," are in fact in-depth investigations of "the clashes of moral value."[635] Similarly, in his "Introduction: The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s" in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory* (1998) which he co-edited with Jane Adamson and Richard Freadman, David Parker responds once more to theory, specifically, deconstruction. He argues that ethical criticism has been an "uninteresting, dépassé" topic for the "'advanced' literary circles" in the 1970s and 1980s, that is, during the heyday of post-structuralism, deconstruction, and political criticism.[636] Notwithstanding Frederick Jameson's attacks on ethics, by the end of 1990s, deconstructionists have presented deconstruction as an inherently ethical project and "its way of reading texts, its rigorous resistance to closure, as an ethical imperative."[637] Ethics in this understanding becomes "a dynamic within language itself to which deconstructive reading is alone properly responsive."[638]

Parker's problem is with the timing of this claim. He explains that in the works of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, ethics was "a subtheme," however, "it has suddenly become a major theme in the past five or six years."[639] For Parker, critics like Barbara Johnson, J. Hillis Miller, Simon Critchley, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham have drawn attention to "the points of intersection between post-

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[635] David Parker, **Ethics, Theory, and the Novel**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, (Ethics), pp.51, 38.
[636] David Parker, "Introduction: The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s", **Renegotiating Ethics in Literature Philosophy, and Theory**, (Eds. Adamson et al.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, (Turn), p.1.
[637] Parker, Turn, p.7.
[638] Parker, Turn, pp.7-8.
[639] Parker, Turn, p.8.

structuralism and ethics" which was "hardly visible at all ten years ago."[640] And, if there has indeed been a turn to ethics in literary theory, it is here in deconstruction's sudden realization of its ethical interest that Parker takes as the "evidence" of the so-called turn.[641] Parker's purpose, therefore, is to question why this rather late, retrospective recognition of the "crypto-ethical" interest of post-structuralism was "not so clear ten years ago in literary theory's confident phase."[642] He suggests that "post-structuralism seemed to be antipathetic in several significant ways to any interest in what would seem the most obvious ethical dimension of literature, that is to say, the narrative or dramatic presentation of moral questions, dilemmas, embodied in characters, imagined agents, lives, selves or subjectivities."[643] What Parker proposes is that ethical criticism should be explicit, should not be taken as a result of dynamics of language, and should "put us back in touch with those most complex and exhaustive forms of ethical inquiry available, classic works of literature."[644] In our age of "post-Marx, post-Nietzsche, post-Saussure and even post-Derrida," what we need is to go beyond the "ideological demystification" of theory and political criticism and embrace "communalism" that defies binaries between selves and "judgmental attitude" by realizing, ethically, the common grounds of our existence.[645]

Another critic that refers positively to the diminishing influence of theory is Daniel Schwarz. He posits the weakening influence of deconstruction as an opportunity to restore the centrality of ethical concerns in literary study. Without deconstruction's suppression of hermeneutical approaches, it has become possible once again to ask freely such questions as "'What does this work mean?' 'What does it signify for us?' and 'How do the imagined worlds reflect anterior ones?'"[646] Considering this possibility "a humanistic revival," Schwarz notes new historicism's and cultural criticism's contributions to it with their foregroundings of "representation and mimesis."[647] In his opinion, "when representation of *a priori*

[640] Parker, Turn, p.8.
[641] Parker, Turn, p.9.
[642] Parker, Turn, p.8.
[643] Parker, Turn, p.8.
[644] Parker, Turn, p.7.
[645] Parker, Turn, pp.7, 6.
[646] Schwarz, Performative, p.188.
[647] Schwarz, Performative, p.188.

worlds becomes important, issues of how humans live and for what they live become central."[648]

For Schwarz, Anglo-American humanist critics like Matthew Arnold, Henry James, J. Hillis Miller, and Raymond Williams have an ongoing and unceasing influence on "how many of us write and teach, especially in departments of English and American Literature."[649] This influence attests to the fact that literary studies has moved beyond theory, or, to a certain degree, theory has lost its allure within the field. Schwarz explains,

> *[t]he differences that separated various strands of Anglo-American criticism—formalist and historical—prior to the theoretical revolution of the 1970s seem less significant than they did once. Now we are able to see that the New Critics, Aristotelians, the* Partisan Review *group, contextualists, and literary historians share a number of important [humanistic] assumptions: authors write to express their ideas and emotions; the way humans live and the values for which they live are of fundamental interest to authors and readers; literature expresses insights about human life and responses to human situations, and that is the main reason why we read, teach, and think about literature.*[650]

Indeed, when Booth joins in 2001 to the discussion he probably ignited himself, he takes theoretical schools that depreciate ethical criticism to task for denying fiction, or story, its moral character, its concern in the human that Schwarz notes above. For Booth, a major problem is that aesthetic is favored over the ethical. In "Why Ethical Criticism Can Never be Simple" (2001), Booth explains that ethical criticism is deemed literarily and aesthetically irrelevant as well as excessively and hence dangerously subjective. However, for Booth, it is both "relevant" and "a genuine form of rational inquiry" that may "produce results that deserve the tricky label 'knowledge.'"[651] The bias against ethical criticism is pointless because, after all, when dealing with literature we are dealing with stories and "stories are major moral teachers."[652] In addition, he finds it "absurd" that ethical criticism has so many "enemies" because a work of literature is "not only implicitly ethical […] but explicitly designed to elicit ethical responses."[653] He suggests that we not limit our

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[648] Schwarz, Performative, p.188.
[649] Schwarz, Humanistic, p.4.
[650] Schwarz, Humanistic, p.4.
[651] Wayne Booth, "Why Ethical Criticism Can Never be Simple," Davis and Womack Eds., (Simple), p.16.
[652] Booth, Simple, p.20.
[653] Booth, Simple, p.23.

understanding of concepts of 'ethics' and 'moral' to meanings of "possible moral codes," and urges that we practice what he calls "critical pluralism—of principles, of methods, of purposes, and of definitions of subject matter."[654] The interesting thing is, an insistence on critical pluralistic approach is one of the stock methodologies of theory against which neo-humanist critics rigorously defend ethical criticism. In the last section of this part, we shall turn to theory, namely, post-structuralism and postmodernism, and understand how such pluralism may work for ethical criticism undertaken by theorists.

1.2.3. Moral Philosophy and Literature as the Foundation of Ethics

This section will discuss briefly how some distinguished philosophers like Cora Diamond, Martha C. Nussbaum, Iris Murdoch, Jane Adamson, and Alasdair MacIntyre have recently made the study of the novel an integral part of moral philosophy. This movement not only provides heightened attention to the ethical vigor of literature but also, in some sense, provides considerable legitimacy to the centrality of ethics in literary study. Moral philosophers approach novels, in Cora Diamond's words, "as presentations, through the use of narratives, of moral views."[655] Yet

> *it is not what the novel* contains *that is supposed to be an example supporting or tending to disconfirm this or the other theory put forward by philosophers. Philosophers have complex views about moral thought, expressed in philosophical prose. Poets and novelists may also have complex views of moral life, moral thought, expressible only through the kind of writing* they *do.*[656]

Similarly, for Nussbaum, the novel has a unique ability for ethical reflection on certain moral issues, and this ability is so unique that she thinks it is unparalleled among other forms of art. This fact authorizes moral philosophy's reflections on the novel's ethical questions/questionings. In other words, literature is moral philosophy's natural subject, standard terrain, due to its unmatched ability to investigate ethical issues. In her books, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990) and in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1989, 2001), and articles, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The*

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[654] Booth, Simple, pp.18, 21.
[655] Cora Diamond, "Martha Nussbaum and the Need for Novels", Adamson et al., Eds., p.47.
[656] Diamond, p.47.

Golden Bowl and Literature as Moral Philosophy" (1983) and "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism" (2001), Nussbaum demonstrates the ways in which moral philosophy requires novels to fulfill its undertakings. In a way, she is one of the most important figures in ethical criticism because moral philosophy's turn to literature is accepted to have given impetus to the rise of ethical criticism. For instance, American literary critic Simon Haines acknowledges the contribution of moral philosophers to neo-humanist critics' efforts at re-legitimatizing ethical criticism and explains that

> *[v]aluable support in this process of recovery has come from the diverse group of moral philosophers […] who have been critical of the dissociated conceptions of language and the self delivered to us, or imposed on us, by the enlightenment. Even these philosophers, however, have too seldom seen* that*, and hardly ever shown* how*, it is literature which has actually been the principal mode of thinking about this problem since the seventeenth century.*[657]

In Haines's account, moral philosophers have turned to literature as a result of their questioning of traditional moral philosophy as outlined, for instance by G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) which discussed the meanings of the concepts of 'good' and 'moral judgment.'[658] The true moral inquiry, however, is guided by the question "how should one live?"[659] For Haines, this question pertains to "a lost and vital language of the self" that has recently been restored to moral philosophy but for "many novelists and poets, and some critics, […] it was never lost at all."[660]

To illustrate, we may look at Nussbaum's essay "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism" (2001). In the essay, Nussbaum finds Henry James's opinions on the inherently ethical and political vocations of the novelist that we see in his introductions to the New York editions of his novels invaluable for her project. According to Henry James, by presenting life in a certain manner, the novelist employs his or her imagination for "exemplary moral conduct."[661] Elaborating on James's idea, Nussbaum writes,

> *[t]he artist can assist us by cutting through the blur of habit and self-deception habit abets; his conduct is ethical conduct because it strives to come to terms with reality in a world that shrinks from reality. When we follow him as*

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[657] Haines, p.21.
[658] Haines, p.21.
[659] Haines, p.22.
[660] Haines, p.22.
[661] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism", Davis and Womack, Eds., (Exactly), p.59.

attentive readers, we engage in ethical conduct, and our readings are assessable ethical acts.[662]

Henry James's ethical conduct in *The Golden Bowl* is the topic of Nussbaum's early article "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy." In this influential article, Nussbaum argues that James's portrayal of Maggie Verver's "refusal to move from father to husband" by making an "od[d]" marriage that keeps her with her father—her utmost companion, for eternity, is in essence a result of her misguided pursuit of "perfection, especially moral perfection."[663] Nussbaum reads Maggie Verver's desire for a flawless, innocent, happy life in which she never hurts anyone, never once makes a wrong (especially by not becoming an adult woman and remaining a daughter to her father who cherishes her company), leads her to reduce morality to the principle of not hurting. Yet in singling out her love and devotion to her father, she not only fails in her moral responsibility to her husband in a marriage that remains spiritually impoverished (to protect her innocence and allegiance to her father in order to not "wound" her father), but she also commits a moral crime against herself because she deters making moral choices. Yet innocence is presented as avoiding making choices and this escape grants Maggie "a safe world in which to live and voyage, protected against nameless dangers."[664]

Nussbaum maintains that James's portrayal of Maggie Verver "poses questions about moral ambition, moralism," and in this way *The Golden Bowl* becomes "philosophical or makes an important contribution to moral philosophy."[665] Since this article is one of the earliest examples of moral philosophy's turn to literature, Nussbaum feels compelled to defend her mission. The importance of her defense is that she highlights not only the morally charged world of the novel but also Henry James's personal moral integrity that leads him to deploy art for ethical inquiry. This sense of the writer's sense of moral responsibility, ambition for ethical reflection, is in fact one of the determining characteristic of contemporary American

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[662] Nussbaum, Exactly, p.59.
[663] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy", **New Literary History**, Spec. issue *Literature and/as Moral Philosophy*, Volume:15, No:1, 1983, (Crystals), p. 25.
[664] Nussbaum, Crystals, pp.29, 26.
[665] Nussbaum, Crystals, p.26.

literature's concerns this study will try to highlight in the following chapters. Nussbaum explains,

> *it is, in fact, not possible to speak about the moral view revealed within this text without speaking at the same time of the created text, which exemplifies and expresses the responses of an imagination that means to care for and to put itself there for us. "Art," James writes, "is nothing if not exemplary," [...] and the "example" in* The Golden Bowl *is, of course, not merely the adventures of the consciousness of one or another character, as our emphasis heretofore may have suggested. It is the entire text, revealed as the imaginative effort of a human character who displays himself here as the sort of character who reads lives and texts so as not to cheapen their value. I claim that the views uncovered in this text derive their power from the way in which they emerge as the ruminations of such a high and fine mind concerning the tangled mysteries of these imaginary lives. And we could hardly begin to see whether such views were or were not exemplary for us if this mind simply stated its conclusions flatly, if it did not unfold before us the richness of its reflection, allowing us to follow and to share its adventures. It is a further fact about the views of this text that they are views very seldom put forward and seriously examined in works of moral philosophy. And this, I claim, is no accident. [… T]here are candidates for moral truth which the plainness of traditional moral philosophy lacks the power to express, and which* The Golden Bowl *expresses wonderfully.*[666]

Cora Diamond, another influential contemporary moral philosopher, acknowledges the importance of Nussbaum's endeavors. In "Martha Nussbaum and the Need for Novels," Diamond defends moral philosophy's turn to the novel for moral investigation on the basis that a novel portrays the moral dilemmas of "a concrete individual person" rather than drawing on types and prescribing universalisms.[667] She takes her cue from Nussbaum who asserts that some novels, in their particularized—as opposed to generalized—accounts of moral issues, "convey moral views that cannot be expressed in other forms."[668] For instance, in *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum writes that her purpose is "to establish that certain literary texts are indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere: not by any means sufficient, but sources of insight without which the inquiry cannot be complete."[669] Besides Nussbaum's assertion of the exceptional service of literature in moral investigation, Diamond also pays special attention to Nussbaum's unwavering focus on the novelist's answer to the question "how to live" which positions the novelist as a moral thinker and therefore classifies the novel an exercise in moral

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[666] Nussbaum, Crystals, pp.42-44.
[667] Diamond, p.42.
[668] Diamond, p.42.
[669] Nussbaum, Knowledge, pp.23-24.

thinking/moral thought. For Nussbaum, as Diamond explains, "the novels themselves" are "expressions of the complex vision of moral thinkers."[670] In this line of argument, both Diamond and Nussbaum isolate themselves from other philosophers who limit their approach to literary texts to investigations of the characters' "dilemmas, their deliberation, their choices, their judgments, their conception of their situation."[671] For Diamond,

> *[b]y taking novels in that way as moral thinking, [Nussbaum] puts herself at a substantial distance from most contemporary moral theorists, for whom moral thinking is the making of moral judgments, using either general moral terms like "good" and "bad," "right" and "wrong," or more specialized evaluative terms like "just," "courageous," "generous," "murder," and so on.*[672]

The difference between moral thinking and moral judgment brings us to a comparison between philosophical and literary moral investigations. To begin, we could note a recommendation by Diamond:

> *The* only *way to see what kinds of moral thinking may be found in literary texts is by giving them sensitive attention, of a sort we are not trained or encouraged, to give them.* We *look for arguments, for theories, for supporting data or counter-examples. The idea that we need to learn to read with a different sort of eye, attentive to different sorts of things, may strike us as very strange; but there are no short cuts for philosophers.*[673]

Jane Adamson and Iris Murdoch share Diamond's opinion. In "Against Tidiness: Literature and/versus Moral Philosophy," Jane Adamson agrees with Diamond and writes that "philosophers need to learn from literature to attend to things other than arguments. This implies a recognition that not all kinds of ethical inquiry are constituted in arguments, theories, etc. directed at logical conclusions."[674] Here, Adamson points at a difference not only in ends but also means in the difference between literature and philosophy, which is put forth by Nussbaum. In *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1986), Nussbaum explains,

> *we can say provisionally that a whole tragic drama, unlike a schematic philosophical example making use of a similar story, is capable of tracing the history of a complex pattern of deliberation, showing its roots in a way of life*

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[670] Diamond, p.43.
[671] Diamond, p.42
[672] Diamond, p.48.
[673] Diamond, p.49.
[674] Jane Adamson, "Against Tidiness: Literature and/versus Moral Philosophy", Adamson et al., Eds., p.101.

> *and looking forward to its consequences in that life. As it does all of this, it lays open to view the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation. If a philosopher were to use Antigone's story as a philosophical example, he or she would, in setting it out schematically, signal to the reader's attention everything that the reader ought to notice. He would point out only what is strictly relevant. A tragedy does not display the dilemmas of its characters as pre-articulated; it shows them searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active. Interpreting a tragedy is a messier, less determinate, more mysterious matter than assessing a philosophical example; and even when the work has once been interpreted, it remains unexhausted, subject to reassessment, in a way that the example does not. To invite such material into the center of an ethical inquiry concerning these problems of practical reason is, then, to add to its content a picture of reason's procedures and problems that could not readily be conveyed in some other form.*[675]

Iris Murdoch makes a similar argument in "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch" (1961):

> *What we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being. […] It is here that literature is so important, especially since it has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy […] Through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives.*[676]

In these arguments, what would otherwise seem a shortcoming of philosophy when compared with literature is, as Adamson notes, nothing more than its privileging of "what is ship-shape, trim, strictly relevant, goal-directed. It values clear distinctions, clean categories, orderly lines of argument proceeding to conclusions."[677]

Perhaps the most significant contribution moral philosophy makes to contemporary literature is Diamond's assertion that the literary text's formal aspects structure its moral vision. She refuses to privilege realistic texts as potential sources of moral vision and writes that a novel's moral view cannot be limited to a realistic depiction of "scenes of deliberation and choice."[678] Taking the example of Kurt Vonnegut's metafictional novel *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), Diamond argues that "the absence of coherent narrative development" of this novel points out its moral

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[675] Martha C. Nussbaum, **The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p.14.
[676] Iris Murdoch "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch", **Encounter**, Volume:16, No:1, 1961, p.17 quoted in Adamson p.85.
[677] Adamson, p.87.
[678] Diamond, p.49.

expression.[679] Besides fragmented narrative, the novel's deployment of irony, it's self-definition as schizophrenic in its subtitle ("somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales") also determines its moral vision. Vonnegut problematizes the possibility of "writ[ing] a book about a massacre" and "the moral activity of the novel lies in its treatment of that subject, of the relation between art, memory, and massacre."[680] In Diamond's opinion, Vonnegut shows that "the moral interest of the work cannot be taken to lie in how characters in it deal with morally demanding situations. The connection between features of the text and the novel as moral thought is a main subject of this novel."[681]

Of course, philosophy's turn to literature is not without its problems and it is addressed in the 2002 Fall/Winter issue of *Diacritics* of the Johns Hopkins University Press which devotes a special issue on ethics as an interdisciplinary bridge between literature and philosophy. In his introduction to the journal, Mark Sanders, for instance, points out the problematics of this interdisciplinarity and argues that literary theory needs "justification" for its turn to "philosophical ethics."[682] He wonders, "where a cross-disciplinary engagement with philosophy has taken place, has there occurred any transformation of literary theory?"[683] To begin, for Sanders, ethics is dominated by the paradigm of "alterity and difference" and "literature engages in a process of […] other-making or making-other: in making-other and, in so doing, inventing others, it makes itself other."[684] Therefore, he considers literary theory's turn to ethics "natural."[685] The only flip-side is that literary theory falls behind the latest developments in moral philosophy which has turned to political theory on a global and transnational scale (Luce Irigaray, Gayatri Spivak, … etc.). Inevitably, literary theory has remained rather "restricted" in its cross/interdisciplinarity with philosophy.[686] For Sanders, "a productive crossing" may be a good opportunity for a refreshed look at one's own discipline and questions

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[679] Diamond, p.49.
[680] Diamond, pp.49-50.
[681] Diamond, p.50.
[682] Mark Sanders, "Ethics and Interdisciplinarity in Philosophy and Literary Theory," **Diacritics**, Volume:32, No:3-4, 2002, p.3.
[683] Sanders, p.3.
[684] Sanders, p.4.
[685] Sanders, p.4.
[686] Sanders, p.10.

surrounding it. In other words, "interdisciplinarity means allowing one's discipline to be open to change in response to another" and Sanders expects literary theory, both in practice and in theory, to be more attentive to some vexing political matters as part of its ethical program.[687]

1.2.4. Theories of Fictional Ethics: Postmodern, Post-Theoretical Ethics

If the first two movements within ethical criticism we have covered so far, that is, neo-humanist ethical criticism and moral philosophy, focus on the proper pursuit of ethical questions in and through literature which comprises perhaps the best medium for ethical inquiry, a third movement carries out theoretical investigations with regard to the manner, or methodology, of such inquiry. The practitioners of this third group are variably referred as post-structuralist, deconstructionist, postmodern, or post-theoretical ethical literary critics.

A common thread among theories of fictional ethics is the concern with intersubjectivity and French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's arguments on the ethics of alterity exert great influence. For Levinas, our ethical responsibility to the other, or to any form of alterity, begins with a face-to-face encounter; seeing the other's face compels us to act ethically. This notion of intersubjectivity is adapted to configure reading as the reader's encounter with a text, or with the otherness of the text, or still, with the otherness presented by the text. As we shall observe, various critics deploy this Levinasian ethics of alterity in their pursuits.

It is possible to begin with a humanist ethical critic's turn to theory to establish how theory figures in ethical criticism and relate the extent of the notion of intersubjectivity. Although Adam Zachary Newton is mentioned alongside humanist critics, it is possible to consider Adam Zachary Newton's intersubjective, Levinasian ethics of narrative among theory-based ethical critics in order to emphasize Newton's reliance on theory besides humanistic principles. In *Narrative Ethics* (1995), Newton disagrees with the idea that ethical criticism needs literary works that "openly declare

[687] Sanders, p.11.

their ethical import, or which stake out a recognizably 'ethical' terrain."[688] In traditional literary criticism, ethics "has usually been forced to assume" a "practical, problem-solving role."[689] For instance, "ethics closely informed the novel's early development" by positioning novels as teachers of "ethical sensibility."[690] Novels such as *Tom Jones*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Middlemarch* "schooled their readership in the correct evaluation of and response to character and moral situation. This tradition culminated, with Henry James's novels and critical prefaces, in an inquiry into moral language and the way words shape and deform social relations."[691] In this understanding, ethics is no more than "moral recourse" because it equates "narrative form" with "ethical' content,'" "moral exemplification."[692] The task of the critic is, in this case, to "matc[h] form to content, and content to conduct."[693] This approach has been valid until "the advent of formalist and poststructuralist approaches and their sustained repudiation of normative, extra-linguistic categories."[694]

His preferred term for ethical criticism is "theory of narrative ethics" and rather than engaging with "considerations about novels' or their authors' moral or moralizing intentions, it should be "concerned with the intersubjective dynamics of narrative, and their ethical implications, independent of the 'moral paraphrases' which they may invite or which can be ascribed to them."[695] Newton writes that his "proposal of narrative ethics implies simply narrative *as* ethics: the ethical consequences of narrating a story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, and reader in that process."[696] Narrative is "independent from any external moral brought to bear upon it" and by narrative ethics he means "narrative as relationship and human connectivity."[697]

Intersubjectivity is a key word in Newton's narrative ethics, explicating his use of Levinas's ethics of alterity as well as his configuration of narrative as an

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[688] Adam Zachary Newton, **Narrative Ethics**, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1995, p.32.
[689] Newton, p.9.
[690] Newton, p.9.
[691] Newton, p.9.
[692] Newton, p.9.
[693] Newton, p.9.
[694] Newton, p.10.
[695] Newton, pp.32-33.
[696] Newton, pp.10-11.
[697] Newton, p.7.

encounter with the other. In this sense, we could say that Newton is a theorist of narrative, a narratologist, who attempts to secure the ethical's importance to narratology. He believes that narrative theory, although it tries "to construct a comprehensive model for the *differentia specifica* of narrative form," has not offered a complete and sufficient understanding of ethical features "as either a formal property (on the order of fictional patterns and structures) or a constitutive force (relations which bind tellers, listeners, and witnesses)."[698] He claims to "argue for just this formal and constitutive value for ethics in any accounting of the way narrative works."[699]

Newton deploys Levinas's ethics of alterity to explain how we may "attend to the shape, the drama, and the circumstances" to the story we read in a narrative without trying to "evaluate or even solve a text's problems."[700] Rather, we should approach the text in its "concrete, formal, narrative particularity."[701] In a Levinasian argument, Newton writes, "[o]ne faces a text as one might face a person, having to confront the claims raised by that very immediacy, an immediacy of contact, not of meaning."[702] Thus, in order to draw the contours of this notion of narrative ethics, a "more authentic provenance for 'ethics,'" Newton relies on "intersubjectivity" and couples it with the face-to-face encounter with the other in Levinas's philosophy.[703] In his allegiance to Levinas, Newton also isolates himself from theories of ethics that "defin[e] freely determined action according to a law of rationality from which they can derive criteria for moral behavior at once universalizable and intrinsically intelligible."[704] For example, Aristotle, Kant, Hume, and Habermas define ethics "in terms of obligation and autonomy, both attributes determined by reference to universal and self-evident laws of reason."[705] In contrast to this traditional view, Newton envisages ethics as "the radicality and uniqueness of the moral situation

[698] Newton, p.29.
[699] Newton, p.29.
[700] Newton, p.11.
[701] Newton, p.11.
[702] Newton, p.11.
[703] Newton, p.11.
[704] Newton, p.12.
[705] Newton, p.12.

itself, a binding claim exercised upon the self by a concrete and singular other whose moral appeal precedes both decision and understanding."[706]

Levinas's particular importance for Newton lies in the connection Levinas establishes between ethics and intersubjectivity. Levinas, as Newton explains,

> *argues that consciousness and even subjectivity follow from, are legitimated by, the ethical summons which proceeds from intersubjective encounter. Subjectivity arrives, so to speak, in the form of a responsibility toward an Other which no one else can undertake; if, from this perspective, selfhood always remains in some way incomplete, it is because ethical responsibility continually outstrips one's capacity to assume it. For Levinas, "ethics describes neither ontic nor deontic categories, which generalize theories of reality from subjective experiences; ethics, rather, originates from the opposite direction—from the other to me, in the sensible experience of the* face *which he or she presents to me." The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility. As such, the face of the other is verticality and uprightness; it spells a relation of rectitude. The face is not in front of me but above me. [...] In the relation to the face I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other.*[707]

Newton applies this sense of encounter as an ethics to textuality and argues that

> *[c]utting athwart the mediatory role of reason, narrative situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text. Again, these relations will often precede decision and understanding, with consciousness arriving late, after the assumption or imposition of intersubjective ties. In this sense, prose fiction translates the interactive problematic of ethics into literary forms. Stories, like persons, originate alogically. As ethical performance, in Levinas's sense, they are concussive: they shock and linger as "traumatisms of astonishment."*[708]

Ethics, when not thought of as "preexisting moral norms," may help us see "the common thread of blurred boundaries between reading people and reading plots, between the separate domains of life and story."[709]

In his response to current attempts to foreground ethical criticism in literary studies, Newton takes deconstruction and moral philosophy (for "confining ethical analysis to the abstract realm of 'values'") as well as neo-humanism to task for their misguided approaches to ethics. Deconstruction attempts to compensate/replace ethics by looking closely at texts themselves rather than analyzing what this act of

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[706] Newton, p.12.
[707] Newton, p.13.
[708] Newton, p.13.
[709] Newton, pp.13, 14.

looking, "facing," means ethically.[710] Moral philosophy, nostalgic for "the deep imbrications of ethics and literature within philosophical thought in classical Greece," approaches literature for "an extended philosophical example" or for "moral training."[711] For Newton, the optimum of engagement of philosophy and literature should preferably concern how "the literary text can extend and develop a philosophical problem by placing it in a new light."[712] Neo-humanism, "as a response to the deconstructive position," engages with "the vexed issue of 'representation,' maintaining that common notions of it are matters of nonarbitrary social practice."[713] For Newton, the mimetic project of neo-humanism "does not entirely succeed" because "[t]hough meaning to claim for literature a valid continuousness with lived experience, they seem too willing to construe oppositionality in terms of Self and Culture, obscuring the challenge of alterity posed by a unique and concrete other."[714] That challenge is a gift of fiction "since confronting a text in its particularity both resembles and differs from the acts of human encounter which the story itself narrates, that is, the relation between subjects and what (or those whom) they objectify."[715]

Newton borrows his working definition of narrative from Gerard Genette's triadic explanation of narrative which may mean, "(1) the story, or signified content, (2) the narrative, the signifier or narrative text, and (3) narrating, the narrative act."[716] Newton deploys the third meaning of narrative in this model and makes it the basis of his "own three-part structure of narrational, representational, and hermeneutical levels" of narrative ethics.[717] He explains that

> *Genette awards* narrating *logical pride of place in fictional discourse, explaining that "the true order is […] something like narrating/story/narrative, with the narrative act initiating (inventing)* both *the story and its narrative, which are then completely dissociable. But since I believe that this act initiates responsibilities alongside forms, it receives far greater attention here than Genette or other narratologists have allowed.*[718]

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[710] Newton, pp.34, 27.
[711] Newton, pp.61, 67.
[712] Newton, p.67.
[713] Newton, p.29.
[714] Newton, p.30.
[715] Newton, p.30.
[716] Newton, p.8.
[717] Newton, p.8.
[718] Newton, pp.8-9.

In Newton's own "triadic structure of narrative ethics," namely, "narrational ethics," "representational ethics," and "hermeneutic ethics," the separation is not to mark clear boundaries but to clarify their interconnectedness: "character and narration, like theme and form, presuppose each other, both in turn inflected by hermeneutic demands."[719] In other words, Newton suggests different ethical dimensions for these different aspects of narrative. Narrational ethics focuses on "the formal design of the story-telling act, the distribution of relations among teller, tale, and person(s) told"; representational ethics turns to "the sea change wrought when selves become either narrating or narrated, that is, how the narrative creates a fictional person and what it means to create a character; hermeneutical ethics, "both a topic within the text and a field of action outside it," considers the reader's process of responding to the otherness of the text as well as the literary critic's way of interpreting it.[720]

Another critic that builds an ethical inquiry based on the encounter with the other is Derek Attridge. In "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other" (1999), Attridge shows how a careful, refined understanding of the other is essential in ethical literary criticism. Despite being "an overworked phrase in current academic discourse," *the other* is useful in defining the "singularity" of what we encounter as we read.[721] By singularity, Attridge means the "uniqueness," "the impossibility of finding general rules or schemata to account fully for" the other.[722] Thus, every other we encounter has a singular otherness that requires our "singular response."[723] Drawing on Derrida's dictum in *The Gift of Death* (1968) that "every other is completely other," Attridge asserts that otherness does not pertain to "a matter of perceptible difference. It implies a wholly new existent."[724] It also implies "a *relation*" because, first, it requires an encounter and, second, "to be other is necessarily to be other *to*. What is the same to me is other to someone else and vice versa."[725]

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[719] Newton, pp.17-18.
[720] Newton, p.25.
[721] Derek Attridge, "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other", **PMLA**, Spec. issue *Ethics and Literary Study*, Volume:114, No:1, 1999, (Innovation), p.21.
[722] Attridge, Innovation, p.24.
[723] Attridge, Innovation, p.25.
[724] Attridge, Innovation, pp.21-22.
[725] Attridge, Innovation, p.22.

In Attridge's formulation, the other may refer to a human agent that we encounter as well as referring to "a relation, or a relating, between me, as the same, and that which, in its uniqueness, is heterogeneous to me."[726] In this way, Attridge does not limit the other to encounters on a real-life basis. As he explains, the other need not be "strictly speaking, a person conventionally understood in ethics or psychology."[727] The other not only emerges in creative act, "innovative activity" such as writing, but also "takes place in reading."[728]

One of the recurring phrases in ethical literary criticism is *responding to the other* and in Attridge's discussion we find a good explanation of what it entails. First of all, responding to the other means responding to the other's otherness:

> *A text is to be considered not a fixed set of signifiers or signifieds but something like a field of potential meaning awaiting realization without wholly determining it in advance. Reading involves working against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in a particular work. Encountering the other in reading, the mind lets itself be carried to the borders of its accustomed terrain by the text. [… A] full response to the otherness of the text includes an awareness of, a respect for, and in a certain sense a taking of responsibility for, the creativity of its author.*[729]

We may identify not only Attridge's but also postmodernist ethical literary criticism's differences from humanistic ethical criticism through the following explanation.

> *It is not the text "itself" but my singular and active relation to the particular configuration of the possibilities represented by the text that is the site of alterity. However old the text, however familiar to me, it can always strike me with the force of novelty, by means of a creative reading that strives to respond fully to the singularity of the work in a new time and place, I open myself to its potential challenge. Rather than the familiar model of the literary work as friend and companion, sharing with the reader its secrets, I propose the work as stranger, even and perhaps especially when the reader knows it intimately.*[730]

In "Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J. M. Coetzee's Fiction" (2004), Attridge identifies ethics in literature not in context but in form and style: "The distinctive ethical force of literature inheres not in the fictional world portrayed

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[726] Attridge, Innovation, p.24.
[727] Attridge, Innovation, p.24.
[728] Attridge, Innovation, p.24.
[729] Attridge, Innovation, p.25.
[730] Attridge, Innovation, p.26.

but in the handling of language whereby that fictional world is brought into being."[731] Attridge writes that "the most fundamental engagement between the literary and the ethical occurs not in the human world depicted in works of literature but in the very act of reading such works, whether or not they deal with situations and relations that could be called ethical."[732] If we want to read ethically, to do "justice" to what we are reading, we must "atten[d] to linguistic and stylistic details with scrupulous accuracy."[733]

In this sense, he privileges modernist writing due to its reluctance to treat language as immediate and transparent.[734] In this reluctance, modernist writing manages to "engage the reader ethically" because when language is conceived that way, the text "challenges habitual norms" and invites the reader to "respond fully" to the text's otherness.[735] He adds that "it is in literature's *resistance* to the demands of storytelling and moral exemplification that it most distinctively engages with the ethics of literature."[736] The task of ethical literary criticism, therefore, is "to take account of that resistance."[737] In the following paragraph, Attridge explains how modernist writing achieves ethical dimension:

> *Modernism's foregrounding of language and other discursive and generic codes through its formal strategies is not merely a self-reflexive diversion but a recognition that literature's distinctive power and potential ethical force resides in a testing and unsettling of deeply held assumptions of transparency, instrumentability, and direct referentiality, in part because this taking to the limits opens a space for the apprehension of the otherness which those assumptions had silently excluded.*[738]

For Attridge, ethics of reading "means doing justice to its *otherness*: to whatever it is about it that challenges our preferences and preconceptions, that stretches our powers of thought and feeling, that resists the encompassing grasp of our interpretive techniques."[739] In other words, literary works' "ethical significance does not depend on the representations of otherness which they may or may not

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[731] Derek Attridge, "Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J. M. Coetzee's Fiction," **Poetics Today**, Volume:25, No:4, 2004, (Servants), p.653.
[732] Attridge, Servants, p.653.
[733] Attridge, Servants, p.660.
[734] Attridge, Servants, p.653.
[735] Attridge, Servants, p.653.
[736] Attridge, Servants, p.654.
[737] Attridge, Servants, p.654.
[738] Attridge, Servants, p.669.
[739] Attridge, Servants, p.654.

contain."[740] This is not to say that "narrative sequences, realistic characters, or thematic developments" are ignored or denied importance. Rather, "they do not in themselves constitute the special contribution that literature makes, or can make, to our involvement in the ethical" because "it is less a question of something we can learn than something that happens to us and through us as we read."[741] At this point, Attridge is explaining the core of his notion of ethics in/of reading which he calls the "event" of reading: "The distinctiveness of the ethical in literature, and in artworks more generally, is that it occurs as an *event* in the process of reading, not a theme to be registered, a thesis to be grasped, or an imperative to be followed or ignored."[742] That is to say, what we encounter when we read falls outside the customary logic of causality, acquaintance, and annuls our prior conceptions: it confronts us as unexpectedly, as compellingly as would, so to speak, a violent earthquake that shakes whatever ground we are standing on and coerces us to acknowledge its unavoidable presence that does not care who we are, what we are doing. The otherness of the text confronts us with such immediate force that it comprises an event, and the presence of the other happens, like an event, and our ability to respond to this is the extent of our ethical bearing.

Attridge offers by far the most interesting formulation of Levinasian ethics, but like Newton, other critics also use it to formulate new approaches and Andrew Gibson is one of them. Gibson is an English literary critic whose arguments unite developments in British, Anglo-American, and European literary theory. In *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas* (1999), Gibson charts the evolution of ethical literary criticism and devises "a postmodern or post-theoretical ethics of the novel" that relies on Levinas's particular definitions of ethics and alterity.[743] He also offers a genealogy for the rise of ethics from a different viewpoint that enriches the arguments noted earlier. In his analysis, he undertakes ethical criticisms of the novels of Henry James, Marcel Proust, Samuel Beckett, and Jeanette Winterson.

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[740] Attridge, Servants, pp.654-655.
[741] Attridge, Servants, p.654.
[742] Attridge, Servants, p.654.
[743] Andrew Gibson, **Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas**, Routledge, London, 1999, p.5.

Gibson borrows from F. R. Leavis the traditional view on the moral value of novels. Gibson explains that in *The Living Pirinciple: 'English' as a Discipline of Thought* (1977), Leavis maintains that literature influences as well as demonstrates the moral values of readers.[744] The study of literature, in this sense, is an intellectual pursuit as long as it notices the "moral and even redemptive" value of literature. Replacing Leavis's preferred term 'morality' with 'ethics,' Gibson limits his alliance with Leavis on his basic premise of "the ethical importance of novels in themselves, of reading novels, of valuing certain novels in certain ways, of the theory and criticism of the novel."[745] Gibson limits his allegiance with Leavis to these ideas because Leavis represents a distinct tradition that relies on a "stable base in constants or universals" including strictly defined moral codes and systems.[746] Gibson's purpose, however, is to establish that ethical criticism of the novel is not, and should not be, "thinkable in terms of certain uniform characteristics or consistent features."[747] Rather than considering ethics as "involving totalities, whether of value or perception," ethical criticism of the novel should try to "struggle" with this paradox of talking about the ethical value of novels without "rely[ing] on or produc[ing] determinations."[748] For Gibson, if this paradox can be managed, we might see "an ethical dimension to the relation to the indeterminable itself," an indeterminacy that informs our relation to the other, hence, all ethical acts.[749]

Before moving on to Gibson's formulation of a postmodernist ethics of the novel, we could take note of his assessment of ethical criticism in literary scholarship. Ethical criticism has been attacked severely not only for relying on but also for reinforcing personal moral values that mostly belong to the demolished world of metanarratives. Rather than joining the chorus announcing the futility of ethics, Gibson tries to "reaffirm literary ethics" against such movements or theories that he considers the "most responsible for the recent neglect of ethics."[750] In this context, he refers to two recent scholarly developments: "the new positivism and the

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[744] Gibson, p.1.
[745] Gibson, p.1.
[746] Gibson, p.5.
[747] Gibson, pp.10, 11.
[748] Gibson, pp.10, 11.
[749] Gibson, p.11.
[750] Gibson, pp.1, 2.

'politics of English.'"[751] The first concerns a set of changes in the academia in the 1990s regarding the increase in funding opportunities for research "in tending and developing the archive or in the production of positive knowledge."[752] While acknowledging the value of that work, Gibson nonetheless asks whether "the experts' knowledge and elaboration of an ever-growing range of scholarly contexts for literary works" serves a coterie audience, i.e., other experts.[753] This "tendency," fuelled by "a pragmatic ethos," makes "the reaffirmation of ethics" so much more "crucial" because, as he wonders, "without an ethics, can the scholar ever be sure of the point to his or her work?"[754]

The second development Gibson talks about is the rise of political criticism (or, political literary criticism) in the early 1970s. He argues that it was "largely responsible for the quick demise of the Leavisite project and, until very recently, the apparent eclipse of ethical criticism."[755] Political criticism claimed "superiority" and granted itself "automatic privilege" through its "historicization and demystification, a power as critique that was simply unavailable to Leavism and humanism, shackled as they were by the terms of an ahistorical and unselfconscious discourse."[756] The raison d'étre of "the politics of English'" was its clai[m of] the moral as well as the epistemological high ground" in relation to "the humanist tradition."[757] Gibson wonders whether "that claim [can] be maintained any longer, or can it only be made on the basis of a supposed political authenticity which continues to sidestep the most appropriate test, practical, political consequences?"[758] Here, Gibson takes political criticism to task for seeking "direct relevance and immediate efficacy" and suggests that we test it "on its own ground, in terms of effectiveness."[759] In this sense, he questions Terry Eagleton whose *Against the Grain* (1986) and *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996) criticizes post-structuralism for siding with "corporate business, or […] theory and postmodernists for being indifferent to malnourished

[751] Gibson, p.2.
[752] Gibson, p.2.
[753] Gibson, p.2.
[754] Gibson, p.2.
[755] Gibson, p.2.
[756] Gibson, p.2.
[757] Gibson, p.3.
[758] Gibson, p.3.
[759] Gibson, p.3.

bodies."[760] Gibson asks whether Eagleton can explain how Marxist criticism that is confined to the academy could absolve "the political critic from the complicities and neglects for which he or she takes others to task?"[761] In his opinion, it is not clear how Eagleton's "*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* work more effectively to relieve the misery of the third world than [Lyotard's] *The Postmodern Condition.* What is the crucial ethical distinction between the two?"[762]

Gibson tries to answer these questions with two suggestions. First, like Wayne Booth, he claims that much of the recent political criticism has actually been ethical criticism. For Gibson, "[p]olitics has been a way in which, for a number of years, criticism has construed its own existence as a crucially ethical project. Literary criticism may even be one of the loci where the political becomes ethical."[763] Nonetheless, for many, ethical criticism means political criticism and if this misconceived equation can be corrected, "political minds might be drawn to engage more fully in immediately political work, which might itself become more effective as a result; and literary criticism would content itself with an ethico-political role, contained, even marginal, but not wholly insignificant."[764] What renders current literary criticism rather insufficient in terms of effectiveness is its limitation to "the urgent, political temporality."[765]

This brings us to Gibson's second suggestion where he proposes that political criticism should revise the temporality of its knowledge, thereby its purpose of having immediate effects. Political criticism may have more effect if it can think in the mode of "Derrida's later writings, in relation to an undecidable future, or a utopian hope which cannot know exactly what it might anticipate."[766] The distinction Gibson makes between the two temporalities of knowledge, that is, of the present, immediate effects, and the future effects of knowledge help him distinguish ethical criticism from political criticism.[767] In this way, Gibson challenges both new positivism and political criticism: "If critics are to claim that literary criticism is

[760] Gibson, p.3.
[761] Gibson, p.3.
[762] Gibson, p.3.
[763] Gibson, p.4.
[764] Gibson, p.4.
[765] Gibson, p.4.
[766] Gibson, p.4.
[767] Gibson, p.4.

anything more useful than 'a contribution to knowledge,' it arguably has to be according to a different temporality to that of the immediately political world, an ethical or ethico-political temporality."[768] He believes that "latter is the condition of literary theory and criticism."[769] In Gibson's account, that condition relies not on timeless and universal values as Leavis and humanist criticism suggests. "The ethics and the ethical temporality" Gibson wishes to establish "emerge from contemporary theory," one not bound by universals.[770]

In proposing this, Gibson notes that the negative or positive approaches to contemporary theory distinguishes critics who defend "a return to ethics in literary theory and novel criticism."[771] First, there is a group of humanist literary critics such as Colin McGinn, Frank Palmer, and S. L.Goldberg who are heirs of the "Leaviste project" and who "cast theory as inimical to ethics."[772] In their arguments, "the linguistic emphases of structuralism and deconstruction," their relativistic, formalist, abstracting views on fiction work to demolish the moral, the human aspects of fiction. The second group comprises another circle of humanists, whom we have so far referred to as neo-humanist to distinguish them from the other group such as David Parker and Wayne Booth whose arguments sound, for Gibson, "more interesting" on the grounds that "they have engaged more fully and knowledgeably with what they take to be the opposition," which is obviously the so-called threat of theory to ethical criticism.[773] Like the writers mentioned above, Parker and Booth too "note the marked decline in confidence in ethical modes of reading fiction in recent decades, and both blame theory for that decline."[774] Wayne Booth criticizes theory's indifference and hostility to ethical criticism and charges theory for its relativism as well as its inability "either to countenance or promote stable values and standards."[775] In Parker's account, post-structuralism "has led to the eclipse of other discursive possibilities, especially ethical ones."[776] As Gibson explains,

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[768] Gibson, p.5.
[769] Gibson, p.5.
[770] Gibson, p.5.
[771] Gibson, p.5.
[772] Gibson, p.5.
[773] Gibson, p.5.
[774] Gibson, p.5.
[775] Gibson, p.5.
[776] Gibson, p.5.

> *[t]he advent of theory and what Parker calls its 'neo-Nietzschean' challenge has made reading narrative merely a straying in a moral wilderness. Novels can no longer offer directives which tell us about the way people are and how to discriminate amongst them. Theory has stripped us of our faith in the constancy of moral structures, of novels as underpinned or determined by, even finally identical with those structures.*[777]

Given these conditions, two factors have made humanists happy. First, "theory is now decisively on the wane and, in a post-theoretical age, novel critics may quietly return to a more cautious, less imperious, more authentically liberal version of humanist morality."[778] Second, "moral philosophy has increasingly allotted major ethical significance and a key ethical role precisely to narrative and the novel and even to novel theory and criticism."[779] He refers to a consensus among literary critics writing on the ethical turn that the most influential moral philosophers and philosophers writing on literature and ethics are Richard Rorty, Martha C. Nussbaum, Cora Diamond, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Their works "have both been concerned with the ethical power of fiction—even as opposed to the ethical power of modern philosophy—whilst noting what they take to be an absence of ethical concern in much contemporary literary criticism."[780]

What Gibson finds problematic with moral philosophy's focus on (or turn to) ethics through a turn to literature as well as humanist critics' investment in this development can be explained in two steps. First, these moral philosophers assert the novel's "ethical superiority" to theory, or philosophy, in that the novel, for Rorty for instance, exemplifies ethical practice par excellence in its refusal of "foundations or universal principles" and its embrace of "specific, limited, and finite moral practices."[781] For Nussbaum, as we noted above, novels "best capture the ethical importance of contingency and the passions, and admit the priority of the particular over the general."[782] Yet Gibson finds these arguments "reminiscient of the liberal humanist tradition of novel criticism" because "[t]he emphasis on concretion or particularity in the novel is very close to being Leavisite."[783] Gibson adds that moral

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[777] Gibson, p.6.
[778] Gibson, p. 6.
[779] Gibson, p.6.
[780] Gibson, p.7.
[781] Gibson, p.7.
[782] Gibson, p.8.
[783] Gibson, p.8.

philosophers seem "to turn away from later theory to an earlier tradition. […] For all their knowledge of post-structuralism, Rorty and Nussbaum's effective sense of the novel and the ethics of fiction is rather pre-structuralist."[784] In his opinion, the moral philosopher's merging of philosophy and theory-free reading

> *is what makes a resort to the philosophers so attractive [for humanists]. For Booth and Parker wish to continue a classical tradition of ethical criticism of fiction; to see it re-emerge unscathed, if necessarily refined and complicated by the questions raised for it by postmodernity. Parker likes Rorty and Nussbaum because they appear to be able to sustain a faith in a classical conception of fictional ethics whilst accepting an ethical foundationalism is no longer possible and ethical universals no longer thinkable.*[785]

Put differently, for Gibson, it is the very possibility of doing literary criticism without being constrained by theory that moral philosophy seems to offer, and Parker and Booth are excited precisely about such freedom from theory. However, there is a paradox here in the sense that the return Parker and Booth as well as Rorty and Nussbaum propose "is not a return."[786] Gibson sees this paradox in Parker's acceptance of the impossibility to reverse to a pre-theory state of essentialism and universalism; Parker "connects the idea of ethics to an essentialist conception of *ethos* and concentrates precisely on texts favored by the Leavisite tradition (*Middlemarch*, *Anna Karenina,* Lawrence's major fiction)" meanwhile "claim[ing] not to think in terms of moral 'codes' or 'systems' but constantly describes novels in such a manner."[787]

There is a third group of humanist critics with whom Gibson identifies, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham is a favorite critic of Gibson from this group. Harpham believes in the sharp difference between moral philosophy and literary criticism and he maintains a "close relation between theory and an ethical criticism."[788] For Gibson, a good grasp of theory is important: he criticizes humanists as well as moral philosophers because they have "ignored all the various problematizations of narrative and narrative 'form'—problematizations that have been very precisely postmodernist, that could not have emerged without the modern novel—in novel

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[784] Gibson, pp.8-9.
[785] Gibson, p.9.
[786] Gibson, p.9.
[787] Gibson, p.10.
[788] Gibson, p.12.

theory from the 1960s onwards."[789] We need to take into account postmodernism's problematizations of "narration, representation and the unity of the work" as well as their "ethical implications."[790] He explains that "the moral philosophers and neo-humanists have largely ignored these questions, just as did a more classical criticism, but without the historical excuse."[791] In this argument, Gibson suggests first a reassessment of postmodernist inquiries into ethics and then a revision of the differences between ethics and morality.

In reassessing postmodernism's relation to ethical issues, Gibson agrees with the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's arguments in *After Virtue* where MacIntyre offers a "diagnosis of the predicaments of contemporary morality."[792] According to MacIntyre, we need to "return to premodern modes of moral thought" because the modern rational justification of morality absolved it from theological, legal, and aesthetic rules/guidance and this inevitably resulted in "moral disorder."[793] Adopting the predicaments MacIntyre proposes, along with its philosophical and historical background, Gibson suggests a different solution. Rather than crediting stable foundations or points of view like MacIntyre, Gibson turns away from privileging vantage points whether they be pluralities, foundationisms, or universalisms. True, he acknowledges postmodernity, "the (not necessarily contemporary) condition" to be one of "more and more developed awareness of moralities as myriad, groundless, incommensurable and interminable" (as MacIntyre suggests), but the key solution to all the problems would be an understanding of "the crucial distinction between ethics and morality: not in that ethics offers a privileged vantage point above plural moralities, but in that ethics is different in character to morality."[794]

Gibson turns to Harpham and Drucilla Cornell to establish the distinction between ethics and morality. Through this distinction, Gibson shows how ethics is not interested in stables, universalisms and how it is not really—as claimed by MacInytre—destroyed by pluralities, incommensurabilities, and indeterminacies, and

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[789] Gibson, p.11.
[790] Gibson, p.17.
[791] Gibson, p.17.
[792] Gibson, p.13.
[793] Gibson, p.13.
[794] Gibson, pp.14, 15.

thereby defends the available grounds for postmodernists ethics. In *Getting It Right: Language, Literature and Ethics* (1992), Harpham suggests that although ethics tends toward "convergence, rationality, closure, transcendence," it nonetheless "sustains an august reticence, a principled irresolution."[795] The "strictly undecidable" character of ethics "suffers determination by morality."[796] Harpham defines ethics as dis-interested; it "precedes and governs our political and moral 'interestedness.'"[797] Ethics, as Gibson adds, "is born free, but also bound everywhere by morality 'to particular communities, institutions, codes, and conventions.'"[798] This is not to say that

> *we can or should shrug off the ordinary, difficult world of moral choices for the lofty, high-minded indeterminacies of ethics […] We are moral as we are political because we are historical beings, and no movement "beyond morality" is properly conceivable. Ethics nonetheless operates a kind of play within morality, holds it open, hopes to restrain from violence or the will to domination.*[799]

In this way, we draw the lines among politics and morality and ethics while ethics "continues to inform" politics and morality.[800] Similarly, in *The Philosophy of the Limit* (1992), Drucilla Cornell, a professor of ethics of law, relates ethics "with the undetermined" and explains morality as the "determinate of the undetermined as duties, obligations, systems, rules, norms, 'a right way to behave.'"[801] Noting Cornell's Levinasian conception of ethics, Gibson tells how, in defining ethics as "the excess that cannot be known positively, within any system of morality," Cornell establishes the indivisibility of ethics and the imagination:

> *In Cornell's thought, the imagination regains its status as a crucial ethical power. […T]he power in question, however, is not the moral power of the imagination as understood by humanism. It is not a power of "deep comprehension" of what is already there, but rather one of speculation and adumbration, a power to break up the given, to admit and elaborate the possible. The imagination is crucial in producing what, with Adorno in mind,*

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[795] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, **Getting it Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics**, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992, (Right) p.55 quoted in Gibson, p.15.
[796] Harpham, Right, p.56 quoted in Gibson, p.15.
[797] Gibson, p.15.
[798] Gibson, p.15.
[799] Gibson, p.15.
[800] Gibson, p.16.
[801] Drucilla Cornell, **The Philosophy of the Limit**, Routledge, London, 1992, p.35 quoted in Gibson, p.16.

Cornell calls the "redemptive perspectives" that "displace and estrange the world" so that "we are made aware that we are in exile."[802]

In Gibson's account, then, ethical criticism is rife with internal conflict due to the issue of determinations. In order to elaborate on this matter, a fault he finds with modernity, he employs the term "radical surpassing" which was coined by Albrecht Wellmer in *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernisms* (1991). The term radical surpassing helps Gibson define the problem both with neo-humanists' and moral philosophers' notion of ethics as well as establish his own position. According to Wellmer, radical surpassing is an attempt to transcend a given, to observe it "from an olympian height, constantly shadowed or overlooked by an ideal space."[803] Gibson argues that "classical ethical criticism has always understood narratives and criticism alike as involved in this movement. The ethical position always exists beyond or on a different plane to its object."[804] Critics such as Parker and Booth and philosophers such as Nussbaum perform radical surpassing when they see ethics as made up of "certain uniform characteristics or consistent features."[805] Seeking clarity and distinction," ethics "relies on or produces determinations"; therefore, "it shrinks from imagining that there might be an ethical dimension to the indeterminable itself."[806] For Gibson, ethics should be able to "allow for radical difference, heterogeneity, the thought of the incommensurable."[807]

In Levinas's philosophy, Gibson finds a solid base to perform such ethics, and he lists the following reasons for turning to Levinas's ethics:

It does not proceed on the basis of or in the hope of establishing a secular, objective, universal morality on securely rational foundations. Second, it does not give primacy to cognition. In Levinas's now famous phrase, the ethical relation is the first relation. Ethics is not a question of knowledge. It does not consist in a resort to categories, principles or codes that are assumed to be knowable prior to the ethical relation, prior to the immediate encounter with what is outside us. Third, Levinas's ethics is non-ontological. To think ethically is to think "otherwise than being." The ethical relation does not presume an exteriority comprehensible in terms of hypostasized essences, static identities or wholes. Fourth, the ethical relation is always both immediate and singular, a question of responsiveness and responsibility to what is at hand. […] Fifth and

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[802] Gibson, p.16.
[803] Gibson, p.11.
[804] Gibson, p.11.
[805] Gibson, pp.10-11.
[806] Gibson, p.11.
[807] Gibson, p.11.

> *last for now, the ethical relation is not only non-cognitive. It cuts radically across what Levinas calls the naïve, arbitrary, spontaneous dogmatism of the self which insists on reducing exteriority to the terms of cognition.*[808]

According to Gibson, we could see Levinas's ethics as the "disenchantment of subjectivity."[809] First, we could look at what "disenchantment of subjectivity" means, and after that look at how Gibson uses it to deploy an ethics of narration. "Disenchantment of subjectivity" is easy to confuse with the postmodernist subject(ivity) that dissolves amongst a myriad identities. The Levinasian "disenchantment of subjectivity" implies the necessary incompleteness of selfhood and its multiplication with every encounter with the other.[810] In Wayne Booth, we have observed a similar multiplication, enrichment of the self through its encounters with other selves through reading stories/novels. In Levinas, we find a solid theoretical basis on this matter.

For Levinas, the other that we encounter is present to us always in the same manner: the other is "always radically in excess of what my ego, cognitive powers, consciousness or intuitions would make of her or him. The other always and definitively overflows the frame in which I would seek to enclose the other."[811] This overflowing in effect verifies a malfunctioning, some essential problem with "the frame" that one has devised in dealing with the world: the more one imposes an identity on the other, the more the other escapes all one's references and vantage points of understanding: "My self-assertiveness—my confident trust in my terms of reference—amounts to an imposition of force and, as such, is unethical. What lies outside me neither asks for, requires, not justifies such an imposition."[812]

The ideal response to the other, for Levinas, would be saying "Here I am" where "the will to know the other or to approach the other in terms of knowledge becomes responsiveness to and responsibility for the other."[813] The ego is deposed, gives up its drive to sovereignty and enters into ethics, into social relationship, dialogue, disinterestedness."[814] Here, what is disenchanted is not "the subject's

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[808] Gibson, pp.16-17.
[809] Gibson, p.26.
[810] Gibson, p.38.
[811] Gibson, p.25.
[812] Gibson, p.25.
[813] Gibson, p.25.
[814] Gibson, p.25.

expectations" with the world that refuses to conform to, or confirm those expectations but rather "a disenchantment of the self that seeks to contain the world within its perspectives."[815]

For Gibson, the ethics of narration works in the same manner. What is crucial here is to go beyond the belief that in narration "a subject takes another, others, the world as the object or objects of knowledge and claims possession of them."[816] Finding this a rather reductive view, Gibson suggests that we realize "a range of distinctions" that narration includes/possesses such as language games, genres of discourse, representation, analysis, judgment.[817] "The ethical question raises itself in different terms in each case."[818] Gibson explains,

> *formal distinctions between narratives or modes of narrative are not merely formalist. They do not describe a given narrative form as simply a reflection or embodiment of an ethics primarily found elsewhere in the narrative text, though this was how a whole Anglo-American tradition of novel criticism as represented by—say—Barbara Hardy and Wayne Booth understood distinctions between modes of narration. Rather, 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. Thus ethical distinctions would be involved, for example, in differentiations between more or less 'omniscient' narrators; between an 'omniscient' third person narrator and one who professes only a limited or partial knowledge of the world narrated; between a third person narrator-character who is absent from the world narrated and one who is a character in the story he or she tells. Each of these distinctions – distinctions between what is apparently known and what is presented as beyond the frame of narratorial knowledge–has an ethical dimension. Indeed, the relevant distinction ultimately expresses the ethics of the text in question.*[819]

In Gibson's opinion, "one of the responsibilities of a postmodern ethics is to resist all reductions of ethics to questions of stable identities."[820] He builds this argument against stable identities through Levinas's notions of *evasion* and *excendance*: in *On Escape* (1935), Levinas defines the self as always en route to escape from itself because the self is the greatest limitation to our being—being is confined to the boundaries the self erects to isolate itself from the exterior world and

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[815] Gibson, p.25.
[816] Gibson, p.26.
[817] Gibson, p.26.
[818] Gibson, p.29.
[819] Gibson, p.26.
[820] Gibson, p.78.

other selves. Without a specific purpose, the self tries to escape these boundaries and limitations through a feeling that Levinas calls *excendance.* Gibson's explains,

> Excendance *is the spontaneous* and immediate *desire to escape the limits of the self, a desire generated as those limits are experienced in their narrowness, even their sheer absurdity. It is thus a principle of unease within and inseparable from the self that is of a different order to being and more profound than it. Evasion is the ethical impulse towards or openness to the other that affects a release from the confinements of the self.*[821]

Excendance is essentially ethical because in charting the self's flight from itself, it defines identity not as one that depends on clearly demarcated boundaries, definitively described and established but rather as something possible to collapse and capable of escaping toward the other to avoid the burden of stable definitions. Ethics, in this sense, is a movement toward the other: "An ethical priority emerges, not as my knowledge dominates the other, but as the moral height of the other dominates me and all the terms—being, essence, identity, principle, the same—in which I would seek to encompass her or him."[822] For Gibson, ethics of narrative could look at whether "Narrative veers toward and threatens to incorporate the other which it narrates, as though it could only have set out to narrate the other in the first place because the other was always part of it from the start."[823] He talks about postmodern ethics and by that he means the way a novel may manage to "destabilize and confound […] familiar narrative categories," to "deconstruct" their statuses as "mode[s] of knowledge," open them up to "[a]lterity they appear to exclude."[824] "Narrative becomes an ethical evasion of or a resistance to the reductions of" gender, identity etc.[825] "Within postmodernity," Gibson explains,

> *[q]uestions of narratives as modes of knowledge, better, as expressions, even simulacra of modes of knowledge; questions of what is "known" in a given narrative, who by, about whom or what, from what perspective, articulated in what terms, qualified in what manner, all appear as questions with an ethical bearing. That bearing was largely ignored by a modern theory and criticism of the novel which simply took for granted the meaning and point of terms like "omniscience," "focalization," "reliability," or "unreliability" in narration, and so on, as if, at some level, at least, it were self-evident that a stratum of objectivity or given truth could be attributed to a novel; as if questions of prior determination and therefore of the reduction of an exteriority were not involved.*

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[821] Gibson, p.37.
[822] Gibson, p.57.
[823] Gibson, p.47.
[824] Gibson, p.50.
[825] Gibson, p.50.

> *This indifference to the epistemological question in its full scope, along with an indifference to the implications of the linguistic turn for the novel theory, were what marked out modern criticism of fiction as specifically modern.*[826]

Another aspect in Gibson's distinction of postmodern and modern theories of fiction concerns "the assumption that, in fiction, ethics and representation are inseparable" therefore robbing a novel of its capacity "to have an ethical dimension outside its mimetic project."[827] "In effect," Gibson writes, "ethics always appears in a relation between two planes: the plane on which representation takes place, whether understood as the author's, narrator's, reader's or culture's, or a mixture of them; and the plane of the represented."[828] Gibson suggests we consider "the ethical interinvolvement of representation and anti-representationalism, to locate an ethics in their complex interdependences, their engagements, collusions, struggles with one another."[829] Gibson refers to the concept of unified work and suggests that the ethics he proposes "raises questions for modes of reading fiction that assume an original and fundamental unity to the text. […] The assumption of the unity of the text has ethical consequences. By the same token, so does the effort to prise such unity apart."[830] In words that echo Jeffrey Karnikcy that we shall turn in a moment, Gibson argues,

> *[t]he ethical significance of the novel would then lie in its function, not as a form of unitary cognition, but as a form which works radically to surpass and, indeed, dissolve any given set of cognitive horizons. […] My ethical model for the text, then, is not one in which particularities are embodiments or illustrations of a stable, pre-existing ground or system, of prior values or principles, but one in which the movement onwards of the text, what Bakhtin calls its "eternal unfinishedness," the unlimited multiplicity at work within it, is of cardinal importance.*[831]

In separating the novel's thematic unity from the moral vision the novel offers, Gibson makes it possible to approach postmodernist works without the assumption of these works' inherent moral flaw by way of style. Indeed, as Jeffrey Karnikcy argues below, the expectation of unity may corrupt the reading experience.

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[826] Gibson, p.54.
[827] Gibson, p.54.
[828] Gibson, pp.54-55.
[829] Gibson, p.55.
[830] Gibson, p.91.
[831] Gibson, p.91.

In concluding this section, hence Chapter One, it would be helpful to observe a theorization of contemporary literature with an eye to ethical criticism. In *Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture* (2007), Jeffrey Karnicky makes an assessment that merges the two different literary trends Chapter One has so far attempted to bring together as the most visible frameworks for an analysis of contemporary American literature. One notable aspect of Karnicky's view is that he refrains from joining the debate(s) on the trajectory of postmodernism and resists looking at it through the lens of epochal shifts which the first part of the chapter discussed. In fact, he argues that "[a]s criticism gets caught up in this postmodernism debate, it leaves little room for a discussion of reading."[832] The importance he bestows on reading comprises the other significant feature of his argument. Karnicky hopes to establish "a rigorous conception of reading" based first on the ethical dimension of the reader's response and second on criticism's acknowledgement of the "ethical register" of contemporary fiction.[833] In this way, he hopes to "reconfigure" contemporary literary criticism so that it may respond more adequately to the ethical "concerns" of contemporary fiction and see that its "ethical component" has "everyday relevance."[834] Therefore, ending the present chapter with Karnicky's particular argument will help envision how contemporary literature may be understood through the lens of ethical literary criticism, through an "ethical register" focused on "how a reader might engage with the otherness produced by and in literary texts."[835]

Karnicky analyzes the ethical elements in Susan Daitch's short story "Killer Whales" (1996), David Markson's novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1995), Richard Powers's novels *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), *Galatea 2.2* (1995), *Plowing the Dark* (2000), and David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* (1996). More or less, and rightly or wrongly, all these works have been gathered under the rubric of postmodernism. It is possible to say that Karnicky reads these works against the grain of the conventions of postmodern literary criticism. In the works of these writers, Karnicky finds representations of life that reveal "neither expressions of a

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[832] Jeffrey Karnicky, **Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture**, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, p.19.
[833] Karnicky, pp.3, 24.
[834] Karnicky, pp.23, 1, 167.
[835] Karnicky, p.24.

complex reality nor symptoms of a disjointed society" as most criticism suggests.[836] He explains that

> *while writers such as Susan Daitch or David Markson might create fragmentary narratives full of miscommunication and disconnection, I claim that they are not simply reflecting a fragmentary contemporary world full of miscommunication and disconnection. Likewise, while Richard Powers's characters often fail to complete goals or to have meaningful human interactions, I do not view these "failures" as reflections of the human condition in the twenty-first century. David Foster Wallace's [...] characters never "self-actualize" or "come to terms" with inner conflicts, and […]* Infinite Jest*, after a thousand pages, doubles back on itself instead of reaching a resolution. I do not consider these works as fragments of a missing unity. The breakdowns and impasses that populate these works of fiction are "ill-formed" and "incomplete," in that they are neither expressions of a complex reality nor symptoms of a disjointed society. Reading these writers does not lead toward a "useful and satisfying" account of the world.*[837]

The underlying criticism in this account regards "[t]he discipline of literary criticism, and particularly postmodern literary criticism," which "has naturalized understanding and meaning as the reasons for reading."[838] Although he admits that "much contemporary fiction frustrates the kind of reading that would seek a complete understanding of a text," the goal of reading should not be limited to comprehension and meaning. He tells that in teaching, he tries to prevent his students from seeing literary works as "puzzles waiting for a good reader to solve them by unity and understanding" and tries to show that postmodern narrative "is not simply a reflection of a disjunctive, fragmentary world."[839] For him, "[n]ot knowing where a reading is going is not a reason to cut off that reading. In fact, reading without a goal of saying what a text means is a key component of an ethics of reading."[840] Furthermore, writing "is not a means of understanding or describing the world. […] Writing does not transcribe the writer's lived experience; a written text does not serve as a touchstone of experience or as a fixed entity that gives an unchanging vantage point from which to understand the world."[841] In other words, it is not possible to find a clear, understandable version of life in fiction to be shared by every reader: "No reading can ever be a final reading. And this inability to produce a final

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[836] Karnicky, p.23.
[837] Karnicky, p.22.
[838] Karnicky, p.19.
[839] Karnicky, p.166.
[840] Karnicky, p.172.
[841] Karnicky, p.39.

reading, to fully understand what is being read, is not a failure of reading. It is reading's very possibility. Reading never stops responding. Reading's work is never done. Reading always remains open to a future encounter."[842]

There is also a problem with the way postmodern literature is characterized: "as postmodern literature is viewed as fragmentary and open ended, it is also seen as a reflection of a totalizable, knowable world."[843] Here, Karnicky sounds critical of the idea of representation; he seems to mean that postmodern literature is criticized on mimetic assumptions that foster a mode of representation that seeks truthful presentation of a "postmodern reality" which is considered "an object of knowledge constituted by its incompleteness."[844] However, the purpose of reading should not be to reach "a 'useful and satisfying' account of the world."[845] The "attempt to reconcile" novels with some "contemporary reality" is dangerous in the sense that it denies literature the possibility of "an alteration of reality" in the mode of questioning it or creating new ways of experiencing it.[846] Besides, the problems concerning what we mean by reading, meaning, representation, and subjectivity are not merely related to some difficulties within postmodern literary criticism. We also need to take into account further problems in theories of literature since the 1980s and 1990s such as reader-response criticism and deconstruction.

To begin, we may note some factors that have relegated reading's importance since the 1980s. Karnicky writes,

> *as focus shifted from literature to theory—and theory can be defined here as the study of the production of subjectivities—reading first became a subject of an intense theoretical debate that eventually dissipated so much that* reading *is no longer considered a useful term. Reading, as a site of theoretical investigation, now seems hopelessly retrograde at best, and politically naïve at worst. For many, reading has come to serve as a synonym for a kind of close textual attention that is oblivious to the social, historical, and material conditions of literary production. In short, reading is no longer hip. Worse, mentions of such concepts as "response" and "ethics of reading" may throw up warning signs for many a reader fearful of a nostalgic return to such 1980s horrors as asymmetrical haircuts and "reader-response" criticism.*[847]

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[842] Karnicky, p.49.
[843] Karnicky, p.21.
[844] Karnicky, p.21.
[845] Karnicky, p.23.
[846] Karnicky, p.23.
[847] Karnicky, p.1.

In fact, as Karnicky demonstrates, reader-response criticism has been surprisingly effective in displacing the importance of the reader's response in theories of reading. Beginning as an opposition to New Criticism's search for meaning in and through textual context, reader-response criticism has turned to the external factors that inform the reader's response to a text. Every reader belongs to an interpretive community and each readerly response is analyzed in accord with the habits of interpretation, social conventions, cultural ideas the community bestows upon an individual reader. In this way, readers owe the meaning they find, the way they respond to a text to the interpretive communities to which they belong.

Karnicky takes reader-response criticism to task for transforming "the line that moves from the text to reader to interpretive community" into "a line of *proliferation* and *expansion*" where "more accounting leads to more and more meanings."[848] Evidently, reader-response criticism limits meaning to that available in any given community as each reader follows the dictates of their interpretive communities. For him, conversely, reading comprises the reader's infinite responses to a text and these responses cannot be limited to external factors.[849] Furthermore, where both the reader and the meaning he or she can produce are restricted to a particular community, the self, or the reader as an individual fades away and "extratextual considerations" such as historical, political, and social concerns gain central importance.[850]

Karnicky considers "the shift" from New Criticism to reader-response criticism "a new area of inquiry" that establishes language as a power mechanism and "breaks literary theory wide open."[851] The "proliferation" takes place on another level; English Departments during the 1980s witness a proliferation of disciplines such as Marxism, feminism, and New Historicism.[852] Karnicky agrees with the fact that as reading "expands it range from text to context, [it] moves toward liberation and an understanding of the workings of power."[853] However, treating language merely as a mechanism of power turn reading into an analysis only of extratextual

[848] Karnicky, p.5.
[849] Karnicky, p.32.
[850] Karnicky, p.4.
[851] Karnicky, p.4.
[852] Karnicky, p.5.
[853] Karnicky, p.6.

factors and cancels out the reader along with his or her response to a text. "What remains unquestioned here is the seemingly commonsensical progress inherent in the movement from the textual to the extratextual."[854] This problem can also be observed in deconstruction's approach to the extratextual.

In Paul de Man's analysis of literary meaning, for instance, Karnicky finds a dead-end. In *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (1979), de Man argues that the habitual search for meaning drives the reader to reconcile the text with the context (or the inside with the outside), the historical with the local, and meaning with form. For him, the irreconcilable disjunction between these binaries makes not only reading and interpretation impossible but also renders the goal of comprehension an unethical act. De Man identifies the metaphor of literature as a box whose inside (meaning) can be revealed by an agent (reader or critic) to be the primal cause of the impossibility of reading. For him, only a questioning of this inside/outside metaphor would enable reading and he situates the ethics of reading in such questioning. According to Karnicky, "a de Manian ethical reading may never get past this kind of questioning" and can only "endlessly short-circui[t] interpretation."[855] If reader-response criticism proliferates and expands meaning, de Man's deconstructive reading offers "*involution* and *stoppage* leading toward a breakdown."[856] For Karnicky, ethical reading does not aim to interrupt interpretation by sabotaging it. It rather looks at the move from the text to the reader, from literature to life, from the self to the other and asserts that the possibility of this move is not through interpretation but through responding to otherness.

Karnicky follows a model of reading suggested by Gilles Deleuze in order to establish reading's necessary detachment from interpretation and its interest in otherness. In "Letter to a Harsh Critic," Deleuze defines two different ways of reading based on their attitudes toward the inside and outside of a text. The first type takes up the metaphor of literature as "a box with something inside and start[s] looking for what it signifies, and then if you're even more perverse or depraved you

[854] Karnicky, p.6.
[855] Karnicky, p.7.
[856] Karnicky, p.6.

set off after signifiers."[857] Questioning such imprisonment within language, unable to move from inside to outside, as if locked in textuality, Deleuze offers a second way of reading:

> *There is the other way: you see the book as a little non-signifying machine, and the only question is 'does it work, and how does it work?' […] This second way of reading's intensive: something comes through or it doesn't. There's nothing to explain, nothing to understand, nothing to interpret. It's like plugging into an electric circuit. […] This second way of reading's quite different from the first, because it relates a book directly to what's Outside. A book is a little cog in much more complicated external machinery.*[858]

The movement that defines reading, then, is the movement that "continually reformulat[es]" the connections between inside/outside, text/reader, literature/life.[859] In this way, the text and the world connect in unique ways, each of which is a separate instance of "plugging into an electric circuit," an unmappable reality to which literature offers unique connections with every work for us to connect with.

As mentioned earlier, Karnicky identifies similar impediments to a resourceful notion of reading in postmodern literary criticism. First, he complains that postmodern literary criticism has privileged meaning to the point of equating reading with the meaning a text offers. Many experimental, self-reflexive works have been deemed inaccessible if not unreadable in that they failed to offer meaning amid fragmentary narratives, multiple plot lines that never converge, characters whose inner lives remain unavailable to the reader, excessive allusiveness, and scientific language. When coupled with the importance given to understanding and meaning, the so-called inaccessibility and incoherency of contemporary writing may result in prejudices in readers and critics alike. For Karnicky, criticism should refrain from relying too much on narrative coherence because "considering a work only within a rarefied realm of contemplation removes the work from a space of response."[860]

Similarly, formal structure should not be the focus, either: "If a work of art is taken to inhabit an aesthetic space separated from the rest of the world, one cannot argue that the work has everyday relevance, let alone an ethical component"[861] For instance, he argues that excessively allusive texts replete with references may be read

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[857] Gilles Deleuze, "Letter to a Harsh Critic", **Negotiations**, p.8 quoted in Karnicky, pp.13-14.
[858] Karnicky, p.14.
[859] Karnicky, p.14.
[860] Karnicky, p.167.
[861] Karnicky, p.167.

by readers who are aware of the references and those who are not. He thinks that efforts at interpreting the references and discussing what they symbolize "may be more of a misreading than one that simply misses the reference altogether."[862]

On the matter of fragmentary narratives, Karnicky looks at David Foster Wallace whose works often produce moments of what Karnicky calls "asignifying stasis."[863] By "asignifying stasis," Karnicky means parts, or fragments of plot whose narrations "continually stop and start," "move in multiple directions at the same time."[864] Analyzing each fragment on its own, and within the limit of its fragmentary narration, Karnicky argues that what happens in that fragment discontinues after it picks up later and that this is intentional. In this way, Karnicky challenges the critical reception of *Infinite Jest*'s fragmentary narrative. In "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*" (1999), Katherine Hayles argues that we can enter Wallace's fragmentary and episodic novel starting from any of the narrative threads since everything eventually connects with everything else. In protest, Karnicky asks, "if no point is any more relevant than another, and if all points are going to lead to the same place, how does one make any sort of decision whatsoever about where to start?"[865] Against Hayles' notion of the "arbitrary" starting points, Karnicky suggests Deleuze and Guattari's notion of multiple points of entry in narratives. In *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), Deleuze and Guattari write that we can enter Kafka's work "by any point whatsoever; none matters any more than another […] We will be trying only to discover what other points our entrance connects to […] and how the map is modified if one enters by another point."[866] Karnicky applies this principle of multiple entrances to *Infinite Jest* and considers the novel another testament to the opportunities offered by ethical reading. "One starting point will not inevitably lead to the same end as any other" and "no starting point can produce a complete understanding of a work, an interpretation that will unify a work and say what it means."[867]

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[862] Karnicky, p.48.
[863] Karnicky, p.93.
[864] Karnicky, p.93.
[865] Karnicky, p.92.
[866] Karnicky, p.92.
[867] Karnicky, p.93.

"Creation" may be the key word in Karnicky's approach to postmodern literature. He traces the importance of creation in both reading and writing. Reading is mostly considered the reader's "solitary encounter" with a text where he or she forms "forms a one-to-one connection with a fictionalized self."[868] Dismissing such a simplification, Karnicky argues that "the connections forged to otherness through reading are complex and varying, and difficult to comprehend or map out. Reading, as the act of making these connections, can be considered as both a creative and an ethical practice."[869] With regard to the ethics of creation in responding to otherness, Karnicky refers to Guattari's notion of engagement with art in *Chaosmosis* (1995). For Guattari, engagement with a work of art (a novel, a musical piece, a film) is activity that may recreate, reinvent the subject. "Engaging with a work, for Guattari, is not an intellectual exercise in which one briefly imagines being other; rather, reading actively creates new ways of living in the world."[870] The acts that lead to ethical reading are "creation, recreation, and reinvention."[871] Karnicky also believes that writing "works not as a representation of the world, but as a kind of creation."[872] In his opinion, contemporary fiction does not so much try to reflect or criticize contemporary reality as offering "new configurations of subjectivity, new ways of life."[873]

Against criticism's assumptions of communication, for example, Karnicky notes how David Markson's novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1995) works out an engagement with the world. Kate, the narrator, is the last person on earth. She spends her days taking notes in her notebook so that she can keep contact with the world she has lost. These notes comprise what she remembers of her life; bits and pieces from books she has read and from stories she has heard people tell. Each note tries to establish some connection to something else. For Karnicky, her engagement with the world is important in the sense that it "move[s] beyond the solipsism of the curator who seeks to order what is inside one's head so that it can be defined, centered, controlled, and thus communicated":

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[868] Karnicky, p.15.
[869] Karnicky, p.15.
[870] Karnicky, p.17.
[871] Karnicky, p.17.
[872] Karnicky, p.23.
[873] Karnicky, p.23.

> *Kate employs many strategies in her writing encounter with the world. In her failed attempts to act as the world's curator, she responds o the "cultural baggage" in her head in myriad ways. She remembers, forgets, imagines, reconfigures, ignores, denies, and tries to figure out. But she never tries to understand; she never catalogs in search of mastery. She follows her thoughts from here to there. She responds to the world and to her memory of the world. She cannot help but create new connections. She can never silence or completely order the assemblage in her head. But her thoughts continually lead her on.*
>
> *Her writings on the classics of art and literature rarely, if ever, attempt to understand or say what a certain text might mean. Her responses cannot be anticipated by the contents of the works she responds to. Kate shows that texts cannot contain their responses. A written work can only call for a response; it can never dictate what that response will be.*[874]

In Kate's responses to texts, Karnicky finds the ethics of reading: in answering the text's call for a response, a reader will form his or her unique responses which will "irretrievably affec[t] the 'I' who is responding."[875] Every time we read, we listen to a distinct voice and our ability and willingness to hear what that voice is telling will tell us as much about that voice as our ability to respond to it.

In light of Karnicky's suggestions, it is possible to say that if the ideal meaning of reading is freedom from fixation on finding meaning, Karnicky's ethical evaluation of contemporary fiction seems to offer us a very good opportunity to do so. He distinguishes contemporary writing on the basis of its lack of a compulsive search for meaning. Following this, he posits an ethics of reading that refuses to treat a literary work as the locus of hidden meaning(s) and truth(s) awaiting discovery by the reader, or, as a refusal to impose a unified meaning on a text. For him, "writing is not a one-way communicative street to reading; writers do not present the world to readers to be interpreted. Reading is not solving a puzzle."[876] Liberating the reader from the chores of detection, Karnicky urges her to focus on her responses because at the core of ethical reading lie the response a reader gives to a text, the ethical dimension of the response, and the effects this response produces in the world. Reading, in this formula, can also be called "an ethics of response" because reading a text, first and foremost of all, is an engagement with other forms, logics, and ideas of

[874] Karnicky, p.55.
[875] Karnicky, p.55.
[876] Karnicky, p.38.

life, subjectivities, and realities.[877] The question to ask when we read, therefore, should be "[w]hat kind of a relationship to otherness does reading produce?"[878] If we can find answers to this question, we may read ethically.

In concluding this part, hence Chapter One, we could say that contemporary literary criticism is preoccupied, on the on hand, with defining the current literary scene through reconfiguring postmodernism's relation to realism and understanding the circumstances and consequences of its possible demise. On the other hand, contemporary literary criticism is preoccupied with the ethical's, or ethic's, forceful presence in thinking about literature, which force creates a whirlwind that brings together an unlikely diversity of critics, from deconstructionists to humanists and to moral philosophers. The lack of resolutions in both sets of endeavors attests to a lively conversation that will continue to grow and perhaps re-define itself in the coming years. In the following chapters, this study will attempt to join this ongoing conversation and besides discussing fiction, will emphasize the importance of creative nonfiction whose curious lack from the above discussions delays a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary literature.

[877] Karnicky, p.1
[878] Karnicky, p.12.

CHAPTER TWO: NEW-INTELLECTUALISM AND THE ETHICAL REDEFINITION OF NONFICTION

2.1. HISTORICAL RECONSIDERATIONS OF HUMAN NATURE

"Anybody who thinks and cares about the world bears an urgent necessity to construct a moral calculus."[879]

The effort to understand truth in its moral as well as historical dimension marks the following discussion of two novelists who have turned to nonfiction in their attempts to understand certain historical events and actions. Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of History* (2008) and William T. Vollmann's *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means* (2004) are the subject matter of the present part. While Baker turns specifically to the tumultuous years that have brought about World War II and invites us to rethink about the so-called "good" and "necessary" war in light of the historical data he provides, Vollmann carries out a comprehensive inquiry into the human potential for violence in landmark events in the history of mankind's propensity for cruelty.

These two works of nonfiction seem to be important in at least three senses. First of all, both Nicholson Baker and William T. Vollmann epitomize the distinctly responsible voice of the author—historically conscious, morally accountable in the representation in history—after the so-called moral relativism of postmodernism. As Vollmann writes, "[i]f we cannot situate ourselves in history, if we cannot match ourselves against our moral peers now dead and gone, what good is history?"[880] In this sense, these works signal the emergence of a new mode(l) of historical narrative: anecdotal and philosophical, non-fiction historiography that believes in the accurate representation of history by way of ethical treatment of historical data, thereby making it possible to break down metanarratives shaping our outlook on history, and human nature. These metanarratives may be the writing of history as we know it;

[879] Vollmann, Rising, p.536.
[880] Vollmann, Rising, p.46.

mediated, or filtered through the meaning-granting intervention of the history writer. They may, however, as well be the by now common problematization of historiographic metafiction; we can indeed reach the past through its textual traces and understand them in their unadorned factuality: history can be presented accurately.

Second, it is significant that they have in this way turned to nonfiction in their historical investigations. Vollmann, of course, stands out both among his contemporaries and ancestors with regard to the scope and ambition of his perspective on the relationship between history and literature. His book under scrutiny in this part is an abridged version of a seven-volume, twenty-year effort at understanding the moral basis of human violence. Furthermore, in his historical novels project called *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscape*, he explores the history of North America which is fraught with most genocidal and destructive wars inflicted by the continent's various colonizers on the native populations. In privileging nonfiction over fiction—without of course dismissing fiction's role in the process—and using it as a medium for ethical and philosophical understanding of history, Baker and Vollmann seem to offer new possibilities for literature's complicated relationship with history.

Third, ethics comprises the framework in their approach to historical narrative. Both books demonstrate non-fiction's ethical commitment to understanding the human in all its complexity and to the responsibility of writing about it; they both focus on motives and contexts of violent acts. While *Human Smoke* re-discovers World War II, *Rising Up and Rising Down* focuses on a myriad of examples without time and space constraints. Both books problematize the ultimate knowledge of past events. As Vollmann argues, "old and 'settled' data" is covered with dust "to the point of blurring its truth," and it seems fair that literature should attempt at lifting up that dust.[881] These authors invite us to join them in their passionate search for moral truth. Their sincere explorations of most vulnerable and morally debatable questions charm the reader immensely in their honest, curious, and sincere efforts to communicate what they think with the reader. Both Baker and Vollmann, as we read these books, become the writer-friends the reader seeks: "He

[881] Vollmann, Rising, p.36.

wins my friendship, as my real friends do, by offering a distinctive, engaging way of being together, one of the possible ways of addressing a world of conflicting values."[882] It is indeed a world of conflicting values, a world that becomes conflicted by way of its truths, their accurate representation, and the reader is invited by the writer to address it together.

2.1.1. Ethics of Documentation in Nicholson Baker's *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization*

Among Nicholson Baker's works of non-fiction, *Human Smoke* holds a different place. Of course, it would be possible to study Baker's nonfiction in related pairs; *Size of Thoughts* (1996) and *The Way the World Works* (2012) may be consigned as essays, and, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (2001) and *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (2008) can be differentiated as works that pertain to investigative documentation and argumentation of a wider scope that refines the form of the essay by way of cross-pollination. However, it would be more reasonable to treat *Double Fold* and *Human Smoke* separately because they seem to mark different possibilities within the contemporary ethical endeavor of non-fiction, that is, respectively, the ethics of representing or documenting history, and journalistic investigations, *a la* muckrakers of the nineteenth-century, of destructive facts that evade public awareness.

As its title indicates, *Human Smoke* is about World War II, and it makes a certain claim in accord with the war's atrocity and calls it the end of civilization as we know it. The *human smoke* of the title is a remark by Franz Halder, a general of Hitler's, who "told an interrogator that when he was imprisoned in Auschwitz late in the war he saw flakes of smoke blow into his cell. Human smoke, he called it."[883] As we read Baker's book, unknown, or ignored details about the war enter our consciousness with such a certain force, such compelling urgency that each detail about the war bears the incomprehensible weight of the possibility of human flesh turned to ash, hanging midair, becoming the air we breathe. In addition, the British

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[882] Booth, Company, p.216.
[883] Nicholson Baker, **Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization**, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2008, (Smoke), p.474.

and American pacifists of the war to whom Baker dedicates his book, loom large in our imaginations in the futility of their heroism and humanity. "They tried to save Jewish refugees," Baker writes, "feed Europe, reconcile the United States and Japan, and stop the war from happening. They failed, but they were right."[884] Yet "[t]hey've never really gotten their due."[885] In claiming the war to be the end of civilization, Baker too is a pacifist who believes in war's purposeless, preventable yet full degradation of human life. The true test of humanity, of being human, in Baker's account, is the sum total of our moral evaluation of war. Or, as Eva Hermann, who was imprisoned for helping Jews, claimed, she "simply tried to remain human in the midst of inhumanity."[886] Reading *Human Smoke*, we are called upon to test our humanity.

It would be greatly unjust to define *Human Smoke* according to its subject matter and thus taper its efforts at revealing the underlying reasons of the war's terminating effect on civilization. What distinguishes *Human Smoke* in achieving that sense is the ingenious style Baker employs. The book comprises of textual traces of the past which are presented in episodic chronological order. We read, mostly in very short paragraphs, published or uttered remarks taken from newspapers, diaries, public speech, radio broadcasts, memoirs, biographies. None of these remarks—provided within quotation marks—lacks a source. Baker offers a meticulous fifty-page *Notes* section for the sources of all his quotations, as well as a twenty-five page *References* section of sources for his assemblage of fragmentary paragraphs that border on five hundred pages.

Baker writes in his Afterword to *Human Smoke* that on the day the book ends, December 31, 1941, "[m]ost of the people who died in the Second World War were at that moment still alive."[887] "Was it a 'good war'?" Baker asks, "[d]id waging it help anyone who needed help?"[888] These questions that guide him leave the reader greatly confused at the end of the book. First of all, the first-hand experiences that chronicle the build-up of the war confound our usual moral categories. One

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[884] Baker, Smoke, p.474.
[885] Baker, Smoke, p.474.
[886] Eva Hermann quoted in Nicholson Baker, **The Way the World Works: Essays**, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2012, (The Way), p.251.
[887] Baker, Smoke, p.473.
[888] Baker, Smoke, p.473.

unavoidably wonders whether it is possible to have distinct categories, in times of war, regarding heroes, villains, or, is 'victims' the only category possible? Alternatively, is war nothing but the blurring of the boundaries between such moral terms as 'just' and 'unjust,' 'good' and 'evil,' 'victim' and 'perpetrator'? Because, after all, what can one know about war, having not experienced it first-hand? Once we gain access to the accounts of first-hand experiences, however, what can one still know about war, having read them? This is one of the problematizations the book raises.

In this sense, *Human Smoke* is very unusual in its attempt at historical writing. What really happened during World War II? How can it be (re)presented? Has this not been a great challenge for literature, especially after the events proved themselves unrepresentable, as postmodernism insisted? For Baker, the past can be understood and (re)presented accurately by looking at it through unnarrated, non-storied textual traces of the war in the accounts of first-hand experiences. Yet the problem may not after all be so much about representing history; he spends considerably long time at the archives, diligently collects accounts of first-hand experiences, and collects them episodically in a book. This crude simplification is ripe for consideration because it is Baker's genius that achieves incredible impact by such a stylistic treatment of historical material. Therefore, the problem seems to be more about how *we* are presented history: who makes meaning out of the tiny parts of the details of the past? Who turns the past into story, hence history? Who, as an agent of creating meaning, is responsible?

Commenting on the episodic style of *Human Smoke*, which re-enacts his trademark focus on minutia that we shall observe on discussions of his fiction in Chapter Three, Nicholson Baker explains,

> *[i]t helps sometimes to look at an action—compassionate, murderous, confessional, obfuscatory—out of context: as something that somebody did one day. The one-day-ness of history is often lost in traditional histories, because paragraphs and sections are organized by theme: attack, counterattack, argument, counterargument. That's a reasonable way to proceed, but I rejected it [in* Human Smoke*] for several reasons. First, because it fails to convey the hugeness and confusion of the time as it was experienced by people who lived through it. And, second, because I wanted the reader to have to form, and then jettison, and then re-form, explanations and mini-narratives along the way—as I did, and as did a newspaper reader in, say, New York City in September, 1941. I think the pared-down, episodic style allowed me to offer some moments of truth that I wouldn't have been able to offer had I had uppermost in my mind*

> *the necessity of making transitions and smoothing out inconsistencies and sounding like me. I offer no organized argument: I want above all to fill the readers' mind with an anguished sense of what happened.*[889]

The formal importance of collage-like history, could be, then, the re-constructing, or perhaps the de-constructing of a historical event beyond the version(s) we are familiar with. There is a disrupted continuity throughout the fragments as topics catch up in later pages, or one fact foreshadows another, or refutes it retrospectively. Therefore, the fragments are not assembled in disorder: it is in their fragmentary, seemingly disorganized sequence that we get a deeper sense of their significance, relationship to other events.

Human Smoke begins in August 1892 and ends on New Year's Eve 1941. In the four-sentence paragraph of the first fragment, we are told what Alfred Nobel, who sells "explosives," remarks to his anti-war friend that has just returned from a "World's Peace Conference."[890] Adamantly hopeful, Nobel states, "[p]erhaps my factories will put an end to war even sooner than your congress. […] On the day when two army corps may mutually annihilate each other in a second, probably all civilized nations will recoil with horror and disband their troops."[891] Baker borrows Nobel's remarks from the memoir of Nobel's friend, the very the addressee of those words. The second fragment moves forward in time to 1914. The setting is a movie theater in France, and Germany's emperor appears on the screen for split second. The intensity as well as the pointlessness of the audience's immediate protest confounds the famous Viennese writer Stefan Zweig. Baker quotes from Zweig's 1964 memoir, *The World of Yesterday*, in which Zweig blames the media for inculcating negative sentiments in public.

These first subsequent fragments more or less set the tone for the whole book. As the author, Baker is visible throughout the book with his particular selection and merging of fragments, yet other than this, he completely disappears behind the many voices he lets us hear. There is little narratorial intrusion other than Baker's framing the quotations with simple stamps of date, setting, and basic circumstances

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[889] Nicholson Baker, Interview by Amazon.com. "Interview with Nicholson Baker." **Amazon**, n.d., http: // www. amazon. Com / Human- Smoke- Beginnings- World- Civilization / dp / 1416572465, (02.01.2009), (Interview), n.pag.
[890] Baker, Smoke, p.1.
[891] Alfred Nobel quoted in Bertha von Suttner, **The Records of an Eventful Life**, Volume 1, Ginn, Boston, 1910, p.437 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.1.

surrounding the selected quote. The facts, intentions, declarations, hypocrisies, and promises we listen to in these quotations turn into voices that contradict and invalidate each other. Alfred Nobel may believe—almost a decade before even the First World War starts—in the hopefully discouraging atrocity of what he manufactures may cause. In hindsight, however, his expectations from civilization prove terribly, fatally wrong. The passion of the hateful uproars, their desire for redress, in a movie theater signal the fierceness of the battles to come. *Human Smoke* proceeds through the 1920s and 1930s and when it finally reaches 1941, we observe, to great distress, the magnificent pro-war and pro-armament arguments in tandem with anti-war sentiments and cries of pacificism across the world, especially in the U.S. and Britain.

There are very disturbing things to discover throughout the book that sometimes puts things uncomfortably directly and sharply. In the years leading up to 1941, we proceed slowly and observe how the leaders of the Allied Powers *prepare* for the war, with morally ambiguous, or questionable motivations. The Second World War is known to history as the good war that was necessitated by the crimes against the Jews and in general to stop Hitler. Yet perhaps not many of us know, perhaps because of lack of research or perhaps because of exclusions from history books, of both Eleanore and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's outspoken anti-Semitism. In 1918, when Roosevelt is working for the U.S. Navy, Mrs. Roosevelt expresses her preference "to be hung than seen at" a party whose guests comprise "[m]ostly Jews."[892] In 1922, the discomfort seems to persist:

> *Franklin Roosevelt, now a lawyer in New York City, noticed that Jews made up one-third of the freshman class at Harvard. He talked the problem over with Henry Morgenthau, Sr., and he went to the Harvard Board of Overseers, of which he was a member. "It was decided," Roosevelt later explained, "that over a period of years the number of Jews should be reduced one or two per cent a year until it was down to 15%." It was about 1922.*[893]

When we next see the couple twenty seven pages and eleven years later, Roosevelt is the president of the U. S. and he is being informed about the latest news from Germany: Jews, who have until recently been employed by large numbers in respectable positions (judges and lawyers, university professors, police force etc.) are

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[892] Eleanor Roosevelt quoted in Joseph P. Lash, **Eleanor and Franklin**, Norton, New York, 1971, p.214 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.4.
[893] Baker, Smoke, p.7.

expelled from their positions and replaced with Gentiles, which fact Roosevelt finds "extremely interesting."[894] In 1935, something interesting happens indeed.

Concerned with the increasing hostility toward Jewish citizens of Germany, many figures, through private efforts or organizations, seek ways to help them. In 1935, New York's Governor Herbert Lehman requests of Roosevelt, on behalf of German Jews, that the present quota of immigration for the Jews be doubled for their uncomplicated immigration to the U. S. "Roosevelt's stiff reply said that there was no immigration quota for 'persons in the class described'" and that visas were granted accordingly "'to natives of Germany'" as the current laws of the country permitted.[895] Lehman had demanded an increase to five thousand visas specifically reserved for German Jews because out of the annual twenty-five thousand visas for Germans, the U.S. had only granted twenty-five hundred to German Jews, that is, one tenth of the total number. Roosevelt seemed determined to continue with the same method.

In Baker's documentation, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor also acquires another, and a rather unpleasant, perspective. In 1934, Roosevelt uses funding from a New Deal program "to build thirty-two ships," visits Pearl Harbor, and praises "the efficiency and spirit of Hawaii's American military forces."[896] Both his visit and remarks create a strong sense of mistrust among Japanese officials who admit thinking that "a major disturbance is purposely being encouraged in the calm Pacific. This is greatly regretted."[897] In 1936, Japanese newspapers report, to their distaste, that China—their opponent—was borrowing loans from the U. S. in order to buy arms from the U. S.[898] When, in 1937, hundreds of American war pilots fly over China, Japan charges the U. S. with violating the American Neutrality Act.[899] Soon,

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[894] Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933, quoted in **Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs**, Volume 1, (Ed. Edgar B. Nixon), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969, pp.172-173 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.37.
[895] Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1935, quoted in **Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs**, Volume 3, (Ed. Edgar B. Nixon), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969, pp.64-66 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.59.
[896] Baker, Smoke, p.51.
[897] "The Japanese General Finds Us 'Insolent'", **New York Times**, 05.08.1934 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.51.
[898] "U.S. Loan to China Reported in Japan", **New York Times**, 21.07.1936 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.63.
[899] "Japan Disturbed by Report 182 Americans Have Enlisted to Fly Warplanes for China", **New York Times**, 06.08.1937 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.71.

Chinese war planes begin bombing Japanese vessels, and the Japanese respond by bombing Nanking, China.[900]

Baker documents the names of both U. S. and British factories, corporations, and individuals responsible for private arrangements in the sale of weaponry, aircraft, bomb, and tanks to Germany—besides China—in the 1930s. Although there is growing protest against Germany's armament, and propaganda for the armament of the U.S. itself, the sale nonetheless continues. In a tellingly paradoxical memorabilia from April 14, 1934, Baker writes,

> *H. C. Engelbrecht, author of* Merchants of Death*, a bestseller about arms dealers, spoke at a conference of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. "Armament is an industry that knows no politics, friends, right or wrong—but only customers," Engelbrecht said. "If you can pay, you can buy."*
>
> *The French arms company Schneider had recently sold four hundred tanks to Hitler's Germany, Engelbrecht observed. […] The Germans had also ordered sixty airplanes from Vickers, the British maker of bombers.*
>
> *"In every war," said Engelbrecht, "the armament maker who sells internationally is arming a potential enemy of his own country—and that, practically, if not legally, is treason."*[901]

It is quite distressing, then, to read a newspaper report dated May 1934, merely a month after the above claim of treason, on the successful commercial ventures of American war craft manufacturers in Berlin. The Boeing Corporation of Seattle is reported to have "sold three two-engine airplanes to Germany" as well as the building rights of these "admirable potential bombers" to the German BMW.[902] What is more, "[t]he Sperry Corporation, maker of bombsights and gyroscopic stabilizers," is reported to have made "a patent-sharing agreement with a German company, Askania."[903] In addition,

> *In Berlin, an American commercial attaché wrote that American manufacturers were selling Germany crankshafts, cylinder heads, control systems for anti-aircraft guns, and components sufficient to make about a hundred airplanes a months. There were, the attaché reported, orders outstanding to equip two thousand planes.*[904]

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[900] Baker, Smoke, p.77.
[901] Baker, Smoke, p.49.
[902] "Reich to be Armed in Air with Mighty Fleet by 1936", **New York Times**, 11.05.1934 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.53.
[903] Thomas Etzold, "The (F)utility Factor: German Information Gathering in the United States", **Military Affairs**, Volume:39, No:2, April 1975 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.53.
[904] Baker, Smoke, p.53.

If one heeds Engelbrecht's claims, it would be natural to expect both the Boeing and the Sperry Corporations to be charged with, and possibly imprisoned for, treason. However, this seems unlikely considering the official explanation for the sales:

> *The U. S. Government released its monthly statistical summary of licensed arms sales to foreign governments. Under the provisions of the Neutrality Act, all arms sales had to have the approval of the Munitions Control Board of the State Department.*
>
> *China was again, in February 1936, the largest purchaser of arms, followed by Chile, followed by Germany. China had bought airplanes, tanks, and ammunition. Germany bought "non-military" aircraft, revolvers, and ammunition.*[905]

Perhaps the most distressing facts concern the attempts to export the Jews from Germany and Poland in the mid-1930s, all of which proved futile for various reasons. In 1934, German secret police and intelligence services distinguish Zionist Jews who are willing to emigrate to Palestine from other Jews that wish to stay in Germany. At this date, Germany's policy regarding Jews is "the emigration of all Jews" and rendering economic survival impossible for those insisting on staying in Germany.[906] The German secret service even begins teaching Zionist Jews methods of agriculture to ensure their livelihood in Palestine. In 1937, Polish government insists that the country can only feed and employ one eight of the present population of Jews and asserts that the remainder, "'the surplus population,'" has to be deported to some other place—another country.[907] Poland carries out meetings with France to send Polish Jews to the French colony of Madagascar, Africa.[908] Due to the lack of enough land for habitation, the plan fails, yet the idea holds:

> *A reporter for the* New York Times *interviewed Alexander Cuza, an elderly minister in the Romanian government. Jews were the spawn of the devil, Cuza said; every Jew must leave Romania; there would be terrible pogroms if they didn't go. "It is for the world to find a residence for the world's Jews," Cuza said. "Madagascar seems a suitable spot." It was January 21, 1938.*[909]

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[905] Baker, Smoke, p.60.
[906] Francis R. Nicosia, "Zionism, Antisemitism, and the Origins of the Final Solution", **Reflections on the Holocaust: Festschrift for Raul Hilberg on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday,** (Eds. Wolfgang Mieder and David Scrase), Center for Holocaust Studies, Burlington, 2001, p.139 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.50.
[907] "Poles Renew Call for Exile of Jews", **New York Times**, 14.01.1937 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.66.
[908] Joseph Marcus, **Social and Political History of Jews in Poland, 1919-1939**, Mouton, Berlin, 1983 mentioned in Baker, Smoke, p.67.
[909] Baker, Smoke, p.79.

The Holocaust came a step closer in 1938. Representatives from the U. S. and Britain convened at a conference designed "to find a home for Jewish refugees."[910] American immigration quotas were declared to be far too generous; "England wasn't a 'country of immigration.'"[911] The headline of *Herald Tribune* of New York read, "Powers Slam Doors Against German Jews," while a German newspaper put it crudely, "Jews For Sale—Who Wants Them? No One."[912]

Two months after this failed conference of 1938, German soldiers began the violent expulsion of Jews to Poland. Yet another month after that, the most violent riot in world history took place: *Crystal Night*. The remaining Jews in German cities suffered unheard of brutalities, ones that equal the atrocities of the concentration camps.[913] In revolt, former president Herbert Hoover said, "[t]hese individuals are taking Germany back 450 years in civilization to Torquemada's expulsion of Jews from Spain."[914] In contrast, *Time* magazine observed the silence of Roosevelt and his officials in the face of events that "shocked an almost shockproof world with a display of deliberate and unprovoked mass cruelty."[915]

Roosevelt's first remarks come five days later at a press conference where he "was asked about the new Washington airport and about cherry trees. Then he read a short statement announcing that he was recalling the German ambassador and that public opinion had been 'deeply shocked.' He did not use the word 'Jews.'"[916] A reporter inquired the possibility of flexibility in the immigration limitations, and Roosevelt reminded the reporter—and the world, besides Jews—of the U. S. "quota system."[917] On the same day, a British newspaper reported that Jews were desperately pleading for visas at Berlin consulates of U. S. and Britain. Quotas were unchanged, yet Roosevelt declared that he would grant extensions to Germans already in the U.S. with temporary visas because sending them back to Germany

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[910] Baker, Smoke, p.89.
[911] Baker, Smoke, p.89.
[912] **Herald Tribune**, 08.07.1939 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.89; Rita Thalmann and Emmanuel Feinermann, **Crystal Night: 9-10 November 1938**, Holocaust Library, New York, 1980, p.22 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.89.
[913] Baker, Smoke, p.99.
[914] Herbert Hoover, **An American Epic**, Volume 4, Regnery, Chicago, 1964 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.100.
[915] **Time**, 21.11.1938 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.100.
[916] Baker, Smoke, p.101.
[917] Franklin D. Roosevelt, **The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt**, Volume:7, Russell and Russell, New York, 1938-1950, pp.597-598, quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.101.

would be, in his own words, wrong "from the point of view of humanity."[918] In 1939, when violent bombings by (and of) European countries begin, Roosevelt takes an unusually concerned stance and writes to the leaders of England, Germany, Italy, and Poland to stop "ruthless bombing from the air of civilians in unfortified centers of population" because it "sick[ens] the hearts of every civilized man and woman," because it is "inhuman barbarism" that will cost innumerable innocent lives.[919]

It should also be noted that as early as 1920, when Winston Churchill served as "secretary of state for war and air," he took severe measures for even as small a problem as suppressing tribal unrest in Iraq.[920] Ordering his commander in Iraq to "proceed with the experimental work on gas bombs, especially mustard gas, which would inflict punishment on recalcitrant natives without inflicting grave injury on them," Churchill was not only hiding his "expert [knowledge] on the effects of mustard gas—he knew that it could blind and kill, especially children and infants," but he was also testing the efficiency of the newly developed war tactic ("air control")— still in its "experimental" phase—that was to replace the more expensive troops with planes.[921] In 1937, a former officer who has served during these civilian bombings, becomes a pacifist and answers the following question he himself asks in the negative: "What is the difference between throwing 500 babies into a fire and throwing fire from aeroplanes on 500 babies?"[922]

At the beginning of 1939, faced with Roosevelt's determination on fixed immigration quota, a U. S. senator and representative "introduced a bill that would allow twenty thousand refugees under the age of fourteen to enter the United States, outside of the German quotas."[923] England had recently accepted a similar bill. Eleanor Roosevelt, "who had set aside her anti-Semitism," supported the bill immediately, but the president never approved it.[924] Instead, he wrote to Hitler and

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[918] Franklin D. Roosevelt, **The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt**, Volume:7, 1938-1950, Russell and Russell, New York, p.602 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.103.
[919] Franklin D. Roosevelt, **F.D.R. His Personal Letters, Volume:2, 1928-1945**, Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, New York, 1950, p.915 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.134.
[920] Baker, Smoke, p.7.
[921] Winston Churchill quoted in Martin Gilbert, **Winston S. Churchill,** Volume:4, Companion Volume:2, Heinemann, London, 1975-1986, p.1190 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.134.
[922] Captain Philip S. Mumford, 1937, quoted in H. C. Engelbrecht, **Revolt Against War**, Dodd, Mead, New York, 1937, pp.15-16 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.66.
[923] Baker, Smoke, p.115.
[924] Baker, Smoke, p.116.

urged that through "'pacific means of settlement, […] countless lives can yet be saved."[925] He seemed to mean the lives of soldiers in a growingly close war.

As these brief, unadorned facts demonstrate, *Human Smoke* may be seen as a colossal work of sadness and remembrance, an elegy to the human heart in its myriad forms of vice and virtue. Not only the subject matter but also its style is greatly important in achieving this effect: in a classic Bakerean approach, every detail gains immense importance, details that speak for themselves in their simplicity, in their unbelievable horror and tragedy. Every utterance matters, every word, in a sense, recaps the whole affair of the war. World War II and whatever it is that has caused it, are and indeed should be, as Baker intimates, a personal problem for every human being. In fact, being human makes them personal; every single human conscience has responsibility to think morally about war, both past wars and future ones to come, because as Baker demonstrates brilliantly, the human capacity, if not propensity, for war, atrocity, and self-righteous justification is dangerously strong. When we move on to next section's discussions on ethics and violence, Baker's vision will haunt us.

In "Why I'm a Pacifist," Nicholson Baker returns to the subject matter of *Human Smoke* and carries out a brilliant discussion of pacifism with regard to World War II as well as extending his argument over to include events after 1941, where *Human Smoke* ended. It is worth noting that the Allies' questionable concern of the Jews that *Human Smoke* reveals by way of documentation gains an explicit, if not outspoken, treatment in the essay. First, Baker tells that while watching a documentary on television, he became aware for the first time of Roosevelt's disinclination to extend visa quotas for the Jews. This awareness "permanently broke [his] trust in Franklin Roosevelt."[926] Another comment makes a severe challenge: the U. S. involvement in war had terrible consequences on Jews. In June 1942, "[m]ore Jews, including orphaned children and old people who had until then been excluded from the camps, were taken from Vienna at the beginning of June" to the

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[925] Franklin D. Roosevelt quoted in Roderick Stackelberg and Sally A. Winkle, **The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts**, Routledge, London, 2002, p.249 quoted in Baker, Smoke, p.130.

[926] Nicholson Baker, "Why I'm a Pacifist", **The Way**, (Pacifist), p.254. (The essay was published originally in *Harper's* in 2011.)

extermination camp.[927] As Leonhard Friedrich, a German pacifist notes, "[i]n the six months after the United States entered the war the Gestapo felt under no restraints."[928] "Meanwhile," Baker writes, "that June, the United States was 'fighting Hitler' by doing—what? By battling the Japanese navy, by building big bombs, and by having war parades":

> *On June 13, 1942, with the Allied land assault on Europe still two years away, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia threw an enormous war parade in Manhattan. It went on for a full day. There were tanks, planes, and picturesque international costumes, but there were also floats meant to stir emotions of enmity and fear. A float called "Death Rides" move slowly by; it was a giant animated skeleton beating two red swastika-bearing drums. There was a huge mustachioed figure in a Prussian helmet and body armor, riding a Disney-style dinosaur that strode heedlessly through corpses—the float was called "Hitler, the Axis War Monster." […] This is what the United States was doing during the early phase of the Holocaust: beating big red toy death drums on Fifth Avenue.*[929]

"Why I'm a Pacifist" also takes note of U.S. foreign policy since the 1990s—that is to say, bombings and attacks—in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran, each of which "refer[s] to our touchstone, our examplar: the Second World War."[930] Baker writes,

> *[w]ar is messy, we say. It's not pretty, but let's be real—it has to be fought sometimes. Cut to the image of a handsome unshaven G.I., somewhere in Italy and France, with a battered helmet and a cigarette hanging from his mouth. World War II, the most lethally violent eruption in history, is pacifism's great smoking counterexample. We "had to" intervene in Korea, Vietnam, and wherever else, because* look at World War II. *In 2007, in an article for [neoconservative magazine]* Commentary *called "The Case for Bombing Iran," Norman Podhoretz drew a parallel between negotiating with Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and negotiating with Hitler: we must bomb Iran now, he suggested, because* look at World War II.
>
> *True, the Allies killed millions of civilians and absurdly young conscripts, and they desolated much of Europe and Japan—that was genuinely sad. But what about the Holocaust? We had to push back somehow against that horror.*
>
> *Yes, we did. But the way you push is everything.*[931]

Baker's pacifism rests on the strong belief in the possibility of achieving peace even when war's massive violence is hurting and killing people. That is to say, even the inevitability of war is not an impediment to at least limiting its destruction, if not preventing it completely. What taints the possibility of peaceful negotiations

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[927] Baker, Pacifist, p.260.
[928] Leonhard Friedrich quoted in Baker, Pacifist, p.260.
[929] Baker, Pacifist, pp.260-261.
[930] Baker, Pacifist, p.254.
[931] Baker, Pacifist, p.255.

during war is the seeming opposition of peace with victory. Baker cites a pacifist, Abraham Kaufman of New York and "the executive secretary of the War Resisters League" who urges the extension of negotiations with Hitler that were carried on "over prisoners of war" over into "protecting the world from Hitler's last-ditch, exterminative frenzy."[932] Baker elaborates:

> *Throughout Hitler's tenure, then, the question for the rest of the world was how to respond to a man who was (a) violent; (b) highly irrational; (c) vehemently racist; professedly suicidal; and (d) in charge of an expanding empire. One possibility was to build weapons and raise armies, make demands, and threaten sanctions, embargoes, and other punishments. If Hitler failed to comply, we could say, "This had gone too far," and declare war.*[933]

This view, of course, represents only one possibility. The other possibility belongs to the pacifist who "thought this was precisely the wrong response":

> *"The Government took the one course which I foresaw at the time would strengthen Hitler: they declared war on Germany," Arthur Ponsonby said in the House of Lords in 1940. The novelists Vera Brittain, who published a biweekly* Letter to Peace Lovers *in London, agreed. "Nazism thrives, as we see repeatedly, on every policy which provokes resistance, such as bombing, blockade, and threats of 'retribution,'" she wrote in her 1942 masterpiece,* Humiliation with Honor.[934]

In light of these insights, it would be useful to conclude the discussion on *Human Smoke* with its possible resonations with some recent events. In doing this, we could refer to J. Hillis Miller's latest book, *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz* (2011). Theodor Adorno has claimed, as we noted earlier in another context, that "[a]fter Auschwitz to write even a single poem is barbaric."[935] J. Hillis Miller elaborates on this remark at length and suggests that one thing Adorno means may be that "everybody's business, after Auschwitz, is to focus all his or her energies on making sure Auschwitz does not happen again. It is barbaric not to do that."[936] Or, it is barbaric to indulge in "aesthetic activities" that remain "detached from politics."[937] Every period after Auschwitz requires so;

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[932] Abraham Kaufman quoted in Baker, Pacifist, pp.247, 248.
[933] Baker, Pacifist, p.250.
[934] Baker, Pacifist, p.250.
[935] Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society", **Prisms**, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1949, 1967, p. 34 quoted in Miller, Conflagration, p.ix.
[936] Miller, Conflagration, p.x.
[937] Miller, Conflagration, p.x.

"[t]hese are the times after Auschwitz, when the impossible has turned out to be possible."[938]

The political engagement of art, of "literary works in general" that Adorno demands, however, is directly related to what he perceives as the failure of cultural criticism. In Miller's interpretation, Adorno thinks that cultural criticism "is now impossible because society as a whole is so corrupt and empty that cultural critique instantly becomes complicit in what it would criticize."[939] Hence Adorno's word of choice: barbaric means in its Greek origin, "nonsense sounds."[940] Not even "'immoral' or 'irresponsible,'" but barbaric, because only barbaric defines the state of art.[941] In agreement, Miller writes, "[l]iterature in our culture is a use of words that is in a peculiar way nonreferential, though it may use real place-names or even present fictional versions of historical personages."[942] This nonreferentiality seems to render literature barbaric in Adorno's sense. Nonetheless, J. Hillis Miller defends, against Adorno, the critical power of literature and insists that "literature may be a valid testimony to Auschwitz."[943] He means fictional works of imagination whose relationship to Auschwitz may come by way of analogy. "Analogies, please remember," writes Hillis Miller, "are not identities, but juxtaposition of 'somewhat analogous events' may help to understand both sides of the analogy."[944] In this sense, for example, he reads Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as an analogy of the Holocaust.

More to the point, he invites us to think about "the chilling resemblance between what happened in Germany and adjacent countries in the years leading up to the Nazi takeover and what has happened recently in the United States and abroad as a result of its actions."[945] More specifically, Miller refers to, for instance

> *the occupation of Iraq, the resulting death of six hundred thousand or more Iraqis (some say the number is now over one million) and the displacement of six million others, the condoning of torture and illegal electronic surveillance here and abroad, and the gradual erosion of our civil liberties, such as the right to habeas corpus. A larger proportion of the United States population is in jail than in any other highly industrialized country in the world. Guantanamo Bay is*

[938] Miller, Conflagration, p.x.
[939] Miller, Conflagration, p.xi.
[940] Miller, Conflagration, p.xii.
[941] Miller, Conflagration, p.xii.
[942] Miller, Conflagration, p.xii.
[943] Miller, Conflagration, p.xii.
[944] Miller, Conflagration, p.xii.
[945] Miller, Conflagration, p.xiii.

> *not Auschwitz, but it is not absolutely different from the Nazi "work camps" either. Our perilous situation has certainly been facilitated [as it was during the Holocaust,] by "the administrative and technological capacities of a modern nation state and western scientific culture." These have been enormously augmented since Auschwitz. President Barack Obama is doing much to reverse this drift toward fascism, but the corruptions of our democratic ideals have penetrated deeply into our national culture and are proving hard to eradicate. If we are withdrawing from Iraq, we have escalated the war in Afghanistan.*[946]

These historical circumstances render history, past and present, impossible to be understood objectively but nonetheless (ethically) representable. In Baker's *Human Smoke*, politics becomes a matter of ethics and art the best medium for critique of all kinds: culture, national and international politics, morality, even whatever it is we mean by humanity. Written seven years after September 11, Baker points at the long way we will have to go to make sense of the wars the U.S. engaged in since World War II. And if, as he claims, World War II becomes a justification for all wars that followed it, we need urgently to come to terms with World War II first, only then may we begin to make sense of September 11.

To repeat the questions that guided Nicholson Baker in *Human Smoke*: "Was it a 'good war'? Did waging it help anyone who needed help?"[947] The efforts of pacifists prove that during war people are in need of food, shelter, security, and their needs turn out to be the most easily dismissed or ignored. As Baker notes, "[t]he Jews needed immigration visas, not Flying Fortresses. And who was doing their best to get them visas, as well as food, money, and hiding places? Pacifists were."[948]

In conclusion, the testimony Baker provides to war in *Human Smoke* through delicately, ethically documented facts offers no affirmations on the delivery of help those most in need have received. In Baker's act of witnessing, every paragraph begins with a name for the subject position, the true source of the quotation. In other words, on a grammatical level, every deed, every decision, every intention belongs to a performing subject. Whether a paragraph starts with Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Stefan Zweig, or Adolf Hitler, that particular fragment identifies the subject as a moral actor in a given situation, and calls on us to testify to their decisions. We testify to the past in its most minute incidents that seem to underline

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[946] Miller, Conflagration, p.xiii.
[947] Baker, Smoke, p.473.
[948] Baker, Pacifist, p.250.

the neglected importance of singular acts and decisions. In this way, we are urged to testify to the present as well; *Human Smoke* is an exercise in training ourselves in making ethical decisions of a much broader range throughout or lives, and the re-evaluation of our own judgments on the basis of particulars, with the help of every tiny detail that tends to evade us. Thinking about war, its justifications, the necessity or futility of pacifism are eventually about our ethical stances. As we shall see in the next section, it is a demanding task, a life-long effort, to define one's ethical stance when it comes to violence—past, present, future—among other things.

2.1.2. Dialogues with the World's Miseries in William T. Vollmann's *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means*

William T. Vollmann's *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means*, in its seven-volume, three thousand-page version that was completed in 1998 and published by McSweeney's in 2003, was a finalist for National Book Critics Circle Award in 2003. Vollmann shortened the series by about one fourth and, Ecco,[949] an imprint of HarperCollins, published the more accessible abridged edition in 2004.[950] In a letter he writes to his literary agent, Vollmann explains that *Rising Up and Rising Down* is "my life's work" and it

> *attempts to delineate a moral calculus for violence—or, in other words, to determine when violence is justified. I believe this is one of the most important tasks which the human mind can hope to undertake. We read the Bible, Aquinas, Thucydides, Marx, Hitler, Gandhi, Ceasar, and so many others to help form our opinions on this question among others.*[951]

In humility, Vollmann acknowledges possible flaws and vaguenesses in his endeavor because he is "not a professional philosopher or logician."[952] Nonetheless, he asserts that *Rising Up and Rising Down* is "honest, not overly complicated, and based on reading and experience, so if a revolutionary or a politician reads it, it may

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[949] Compared with the nonprofit McSweeney's, the more mainstream Ecco may seem an odd choice, yet as Vollmann explains, the justification for the abridgment was financial. Further details about the book's process of publication will be noted later (Vollmann, Rising, p.xi).
[950] This study will refer to the 2004 abridged edition.
[951] William T. Vollmann, "My Life's Work", McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., (Life's Work), pp.327, 325.
[952] Vollmann, Life's Work, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.327.

conceivably do real good in the world."[953] His belief seems to be well-grounded, because as he puts it himself, "[t]he subject of ethical violence remains largely unexplored."[954] About *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann writes that it could be "used in classes in: ethics, history, philosophy, criminology, Slavic studies, Asian studies, political science, and perhaps military science."[955] Yet this book's length makes it difficult to find a publisher, and to his agent, Vollmann writes in 2002, to serve as justification for its seven-volume bearing: "I've been advised to provide a description of current literature on this topic. Michael Walzer's book on just and unjust wars is one example, but *Rising Up and Rising Down* attempts a much wider scope. I don't really know of any comparable work."[956]

As Michael Hemmingson explains about *Rising Up and Rising Down* in the only critical work devoted to Vollmann to this date,

> *[w]hat started out as a monograph grew exponentially during the two and a half decades Vollmann travelled the world independently and as a foreign correspondent. With this continued experiences and observations, he added more pages to the essay, creating a work of philosophy, history, and memoir. It also works as ethnography in its observations of foreign cultures; it is investigative journalism for its reportage of gangs, crime, war, and human rights violations.*[957]

An all-encompassing sense of discomfort with the excuses for violence pervades *Rising Up and Rising Down*. Hence, the title's *rising up,* which means, as Vollmann explains, "[a] just act of violence. Both ends and means are legitimate," and *rising down*, which means "[a]n unjust act of violence. Means, ends, or both fail to meet legitimacy's standard."[958] *Just* and *unjust* turn out to be the most thorny issues in presenting excuses for violence. What is most vexing about violence, in other words is that, whether it comes through acts of terror, self-defense, military or police activity, it is always accompanied by a series of justifications, just or unjust, of defense: defense of class, defense of ideology, defense of honor, defense of ground,

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[953] Vollmann, Life's Work, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.327.
[954] Vollmann, Life's Work, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.327.
[955] William T. Vollmann, Life's Work, McCaffery and Hemmingson Eds., p.327.
[956] Vollmann, Life's Work, McCaffery and Hemmingson Eds., p.327.
[957] Michael Hemmingson, **William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews**, McFarland, North Carolina, 2009, p.49.
[958] Vollmann, Rising, p.453.

defense of authority. Vollmann, not content with many of these justifications, hopes "to arrive at a way of ethically categorizing violence."[959]

The biggest challenge in this ethically motivated task is the fact that violence is usually justified with "moral values" that either absolutize or relativize its excuses.[960] Vollmann holds that "every violent act refers itself back to some more or less rational explanation"; while less convincing rationalizations fade quickly, others reach absolute status if an "intellectual-moral logic in between" the ends and means of violence are "correctly assembled."[961] Put differently, a violent act may take place with the motivation of a presupposition which will ensure its justification. This simple logic fails terribly and succumbs to relativism. For instance, violence may be justified on the basis of "defense of homeland."[962] Yet another justification of violence, such as "defense of authority," may invalidate it.[963] What happened in Yugoslavia during a civil war between Serbs and Croatians in the 1990s is a case in point: "[a]uthority's federalism, which just happens to have a Serbian flavor, mobilizes its defensive violence against Croatian defense of ethnicity and localism. Here is where relativism comes in.[964] In this sense, how can we decide whose defense, therefore violence, is right and necessary? Vollmann's purpose in this book is to give these questions their ethical due.

Vollmann follows a three-step methodology whereby he first discusses, with examples and deliberately inconclusive argumentations, when violent defense of honor, class, authority, and ground is justified and unjustified. He studies deeds and decisions, for example, of Gandhi in accord with the prescriptions of the Golden Rule; of Napoleon with an eye on the limits and requirements of collective and individual honor during wartime; of Stalin with regard to his socialism and the eradication by starvation of the class of rich peasants. He tries to filter the particular justification of violence or nonviolence in each example through "induction and common sense" and explains that his "intention was neither to uncover new facts about the doings of historical figures, nor to formulate new interpretations of them.

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[959] Vollmann, Rising, p.45.
[960] Vollmann, Rising, p.xi.
[961] Vollmann, Rising, p.xi.
[962] Vollmann, Rising, p.xi.
[963] Vollmann, Rising, p.xii.
[964] Vollmann, Rising, p.xii.

What I tried instead to do was to lay out the received wisdom […] and then judge that."[965]

Although Vollmann proposes his subjective versions, his ethical judgments on possible justifications for given acts of violence, he refrains from presenting them as absolutes. A major purpose of *Rising Up and Rising Down*, in fact, is to urge the reader to make his or her own decisions by way of empathy. As Vollmann himself puts it, "[t]he reader is invited to consider each of the moral decisions undertaken by our historical protagonists as the centerpiece of a parable" and try to see "whether *we can imagine ourselves in to the circumstances described.*"[966] In fact, he seems to envision a kind of correspondence with the reader; believing that his subject matter is of great concern to ethical human life, Vollmann shares his thoughts with the reader in great enthusiasm. In his *Preface* to the abridgment, he addressed his readers: "[t]hank you for reading this book. My sincere intention in writing it was to be helpful."[967] Likewise, in the *Preface* to the seven-volume original edition, he writes, "I offer it to you, my unknown reader, in the hope that it may someday save a life or comfort a seeking mind."[968] Herein lies one of the biggest assets of Vollmann's book in its explicit demand of and for a more ethical consideration of violence. He states that "the suffering of others shames me and awes me" and "if we think about a sufficient number of cases we may be able to plant the seeds of a tentative ethics which others could consider, pick and choose from and hopefully benefit from even if they cannot improve."[969]

The second step in this grand inquiry is a condensed version, in the mode of a chart, or an outline, that lists the questions that the *parables* have so far raised and the tentative answers Vollmann formulates for them. It is called "The Moral Calculus," and it divides the book into two, bridging the first part's investigations to the final part's extensively researched and detailed ethical evaluations of major events of recent violence as well as offering convenient access to just and unjust moral values surrounding justifications of violence.

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[965] Vollmann, Rising, pp.45, 46.
[966] Vollmann, Rising, p.46.
[967] Vollmann, Rising, p.xiii.
[968] Vollmann, Rising, p.xv.
[969] Vollmann, Rising, p.31.

Before moving on with a discussion of Vollmann's remarkable case studies, it is useful to situate *Rising Up and Rising Down* within a historical and cultural, as well as philosophical and literary context. It is possible to begin with noting the two-fold structure of Vollmann's *Preface* to the original edition of the book. There is a brief paragraph that is dated 1998 when the project was completed in which Vollmann defines his project "as a companion piece to [his] memoir *An Afghanistan Picture Show* and to [his first] novel *You Bright and Risen Angels*" in the sense of these works' engagement with "do-it-yourself politics of an extreme character."[970] This sense of continuity in subject matter and critical approach attests to Vollmann's wide-ranging, all-encompassing preoccupation with issues he finds important.

The second, slightly longer part in the original preface is an addendum for the publication of the seven-volume version of the book in 2003, which reads:

> *No doubt I have Osama bin Laden to thank for the fact that this work is getting published in my lifetime. People have advised me to "bring it up to date" by inserting references to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I feel no interest in doing that, although a footnote here and there pays note to those grisly events. Nor did I alter any case studies, some of which are set in Muslim countries. (If you read them with that knowledge, you will see that even to a superficial observer such as myself some sort of attack was predictable and perhaps preventable. I can assure you that it will get worse.)*[971]

(It is confounding that without September 11's trauma Vollmann's inquiries seemed less relevant.) The four-year gap between the completion and the publication of the project might therefore be telling, first, in the sense of the literary hardships such a serious—however heavy-handed—meditation on the most disturbing quality of human nature may suffer in twenty-first century literary marketplace. As Hemmingson explains,

> *[t]he publication of this massive work proved to be a difficult, but admirable, task for the small publishing operation McSweeney's Books. On their website, "Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency," is a page called "An Oral History of* Rising Up and Rising Down*" that contains testaments and reflections by the people who worked on the book, from Vollmann's literary agent to the interns and production staff.*[972]

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[970] Vollmann, Rising, p.xv.
[971] Vollmann, Rising, p.xv.
[972] Hemmingson, p.50.

Among the staff is novelist Dave Eggers, the contemporary writer of remarkable novels such as *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) and the most recent *Hologram for the King* (2011). Eggers writes,

> *I saw an excerpt [of* Rising Up and Rising Down*] and I tried to find out when it would be published as a whole. I wrote to Vollmann, offering to publish any other excerpts from it, and that led eventually to his giving us "The Old Man," which we published in our seventh issue. […] A while later, I saw him read one night at Black Oak Books in Berkeley, and during the Q&A he mentioned that* Rising Up and Rising Down*'s publisher had backed out, and the book was orphaned. So I went home, did some rudimentary math, and wrote him a letter to the effect that McSweeney's might be able to figure out a way to get the book out.*[973]

Second, within the period of four years, a massive national tragedy directly related to Vollmann's inquiry takes place, thereby rendering his book both more significant within the present historical global and national conjecture and more disturbingly revelatory, even prophetic in its warnings. In fact, *Rising Up and Rising Down* may stand as testimony against the denunciations of so-called indifference and moral depravity of literature and culture at large after the attacks on Twin Towers that we have mentioned earlier.

The not-so-subtle critique in the supplementary paragraph of the preface depends as much on Vollmann's personal judgments as on his growing comprehension of human nature and its propensity for cruelty and self-righteousness during the twenty-three years that he spends in completing his meditation on violence. He explains that in the two decades of the making of this book he has discovered "a lack of decency and compassion" in people's personal moral values.[974] This is partly due to the fact that "[m]ost of us expediently rig our own moral calculuses in such a way that our actions become automatically justified in accordance with our own urgencies."[975] Yet on a more essential manner, because human violence is deeply engrained in human nature, we can only hope to "prevent" future ones through an ethical study of acts of violence.[976] On the human propensity for violence, Vollmann writes,

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[973] Dave Eggers, "An Oral History of *Rising Up and Rising Down*", **Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency**, n.d., n.pag. quoted in Hemmingson, p.50.
[974] Vollmann, Rising, p.143.
[975] Vollmann, Rising, p.141.
[976] Vollmann, Rising, p.41.

> *[i]nduction leads to the conclusion that human behavior winds on morally unaltered, and probably unalterable. "Now earth was corrupt in God's sight," says the book of Genesis, "and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth." If violence is a kind of dust that lies inside the house of the soul, there does not seem to be any way to sweep it out the door. We can only sweep it into one corner or another. Go back fifty thousand years to the Neanderthal man whom archeologists would find "frontally stabbed in the chest by a right-handed antagonist." To murder is not only human, but protohuman. [… A]s that Neanderthal homicide proved, human violence itself cannot be altered without altering human nature. "Vice and virtue form the destinies of the earth," said Robespierre; and on the day that that is no longer true, there will be no more human beings as we understand them.*[977]

Far from being deterministic, Vollmann believes in searching and attaining the truth about meaningful, just, responsible human life by becoming responsibly and critically aware. He insists that we should "grant our authority as human beings, as citizens, to judge each other's means, even when those means do not directly affect the rights of our sovereign private selves."[978] Hence, his preoccupation with ethics, which he claims, has been frequently deployed as a "metaphor" by "revolutionaries, conquerors, patriots, and the other violent movers."[979] Instead, ethics should guide us in "the evaluations of justifications" where violence is normalized on improbable bases.[980]

Nonetheless, the discourses on human progress may seem to contribute to the normalization, if not to the camouflage, of violence. "Yes, we now have 'laws of war'" Vollmann admits, "but we inhabit a planet in which the commission of atrocities remains normal."[981] He notes the widespread argument that violence on global, local, tribal scales "no longer stains our planet" and disagrees:

> *Which outrages upon freedom, safety, and peace vanished? Rape, murder, torture, slavery and compulsion, censorship, war and institutionalized tyranny—the marks of all these I've seen with my own eyes. To be sure, the* forms *of them do vary, and so do their relative proportions and frequencies. Human sacrifice, for instance, is at present much less common than assassination and genocide as expressions of religious praxis. Violence no longer hovers over the ballot box in American cities; it's in other lands. Institutionalized slavery is neither as widespread nor as overt as it was two hundred years ago, although it can still be found in the Sudan, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, and doubtless a hundred other habitats for*

[977] Vollmann, Rising, pp.23-25.
[978] Vollmann, Rising, p.117.
[979] Vollmann, Rising, p.117.
[980] Vollmann, Rising, p.118.
[981] Vollmann, Rising, p.22.

> *sweatshops, forced prostitution, and indentured servitude. […T]orture, now in its renaissance, is committed by a third of all the governments on this earth. […T]he telling fact is the sameness of the calamities we inflict upon one another. (Yes, the forms change; the shapes of the wounds change.)*[982]

Violence, therefore, is justified in the name of human progress and "we need not delude ourselves that 'history' has accomplished much in the way of human improvement."[983] Because, as Vollmann puts it, "[t]he world was different once. Learn what today's truth has in common with yesterday's. Hitler invokes defense of homeland. So does Lycurgus the Spartan."[984] Interestingly, "[m]y President [George W. Bush] invokes it today. Which of those two predecessors, if either, does he more faithfully resemble?"[985] This is a very insightful and sharp aside on September 11's connection to other grave events. Does history, as the saying goes, just repeat itself? If that is the case, how can we prevent the same atrocities happening over and over?

In some sense, Vollmann finds reassurances of peace unsound, insincere, and manipulative. For instance, in response to a military historian's claim that "[d]espite the confusion and uncertainty, it seems just possible to glimpse the emerging outlines of a world without war," Vollmann writes, "[m]aybe so—if thermonuclear war exterminates all of us."[986] Not pessimist about peace nor cynical about the world, Vollmann simply underlines a fact he defends persistently: human violence will exist as long as the human race exists. Vollmann believes in the possibility and responsibility of doing something for the world. He explains, "[p]utting aside any notion that the world is becoming a better place was neither easy not pleasant for me; and I've not yet given up believing both that the world *ought* to be better and that we have a duty to construct methods of improvement."[987] At the same time, he admits that our powers are limited to improve the world: "Isolationism, greed, anger, fear, ethnic nationalism, racial and class hatred, murderous coldheartedness and native human viciousness, once called original sin, now more politely known as the aggressive propensity, continue to narrow justice."[988]

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[982] Vollmann, Rising, p.22.
[983] Vollmann, Rising, p.22.
[984] Vollmann, Rising, p.447.
[985] Vollmann, Rising, p.447.
[986] Vollmann, Rising, p.49.
[987] Vollmann, Rising, p.21.
[988] Vollmann, Rising, p.21.

We could understand Vollmann's ideas better by turning to his particular arguments in more detail. At the beginning of *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann undertakes a philosophical meditation on death and by extension the meaning of life. For him, the compelling force of violence on human thought is its inherent connection to death. "Death is ordinary," Vollmann asserts; "[b]ehold it, subtract its patterns and lessons from those of the death that weapons bring, and maybe the residue will show what violence is."[989] During an excursion, Vollmann walks through the underground tunnels adorned with human bones in the Paris catacombs that "organized death's jetsam according to a sanitary aesthetics[; …] joints of bones, heads of bones, promiscuously touching, darkness in the center of each."[990] The catacombs contain "the remains of about six million persons—our usual number of Jews who died in the Holocaust."[991] He finds the coincidence interesting because "[t]he crimes which the Nazis accomplished with immense effort in half a dozen years, nature had done here without effort or recourse and was doing."[992]

His preoccupation with the ordinariness of death, however, is shadowed by the senselessness of all deaths, either by violence or not. In this sense, Vollmann considers death a form of self-understanding, of "self-knowledge" that we try to ignore because it hurts.[993] For him, refusing to see dead bodies is refusing to acknowledge the inevitable future status of our own bodies. Analogous to the unpleasant recognition of one's greed, selfishness, or cruelty after a rigorous and honest self-investigation, death is also a painful recognition that evades our consciousness at every chance. And when it forces itself upon us by way of others' deaths, it hurts because we not only fail to evade it but also have to make sense of it. There are, of course, various ways of granting meaning to death, justification of violence aside. Vollmann notes, for instance, a pediatric oncologist who leaves that profession because medicine saves only twenty-five percent of the terminally ill children and he cannot save his soul from emotional damage.[994] Yet while he fails to accept and understand death as an oncologist, this person finds comfort working as a

[989] Vollmann, Rising, p.1.
[990] Vollmann, Rising, p.1.
[991] Vollmann, Rising, p.2.
[992] Vollmann, Rising, p.2.
[993] Vollmann, Rising, p.5.
[994] Vollmann, Rising, p.11.

coroner: investigating dead bodies for causes of death of all kinds (murder, suicide, violent accidents, natural causes) through all kinds of dissections and mutilations, the former oncologist now at least "understand[s] a dead man" by noting down the causes on the death certificate.[995] When the cause of death materializes as a biological fact or criminal act or an accident, death becomes comprehensible.

This seems to hold true as long as one is privileged—or shall we say blessed—by a personal disaffiliation, especially in the case of death that comes through violence. The former pediatric oncologist may manage to evade death's mutilation of his heart and soul by dissociating himself from his terminally ill child patients, but a Serbian woman who loses her fiancé to violent death under Croatian attack becomes another victim to that same violence. Out of all-encompassing hatred, maddening incomprehension, she attaches a face to the "Angel of Death."[996] More correctly, violence gives a face to the Angel of Death: it acquires the face of the opponent, the oppressor, the whole ethnic group, the whole nation, and the whole race.[997] When death acquires a face, when it comes through violence, the human heart is irrevocably mutilated.

The problem here may be related to the fact that "a major ethical constituent of violence is *the unique relationship between each victim and perpetrator at a given time.*"[998] If, for instance, killing is justified during times of war but prohibited during peaceful times, a compelling debate arises: "if the motive and context are so crucial, then we must ask whether one can with equal justification kill out of hatred, out of fear, out of rational self-defense or out of mercy."[999] The case of Holocaust, for instance, invalidates the uniqueness principle he mentions above and diverts the argument to justifications of violence on the basis of hatred among other things. On violent acts of mass(ive) scales, Vollmann argues, "the individuality of victims and perpetrators remains immaterial to our judgment: by their very large numbers, the dead in that pit constitute a silent scream of crime. We know all we need to know (except, of course, how to stop it next time)."[1000] The crime is one "against humanity

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[995] Vollmann, Rising, p.10.
[996] Vollmann, Rising, p.19.
[997] Vollmann, Rising, p.18.
[998] Vollmann, Rising, p.38.
[999] Vollmann, Rising, p.38.
[1000] Vollmann, Rising, p.41.

because it attack[s] human diversity, without which the whole concept of humanity becomes reduced to ethnicity or nationality."[1001]

Another forceful argument regards "the morality of weapons."[1002] A weapon grants its owner "the three gods of violence"[1003]: "security, autonomy, and power."[1004] What is willfully ignored, for Vollmann, is the fact that "[a] gun in my hand prepares me, transforms me. If I can accurately shoot paper targets from a distance today, I have a better chance of being able to shoot my enemies tomorrow."[1005] This is called the "law of might," which "accords respect to an individual, who may well come to respect himself accordingly."[1006] Vollmann finds a fatal danger in this law: "the capacity to do violence extends the self: it does not only arm it, it also 'hands' it, awarding it extra fingers of choice. The weapon becomes a limb, a friend."[1007]

In the U.S., gun ownership gains another dimension: it becomes an instrument of the national creed of self-reliance.[1008]

> *The price we pay is one Columbine massacre after another. What some of us get in exchange, or at least what we strive for, is a sense of wholeness, pride, fulfillment best known to the hunter-gatherer. In the hands of a Columbian* para*, a gun is primarily a tool of terror, deterrence, retribution, revenge. […] For an American, for better or worse, an "equalizer." […] Self-reliance equals defiance. […] Americans solve their own problems. […] That is why […] those two despised boys at Columbine brought guns to school and solved their own problems, evilly and uselessly.*[1009]

The true approach to the self within an ethical evaluation of its rights of self-defense, however, should begin with the self's right to choices regarding ethical decisions leading up to violent or nonviolent self-defense. The choices available to a victim of aggressive bullying behavior illustrate this point nicely. The victim may choose to show nonviolent resistance to bullying acts. This passivity, however, cannot be justified because neither the violence nor the nonviolent resistance serves a

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[1001] Vollmann, Rising, pp.39, 40.
[1002] Vollmann, Rising, p.59.
[1003] Vollmann, Rising, p.59.
[1004] Vollmann, Rising, p.53.
[1005] Vollmann, Rising, p.53.
[1006] Vollmann, Rising, p.53.
[1007] Vollmann, Rising, p.55.
[1008] Vollmann, Rising, p.662.
[1009] Vollmann, Rising, pp.662-663.

particular faith or ideology.[1010] In fact, countering violence with nonviolence may only lead the victim to "become an unwitting accomplice in [the bullies'] sadism."[1011] Such passive self-defense may have justification "in extreme situations only for martyrs" who endure violence for a cause, for an ideology.[1012] The position of the victim of bullying, moreover, points out another complication. In most cases of violence, such as rape, infanticide, and murder, "the victims seem to be mere placeholders, almost accidental outlets. Violence rises up and takes the sacrifices it finds. It employs the means that it finds. It even takes whatever motives it finds."[1013]

Similar to the non-justifiable violence of "nonsociopathic homicides," violent defenses of honor and class are also tainted with unjust defenses. Honor may be classified as collective and individual honor with inward and outward aspects.[1014] Mobilized at times of conflict to unite ethnic or racial groups and nations, collective honor overrides the consciences of individuals. However,

> *collective honor ought never to be its own justification. True honor, the only kind whose defense is justifiable, is that which allows one to evaluate the goodness of an end, and to make a judgment as to the ethical suitability of a means to an end. This is the honor that keeps one from becoming a rapist or executing unarmed prisoners of war, that tells when the time has come to kill and die in defense of one's country.*[1015]

Vollmann's elaboration on Abraham Lincoln's authority position in American Civil War also touches on the delicate balance between the collective and the individual, at least on a corresponding level. The conflict between the federal government of the Union and the Southern states, in Vollmann's opinion, could be read alternatively as an ethical dilemma based on defense of authority and defense of homeland.

Vollmann's argument draws on the rights of States—which were ambiguously defined in the sovereign Constitution—and the unjust defense, ungrounded aggrandizement of Lincoln's authority. In other words, rather than discussing the obvious moral wrong of slavery, Vollmann evaluates Lincoln's decisions regarding Southern states. For example, in his "House Divided" speech,

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[1010] Vollmann, Rising, p.76.
[1011] Vollmann, Rising, p.76.
[1012] Vollmann, Rising, p.75.
[1013] Vollmann, Rising, p.28.
[1014] Vollmann, Rising, p.151.
[1015] Vollmann, Rising, p.159.

Lincoln merges the issues of slavery and secession, thereby greatly disregarding South's economic impoverishment against free states as well as denying the South's "right to secede."[1016] In claiming authority over both the slaves and the Southern states, Lincoln provokes the South to assert its own defense of authority and homeland. Therefore, Vollmann suggests, "Lincoln was wrong to prohibit secession, but that secession was largely in the pursuit of an immoral end. The outcome, which neither Lincoln nor the South expected, was a good one: the formal destruction of slavery within the United States."[1017] The immorality of slavery notwithstanding, he illustrates the problem by way of analogy:

> *The South in 1860 has much the same feelings as the U.S. would have had in 1960 had a Trotskyite President been elected and had he announced that the United States cannot stand half privatized, half nationalized; all private property must go sooner or later. This dangerous President, Abraham Lincoln, has said exactly that about the South's property.*[1018]

In defending his federal authority, Lincoln exercised "executive centrality" over the South.[1019] One dimension of the problem is that although Northern states supported Lincoln's emancipatory goals, Southern states did not, and Vollmann's ethical judgment for such a situation in his moral calculus reads; "[c]onsensus constitutes no guarantee of authority's justice."[1020]

In addition, despite his personal feelings in favor of abolition, Lincoln's purpose was to "not permit slavery to spread above the line of Missouri Compromise."[1021] What he held first, and above all else was to preserve "the union and constitutionality."[1022] In Vollmann's opinion, "[o]nce the war had begun, it probably gave him gratification to be able to proclaim emancipation without violating the Missouri Compromise or the Fugitive Slave Act, which the secessionists, by seceding, had already annulled."[1023] In another clarification of his stance, Vollmann writes,

> *I certainly am glad that the Union won the Civil War. Were it possible to leave slavery out of the equation (which it isn't), I still wouldn't be sorry. But the*

[1016] Vollmann, Rising, p.298.
[1017] Vollmann, Rising, p.299.
[1018] Vollmann, Rising, p.299.
[1019] Vollmann, Rising, p.281.
[1020] Vollmann, Rising, p.288.
[1021] Vollmann, Rising, p.302.
[1022] Vollmann, Rising, p.314.
[1023] Vollmann, Rising, p.314.

> *natural process by which successful authority enlarges itself depresses me. Defense of authority is unjustified when that defense in and of itself permanently aggrandizes the authority.*[1024]

Therefore, Vollmann manages to discuss the Civil War from another ethical angle that acknowledges the evil of slavery but looks beyond the received wisdom: what else is there in Lincoln's and the South's defenses?

To conclude, with regard to the historical range he offers and his emphasis on reaching universal codes in ethical thinking and placing them at the center of human existence, Vollmann could be seen as a distinctively responsible literary voice. To repeat, Vollmann believes in the possibility and responsibility of doing something for the world and explains that he has "not yet given up believing both that the world *ought* to be better and that we have a duty to construct methods of improvement."[1025] It is possible to say that with *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann has definitely fulfilled a great part of his duty and reminds many readers to fulfill theirs.

2.2. A NEW GENERATION OF MUCKRAKERS?

The title of this part considers the possibility of finding a connection in some contemporary works of creative nonfiction to the twentieth century journalistic phenomenon of muckraking and an affiliation with the more recent New New Journalism (Boynton).[1026] This connection, however, does not comprise a direct genealogy or remains limited to—nor relies, in its form, scope, or definition, on—these two traditions. In other words, the general principles of muckraking and New New Journalism serve to highlight the outline of a recent effort by way of their wide-ranging purposes and forms. The purpose, therefore, is to reflect on the possibility of describing something new with an eye to previous similar efforts. The works discussed in this part are Nicholson Baker's creative nonfiction on the demolition of the library's traditional duty to preserve the print heritage of human civilization; William T. Vollmann's essayistic meditations on the centuries-long conflict on the U.S.-Mexico border; Jonathan Safran Foer's ethically-charged forays into meat

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[1024] Vollmann, Rising, p.315.
[1025] Vollmann, Rising, p.21.
[1026] Robert S. Boynton, **The New New Journalism, Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft**, Vintage, New York, 2005.

production and consumption. These works are the results of serious and in-depth research, and in the refined treatment of Baker, Vollmann, and Foer, the research yields a narrative that is at once storytelling, ethical reflection, and a realistic exposition of serious social, cultural, and political problems. Their difference from muckraking and New New Journalism is that neither Baker nor Vollmann or Foer can be confined to journalism, whether that be literary or reportorial journalism. In fact, their achievement, although it may be built on the methods of these other traditions, creates completely new opportunities for the American writer who is ethically bothered by some crucial social, cultural, and political problems, who is intellectually willing and competent to undertake a rigorous, meticulous, and extensive discussion and analysis of his or her topic. In other words, Baker, Vollmann, and Foer turn creative nonfiction into an endeavor that addresses ethical questions in an intellectual manner.

To note briefly, muckraking was a journalistic tradition of the early twentieth century. The works of the muckraker journalists whose "investigations of social problems, government corruption, and corporate influence" have been helpful in fulfilling "the turn-of-the-century progressive reforms."[1027] Broadly speaking, muckrakers were journalists and muckraking was "the journalistic movement that exposed social, political, and ethical problems in the United States and generated public support for major reforms during the first decade of the twentieth century."[1028] They were interested in exposing "political corruption, mistreatment of workers, the plight of immigrants, and urban misery and decay."[1029]

Coined in 1906—in a disapproving tone—by Theodore Roosevelt, "[t]he word is still used today in reference to American journalists who uncover evidence of corporate greed, government corruption, and other lawlessness."[1030] Hillstrom argues that although "the American media underwent significant changes, investigative journalists [still draw] attention to some of the same issues that the muckrakers addressed almost one hundred years earlier."[1031] For instance, she proposes Eric

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[1027] Laurie Collier Hillstrom, **Defining Moments: The Muckrakers and the Progressive Era**, Detroit, Omnigraphics, Michigan, 2010, p.xiii.
[1028] Hillstrom, p.xiii.
[1029] Hillstrom, p.xv.
[1030] Hillstrom, p.4.
[1031] Hillstrom, p.96.

Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001) as the modern-day *The Jungle* (Sinclair Lewis, 1906) and considers the films of Michael Moore such as *Bowling for* Columbine (2002) as essentially muckraking.

Like Hillstrom, Robert Boynton, too notes that muckraking continues at present. Yet in his comprehensive outlook, Boynton notices the emergence of a "new breed" of writers in the twenty-first century whom he gathers under the rubric New New Journalism, a term that owes as much to Tom Wolfe's notion of New Journalism as to muckraking.[1032] Boynton's brilliant argument in *New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on their Craft* (2005) refines the understanding early muckraking movement by connecting it to the impressive development of American literary journalism in the twentieth century. He also reconsiders the influence of Tom Wolfe and the scope of his New Journalism within the larger tradition of American reportorial and literary journalism. Furthermore, his discussions tend toward a revision, or a better understanding, of the relationship between fiction and nonfiction, that is, the novels and reportorial or literary journalism of the last century.

Robert Boynton's book comprises of interviews he conducts with nineteen writers whose works he considers to form the New New Journalism movement. Among them are Gay Talese (b. 1932), Jane Kramer (b.1938), Jon Krakauer (b. 1954), Lawrence Wright (b. 1947), Susan Orlean (b. 1955), Ted Conover (b. 1958), and Eric Schlosser (b. 1959). In his astute *Introduction* to the book, Boynton provides a genealogy for this movement in two steps. First, he examines Tom Wolfe and New Journalism, and second, he looks at the historical and artistic development of journalism in America. In this way, Boynton posits a "dual heritage" for New New Journalism.[1033] New New Journalists inherit from Wolfeian New Journalism and its more refined practitioners "the license to experiment with form."[1034] In point of fact, Boynton considers New Journalism "a truly avant-garde movement that expanded journalism's rhetorical and literary scope by placing the author at the center of the story, channeling a character's thought, using nonstandard punctuation,

[1032] Boynton, p.xxviii.
[1033] Boynton, p.xi.
[1034] Boynton, p.xi.

and exploding traditional narrative forms."[1035] He notes praisefully the works of Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, and Michael Herr.

However, while Wolfe's journalism remains limited to reporting "surface" details that point at class and "social status," New New Journalist desire more "to address the social and political concerns of nineteenth-century writers such as Lincoln Steffens, Jacob Riis, and Stephen Crane."[1036] That is to say, their approach to society is not limited to status and their particular approach to society comprises another differentiating characteristic of New New Journalism in terms of method: "Contrary to the New Journalists, this new generation experiments more with the way one gets a story. To that end, they've developed innovative immersion strategies [… and] their most significant innovations have involved experiments with reporting, rather the language or forms they used to tell their stories."[1037] For instance, Ted Conover "work[s] as a prison guard […] and live[s] as a hobo" for two different books; Leon Dash, Adrian LeBlanc, and Jonathan Harries spend years of research for their reports.[1038] In this way, while for Wolfe reporting meant "relentless accumulation of details that define an individual's status," New New Journalism reports the experience of reality.[1039]

For Boynton, Wolfe's focus on reporting the exterior also points toward a problem with his notion reporting and of character building in the novel. Since he remains an observer of the exterior, and even claims in *New Journalism* (1973) that only the novel can enter the "privacy" of individuals that reporting observes at the level of status, he has to imagine his characters that he assiduously tries to report on in a novelistic way.[1040] As Boynton puts it, "Wolfe went inside his characters' heads; the New New Journalists become part of their lives."[1041] In other words, "[w]e read Wolfe for the imaginative distortion he brings to reality, not the reality itself."[1042] This fact casts a shadow over his characters in his novels as well as his sense of reporting real life and writing realistic novels. Boynton deftly notes James Wood's

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[1035] Boynton, p.xii.
[1036] Boynton, pp.xiv, xi.
[1037] Boynton, p.xiii.
[1038] Boynton, p.xiii.
[1039] Boynton, p.xiii.
[1040] Boynton, p.xiii.
[1041] Boynton, p.xiii.
[1042] Boynton, p.xiii.

criticism of Wolfe for building characters that remain at the level of being one-dimensional stereotypes.[1043] It is worth observing how Wood formulates his criticism in the essay to which Boynton briefly refers.

In "Tom Wolfe's Shallowness, and the Trouble with Too Much Information," Wood claims that "Wolfe's novels are placards of simplicity" and that he "is not in search of realism; he wants hot, brothy journalism" filled with people (not "individuals") that Wolfe "choos[es] from society's catalogue."[1044] Wood writes,

> *[w]hat is so curious is that Wolfe thinks his fiction is realistic, and has used it as an example of how the American novel should develop. In 1989 he wrote a bouncy manifesto called "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," in which he championed "a highly-detailed realism based on reporting," like that of his own novel* The Bonfire of the Vanities*, which had appeared two years earlier. He complained that too few novelists were interested "in the metropolis or any other big, rich slices of contemporary life"; they had abandoned realism for what he called "literary games"—minimalism, or various sterile, white-coated avant-gardisms. Only by vigorously going out and reporting on American society could one bring it back and wrestle it into the novel. Zola had done this with French society when he went on his "documentation" trips, and Sinclair Lewis had done this with his America in the 1920s and 1930s. It is reportorial detail that makes novels "engrossing" and "gripping" and moving," said Wolfe—"the* petit faits vrais *that create verisimilitude and make a novel gripping or absorbing."*[1045]

Wood—the champion of literary realism, of the fully rounded fictional character, of the exquisitely rendered plot—cannot disagree more. "The kind of 'realism' called for by Wolfe," Wood explains, "is always realism about society and never realism about human emotions, motives, secrecies."[1046] He goes far as to claim that "[t]he acceptance of this kind of literature is dangerous not because anybody will confuse it with life, will think, 'This is what life is like," but because readers may read it and think, 'This is what literature is like.'"[1047] Therefore, Boynton and Wood concur on Wolfe's lack of truthful representation of the human. As Boynton notes, Wolfe's New Journalism is a very short-lived phenomenon, becoming completely obsolete "by the 1980s."[1048]

[1043] Boynton, p.xiv.
[1044] Wood, Shallowness, pp.210, 212, 214.
[1045] Wood, Shallowness, pp.210-211.
[1046] Wood, Shallowness, p.217.
[1047] Wood, Shallowness, p.220.
[1048] Boynton, p.xx.

In light of this discussion, Boynton's celebration of the New New Journalism's focus on "[s]ubcultures in general, impoverished subcultures in particular" proves a very significant contribution not only to American nonfiction but also to American literature.[1049] The writers of the New New Journalism "view the disenfranchised not as exotic tribes, but as people whose problems are symptomatic of the dilemmas that vex America. There is an activist dimension in much of the New New Journalism, an element of muckraking and social concern."[1050] In this way, New New Journalism comprises "the literature of the everyday[, …] drilling down into bedrock of ordinary experience, exploring what Gay Talese calls 'the fictional undercurrent that flows beneath the stream of reality.'"[1051] As Boynton explains, the works of the New New Journalists are "[r]igorously reported, psychologically astute, sociologically sophisticated, and politically aware."[1052]

> *They bring a distinct set of cultural and social concerns to their works. Neither frustrated novelists nor wayward newspaper reporters, they tend to be magazine and book writers who have benefited enormously from both the legitimacy Wolfe's legacy has brought to literary nonfiction, and from the concurrent displacement of the novel as the most prestigious form of literary expression. When experimenting with narrative and rhetorical techniques, they conceive of themselves as working wholly within the nonfiction genre, rather than parsing the philosophical line between fact and fiction, as Norman Mailer and Truman Capote did with their nonfiction novels,* The Armies of the Night *and In* Cold Blood.[1053]

Equally important for the formation of the New New Journalism is the development of American journalism in the nineteenth century. During much of the century, nonfiction was popular over fiction for a variety of reasons such as the general notion that novels were "frivolous or potentially immoral" and the national and the international appetite for learning through "'true adventure' books," of the expanding American "frontier" and "growing population."[1054] Put simply, "America was the story the world wanted to hear."[1055] In journalism, the effect of nonfiction has been that revolutionary journalists began, in the 1830s, to offer their readers "'human interest' stories that drew an audience of readers starved for information

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[1049] Boynton, p.xiv.
[1050] Boynton, pp.xiv-xv.
[1051] Boynton, p.xv.
[1052] Boynton, p.xi.
[1053] Boynton, pp.xi-xii.
[1054] Boynton, p.xxii.
[1055] Boynton, p.xxii.

about other people like themselves, distressed souls from other lands or from upstate farms—people marooned in a rapidly growing city that was often inscrutable, uncaring, and unintelligible."[1056]

In Boynton's opinion, the basic premises of Wolfe's New Journalism were established a century ago. More specifically, Boynton locates the true flowering of New Journalism (that Wolfe had in mind) in the work of the brilliant journalist Charles Dana in the 1880s: "Dana's contribution was to combine a focus on the everyday with a concern for vivid, well-written stories. For Dana, a newspaper story was itself an art form."[1057] His newspaper, *The New York Sun*, "included reporters like Jacob Riis, who wrote about the New York slums he had inhabited for seven years, which lent *Sun's* journalism a muckraking edge."[1058] Indeed, the term New Journalism around the days Dana started practice gained currency as a widely deployed method in many newspapers and the term "was used to describe the blend of sensationalism and crusading journalism—muckraking on behalf of immigrants and the poor."[1059] Another important figure, Lincoln Steffens, "the city editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser* in the 1890s," proposed the emergence of a new genre, "literary journalism," giving further importance to journalism.[1060] Boynton explains, "Steffens made literary journalism—artfully told narrative stories about subjects of concern to the masses—into editorial policy, insisting that the basic goals of the artist and the journalist (subjectivity, honesty, empathy) were the same."[1061] Around the time Steffens made his proposition, the novelist Stephen Crane was writing literary journalism in many newspapers. "Among his contemporaries, Crane was one of the best to put Steffens's vision into practice as he balanced the demands of literature and journalism in a manner that honored both."[1062] Soon, however, the prestige of journalism began to fade:

> *By the first decades of the twentieth century, the growing belief that newspapers should strive for objectivity left little room for literary journalism in their pages. Novelists [like Crane] were warned by Flaubert, Joyce, and others that writing journalism would harm their fiction, further diminishing journalism's status in*

[1056] Boynton, p.xxiii.
[1057] Boynton, p.xxiii.
[1058] Boynton, p.xxiii.
[1059] Boynton, p.xxiv.
[1060] Boynton, p.xxiv.
[1061] Boynton, p.xxiv.
[1062] Boynton, p.xxv.

> *the literary world. The novel gradually took on what [the historian of American literary journalism, John C.] Hartsock calls a "cryptotheological aura," a sense of importance and transcendence that journalism could never match. "The 'fall,' then, of journalism—and by extension narrative literary journalism—from literary grace was largely the result of the invention of high literature in the nineteenth century," Hartsock argues.*[1063]

When Wolfe championed New Journalism in the late 1970s, "the literary hierarchy" was still in the above order and he was reviving—whether consciously or not—a valuable, albeit suppressed, method. In the sense that Wolfe reversed an unfair hierarchy, he can be seen as a hero, however problematic in some senses, for the revival of literary journalism in America and for paving the way for the successful rise of what Boynton calls New New Journalism. In Boynton's genealogy, therefore, we find the basic premises not only of what he proposes with the term New New Journalism but listen to a valuable mini lecture[1064] on the interplay between fiction and nonfiction, the novelist and the reporter, in American literary history. As Boynton explains,

> *with their muckraking and intensive reporting on social and cultural issues, the New New Journalists have revived the tradition of American literary journalism, raising it to a more popular and commercial level than either its nineteenth- or late-twentieth-century predecessors ever imagined. The debates over "journalism" and "literature"—between "subjective" and "objective" reporting—weigh less heavily on this generation, freeing them to combine the best of both genres. Having done so without manifestoes or public debates, the New New Journalism has assumed a premier place in American literature.*[1065]

The importance of Boynton's analysis to this study is that the works by Baker, Vollmann, and Foer discussed in this part bear some affinities with New New Journalism Boynton describes. Like the New New Journalists' turn to the subcultures and the impoverished, Baker, Vollmann, and Foer turn to the ignored, the neglected, the disrespected, and the uncared for. Like the New New Journalists' methods of extensive immersion and prolonged research, Baker, Vollmann, and Foer spend very long periods doing research. Baker reveals a series of fallacies and deceptions carried out on both governmental and library administrative levels with regard to a major change in the library archiving systems that threatens the collapse of civilization's

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[1063] Boynton, p.xxvi.
[1064] The fact that Boynton is the director of graduate program in Journalism at New York University and a contributor and editor to various magazines like *Harper's*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *New York Times* lends more credit to his already insightful analyses.
[1065] Boynton, p.xxx.

print heritage. Working as a muckraker, he exposes the corruptions one by one; when his efforts are willfully thwarted, he exercises his legal right as a private citizen to be granted access to archives and goes to court. As a successful and acclaimed novelist, he revels in the literary possibilities of nonfiction and does not defer to a literary hierarchy that we observed above. Working diligently, sacrificing many years of his life to the cause of helping save the library's print heritage, he narrates the story of the loss of the library card catalogs, the destruction of old and rare books and newspapers: this is a personal, an ethical matter for Baker. It is not possible for him to let the demise of the library go unnoticed, unknown to public, hidden by authorities. Besides his ethical concerns, his intellectual powers are at top speed: Baker thinks, cares, and offers discussions on the philosophical and moral basis of preserving the library heritage.

Similarly, Vollmann is preoccupied with his topic on both ethical and intellectual levels. Many years in the making, *Imperial* draws on an unprecedented rich amount of research and interviews, done and conducted over almost a decade. Yet his efforts go beyond muckraking or journalism in his treatment of his topic. The centuries-long conflict on the U.S.-Mexico border becomes for him a story of the region, the plight of a people whose water and the right to live are gradually stolen from them. The story of Imperial Valley that Vollmann writes is the narrative of Vollmann's explorations of escape routes with illegal immigrants, his talks with border police of both the U.S. and Mexico, the days he spends with many legal and illegal immigrants to understand their poverty, their predicaments, and the story of the official history of Imperial Valley that begins in the 1900s and re-enacts its dramas in new guises in the next decades, until the present.

Likewise, Foer establishes a perfectly sound, and urgent connection between factory farming's degradation of animals and environment and our ethical existence. He does not treat meat consumption as essentially evil and does not promote vegetarianism. Yet his philosophical musings, the series of deceptions and corruptions he exposes with regard to the meat industry gains an incredible urgency when he connects the issue to the human tendency to create stories about food. How we approach factory farms and the stories we tell ourselves for the food we eat are important for Foer: If a person does not have a self with ethical principles, and if

storytelling does not carry that message through time, there is nothing of human value there to save.

It would be great disservice to define the achievements of Baker, Vollmann, and Foer by explaining away their works as mere journalism or mere nonfiction. Yet it would be another instance of injustice if we do not acknowledge their contribution to American literary journalism by way of their exquisite creative nonfiction that not only offers new and revitalizing energies through their ethical and intellectual scope, ambition, and achievement but also perhaps perfecting the methods of the nonfiction writer in their treatment of a subject in a mind-bendingly accurate way that is simultaneously philosophically and ethically defended and described.

Furthermore, the accomplishments of Baker, Vollmann, and Foer also counteracts a dire situation in American letters: a pervasive anti-intellectualism. Many critics have recently been referring to anti-intellectualism in America—mostly as a factor in literature's diminishing importance under the negative impact of political factors. "What can criticism and theory do," W. J. T. Mitchell asks, "to counteract the forces of militarism, unilateralism, and the perpetual state of emergency that is now the explicit policy of the U.S. government? […] What good is intellectual work in the face of the deeply anti-intellectual ethos of American public life?."[1066] In a similar tone, novelist Raymond Federman remarks,

> *[i]t is a recognized fact that the United States is an anti-intellectual*[1067] *nation, a nation of pop culture, a nation that prefers easy spectacle to self-reflection, entertainment rather than art, and consequently it is difficult for writers not only to be taken seriously but even to have access to the sociopolitical arena. It is easier, in America, for a former football or basketball player, or even a wrestler, easier for a second-rate movie star to become involved in the political process and influence the course of history than it is for a writer or an intellectual. The people of the United States distrust writers, especially when their work refuses to entertain—refuses to tell and retell the same old story the same old way. This raises crucial questions about the role of American writers in the face of the great changes that are taking place in the world today. In this sense one could say that American writers, as far back as the early colonial days, have always been* Fallen Prophets. *Whitman and Melville (certainly the*

[1066] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Medium Theory: Preface to the 2003 Critical Inquiry Symposium", **Critical Inquiry**, Volume:30, No:2, 2004, p.327.
[1067] For a discussion on intellectualism in America, see Richard Posner's *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (2001), John Michael's *Anxious Intellects: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals, and Enlightenment Values* (2000).

two greatest American writers of the nineteenth century) were indeed Fallen Prophets.[1068]

The role of the American writer, in Baker, Vollmann, and Foer's understanding, would be to engage with whatever difficulty they see through continued and responsible treatment. As we observed in the previous part, *Human Smoke* and *Rising Up and Rising Down* were, too, propelled by some urgent need to understand the basics of our human lives, and they turned to history and human propensity for violence. It is possible to say that Baker, Vollmann, and Foer proceed determinedly to clarify important issues that need to be clarified, to bring to light unknown but crucial facts of life, to invite the reader to care, to think, and feel morally responsible. Their invitations are valuable because who could be a better example than the writer whose ethical and intellectual pre-eminence is both admirable and, as we experience while reading, delightfully contagious in that they make us ask ourselves: What is life but the life of mind that thinks about, cares, loves, questions everything about the human, and communicates these concerns?

2.2.1. Fallacies and Deceptions in Nicholson Baker's "Discards," "Truckin' for the Future" and *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*

As multifaceted as human civilization, so are our attempts at simultaneously preserving and destroying it. The intellectual heritage of humanity stored in the archives of books and newspapers seems to come under severe attack since the mid-twentieth century, and it has an unlikely enemy as novelist Nicholson Baker demonstrates in his exposé of the corporational underbelly of the so-called technological evolution of the information age.

In three pieces of nonfiction, "Discards" (1994), "Truckin' for the Future" (1996), and *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (2001), Baker reveals how the trend toward information culture is turning libraries into centers of info-capitalism and turning readers and researches into customers. In the meantime, card

[1068] Raymond Federman, "Critifictional Reflections on the Pathetic Condition of the Novel in Our Time", Berry and Di Leo, Eds., pp.219-220.

catalogues are ruthlessly destroyed in the name of the progressive dictates of computerization; print archives of historical legacy, rare and out of print books, centuries-long runs of journals and newspapers, once digitized, are simply thrown out on the pretense that they have completed their life cycles. Baker reveals the unknown, hidden side of the library revolution in the mode of a muckraker whose primary obligation is responsibility to our print heritage.

In "Discards,"[1069] Baker discusses the dubious merits of the digital revolution libraries are undergoing, and the essay comprises a preliminary argument that Baker extends into book form in *Double Fold*. Almost all the information Baker presents comprises of his interviews with the central agents of the revolution such as librarians of both administrative and clerical positions. He visits many university libraries, such as Cornell, Harvard, Berkeley, as well as digitization staff with whom universities entrust their entire card catalogues. He interviews staff of all levels, investigates the transcription processes into microfilm from beginning to end, and reports his findings with the proper documentations of names, places, and dates as well as the accompanying justifications of digitization wherever due.

"Discards" opens with a scene of strange ado for a strange event: a university library celebrates its transition from the centuries-long tradition[1070] of card cataloging to online cataloging in 1985. The t-shirt of a librarian reads, "The Great Discard"; another librarian ceremoniously unloads a drawer of cards to "a trash can decorated with colored paper" while hundreds of balloons float with cards hanging from their strings.[1071] At another university, "the card catalog was ceremonially put out of its misery by an official who pointed a gun at it and 'shot' it."[1072] In yet another university, "a mock wake," complete with "veils," "hymns," and "flowers" is held for the discarded library card catalogue.[1073]

[1069] Nicholson Baker, "Discards", **The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber**, Random, New York, 1996. (The essay was published originally in the *New Yorker* in 1994.)
[1070]The origins of card cataloging goes back to 1791, when the French "Revolutionary government, having confiscated a number of private and monastic libraries throughout France, became curious to know what interesting books it suddenly possessed" (Baker, Discards, p.142). The primary details of each book were written on "ordinary playing cards," and "aces and deuces" were saved "for books with wordy titles" (Baker, Discards, p.142).
[1071] Baker, Discards, pp.125, 126.
[1072] Baker, Discards, p.128.
[1073] Baker, Discards, p.128.

By the time Baker writes this essay, a major amount of the discarding of card catalogues has been completed in many university and public libraries nationwide.

> *One of the odder features of this national paroxysm of shortsightedness and anti-intellectualism is that it isn't the result of wicked forces outside the library walls. […] The villains, instead, are smart, well-meaning library administrators, quite certain that they are only doing what is right for their institutions.*[1074]

Baker is dismayed to see that the process of discarding is taken so light-heartedly. In a dispirited voice, Baker notes how "nobody is making an audible fuss about what they are up to. Nobody is grieving" at the loss of millions and millions of cards that constitute a major part of the history of libraries.[1075]:

> *cards typed on manual typewriters and early electric models; cards printed by the* Library of Congress, Baker & Taylor, *and OCLC; cards whose subject headings were erased with special power erasers, resembling soldering irons, and overtyped in red; cards that have been multiply revised, copied on early models of the Xerox copier, corrected in pencil, color-coded, sleeved in plastic; cards that were handwritten at the turn of the century; cards that were interfiled by generations of staffers, their edges softened by innumerable inquiring patrons.*[1076]

If we consider the value of card catalogs in this light, as an integral part of the history of the library if not of human civilization, Baker's discomfort at the merry occasions for the discarding ceremonies makes sense. Baker cannot accept the idea that cards should be disposed of with such "glee" as the antiquated instruments of the past, long overdue at their service, and a burden on the library.[1077] Especially since what replaces them remains far from being good substitutes because the online library catalog, in its earliest phase in mid-nineties is so inefficient and prone to mistakes that it only turns a faultless research system into one full of faults and misdirection.

The process of discarding requires that cards be microfilmed or transcribed into computer databases manually. After that, if possible, they are recycled as waste paper, or else, "thrown out."[1078] Microfilming is "a luxury few libraries can afford" if they are not "funded with federal grants [such as Title II-C grants] and large private

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[1074] Baker, Discards, p.128.
[1075] Baker, Discards, p.128.
[1076] Baker, Discards, p.126.
[1077] Baker, Discards, p.128.
[1078] Baker, Discards, p.127.

gifts."[1079] Therefore, card catalogues are mostly transcribed by corporations into computer database systems for considerable fees, and then, at the request of libraries, discarded, whether ceremoniously as we mentioned above, or by the digitizing company. OCLC, formerly Ohio College Library Center and now Online Computer Library Center, is the most functional corporation of the international "information industry" that libraries trust their catalogs to be digitized with.[1080] In his frequent visits to OCLC, Baker realizes that OCLC takes its business very seriously yet employs staff that lacks basic traditional card cataloging education, or as Baker calls it, "the intricacies of the cataloger's art."[1081] Well-learned in the librarian's craft, Baker lists what any competent cataloger, traditional or now computerized, needs to have full command of: "the Dewey decimal system"; "the Sears List of Subject Headings"; "Cutter numbers"; "the abbreviational niceties of the International Standard bibliographic Description (ISBD) format."[1082] The chances are slim for the young, mostly temporary staff of OCLC working in shifts to have command of these systems perfected by decades of expertise and practice: the price the digitized catalog shall pay seems self-evident.

While computerization allegedly enables more efficient research in terms of saving time and offering wider ranges of research, it is unexpectedly likely for a computer system to refuse a card's "additional subject headings or enriching notes of various kinds," thereby severing them from their specificities, such as related subjects, and "See Also" notes added in years by librarians themselves.[1083] Moreover, if the digitizing staff makes a typing error with the title or author of a book, or conflates two authors with very similar names and creates variability, the error is likely to damage both the researcher and the book. Another grave mistake would be incorrect recording of subject matter. For instance, Baker tests the computer catalog of University of California and searches "Rome—history."[1084] The search definitely "miss[es] many excellent books, including Robert Brentano's *Rome*

[1079] Baker, Discards, p.129.
[1080] Baker, Discards, p.129.
[1081] Baker, Discards, p.130.
[1082] Baker, Discards, pp.130-131.
[1083] Baker, Discards, p.131.
[1084] Baker, Discards, p.169.

Before Avignon, which is catalogued under 'Rome (Italy)—History—476-1420.'"[1085] Baker tells that typing mistakes or the jumbling of details as in this example, if they are noticed at all, take a long time to correct due to the tedious bureaucratic paperwork it requires. After transcribing the cards, companies return the cards to the libraries, and the cards are immediately destroyed. Thus, there is chance that a book completely disappears from the archives if its digital record is wrong; it becomes irretrievable by the researcher because it becomes unsearchable on the database. Even as much as a misspelling in the surname of the author may cripple a computer research. In contrast, in card cataloguing, a spelling error can be corrected easily, anytime, via crosschecking the card with the book. What is more, the "collocation" method in card catalogs renders typos benign[1086]: "the object of a catalog, […] is to group together, to collocate, all the works by a given writer, and all the editions of a given work by a given writer, and all the works about a given writer's work, and all the biographies of a given writer, in the proper groups and subgroups, rationally."[1087]

The huge number of typographical errors has led databases to develop control mechanisms, and universities that first paid corporations like OCLC to turn their card catalogs into computer catalogs, now have to pay to utilize the control software. Baker finds this situation

> *sad because the cost of technology now consumes nearly 30 percent of the typical American library's budget, according to one 1992 estimate, forcing it to cut book purchases, reference staff, and skilled catalogers, and sad because the technology that libraries are actually buying turns out to be remedial software meant to correct the hash that earlier technologies have made of information once safely stored on paper. […This] is a kind of self-inflicted online hell.*[1088]

This is not to say that Baker denies computerized catalogues any value: he finds them efficacious "in principle."[1089] For instance, computer databases preserve the public from vandalizing catalogues by tearing or stealing the cards, which, surprisingly has been very common in the 1980s. "Card catalogues attract vandals" Baker explains, "because they are expressive of needful social trust and communal achievement, as are other common targets, such as subway cars, railroad bridges,

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[1085] Baker, Discards, p.169.
[1086] Baker, Discards, p.139.
[1087] Baker, Discards, p.151.
[1088] Baker, Discards, p.154.
[1089] Baker, Discards, p.134.

mailboxes, and traffic signs."[1090] Yet from another perspective, the computerization of catalogues causes so much more loss:

> *The unfortunate truth is that, in practice, existing frozen card catalogs, which just sit there, doing no harm to anyone, are typically being replaced by local databases that are full of new errors, are much harder to browse efficiently, are less rich in cross-references and subject headings, lack local character, do not group related titles and authors together particularly well, and are in many cases stripped of whole classes of specific historical information (e.g., the original price of the book, its acquisition date, the original cataloger's own initials, the record of any copies that have been withdrawn, and whether it was a gift or purchase) that existed free, using up no disk space or computer-room electricity, requiring no pricey software, updates or daily backups or hardware service calls, right in the original Remington or Brodart wooden cabinets.*[1091]

Of course, most of these criticisms would not apply to today's extremely fast and efficient online university library databases that not only enable access to previously unimaginable resources, but also make it possible to carry out comprehensive research which would otherwise be rather difficult. What is important here is to highlight the sacrifice we have to endure for the sake of better research; an ethical evaluation of the means and ends.

If only the major excuse for the discarding frenzy were for purposes of research: University of California Berkeley, which holds "one of the best research collections in the world" and is "unusually high" in "the quality of its cataloging," decides to open up "space for eight study tables" in its library.[1092] Budget constraints force them to pay OCLC for an average rather than a "premium" and hence more comprehensive electronic transcription packet.[1093] Transformed into their "mediocritize[d]" digital versions, the Berkeley card catalogues are thrown away.[1094] "Library administrators always use the magical phrase 'out of space' when they want to get rid of something, but this in no way constitutes an argument. Libraries have been running out of space since the Sumerians first impassioned clay."[1095] Along with card catalogues, books classified as obscure or old receive the same treatment, which he discusses at length in *Double Fold*, to be discussed below. The ungrounded argument on lack of space is dangerously revelatory:

[1090] Baker, Discards, pp.135-136.
[1091] Baker, Discards, p.138.
[1092] Baker, Discards, p.156.
[1093] Baker, Discards, p.155.
[1094] Baker, Discards, p.155.
[1095] Baker, Discards, p.157.

> *When we redefine libraries as means rather than as places—as conduits of knowledge rather than as physical buildings filled with physical books—we may think that the new, more "visionary," more megatrendy definition embraces the old, but in fact it doesn't: the removal of the concrete word "books" from the library's statement of purpose is exactly the act that allows misguided administrators to work out their hostility toward printed history while the rest of us sleep.*
>
> *Again, lest we become confused and forgetful, the function of a great library is to sort and store obscure books. […] Libraries are the repository for the out of print and the less desired, and we value them inestimably for that.*[1096]

Libraries should remain environments of paper, not environments of technology, Baker warns us. A greater warning comes in "Truckin' for the Future."[1097]

When librarians notify Baker-the-library-enthusiast and the self-proclaimed "preservationist," on some dire constraints San Francisco Public Library is going though, Baker embarks on a project that would become one of the best investigative journalisms in his career.[1098] Baker is not exactly a journalist let alone an investigative journalist. Nevertheless, the methods he employs when thinking about and researching a subject matter for an essay in progress, when combined with his intellectual and ethical zeal, may effortlessly produce unique works that connect him to the muckrakers of the past and the New New Journalists of the present. In "Truckin' for the Future," Baker reveals "the real story" behind the electronic revolution the libraries are undergoing.[1099]

In 1996, San Francisco Public Library, directed by Kenneth Dowlin,[1100] moves to a new handsome building, "a large gray structure with a hole in the middle where the stacks should be."[1101] In the years leading up the move which Dowlin himself proposes, the library, its holdings, and its function go through major changes, unbeknownst to many who would be concerned. Baker fills us on the details he has learned with great care and attention.

[1096] Baker, Discards, pp.158-159.
[1097] Nicholson Baker, "Truckin' for the Future", **The Way,** (Truckin'). (The essay was published originally in the *New Yorker* in 1996.)
[1098] Baker, Truckin', p.106.
[1099] Baker, Truckin', p.107.
[1100] The title of the essay is the catch phrase of Dowlin's (failed) campaign for the presidency of American Library Association in 1987 (Baker, Truckin' p.116). Also worth noting is that Dowlin is a former Marine Corps, and a part-time bookmobile driver before he ventures on the world of library administration, a very unlikely, or so it would seem, background for his revolutionary librarianship in Baker's estimate.
[1101] Baker, Truckin', p.109.

To begin, the story of the move, as Baker reveals, is one of deception and manipulation:

> *The construction [of the new library building] was financed with more than a hundred million dollars in public money: the voter approved this munificent bond issue because the old [library], they were told, couldn't hold what is was asked to hold—a research-level general collection, thousands of specialized periodicals, […] city archives, newspaper archives, photo archives, and so on. When appeals went out for money to furnish and outfit the new building, more than thirty million dollars flowed in from private donors and "affinity groups," representing gays and lesbians, several ethnic communities, and environmentalists.*[1102]

Thirty-one librarians of San Francisco Public Library see the construction details of the new building, and with admirable insight and intellect, if not work ethic and personal moral responsibility, detect a grave problem: the space the new building proposes reserves too little for shelf space and offers an abundance of "floor space, or atrium space."[1103] In their letter to Kenneth Dowlin, the staff remind the administration of this fact, and even go on to claim that "the current plan for the new building is not meeting the needs set forth to voters to justify the expenditure."[1104] It takes four years for the library administration to heed the warnings. Prior to the move to the new building, the administration orders "weeding" in haste, a routine but vigilant, long process in library practice, which means the careful selection and discarding of extra copies, unused, or books damaged beyond repair[1105] Not surprisingly, the care and expertise weeding requires is unheeded, too, and an incredible number of books is discarded to downsize the library's archive until it fits the new building. Baker reports from his interview with two librarians who worked in the weeding process:

> *LIBRARIAN A: They said, "Get rid of as much as possible." And they said, "Anything that doesn't look like we should have it in the New Main Library, if it doesn't look good, if it needs to be repaired…" And then there was the question whether when you sent things to be repaired, was it actually being repaired, or were they tossing it?*
> *LIBRARIAN B: There seemed to be a reluctance to send things to Repair because [the staff in Repair] were "overwhelmed."*
> *LIBRARIAN A: People were beginning to think, "Wait a minute, these are just being tossed."*

[1102] Baker, Truckin', p.109.
[1103] Baker, Truckin', p.109.
[1104] Baker, Truckin', p.110.
[1105] Baker, Truckin', p.110.

> *LIBRARIAN B: Actually, we don't know what happened, because the librarians weeded their areas but a senior librarian had the final word we don't know what she did.*
> *LIBRARIAN A: She started putting everything on the same truck, and I said, "This is not to be thrown away, it's not to be discarded." She said, "No, just put it on."*[1106]

While loads and loads of books leave the library with trucks that come every other day, some librarians start what they call "guerilla librarianship" until "the library comes to its senses."[1107] They stamp due-dates on non-circulating books and rescue them from discard, they delay or refuse to weed: they "have saved thousands of books by the sly, quietly transferring them from one department to another, hiding them in their lockers. They reintroduce these books when the danger has passed."[1108]

Most of these librarians follow in the steps of William Ramirez, the former chief librarian of San Francisco Public Library who stands up against Kenneth Dowlin's former policies of slow discard under various pretenses. In 1986, Ramirez writes a "memo" to Dowlin and explains that the library staff is concerned that present policies will "move us in the direction of changing this library from a strong reference, research resource and service center to an undistinguished 'popular library.'"[1109] Three years later, when an earthquake in San Francisco closes the library to public for safety reasons, Dowlin decides to turn this situation into an opportunity to prepare for the future move to the new building. He orders that book departments be combined, through, for instance, merging literature and history departments under Humanities. Twenty-seven librarians sign a petition, to no avail, against this ruin of specific departments.

Baker is right in connecting these developments to Dowlin. San Francisco Public Library opens a new chapter in its history, a chapter that also revises the function and meaning of the public library, under Dowlin's administration that revises the deeds of the previous administrations. In the 1960s, under the administration of William Holman, San Francisco Public Library

> *began an ambitious program of book buying (out-of-print as well as new books, with the intention of turning [it] into a high-level research-library—not quite as high-level as the New York Public, but worthy even so of San Francisco's*

[1106] Baker, Truckin', p.113.
[1107] Baker, Truckin', pp.121, 115.
[1108] Baker, Truckin', p.121.
[1109] Baker, Truckin', p.120.

> *literary past, with pockets of eccentric comprehensiveness. Subsequent city librarians built on Holman's hoard, until Dowlin arrived with an alternative vision. "First and foremost," Dowlin wrote in a letter to the Chronicle not long ago, [San Francisco Public Library] is a public library, not a research facility." It's both, of course, and the books and scholarly journals stored in Brooks Hall—a vast, dusty space under the street which the library borrowed recently to store its overflow—belie Dowlin's claim.*[1110]

Worth noting is the fact that Baker pays his visit to Brooks Hall without any entrance supervision, which gives another glimpse of the vulnerability of these forsaken books. As he explains, the collections "sitting unprotected in the squalor of a storage area, near carpet remnants and construction debris" in Brooks Hall include rare and extremely valuable collections and reference books.[1111] Yet since they do not comply with the recently "fashionable" notion of "circulation-sensitive" library management, or in other words, because they "simply don't accord with the altered conception of the public library's true mission," Brooks Hall cannot go beyond serving as a "book dealer's paradise" accumulated over the years by Dowlin's predecessors.[1112] As Baker puts in, "circulation […] is a meritless measure of a book's interest or usefulness in a research library; interests change from one generation to the next."[1113]

Baker's other findings prove no less heartbreaking and alarming. Upon exploring the new building, for instance, Baker discovers many librarianship routines other than weeding that are abused. Similar to his unnoticed trip to Brooks Hall, Baker enters unnoticed into the otherwise "restricted" staff-only book sorting room in the new library building.[1114] The customary way of sorting returned books is to "slid [them] down a chute into the sorting room in plastic bins: a simple, durable system."[1115] The new building, however, uses "a motorized conveyor belt [that] pulls the books down the chute one at a time, and when they jam, they get hurt. It's as if you sent your clothes down to the luggage handlers in the airport without putting them in a suitcase. Hundreds of books have been torn and injured this way."[1116] What is more, this new sorting room lacks both the conventional shelves a sorting room

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[1110] Baker, Truckin', p.119.
[1111] Baker, Truckin', p.119.
[1112] Baker, Truckin', pp.120, 119.
[1113] Nicholson Baker, **Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper**, Vintage, London, 2001, (Double), p.221.
[1114] Baker, Truckin', p.122.
[1115] Baker, Truckin', p.121.
[1116] Baker, Truckin', p.121.

holds and the staff responsible for shelving them in the sorting room. As a result, Baker observes, "at least forty thousand books currently await reshelving" as they are stacked carelessly, in odd angles, in disorderly stacks on the floors, suffering from some more damage to their spines and covers.[1117] "The sorting room is like the entire new library," Baker succinctly concludes, "in that it has built into it a contempt for, at least an indifference to, literary culture and requirements."[1118]

The card catalog of the library, as would be expected, never makes it to the new building, and stays behind at the old building and waits for the completion of full digitization before it is destroyed. Librarians plead Baker to "save" the catalog and Baker "agree[s] to keep it intact."[1119] First, he makes "a formal request under the Public Records Act to inspect the card catalog" hoping that the "legalistic demarche would" clarify the catalog's position as "public document, and temporarily" delay its destruction as "surplus property."[1120] When his request is denied, Baker "sue[s] for legal access" and not only is he granted access but also the city's Library Commission "vote[s] to find a way to keep it."[1121] Baker later makes another formal request to be presented with the library's "Withdrawal Register" since 1897. In the request, he writes, "[s]urely there is a record of the disposition of million dollars' worth of city property."[1122] The response to the request which turns into "Exhibit D *Baker vs. San Francisco Public Library*" denies such comprehensive records other than a list of books removed between 1995 and 1996. Even a study of this list reveals massive loss: many "last copies and hard-to-find books" were discarded, including works by "Muriel Spark, Goethe, and William Dean Howells," the last copy of a 1901 edition of Charles Darwin's *The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants*, and "an appalling number of research-level monographs in the sciences."[1123]

As part of his investigation, Baker spends a month crosschecking cards with their online catalogs and notices incredible lapses and absences in database entries. The digitization process, carried out by corporations and funded by government, is

[1117] Baker, Truckin', p.122.
[1118] Baker, Truckin', p.122.
[1119] Baker, Truckin', p.106.
[1120] Baker, Truckin', p.106.
[1121] Baker, Truckin', p.106.
[1122] Baker, Truckin', pp.124-125.
[1123] Baker, Truckin', pp.127, 126.

supposed to have been faultless since its expensive expert services have liquidated the library's generous share of the city budget. This is the crux of the matter:

> *The real story is about what happens—what to a greater or lesser degree is happening in a number of cities around the country—when telecommunications enthusiasts take over big old research libraries and attempt to remake them, with corporate help, as high-traffic showplaces for information technology. Such transformations consume unforecastably large sums of money, which is why the [San Francisco Public Library] found itself […] essentially broke, with a one-million-dollar deficit in its operating budget, its new building annotated and beflagged with the names of major benefactors who enabled it, just barely, to open its doors.*[1124]

These benefactors have complex relationships with libraries, and have curious purposes with regard to libraries. To illustrate, Pacific Telesis Group is a corporate benefactor of San Francisco Public Library and it "wants to become a 'content provider' in the growing fee-for-service information business."[1125] The person that presides over this company provides the same services for the San Francisco Library Commission—an official position in the government—and believes in "informational connectivity."[1126] Likewise, Kenneth Dowlin, "the city librarian," has plans to turn the library into a "telecommunications utility" through installing his own remote electronic access software, and if it is accepted, he notifies, "I get my five percent."[1127] Dowlin has a point, it is a lucrative business indeed: "Last year, the entrepreneurial [San Francisco Public Library] launched Library Express, a service that charged sixty dollars an hour to clients who needed, and could afford, a higher level of research assistance and document retrieval than the unpaying patron."[1128] Lucrative, besides brand new, one should say: the function of the library is redefined and its services categorized and price-tagged accordingly, while creating itself a niche market for "clients" seeking "content."

Of course it would have been possible to ignore these technological developments in library science, Baker insists, were these people also not destroying the actual books on the library shelves. During the course of the move to the new building, Kenneth Dowlin has "sent more than two hundred thousand books to a

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[1124] Baker, Truckin', p.107.
[1125] Baker, Truckin', p.107.
[1126] Baker, Truckin', p.107.
[1127] Baker, Truckin', p.108.
[1128] Baker, Truckin', p.108.

landfill—many of them old, hard to find, out of print, and valuable."[1129] Probable candidates are the books that Baker would not find in the online catalog. Baker learns these facts from librarians who want their names undisclosed because "Dowlin has a way, some assert, of punishing dissidents by exiling them to branch duty (a charge the administration has denied)."[1130] These anonymous rebels, or heroes, of San Francisco Public Library believe that "their library was undergoing a kind of brain surgery" and as one of them puts it, "its EEG[1131] is going flat."[1132] (109).

Baker is deeply troubled with the loss of card catalogs and the discarded books, and we shall find him in *Double Fold* himself purchasing the card catalog of an entire library to save it from destruction. His criticism of library's claims to so-called space limitation in excusing discard of books and catalogs can also be observed in "If Libraries Don't Do It, Who Will?"[1133] (2001), which is Baker's commemoration of the opening ceremony of a new library at Duke University. Praising Duke University on their exemplary attitude toward storing and valuing books against the widespread national tendency to downsize library spaces through digitization, Baker reiterates his argument from another perspective: The country is full of huge buildings; there are enough big buildings reserved for storing "cheese products, or truck parts, or Happy Meal toys, or Pentium computers that will be scrap in five years" or even "laundry."[1134] Authorities, however, "inflate the cost of keeping things, and they denigrate the durability of paper, because it's distressing to them that it is so inexpensive to store what was long ago bought, cataloged, and shelved."[1135] Therefore, when it comes to the huge and ever-expanding collections of libraries, every effort is made at "squeezing" print material into microfilms; impressive amounts of money is spent on "digital projects" that doubles or triples the storage expenses libraries would need.[1136] Libraries cannot, by principle, operate on "reformatted" material; nor can they trust "businesses" and corporations to carry out

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[1129] Baker, Truckin', p.108.
[1130] Baker, Truckin', p.108.
[1131] Electroencephalogram, recording of electrical activity of the brain.
[1132] Baker, Truckin', p.109.
[1133] Nicholson Baker, "If Libraries Don't Do It, Who Will?", **The Way**, (Libraries).
[1134] Baker, Libraries, pp.129, 130.
[1135] Baker, Libraries, p.131.
[1136] Baker, Libraries, pp.129, 131.

a task of such importance.[1137] Further, it is a paradox that keeping a book in a library costs the library far much less than its digitization it does. As in his previous essays, Baker is motivated as much through his love of and respect for books and belief in the importance of preserving them as with a desire to expose the corporationial and governmental forces at work in destroying an immense part of human civilization forever.

What we glimpse in "Discards," "Truckin' for the Future," and "If Libraries Don't Do It, Who Will?" culminates in *Double Fold* which is Baker's most extensive treatment of the topic in his decade-long struggle with raising public and private awareness with regard to the fallacies and deceptions of digital revolution. In thirty-eight short chapters titled wittily as "It Can Be Brutal," "Destroying to Preserve," "Dingy, Dreary, Dog-eared, and Dead," the book stands witness to a massive project of destruction in about three hundred pages. There is also an *Index*, *References*, and three high-quality reproductions of colored photographs of six richly illustrated newspaper spreads and one sheet's horribly unsuccessful microfilm image, and a *Notes* section that offers 257 notes for citations for the people and materials Baker quotes from. A work of immense passion, serious investigation and documentation, *Double Fold* brings Baker the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction in 2001.

While we may read about Baker's love-affair with the exquisiteness of books and newspapers in essays like "The *Times* in 1951" (2001) and "Reading the Paper" (2002), which are both collected in *The Way the World Works*, it is only in the Preface to *Double Fold* that we find the origins of Baker's passionate defense of libraries. In 1993, the *New Yorker* commissions Baker for an essay. Baker plans to write "a brief, cheerful piece about the appeal of card catalogues."[1138] "I began talking to librarians around the country," Baker explains, "and I found out that card catalogs were being thrown out everywhere. I grew less cheerful, and the essay grew longer."[1139] This essay is "Discards" that was discussed above, which qualified Baker as a "library activist" in the eyes of many librarians.[1140]

[1137] Baker, Libraries, p.134.
[1138] Baker, Double, p.vii.
[1139] Baker, Double, p.vii.
[1140] Baker, Double, p.viii.

Baker's concentration on card catalogues in "Discards" does not lead him immediately to the recognition of the greater catastrophe that *Double Fold* reveals. As he tells in "Truckin' for the Future," the librarians in San Francisco who plead him for help actually help him become aware of the massive book-discarding policy of libraries. *Double Fold* is also based on the chasing of a lead. The events Baker reports in "Truckin' for the Future" creates a stir[1141] in San Francisco and an old man named Bill Blackbeard informs Baker on further shocking news. What Blackbeard tells is so completely shocking that Baker fails to "comprehend"

> *that the Library of Congress, the purported library of last resort, had replaced most of its enormous collection of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers with microfilm, and that research libraries were relying on what [Blackbeard] called "fraudulent" scientific studies when they justified the discarding of books and newspapers on the basis of diagnosed states of acidity and embrittlement.*[1142]

Two years later, Baker begins investigating these leads and what is planned as another article for the *New Yorker* expands and turns into *Double Fold.*

One could argue that an ardent lover of books and literature who cherishes their material peculiarities and beauties to the point of obsession, a treasurer of literary culture who believes in the preservation every bit of written history as much as possible such as Baker would not have been hard pressed to react in the way he did. He is so frustrated and desperate that he ends up writing extensively and diligently about the unknown controversies surrounding the deliberate destruction of the cultural and intellectual history of the country. At we witness in the above essays and as we shall see shortly, Baker's reactions to violations of books and libraries may ultimately point out his rightful mistrust on the ethical and intellectual judgment one would normally expect from experts and authorities on delicate matters. And, when they fail, voices of disapproval rise inevitably.

Double Fold takes libraries to task for converting original print materials of historical value on a deceptive, if not completely untrue, hypothesis since 1950. Libraries and microfilm companies carry out aggressive propaganda on the imminent loss of nearly all old books and newspapers to some alleged inevitable paper damage

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[1141] The reaction *Double Fold* receives from librarians yields various controversial responses and reviews. See Lynch (2003), Orr (2002), and Pavelka (2002).
[1142] Baker, Double, p.viii.

that they prove with unreliable tests. It is claimed that all paper made of "ground-wood pulp"[1143] will "crumble into dust" in the very near future. Therefore, the argument is on behalf of preserving print documents by microfilming them before their paper disintegrates.[1144] Baker cannot be convinced, because, intent on finding such disintegrating paper, his searches in the libraries yield no example of disintegrating paper. Furthermore, there is no approved scientific study on the life of paper: "there has never been a long-term study that attempted to plot an actual loss-of-strength curve for samples of naturally aging newsprint, or indeed for samples of any paper."[1145] Yet microfilming has to have some justification and the justifications have to be scientifically proven:

> *In the absence of real long-term data, predictions have relied on methodologically shaky "artificial aging" (or "accelerated aging") experiments, in which you bake a paper sample in a laboratory oven for a week or two and then belabor it with standardized tests. […] But the results of these sorts of divinatory calculations, invoked with head-shaking gravity by library administrators, have been uniformly wrong, and they are now viewed with skepticism by many paper scientists.*[1146]

The book's title refers to one of these tests where the edge of a book page is folded from the exact same point numerously until paper breaks with use. The fold test is specifically designed to announce the onset of the "apocalypse of paper" and thereby to promote the discarding of books, which was not to begin until the space-killers of newspapers were gone after microfilming.[1147] A particular piece of paper's success in the fold test determines the numbers of years it can survive in the library before it disintegrates due to "inherent vice."[1148] The folding test declares the most likely lifespan for a paperback book from the 1900s as twenty-five years and microfilming is encouraged to preserve these imperiled books. Yet in a couple of years after the fold test begins to send books and newspapers to discard, scientists prove that the fold test is an incredibly misconceived, misguiding test, and for Baker it is nothing but "an instrument of deception, almost always of self-deception" at the

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[1143] The 2002 Vintage copy of *Double Fold* used in this study seems to be printed on ground-wood pulp paper with a texture of visible fibers, the not so smooth but beautifully yellowish pages.
[1144] Baker, Double, p.6.
[1145] Baker, Double, p.8.
[1146] Baker, Double, p.8.
[1147] Baker, Double, pp.143, 33.
[1148] Baker, Double, p.150.

service of libraries intent on opening up space.[1149] As a scientist clarifies, the fold test could only be used on paper whose usage requires that it be folded frequently by users and sometimes by design, such as "bank notes and maps," and a fold test on books bears no resemblance to actual use where readers turn rather than fold pages, and that this test cannot have any determination on the endurance of paper, the necessity and urgency microfilming, nor the discarding of books or newspapers.[1150]

Baker's purpose in revealing these misdirections is to take libraries to task for their deceptive reformatting and microfilming policies. For instance, the British Library of London, home to the biggest archive of international newspapers, has been suffering from storage trouble since 1996 and has been "rid[ding] itself of about" millions of volumes of the world's best collections. Brian Lang, the library's director, informs Baker that "[t]he intention is that runs of newspapers for which no bids have been received will be pulped."[1151] The U. S. Library of Congress "reject[s] everything" British library offers them, including precious archives of U.S. newspapers, while the American Antiquarian Society accepts some collections that cover the Civil War era.[1152] Terrified at the idea of these newspapers being pulped, destroyed to flakes by machines, Baker "hastily form[s] a non-profit corporation" since a private citizen cannot bid on library discard auctions, and rents a warehouse with his savings.[1153] Via his non-profit "American Newspaper Repository" corporation, Baker starts bidding on the British Library's discards. If his efforts may seem grand, they are not without basis:

> *If American libraries had been doing the job we paid them to do, and innocently trusted that they were doing, over the past five decades—if they had been taking reasonable care of our communal newspaper collections rather than stacking them in all the wrong places, and finally selling them to book-breakers or dumping them in the trash outright (an employee of one Southern library recently rescued from a Dumpster, and successfully resold to a dealer, a run of* Harper's Weekly *worth ten thousand dollars)—then the British Library's decision to auction off millions of pages of urban life, although it would mark a low point of cultural husbandry, would not have been such a potentially disastrous loss to future historians. Fifty years ago, after all, there were bound*

[1149] Baker, Double, pp.146, 161.
[1150] Baker, Double, p.153.
[1151] Baker, Double, p.11.
[1152] Baker, Double, p.11.
[1153] Baker, Double, p.12.

> *sets, even double sets, of all the major metropolitan dailies safely stored in libraries around the United States.*[1154]

Intent on uncovering the grandiosity of this loss, Baker belaboriously lists all the major libraries and the collections they have discarded on the way to becoming depositories of microfilmed versions of these documents.

The role of government policies turns out to be surprisingly supportive of this destructive policy, if not outrightly encouraging. For instance, the National Endowment for the Humanities has been carrying out a specially funded U.S. Newspaper Program since 1985. The purpose of the project is first, the cataloging of U.S. newspapers as much as possible and second, the conversion of these newspapers into microfilm. The program "has given libraries about forty-five million dollars in so-called preservation money—and zero dollars for storage space."[1155] In point of fact, the program

> *makes no requirement that libraries actually preserve, in the physical sense of 'reshelve,' their originals after they have been sent out for federally funded filming. The effect of all this [National Endowment for the Humanities] microfilm money has been to trigger a last surge of discarding, as libraries use federal preservation grants to solve their local space problems. Not since the monk-harassments of sixteenth-century England has a government tolerated, indeed stimulated, the methodical eradication of so much primary-source material.*[1156]

The determining role of individual local government officials is another determining factor since the city librarian and the library administration may cooperate in saving not only their but also other libraries' archives. Something to this effect has taken place in Boston Public Library where the library "curator of microtexts and newspapers," Charles Longley, and the city Librarian Philip McNiff have worked together not only to preserve the city library's collections but also salvaged newspapers from among Harvard's discards.[1157] The opposite example has been observed in "Truckin' for the Future" in Kenneth Dowlin's revolutionary administration. It is sad to note that the positive example of Boston Public Library is limited to a few other efforts and besides their recoveries, "the annihilation of once accessible collections of major daily papers of the late nineteenth and twentieth

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[1154] Baker, Double, p.13.
[1155] Baker, Double, p.15.
[1156] Baker, Double, p.16.
[1157] Baker, Double, p.17.

centuries is pretty close to total."[1158] This, in Baker's opinion, is nothing more than the intentional erasure by a country of its own history by destroying its permanent records and replacing them with their barely mediocre replicas.

Baker's focus on newspapers is especially important because as the primary targets of the destructive operation of microfilming, they lose all their authenticity. He does grant microfilm its practical uses and does not object to it in principle. Nevertheless, at least in 2001 when Baker writes the book, high-resolution image scanners were not available and black and white microfilming was at its best an average means of converting the vast sheets of newspapers heavily and vividly illustrated along with other non-reproducible features. As he explains,

> *the microfilming of old newspapers (which contain many thousands of woodcuts, by the way, not to mention Easter-egg cutouts, paper dolls, dress patterns, and illustrated sheet music) has, right from the beginning, been intimately linked with their destruction. The disbanding of every volume in order to speed production and avoid gutter shadow (the middle area of an open volume, where the pages turn down toward the binding, a region harder to light and keep in focus) has long been the preferred method of newspaper microphotography in the United States.*[1159]

No doubt the disbanded pages were not rebound; they had to be destroyed to be preserved because of both paper disintegration and space.[1160]

Taking the American Library of Congress specially to task, Baker wonders, "[w]hy, one wants querulously to ask, is our national library so often in the throes of space crisis?"[1161] Baker is irritated to note that "[a] year of daily paper would fill fifty-two volumes and occupy less than half the Barbie aisle in a Toys R Us."[1162] Somehow, however, Library of Congress seems to find it hard "to do what any steadily growing concern—a successful pet-food discounter, say, or a distributor of auto parts, or a museum of sculpture—manages to do year after year, without fuss."[1163] It is a problem of "will," he concludes[1164] (36): "librarians have lied shamelessly about the extent of paper's fragility, and they continue to lie about it.

[1158] Baker, Double, p.18.
[1159] Baker, Double, p.25.
[1160] Baker, Double, p.26.
[1161] Baker, Double, p.35.
[1162] Baker, Double, p.35.
[1163] Baker, Double, p.36.
[1164] Baker, Double, p.36.

For over fifty years they have disparaged paper's residual strength, while remaining 'blind as lover' to the failings and infirmities of film."[1165]

In conclusion, although technology has advanced to a point of perfection in terms of online and digital archiving, benefiting both scholars and public in unprecedented efficiency, Baker's criticisms on library's discard policies should be considered as the reasonable worries of a humanist. As Geoffrey Harpham writes,

> *[h]umanists operate on a human scale; they treat their subjects not as organisms, cells, or atoms, nor as specks of animate matter in the vast universe. Nor, for that matter, as clients, patients, customers, or cases. But as self-aware individuals conscious of their existence. Humanistic knowledge is centered in texts (in the broadest sense of the term) produced by human beings engaged in the process of reflecting on their lives. At the core of the humanities is the distinctively human capacity to imagine, to interpret, and to represent the human experience.*[1166]

Harpham sounds almost uncannily right when we consider his words within the context of humanity's engagement with technology, or in Baker's defense of the preservation of the library, and the library's preservation of the archives of human history. On a final note, if Nicholson Baker's argument on the importance of the necessity of the preservation of the print heritage of history would require a vivid illustration of its relevance, William T. Vollmann's *Imperial* (2009) would singlehandedly prove the significance of Baker's insight; without extensive research, access to centuries-old resources, a major contribution to an understanding of a particular period in history such as Vollmann's would have not been possible.

2.2.2. New Faces of the Empire in William T. Vollmann's *Imperial*

Imperial is the 1300-page account of Vollmann's decade-long study of the history of the Imperial County of the state of California.[1167] With the zest of a historian and as an ardent investigator, Vollmann covers newspaper and many other historical archives from the 1900s onwards and brings to light such details that re-write a major part of the region's and nation's history. Though immensely important, archival coverage is not the only strength of *Imperial*. Were it not for Vollmann's

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[1165] Baker, Double, p.41.
[1166] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Beneath and Beyond the 'Crisis in the Humanities'", **New Literary History**, Volume:36, No:1, 2005, p.27.
[1167] Hemmingson, p.76.

ingenious interviews with legal and illegal Mexican immigrants, his efforts to gain deeper understanding of these people's lives, aspirations, sufferings, and work conditions through absorbing every detail of every aspect of the Mexican-American border, historical research would not have made such impact. It would have been a backward glance. In Vollmann's overarching perspective, however, the backward glance turns into a cautionary tale about the present and the future while Vollmann sees a striking continuity in America's centuries-long relationship with Mexico. Meanwhile, his narrative veers among the genres of "ethnography," "journalism," "memoir," "cultural study", "political criticism," and "prose poem."[1168] In their totality, the mixture of these genres brings to the contemporary American literary scene a precious sense of seriousness and responsibility. The book's comprehensive grasp of the essence of America might even have produced, if Vollmann had chosen to, a magnificent novel, yet as will be noted below, the nonfictional form makes this grand endeavor probably more significant than it would be in fiction.

Vollmann's interest in Imperial Valley begins in 1997 when his friend, the influential American literary critic Larry McCaffery introduces Vollmann to the area.[1169] On his first visit, Imperial does not impress Vollmann. He finds it "hot, flat, muted and dull. The badlands and mountains of San Diego appealed to me more; in the most objective sense, they offered entities to look at."[1170] Through the years, Vollmann goes to Imperial on writing assessments for magazines, and each visit presents him a new vista on the myriad forms of human suffering caused by border issues. The research widens, and *Imperial* comes into being slowly. Vollmann explains,

> *[w]hen I began to study the history of the period, my mind remained unbiased by knowledge. All I knew was that somehow Imperial County had altered from being one of the richest bits of farmland in the United States to the poorest county in California, and I couldn't fathom how. John Steinbeck's* The Pearl*, set in Baja not far south of Imperial, is a parable about how lives can be ruined by wealth. When a poor man finds the pearl, everyone wants to get it from him; he becomes endangered and dangerous. The great wealth of Imperial, the pearl whose discovery revived her perched silt, was the water to which one accident of geography, a second of relative seniority, and a third of American water law's generosity entitled her.*[1171]

[1168] Hemmingson, p.76.
[1169] Hemmingson, p.76.
[1170] William T. Vollmann, **Imperial**, Viking, New York, 2009, p.302.
[1171] Vollmann, Imperial, p.528.

This book is not only revisionary history in the mode of a reevaluation of some American myths but it is also illuminating in its lessons for a very current and urgent global issue that misses the large audience it deserves: water politics. The world is faced with diminishing water resources and in the near future, it will cause as great controversies as other natural resources have caused in the past. Water, as we shall discuss below, will become the central agent in every conflict between the U.S. and Mexico, and actors claiming rights over Imperial Valley's water, for just and unjust purposes, will populate the following history and will remind us of the dangers of the future to come.

A good point of entering the massively detailed world of *Imperial* would be to clarify what Imperial pertains to. Factually, Imperial refers, first, to one of the fifty-eight counties in the state of California. The Imperial County lies on the Mexico-California border where Mexicans try constantly and desperately to enter the U.S. illegally. Within the county, there is also a city called Imperial. The Imperial of the title, however, does not have existence besides this book or outside Vollmann's personal perception: he defines, in a sense, an undefined—if ever definable—Imperial, an "amorphous region," possibly "an arbitrary, semi-imaginary area."[1172] Vollmann's Imperial seems to point at the region in its totality before 1848 when the "Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo cedes half of Mexico to U.S., including much of the area which I call Imperial."[1173] Hence, the region Vollmann calls Imperial is both Mexican Imperial and American Imperial: it suffers from a "maddening doubleness," a "bifurcation" that differs from its current state of "existing within mutually exclusive zones of authority."[1174] Under the title of "Definitions of Imperial" we read:

> *Imperial is green, green fields, haystacks, and wide mountains. Imperial widens itself almost into boundlessness, like the Salton Sea as you go south. Imperial is bright fields, then desert wastes, stacks of hay bales almost Indian yellow. Imperial is a dark field glimmering white with irrigation sprays. Imperial is a loud lonely train whistling in darkness. Imperial dreams fragrant vegetable dreams. Imperial dreams resentfully of the wealth it could have if the stink of death would only depart from the broken-windowed resorts of the Salton Sea. Imperial is the smell of a feedlot on a hot summer night. […] Imperial is the*

[1172] Vollmann, Imperial, pp.48, 110.
[1173] Vollmann, Imperial, p.1136.
[1174] Vollmann, Imperial, p.185.

> *brown-skinned man who somehow missed every immigration amnesty and who now laments for the good old days of the 1950s when* all we needed back then was just a rancher to give a signature to back us up. *Imperial is solid white farmer-citizens, and the conglomerates who now own so many of them. […] But most of all, Imperial is "Mexicans" legal and illegal, and Imperial is also "Mexican-Americans. […] Legally and illegally they establish themselves upon the land, and they try to stay; they want to live. […]* Imperial is the continuum between Mexico and America.[1175]

For Vollmann, all these attributes make Imperial "peculiar, enigmatic, sad, beautiful."[1176] It was first a frontier for America, and then, an abandoned dream. As Vollmann puts it, "Imperial is a future of *Settlement, Organization, Progress, and Achievement,* which its own pioneers, settlers, and organizers might not like if they knew what was coming."[1177] At the beginning of the twentieth century, as one of the symbols of American progress, the irrigation of this land was claimed to carry it up in the ranks of the Nile Delta.[1178] Ever since the beginning of its settlement in the 1900s, however, irrigation was regulated by private enterprise which also regulated the wealth of the landowners. Therefore, the promises of Imperial's history contradict all these geographical details and renders them mere historical errata. For Vollmann, understanding what Imperial is and what Imperial was is the main question of this book.

As usual with Vollmann books that include maps, figures, photographs, and sketches most of which are authored and drawn by Vollmann, *Imperial* opens, in a wonderful Viking Penguin production, with maps of the region drawn by Vollmann and the photographs taken by him are dispersed throughout the book. The first map, "The Entity Called Imperial" on page xxiv, signals Vollmann's approach to his subject matter in advance. In calling Imperial an "entity," Vollmann emphasizes how Imperial resists definitions and borders—despite comprising one itself; it has a separate life, an independent existence that extends beyond borders; it is a state of mind, a historical plane unknown to official maps. It is the history of America, comprising its dreams and failures, beauties and cruelties. This is evident in the opening pages where a full-page reproduction of a death certificate sits across the dedication page.

[1175] Vollmann, Imperial, p.49.
[1176] Vollmann, Imperial, p.41.
[1177] Vollmann, Imperial, p.185.
[1178] Vollmann, Imperial, p.1180.

A 2002-reissue of a death certificate from 1924, by the County of Imperial, State of California, records the name of the deceased as "John Doe unknown Mexican."[1179] For seventy-eight years, this person has remained missing and unidentified. The denominator John Doe, used for the unidentified deceased, seems to acquire, in Imperial Country, another meaning: missing, illegal, Mexican, who populate the pages of *Imperial* and the County of Imperial. Vollmann dedicates his book to the memory of Serafin Ramirez Hernandez, "unknown, missing, illegal, Mexican," one among many that do not belong legally to the U.S. but in some mysterious way, do, perhaps because they represent "the entity called Imperial" and establish the contrast between the "American dream" and the "Mexican dream."[1180] Understanding the differences and similarities between these dreams comprises for Vollmann an "attempt to become a better-informed citizen of North America":

> *Our "American dream" is founded on the notion of the self-sufficient homestead. The "Mexican dream" may be a trifle different, but requires its kindred material basis. Understanding how these two hopes played out over time required me to cultivate statistical parables about farm size, waterscapes, lettuce prices, et cetera. I have harvested them and now present them to you.*[1181]

Vollmann's method in "harvesting" the information is one of the most important aspects of his endeavor in *Imperial*. Information resides in the human element, and Vollmann relies on the human element; his interviews serve the purpose not so much the stranger's need to learn by asking questions as the act of observing the actual answers manifest themselves in and through mundane circumstances. The time Vollmann spends with the people he interviews brings them closer and he parts with many of them as friends. To illustrate, a day Vollmann spends with his new friend Lupe Vasquez, a legal worker in the U.S. fields, helps him understand both this individual and the difference he mentions above with regard to the dreams of America and Mexico. Lupe Vasquez, Vollmann learns, "who gets up at three-thirty to pick crops in and for another nation, is the difference between the right to happiness, which none of us can be guaranteed, and the right to happiness's pursuit, which I do find written into a certain early document of my United States."[1182]

[1179] Vollmann, Imperial, p.x.
[1180] Vollmann, Imperial, pp.xi, 115.
[1181] Vollmann, Imperial, p.115.
[1182] Vollmann, Imperial, p.262.

The difference between the American dream and the Mexican dream, then, is one that relies on a perception of the relationship between having something and having nothing, or between the possibility and impossibility of having something. This difference can be explained more concretely in the "two reifications of happiness, the self-sufficient American homestead and the Mexican *ejido.*"[1183] The contrast between these two means of farming constitute one of "the strange nuances of Imperial's history north and south: Mexican and American Imperial dream very different agrarian dreams."[1184] When homestead farmers arrived at the Imperial Valley, they dreamed of increasing self-sufficiency and independence on their government-release lands and "enlarged themselves beyond the statuary limits of the 1902 Reclamation Act" that allotted 160 and 320 acres of land, respectively, to, single and family farms.[1185] In 1907, Reclaiming the Arid West program reminded them that "Reclamation Act forbade the delivery of water on any government project to privately owned lands to a greater extent than 160 acres."[1186] Water expenses drove enlarged farms out of business, and they sold their farms to powerful farming corporations. Small farms, in turn, failed to survive against the big corporate farms. Vollmann reports that

> *[t]wo doctors who have studied American rural poverty assure me that between 1910 and 1920 there began for the first time a trend toward an absolute as well as relative decrease in the farm population. The ideal agrarian world was cashing out, bit by bit. […] But the allure of the family farm only increased as it became more utopian.*[1187]

By the 1930s and 1940s, the problem is even worse, and it brings about an equally big problem. Large farms, which are now an impressive/oppressive majority, are operated by "tenants" and many "depen[d] on hired field labor."[1188] By 1945, less than half of "Imperial County's workforce engages in agriculture."[1189] The remaining half is performed by Mexican field workers who work for very low wages.

Ejidos of Mexico similarly suffered under government and corporate control. *Ejidos,* as Vollmann defines, are "[c]ommunal inalienable holdings, either from pre-

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[1183] Vollmann, Imperial, p.315.
[1184] Vollmann, Imperial, p.315.
[1185] Vollmann, Imperial, p.327.
[1186] Vollmann, Imperial, p.327.
[1187] Vollmann, Imperial, p.334.
[1188] Vollmann, Imperial, pp.572, 573.
[1189] Vollmann, Imperial, p.574.

Conquest times or else carved out of other lands by the Mexican Revolution."[1190] The government owns these parcels of lands, but as long as the farm passes from generation to generation in agricultural use, the family may "work" on and "bequeath" the land[1191] In the first decade of the twentieth century, the U.S. based Colorado River Land Company that provides irrigation services in Mexico buys—after much manipulation—many *ejidos* from Mexican government. The high cost of water does not bring the company any profit, and the company goes out of business after two decades and the farmers re-own their lands. Though small in numbers, they still exist and Vollmann notes that "[i]n 2004, there were two hundred and twenty-eight *ejidos* in Baja California."[1192] The American homestead, in contrast, does not exist. For Vollmann, there is a reason that *ejidos* "have not entirely failed to hold their own."[1193]: "In the *ejidos* somebody's farm might or might not get improved, and nobody else will give a damn. He might or might not make a success; he might spend the harvest season getting drunk with his mistress, and that is literally his affair. He has no intention of selling out, not ever; he is home."[1194] In this sense, the failure of American homestead in the face of farming corporations is the "mirror image" of *ejidos'* eventual freedom from them.[1195]

Turning to the present, Vollmann makes clear that the current state of affairs between the two sides of Imperial is one of constant struggle. *Imperial* opens with a typical scene from the present and Vollmann joins the U.S. border patrol agents on their duty. Patrol agents keep their eyes on the All-American Canal that marks the border: U.S. territory is called the "Northside" and Mexico territory is called the "Southside."[1196] This is telling in the sense that a division based on the directions of south and north may pertain more to a coherent than a divided place. On the "Southside" of the canal, Vollmann writes, "two Mexicans waited, not aliens yet; while on our side, Northside, [an] agent sat calmly watching them in his car."[1197] The scene is almost ordinary; it is one of the "methodical patrols and prowls to keep

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[1190] Vollmann, Imperial, p.xxix.
[1191] Vollmann, Imperial, p.335.
[1192] Vollmann, Imperial, p.335.
[1193] Vollmann, Imperial, p.336.
[1194] Vollmann, Imperial, p.340.
[1195] Vollmann, Imperial, p.336.
[1196] Vollmann, Imperial, p.3.
[1197] Vollmann, Imperial, p.3.

the have-not millions out of paradise—which in this case was Imperial County, California," the land where "fields of blondness, of endless pallid asparagus, onion plants like great lollipops and honey-colored hay bales produced the lowest median tax income of any county in the state."[1198]

The patrol is also a test of patience for the parties involved. Mexicans wait for hours on end to seize a chance to jump into the water of the canal, and the patrol agents wait calmly for them to "pop their heads" out of the water.[1199] "Get out," the patrol agent shouts at the now-illegal Mexican, who heeds but throws stones and curses as he disappears.[1200] The Mexican side of the river is "hot and thorny and dry" while on the other side are "all those American fields appearing so cruelly green like Paradise, because the water belongs to America."[1201] Yet it is not America some people want to go to after they cross, it is Canada, where they believe, "you don't get hassled like you do in America."[1202] For others, staying in an American prison and being fed is also a good option.[1203] Vollmann learns that the average seize of the border patrol varies, per night, between eighty and six hundred Mexicans, most of whom are young and "agile" males capable of climbing the fence protecting the American border after swimming in the severely polluted, life-threatening water of the canal.[1204]

It may be difficult to cross the border but it is definitely more difficult to stay alive on the desert surrounding Imperial. Mexican human smugglers, called coyotes, help illegal immigrants cross at expensive prices but nonetheless increase their chances of surviving on the desert and escaping the night-vision cameras of the patrol agents. In the following paragraph, Vollmann describes a coyote he approaches for an interview:

> *The coyote came out with his shoulders down like a charging bull. I nodded and smiled, but he looked at me with a strangely flat, almost watery gaze which I have long since learned signifies a gazer who cares not what evil he does, someone utterly and inhumanly unreachable. I saw this gaze once in a Russian paramilitary policeman during the Yugoslavian civil war; he soon held a*

[1198] Vollmann, Imperial, p.3.
[1199] Vollmann, Imperial, p.3.
[1200] Vollmann, Imperial, p.4.
[1201] Vollmann, Imperial, p.6.
[1202] Vollmann, Imperial, p.6.
[1203] Vollmann, Imperial, p.12.
[1204] Vollmann, Imperial, p.13.

bayonet to my throat to "test" me. I saw it in some teenagers in Harlem who seared my arm with a cigarette butt.[1205]

Evil naturally follows as would in any human trafficking operation: the women smuggled by coyotes are raped as part of their crossing fee and the women know this beforehand, but in their desperation, this option seems like the lesser of two evils; many coyotes abandon the crossers to die on the desert when border patrol catches them. In other words, even if they receive help from coyotes for secure passage across the border, the crossers remain vulnerable to the whims of the sly, calculating, dangerous coyotes. Crossing the border illegally is in many respects a lose-lose game for those unlucky ones.

In Vollmann's opinion, the financial arrangements of this trade comprise the worst cruelty the illegal immigrants suffer from. Coyotes charge their fees when they deliver the crossers to their families or friends across the border, and it is almost always the family or friends that pay the coyote. In one way, this agreement protects the crossers by preventing the coyote from "pocketing their money and murdering them."[1206] However, the crossers become "merchandize" in the eyes of the coyote who holds them in hotel rooms "until payment."[1207] "These holding areas," Vollmann explains, "could be found in almost any town in Imperial County."[1208] In case of delayed payments, the crossers become captives, and if nobody claims them, their fate remains unclear.

Another "consequence of the cash-on-delivery system was that if the package got lost in transit, the shipper saw no reason to inform the recipient, who would now not be liable for payment. To my mind, this was the most evil aspect of the trade."[1209] Much worse is the fact that this is most likely to occur on U.S. territory. Hence the death certificate we mentioned above; hence Serafin Ramirez Hernandez, who was in a run-off coyote's van that caught fire, killing half of its sixteen passengers—illegal border crossers. Vollmann learns about Hernandez via flyers his friends distribute on the street. The flyer has a photograph of the missing Hernandez, "whose blurred head," Vollmann thinks, "stared out at me from the flyer most distantly, resolutely

[1205] Vollmann, Imperial, p.26.
[1206] Vollmann, Imperial, pp.31-32.
[1207] Vollmann, Imperial, p.32.
[1208] Vollmann, Imperial, p.32.
[1209] Vollmann, Imperial, p.32.

seeking something beyond and behind me."[1210] His file remains open in the Mexican consulate in San Diego until his body is discovered and "John Doe unknown Mexican" can be replaced with his name.[1211] Meanwhile, the frequency of such crossing tragedies is used by the U.S. authorities for warning and discouraging illegal immigrants from working with coyotes. As Vollmann puts it, "[m]y government had figured out that it could use deaths caused in part by its own policies to make propaganda."[1212]

Nevertheless, neither illegal immigrants nor the border patrol officers are the real representatives of Imperial: water is, and has always been, the most active agent in the history of Imperial. Indeed, nearly every entry to *Imperial's* impressive back matter "The Chronology of Imperial" regards the particular states and stages of Imperial's complicated history of water. The first entry to the chronology is dated "Millions of years ago," and notes that "Gulf of California reaches beyond the site of Indio," which is another county in California.[1213] As the saying goes, where there is water there is life, and the next entry accordingly notifies us of the "first migration to Mexico" that reaches back to "as early as 40,000 B.C." Yet the water in question has a complex relationship with land, and as the third entry notes, while water recedes toward the ocean, some of it accumulates in "Salton Sink" by 700 and remains at gradually diminishing levels there through much of the eighteenth century.[1214] In 1900, the prospect of irrigation notifies a miracle to come true: what was desert until now is turning into a paradise of farms and irrigation canals. To honor this majestic transformation, a valley in California it is called Imperial.[1215]

The same year, the private enterprise titled Imperial Land Company is established, which, in an effort to compensate the U.S. government's lack of development in this fertile area of irrigated farming, supplies land lease and provides irrigation service to the farms the company sells. Their promise is that land is "like an inexhaustible bank account on which the plant life of the future may draw at will

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[1210] Vollmann, Imperial, p.34.
[1211] Vollmann, Imperial, p.x.
[1212] Vollmann, Imperial, p.38.
[1213] Vollmann, Imperial, p.1133.
[1214] Vollmann, Imperial, p.1133.
[1215] Vollmann, Imperial, p.1140.

without danger of protest."[1216] In 1901, the town of Imperial is founded. The same year, Imperial Canal, later to be renamed Alamo Canal, is built and "irrigation begins in the Imperial Valley."[1217] A newspaper's headline reads, "Water in the town of Imperial: the headgates of the Imperial canal were opened: Water is here. The desert disappears."[1218] The last two phrases become the ghosts of *Imperial*, recurring incessantly throughout the book. In 1901, the Salton Sink is dry.

In 1902, The Reclamation Act creates homestead programs for Imperial Valley and allots a 160-acre homestead for singles and 320 acres for married couples.[1219] By 1904, with the help of widespread private corporational propaganda on the "miracle of irrigation" that promises wealth and profit to the farmers of Imperial Valley, the population of farmers and private water companies increase in significant numbers. In 1904, mud and salt builds up in the Alamo Canal. Water companies of Imperial "make a cut in the Colorado River in Mexican territory for the New Imperial Canal. Series of floods widens this cut dangerously."[1220] In 1905, the flood forms the New River and "Salton Sea is formed," or as Vollmann writes, "the Salton Sea flood[s] itself into being."[1221] In 1907, Imperial becomes a county. Between 1910 and 1920, Imperial Country ranks "the third-fastest-growing county in the U.S," and the valley is inhabited by half of the total population of California.[1222]

As this brief history demonstrates, water comes to Imperial Valley unnaturally, and brings along with it long-term complications. The irrigation system does not last very long due to salination and alkalinization as is usual with irrigation systems. The polluted waters flow into Salton Sea, which gradually acquires its terrible smell and poisonous water that otherwise nurses the region's avian and fish population. Today, Salton Sea is populated by "half-mummified birds and fishes crunching underfoot" either because the water is "poisonous" or excessively "salty."[1223] Has it always been like this, Vollmann wonders, through questions that seem not rhetorical but sincere:

[1216] Vollmann, Imperial, p.118.
[1217] Vollmann, Imperial, p.118.
[1218] Vollmann, Imperial, p.119.
[1219] Vollmann, Imperial, p.1140.
[1220] Vollmann, Imperial, p.1141.
[1221] Vollmann, Imperial, pp.1141, 50.
[1222] Vollmann, Imperial, p.1141.
[1223] Vollmann, Imperial, p.42.

> *And what should we do about the Salton Sea, which is to say what should we think, and on what basis, not to mention how should we live? Without a past, no matter how controvertible, the present cannot be anything other than a tumble through darkness towards the darkness which neither past nor present can illuminate.*[1224]

In pursuit of answers to these questions, on the ways in which Imperial County connects to America beyond the troublesome border, *Imperial* leads us to unknown, or evasive, histories, facts, and sufferings as much as *Human Smoke*, *Rising Up and Rising Down*, and *Double Fold* did on their respective topics. Vollmann's methodology is, first of all, an acceptance of Imperial's mysteries: "Imperial is a place I'll never know, a place of other souls than mine; and how can anyone know otherness?—Through study, perhaps; through history."[1225]

To continue with the history of Imperial, we may note the illusory and deceptive propaganda for settlement in Imperial. For instance, a newspaper in 1903 insists, "[i]n no section of Arid America can there be found so large a tract of so fertile soil, capable of being furnished with a water supply so abundant at so low a price for the water right and with so cheap water for all time to come."[1226] Vollmann thinks that the miracle-like representation of water in Imperial was a denial of the finite, or finiteness, that is emblematic of the American national character:

> *The story of any life is the story of expectations fulfilled or disappointed, of "progress" from birth to death, projects accomplished or not (marry this person, farm this land, write this book), above all, capital being drunk dry. Yes, the Colorado River can burst through the cut, sweep away [the] Mexicali [town in Mexico], and scour a deep gorge for the [New River] to speed through, but someday that gorge will go dry; in fact, it already has; the [New River]'s foul black spew is dead and buried.*[1227]

Still, it is this willful ignorance of the finite source of water that creates Imperial, or, imperial America, that is always on the move to possess. As Vollmann puts it, "[w]ater is life; Imperial is, among other things, water; we are Americans, so water must be infinite."[1228] After all, the epigraph to the book quotes from the 1909 Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture: "As long as a farmer has an abundance of water, he almost invariably yields to the temptation to use it freely,

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[1224] Vollmann, Imperial, p.42.
[1225] Vollmann, Imperial, p.114.
[1226] Vollmann, Imperial, p.123.
[1227] Vollmann, Imperial, p.119.
[1228] Vollmann, Imperial, p.123.

even though he gets no increased returns as a result."[1229] To elaborate on the American yearning for the infinite, Vollmann reads Emerson's words in "The Young American" (1844) as a "hymn to possession": "The bountiful continent is ours, state on state, and territory on territory, to the waves of the Pacific sea."[1230] For Vollmann, Emerson's remark claims, "the days and lands of my life remain literally innumerable."[1231] He then quotes the remarks of a "senatorial candidate" in 1898, who reminds Americans of things to be accomplished: "canals to be dug, railways to be laid, forests to be felled, cities to be built, unviolated fields to be tilled, priceless markets to be won, ships to be launched, peoples to be saved, civilization to be proclaimed, and the flag of liberty flung to the eager air of every sea."[1232] Connecting these remarks to the ever-imperial America, Vollmann comments,

> *[w]e peeled half of Mexico, now we're off to Spanish Cuba! Our soon-to-be-Senator elects* us *the chosen people; he dreams aloud of "commercial empire." […] And in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the most self-confident American President ever proclaims civilization in Iraq and Afghanistan—mission accomplished!*[1233]

In Vollmann's opinion, all these instances of progress, of mission, are exemplified in the conflict over water that begins as early as 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo which defines the Mexican-American border by drawing imaginary coordinates between the rivers Mexico and the U.S. share. Until 1942, that is, the completion of the All-American Canal, however, the border lacks the oppressive force it has now. Once the All-American Canal is built, Vollmann writes, "the ecological, economic, and moral effects of the [border] line will become ever more hurtful to the portion of Imperial which remains on Southside."[1234] For instance, in mid 1980s, completely devoid of the water sources it has once received naturally, Mexico desperately collects the seeping water from the canal to irrigate its farms. In response, the U.S. "informs Mexico" that the seepage "belongs to *us*. We reserve the right to lay concrete, thereby preserving our water from crossing without

[1229] Vollmann, Imperial, p.ix.
[1230] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Young American", 1844 quoted in Vollmann, Imperial, p.119.
[1231] Vollmann, Imperial, p.119.
[1232] Vollmann, Imperial, p.120.
[1233] Vollmann, Imperial, p.120.
[1234] Vollmann, Imperial, p.246.

permission to Southside."[1235] After the lining of the canal in 2003, Mexico, who relies on the seepage and lacks alternative sources for irrigation, files suit to U.S. By now, however, the water of the river is excessively salty, and saline water is not good for farming. Vollmann comments, "[t]he rest of southern California might be thirsty and thirstier for Colorado River water, but you know what? American Imperial (we'll ignore her Mexican sister) had been here first! Other water districts are, in the Imperial Irrigation District's considered legal opinion, *junior rightholders*."[1236]

The strife over water is not limited to agricultural use, and surprisingly, not limited to international dispute. Imperial's water is also needed to meet the demands of nearby cities. "As the millennium turned," Vollmann explains, "Imperial's eponymous county got squeezed by San Diego, Los Angeles. [...] *The Urbans*, as Imperial County called them, requested her to sign a water-transfer agreement which would begin to dry up the farms in whose name she had come into being."[1237] Yet a century ago, "you want your broccoli year-round, don't you? Imperial asked the world. And you want it at a low price, right? Well, then no reductions in water deliveries for us, please, not ever!"[1238] During the 1990s, water companies under the guise of farm companies, redirected the irrigation water of Imperial Valley through pipelines to counties like San Diego and further diminished its agriculture.[1239] For Vollmann, although this phenomenon may seem recent, Imperial has always been about water farmers rather than agriculture farmers.[1240] Wittily, Vollmann wonders, "is the Imperial on the north side of the international line American or un-American, and what does the answer to that question say about what Americans profess?[1241] Perhaps, Vollmann is right in thinking of Imperial as the undivided space between the south and north of Imperial Valley: they seem one in their fate regarding the water they lose.

As mentioned previously, the insights Vollmann gains during writing *Imperial* may as well have produced a historical novel. Yet Vollmann has

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[1235] Vollmann, Imperial, p.931.
[1236] Vollmann, Imperial, pp.923-924.
[1237] Vollmann, Imperial, p.930.
[1238] Vollmann, Imperial, p.925.
[1239] Vollmann, Imperial, pp.926-927.
[1240] Vollmann, Imperial, p.927.
[1241] Vollmann, Imperial, p.159.

deliberately chosen to write a work of nonfiction on Imperial, and he defends this choice with a well thought-out argument that seems significant in at least two senses. First, it clarifies Vollmann's ideas on the literary requirements of historical novels. Second, Vollmann ends up devising a theory for nonfiction that is based, as *Imperial* is, on research and the representation of real life.

Vollmann explains that "[his] original intent was to write a novel about Imperial, a story which followed the lives of [illegal immigrants] from Southside all the way across wall and desert to, say, Yuma, where they labored for low wages until they get caught and deported."[1242] Although this novel is not written, six tentative beginning chapters of it appear within the text of *Imperial*. Each time Vollmann attempts to fictionalize Imperial and cohere it into a novel, he is halted: he turns back to his memories and rewrites anecdotes from his experiences he reports/narrates in *Imperial* and ends them abruptly. It seems as if he is still in the process of absorbing what he has experienced and not determined to what to say. Meanwhile, he also comments on the possibilities of writing fiction out of what he observes. "We all do it," Vollmann claims, "[w]e're all novelists."[1243] He seems to mean that imagination is at work in the interpretation of most mundane events, let alone historical events. In this sense, the interventions of the tentative beginnings of the unwritten novel of Imperial demonstrate Vollmann's imagination trying to understand, interpret his experiences.

Nevertheless, he does not end up writing the novel on Imperial for reasons that seem to question the worth or reliability of a novel on this particular topic which he believes he does not know deeply yet. He illustrates this point by referring to a Mexican woman named Maria whose life he observes. The woman is a teacher in Mexico but works as an illegal laborer, namely, as a housecleaner, in Sacramento, California. She has a brother who works as an accountant in Mexico, and he helps her with cleaning whenever he visits. If, by chance, the brother comes across the owner of the house,

> *he'll rush to show his picture identification, and his expression is pitiable beyond abject: it must be a reflex, the reflex of submission to this foreign power*

[1242] Vollmann, Imperial, p.163.
[1243] Vollmann, Imperial, p.163.

> *which took half his country but which repays the theft by oozing money from its bowels—what phrase could better locate his sister who cleans toilets?*[1244]

Maria's life could be the gem of a novel, yet Vollmann doubts whether he can know Maria, or "learn enough about Maria's life to express the respect I have for her endurance, and the compassion I feel for her intellect which wastes itself on drudgery."[1245] In this sense, fictionalizing a real person's plight is also an act of "pay[ing] tribute," and it is definitely different from "invent[ing] a character."[1246] Vollmann concludes that he "do[es] not understand enough about border people to describe them without reference to specific individuals, which means that [he] remains too ill acquainted with them to fictionalize them."[1247] Witnessing the hardships that shape the life of a person does not necessarily mean knowing that person completely. Nor does he deny the possibility of establishing intimacy with these strangers that makes them friends, sharing their heart's contents with each other. In other words, once the acquaintance is well-established, he may succeed in inventing stories. Until then, however,

> *[m]aking up tales about Maria's life would not only be disrespectful to her, it would be bad art. […] The best compliment I can pay Maria is that I cannot imagine her life, especially the drudgery of it but also its various helplessnesses, humiliations, and apprehensions. Writing a novel about Maria would be like slapping her face. Someday, if I ever get out into the world and see more, suffer more, which might not be worth it, writing a novel about her might be an act of beauty and truth.*[1248]

Although Vollmann emphasizes the deeper understanding of people's suffering as the prerequisite of a fictional account of reality, he does not single it out as the only requirement for a novel. He insists that a novel on Maria's miserable life "would have failed, because respect must encompass more than the heroine's victimhood. It needs also to embrace her various happinesses and her sillines[ses]."[1249] In other words, the novelist has to take into account (or imagine) every tragedy, joy, folly, and anything and everything else that makes a character fully and truly human.

[1244] Vollmann, Imperial, p.170.
[1245] Vollmann, Imperial, p.170.
[1246] Vollmann, Imperial, p.170.
[1247] Vollmann, Imperial, p.170.
[1248] Vollmann, Imperial, p.170.
[1249] Vollmann, Imperial, p.173.

Vollmann develops and supports this idea with reference to Gustave Flaubert's story "A Simple Heart" in which Felicité, a devoted maidservant who spends her life in drudgery, is depicted as a dim-witted person that builds her life around harmless but foolish passions. It is Flaubert's overt portrayal of Felicité's "stupidity" that makes the story a "masterpiece"; Flaubert makes us "realize that of all the characters in this story, she's by far the finest, a fact never noticed by any of the busy, self-absorbed human beings around her, who remain ordinary as she is."[1250] This realization constitutes an epiphany for Vollmann:

> *What "A Simple Heart" did for* my *heart when I first read it many years ago was to alert me to the probability that among the people whom I myself overlooked, there might be Felicités, whose hidden goodness would do me good to find her. Later, when I began writing books, it occured to me that discovering and describing those goodnesses might accomplish some external good, perhaps even to Maria and Felicité, who have less need of our pity than we might think. Suppose that [Felicité's mistress], after reading my version of "A Simple Heart," refrained just once from assaulting Felicité with harsh words. Or is that aspiration ridiculous?*[1251]

We may perhaps know whether or not it is ridiculous by looking at one of the tentative beginnings of *Imperial's* unwritten novel form and decide for ourselves. The beginning adapts the first paragraph of "A Simple Heart" and credits Flaubert as the author. The mistress-servant relationship turns into an employer-employee relationship in a Mexican labor camp, or factory, (*maquiladora*) where women try to endure sexual abuse to keep their inhumanly low wages under inhumanly hard workloads.[1252] In other words, it is a modern-day master-slave story, and it is one that demonstrates that victimhood has no bounds: the factory is owned by Americans and it is located on the non-tillable land of Mexico whose farms have dried up when the water of the Colorado was denied to them. For these women working in factories, challenging abuse is a reason for immediate loss of job, which means starvation since these factories are the only options for many that cannot go to the U.S., legally or illegally, to work for even lower wages. Vollmann decides that the brutality of this story, or the excruciating real-life stories of cruelty other Mexicans suffer, cannot easily be justified to be used in works of art. "And yet of course it *would* be right to make a poem or a song, a painting or a novel about it," Vollmann clarifies, "if doing

[1250] Vollmann, Imperial, p.171.
[1251] Vollmann, Imperial, p.171.
[1252] Vollmann, Imperial, p.172.

so would help anyone to *feel*. Steinbeck might have been able to do it. Maybe someday I will attempt to do it. At the moment, I cannot presume to do anything with this story except to show it to you, tiptoe around it, and walk away."[1253] Of course, by "tiptoe," Vollmann underestimates the richness of his descriptions of these factories, the forceful simplicity and heart-breakingly enlightening aspects of his conversations with the workers, and the seemingly objective yet factually disturbing narrative he offers on the conditions of the factories. Therefore, when he walks away as he claims, he leaves the reader throbbing with pain and anger, if not sadness which does not bear the mark of sentimentality.

John Steinbeck is a figure that looms large behind the project of *Imperial*. Another tentative beginning for the unwritten novel of *Imperial* is credited to Steinbeck and it comprises an incomplete sentence: "Maria loved truth and hated untruth."[1254] These words belong to Steinbeck, who writes after his late "friend Ed Ricketts that the man loved what was true and hated what wasn't."[1255] "I feel protective toward this dead writer," Vollmann writes.[1256] "Steinbeck desired all of us to be angry and sorry about the plight of the Okies, and his own outrage makes *The Grapes of Wrath* a great book."[1257] What is even greater is Steinbeck's "distrust of authority" in the face of the American national trust in government which makes him "one of the most un-American Americans of his time."[1258] "I want to be un-American like him," Vollmann asserts, "unaffiliated with anything but balance. I want to show Felicité's goodness and stupidity together."[1259] In praising his favorite novel by Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (1952), Vollmann's remarks on Steinbeck may also be read as a defense of, if not guidance for, his own writing:

> *If Steinbeck occasionally mistook sentimentality for truth, well, there remain worse vices. Steinbeck worried and at times grew bitter, but he was never cynical. One aspect of his credo which too many of us misperceive as sentimental is his very Imperial glorification of individual choice. If I dislike, say, what America "stands for," and if I express that feeling in public, I may find that certain other Americans dislike* me. *That happened to Steinbeck. The many bannings of* The Grapes of Wrath *comprise its badge of honor. This book*

[1253] Vollmann, Imperial, p.174.
[1254] Vollmann, Imperial, p.178.
[1255] Vollmann, Imperial, p.178.
[1256] Vollmann, Imperial, p.175.
[1257] Vollmann, Imperial, p.177.
[1258] Vollmann, Imperial, p.177.
[1259] Vollmann, Imperial, p.177.

> *upset people. It actually had something to say. It was angry, unashamedly sexual and un-American. Being un-American, Steinbeck was the most American of us all.*[1260]

Furthermore, these arguments reveal Vollmann's ideas on writing novels and the functions of novels, as he clarifies again by way of Steinbeck:

> *Were I writing a* Grapes of Wrath *about Imperial, I would have to first attempt what Steinbeck did for the whole agricultural California; I'd construct a sociology of Imperial.* Let us see the fields that require the impact of their labor and the districts to which they must travel, *he writes, then inserts a true and pathetic detail, just as any novelist or journalist would do; afterwards, he gets down to delineating his data:* There are vegetable crops of the Imperial Valley, the lettuce, the cauliflower, tomatoes, cabbage to be picked and packed, to be hoed and irrigated. There are several crops to be harvested, but there is not time distribution sufficient to give the migrants permanent work.[1261]

In Vollmann's opinion, there is a difference between collecting information and planting them in a narrative in an organized manner. As the emphasized lines of the quote attest, he applies this theory to practice in order to demonstrate their dullness. What is more, *Imperial*, in its entirety, grapples with the question of constructing sociology and collecting true details. In keeping them non-fictionalized, Vollmann aims to achieve an effect that a novel might not perfectly achieve: he provides reality in its unadorned, simple form. For instance, referring to the hundreds of people with whom Vollmann has acquainted himself—or with his "friends"—Vollmann writes, "I would never consider changing a word of their stories. They are real and they have taught me many things that are true as I peer into the mystery called Mexico."[1262] As he writes,

> *[i]t is they, the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, the cabbage-pickers legal and illegal, whom it is slowly becoming my privilege to know. Imperial is what I want it to be, but they are ones who are what they are. The desert is real, as are they, but there is no such place as Imperial; and I, who don't belong there, was never anything but a word-haunted ghost. This is my life and I love it. Books are whatever we want them to be. I am where I want to be, in Paradise.*[1263]

Paradise, in this understanding, could be the freedom to know people, know the other, through a face-to-face relationship in the Levinasian sense that enables the possibility of knowing a person as Vollmann so desires.

[1260] Vollmann, Imperial, p.178.
[1261] Vollmann, Imperial, p.179.
[1262] Vollmann, Imperial, p.180.
[1263] Vollmann, Imperial, p.181.

2.2.3. Chinese Boxes of Corruption and Destruction in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*

Although Jonathan Safran Foer (b. 1977) is one of the preeminent young writers of contemporary American literature, having written acclaimed and award-winning novels such as *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), he has not been included in this study. However, his creative nonfiction, *Eating Animals* (2009) is a tour de force that necessitates mention in this particular part of the study on the basis that his book is on par with Baker and Vollmann's books in terms of demonstrating contemporary nonfiction's potential for ethical reflection, investigation of the ignored and dismissed parts of our moral lives, and the sheer amount of research as well as Foer's intellectually and ethically rigorous discussion of his topic. *Eating Animals* is not a defense of, or propaganda for, vegetarianism. It is rather, like Sinclair Lewis's *The Jungle* of a century ago, an exploration of the underbelly of meat production.

Yet for Foer, consumption is equally important as production: our ethical response to factory farming is nothing but the trial of our humanity, our ethics, another instance of the self's struggle with its desires and emotions, and the other. When subjected to ethical criticism, Foer's text itself emerges as the unknown other that we have to encounter, respond ethically, and redefine ourselves in our response to it. The ethical force of *Eating Animals* intensifies, as we see in Vollmann's books, because of the writer's own ethical encounter with his subject. He cannot conduct interviews with animals, but looks at them in the face, and in the Levinasian sense of face-to-face encounter, the ethical relationship takes place. Therefore, it is in the sense that Foer, too, relies on investigative journalism but moves toward a discussion of the human in its ethical bearing that his book deserves elaboration besides Baker and Vollmann.

Before writing this book, Foer spends a year reading all the literature he can find on "eating animals: histories of agriculture, industry and United States Department of Agriculture materials, activist pamphlets, relevant philosophical

works, and the numerous existing books about food that touch on the subject of meat."[1264] He then begins paying extensive visits to factory farms, learns the minutest details about the conditions animals are kept in factory farms. He even includes a life-size rectangle that an egg-laying hen is typically allowed to stand on all its life, which is quite smaller than the actual page these words are written on. Foer also visits some of the few remaining family farms and reserves individual chapters for the farmers' stories. The reports of his investigations make up the middle of the book. At the end, Foer presents a detailed, sixty-page Notes sections and an Index.

Eating Animals begins by establishing the role of food in human life. Foer grows up in a crowded Jewish family that often gathers at his grandmother's house for meals. His grandmother is an excellent cook, but she always cooks "chicken with carrots," and nobody ever gets tired of eating this "delicious" dish.[1265] While they eat, his grandmother rarely sits with them. "Even when there was nothing more to be done—no soup bowls to be topped off, no pots to be stirred or ovens checked—she stayed in the kitchen, like a vigilant guard (or prisoner) in a tower. [… As if] the sustenance she got from the food she made didn't require her to eat it."[1266] When she is not cooking and serving, she tells her grandchildren facts about food: "dark food is inherently healthier than light food, or that most of the nutrients are found in the peel or the crust. […] No foods are bad for you. Fats are healthy—all fats, always, in any quantity. Sugars are very healthy. The fatter the child is, the healthier it is."[1267] His grandmother's stories about food, however, are also the story of her life.

Foer presents us with a parable—both a fact and a story—based on his grandmother's childhood experiences. She escapes from Poland during World War II. Foer tells us, "[m]y grandmother survived the War barefoot, scavenging other people's inedibles: rotting potatoes, discarded strips of meat, skins, and the bits that clung to bones and pits."[1268] In other words, during the war, she is a homeless, wandering child, always in mortal danger, always tired, always hungry. Once, when a lot people have died from starvation, a Russian farmer pities her and gives her a

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[1264] Jonathan Safran Foer, **Eating Animals**, Penguin, London, 2009, p.45.
[1265] Foer, p.4.
[1266] Foer, p.3.
[1267] Foer, p.4.
[1268] Foer, p.3.

piece of meat, yet the hungry child nearing death won't eat the meat to save her life, because the meat is pork, not kosher. Foer asks his grandmother, "[b]ut not even to save your life?" to which she replies, "[i]f nothing matters, there's nothing to save."[1269] This answer is a clue to Foer's ethical investigation in *Eating Animals.* If a person does not have a self with ethical principles, and if storytelling does not carry that message through time, there is nothing of human value there to save.

Therefore, Foer discovers as a child that for his Jewish grandmother, food was "not *food*. It [was] terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, joyfulness, humiliation, religion, history, and, of course, love."[1270] Put differently, food was, for his grandmother, life, death, family, metaphysics, war, ethics, a story of the past, and of the future. As Foer perceives his grandmother's understanding of food, he understands that food is both duty and ecstasy, both crude matter and transcendence. According to Foer, "stories about food are stories about us—our history and our values."[1271] He means that what and how we eat, and the stories we tell about eating are constitutive of who we are in terms of our values. "Within my family's Jewish tradition," Foer explains, "I came to learn that food serves two parallel purposes: it nourishes and it helps you remember. Eating and storytelling are inseparable—the saltwater is also tears; the honey not only tastes sweet, but makes us think of sweetness."[1272] "We are made of stories," he concludes, and our stories about the meanings of our choice of food turn the act of eating into a realm of values, because, as Foer wonders, "[w]hy should eating be different from any of the other ethical realms of our lives?."[1273]

Accordingly, *Eating Animals* begins and ends with chapters titled Storytelling. This gives the book a circular structure: it begins with stories and ends with stories. In this way, Foer shows that nonfiction is as much a narrative as it is a collection of facts. As we noted above, Foer's researches and reports make up the middle of the book. As he literally surrounds the factual with the story, or storytelling, he reminds us that we give meaning to our world and our lives through storytelling, which, of course, is a way of constructing our world and our selves. The

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[1269] Foer, p.17.
[1270] Foer, p.5.
[1271] Foer, p.11.
[1272] Foer, pp.11-12.
[1273] Foer, pp.14, 9.

stories end up shaping our future as well as our past because our notion of reality is formed through our stories; the plausibility of our stories marks us as realists. Foer thinks as much about his childhood stories about food as about the ones he will tell his children. He wants to tell his offspring good stories, meaningful and morally valid stories. He thinks that we are as ethical as our desire and ability to take responsibility for our stories—hence *Eating Animals*' concern with meat as food. Therefore, he demonstrates how our thoughts and actions are, to the extent that they construct and represent our sense of reality, integral pieces of our story. For Foer, the most basic modes of our existence are the most revealing elements of the stories that make us who we are. In other words, the human self is composed of its stories.

The originating impulse behind *Eating Animals* is Foer's fatherhood. He explains, "[f]eeding my child is not like feeding myself: it matters more. It matters because food matters (his physical health matters, the pleasure of eating matters), and because the stories that are served with food matter. These stories bind our family together. And bind our family to others."[1274] For instance, when a child learns that "the parsley on the plate is for decoration, that pasta is not 'breakfast food,' we eat wings but not eyes, cows but not dogs," we pass this information with stories which "establish narratives, and stories establish rules."[1275] A surprisingly rich set of codes and values pass on to the next generation in stories about food. What would the moral difference be, Foer compels us to think, between eating a piece bread that is not bought with money deservingly earned, and eating the meat of a factory farming animal that saw no sun, didn't walk, couldn't even move in its restrictive crate, couldn't nurse, and butchered while standing on an assembly line.

As a person, a father, a citizen, and a writer, Foer decides to face a reality that is quite basic: do we know exactly how our food is produced? Do we have any real knowledge and control of what we eat? Foer explains,

> *[t]his story didn't begin as a book. I simply wanted to know—for myself and my family—what meat* is. *I wanted to know as concretely as possible. Where does it come from? How is it produced? How are animals treated, and to what extent does that matter? What are the economic, social, and environmental effects of eating animals? My personal quest didn't stay that way for long. Through my efforts as a parent, I came face-to-face with realities that as a citizen I couldn't*

[1274] Foer, p.11.
[1275] Foer, p.12.

> *ignore, and as a writer I couldn't keep to myself. But facing those realities and writing responsibly about them are not the same.*[1276]

An attempt to define what meat is, therefore, even for those who unconsciously avoid the topic religiously, is uncomfortable to say the least. The topic of eating animals "cuts right to one's deepest discomforts, often provoking defensiveness and aggression."[1277] Foer wonders, if we assume for a moment that extremely evil things are indeed done in order to supply us with meat, should this fact be "ethically compelling" for us?[1278] Should we feel sympathy for animals in order to care about our meat? As for Foer's personal story with respect to animals, until he was twenty-six he dislikes animals; he found them "bothersome, dirty, unapproachably foreign, frighteningly unpredictable, and plain old unnecessary."[1279] His particular dislike of dogs (he thinks) was based on a "fear that [he] inherited from [his] mother, which she inherited from [his] grandmother."[1280] The fear and dislike persists until he sees a stray puppy while strolling in Brooklyn, and adopts George on the spot. Foer suddenly becomes, in his words, "a dog person."[1281] Foer believes that the major issue in liking and disliking animals is how we feel about encountering the other because, on a basic level, interacting with animals is not essentially different from interacting with people:

> *Our various struggles—to communicate, to recognize and accommodate each other's desires, simply to coexist—force me to encounter and interact with something, or rather someone, entirely other. George can respond to a handful of words (and choose to ignore a slightly larger handful), but our relationship takes place almost entirely outside of language. She seems to have thought and emotions. Sometimes I think I understand them, but often I don't. […] The list of our differences could fill a book, but like me, George fears pain, seeks pleasure, and craves not just food and play, but companionship. I don't need to know the details of her moods and preferences to know that she has them. Our psychologies are not the same or similar, but each of us has a perspective, a way of processing and experiencing the world that is intrinsic and unique.*
>
> *I wouldn't eat George, because she's mine. But why wouldn't I eat a dog I'd never met? Or more to the point, what justification might I have for sparing dogs but eating other animals?*[1282]

[1276] Foer, p.12.
[1277] Foer, p.13.
[1278] Foer, p.14.
[1279] Foer, p.21.
[1280] Foer, p.21.
[1281] Foer, p.21.
[1282] Foer, pp.23-24.

The question of "other animals" that are eaten is highly disturbing. The great majority of animal production for human consumption in the U.S. is done in factory farms. "Ninety-nine percent of all land animals eaten or used to produce milk and eggs in the United States are factory farmed. So although there are important exceptions, to speak about eating animals today is to speak about factory farming."[1283] Simply put, factory farming is "industrialized" large-scale "agriculture" where animals are "genetically engineered, restricted in mobility, and fed unnatural diets (which almost always include various drugs, like antimicrobials)."[1284] Although considered to be economically viable, factory farming disregards issues like "environmental degradation, human disease, and animal suffering."[1285] In this way, factory farming completely reverses the traditional understanding of farming: "For thousands of years, farmers took their cues from natural processes. Factory farming considers nature an obstacle to be overcome."[1286] In terms of encountering the other, factory farming encounters nature, animals, and behaves utterly irresponsible. Yet at the same time knows how to convey the opposite impression:

> *Factory farming's success depends on consumers' nostalgic images of food production—the fisherman reeling in fish, the pig farmer knowing each of his pigs as individuals, the turkey rancher watching beaks break through eggs—because these images correspond to something we respect and trust.*[1287]

Besides respect and trust, eating animals is connected to other significant feelings and moral terms, such as shame, being realistic and sentimental.

Foer elaborates on the role of shame in our relationship with animals by referring to Kafka and Jacques Derrida. First, Foer refers to Max Brod's anecdote about Kafka's vegetarianism. While visiting the great aquarium in Berlin, Kafka, who has just become a vegetarian, looks at the fish in tanks and remarks, "[n]ow at least I can look at you in piece, I don't eat you anymore."[1288] Therefore, Foer thinks that behind Kafka's vegetarianism is the underlying shame he felt in front of animals while he was eating them: shame, "the core experience of the ethical," is both

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[1283] Foer, p.34.
[1284] Foer, p.34.
[1285] Foer, p.34.
[1286] Foer, p.34.
[1287] Foer, p.35.
[1288] Franz Kafka, quoted in Max Brod, **Franz Kafka**, Schocken, New York, 1947, p.74 quoted in Foer, p.36.

"social" shame, directed toward "invisible others," and "intimate" shame springing deep from within our minds and hearts.[1289] Foer believes that shame is also connected to forgetting:

> *Shame is what we feel when we almost entirely forget social expectations and our obligations to others in favor of our immediate gratification. Fish, for Kafka, must have been the very flesh of forgetting: their lives are forgotten in a radical manner that is much less common in our thinking about farmed land animals. Beyond this literal forgetting of animals by eating them, animal bodies were, for Kafka, burdened with the forgetting of all those parts of ourselves we want to forget. If we wish to disavow a part of our nature, we call it our "animal nature." We then repress or conceal that nature, and yet, as Kafka knew better than most, we sometimes wake up and find ourselves, still, only animals. […] We can recognize parts of ourselves in fish—spines, pain receptors—but then deny that these animal similarities matter, and thus equally deny important parts of our humanity. What we forget about animals we begin to forget about ourselves. Today, at stake in the question of eating animals is not only our basic ability to respond to sentient life, but our ability to respond to parts of our own (animal) being. There is a war not only between us and them, but between us and us. It is a war as old as story and more unbalanced than at any point in history.*[1290]

Therefore, just like "taste," "shame" is both intimate and social; insofar as it shows how responsible we feel before the other. In abusing, mistreating, disrespecting, terrorizing, killing, and eating animals, we "forget" their lives. But this is not all. According to Kafka, animal bodies carry all those things in ourselves that we would like to forget. "Animal nature" is what we conceal.[1291]

Foer juxtaposes Kafka's sense of shame with Derrida's claim that "[t]he animal looks at us, and we are naked before it."[1292] When an animal appeals to us, solicits us, we are "exposed," we have been "called" in a way. [1293] There is an ethical interrogation of us in the look of an animal. Foer, when he comes face to face with the sea horses in the Berlin aquarium, which are a significant "bycatch" of tuna fishing all over the world, feels shame "in being human."[1294] He writes, "I felt shame in the deaths my culture justified by so thin a concern as the taste of canned tuna."[1295] Both his son and his dog, George, call Foer to shame and responsibility on the matter

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[1289] Foer, p.36.
[1290] Foer, p.37.
[1291] Foer, p.37.
[1292] Jacques Derrida, **The Animal that Therefore I Am**, Trans. David Wills, Fordham University Press, New York, 2008, p.29 quoted in Foer, p.38.
[1293] Foer, p.38.
[1294] Foer, p.40.
[1295] Foer, p.40.

of the eating of animals, just by looking into his eyes, in neutral appeal. As Foer explains,

> *nothing inspires as much as shame as being a parent. Children confront us with our paradoxes and hypocrisies, and we are exposed. You need to find an answer for every why*—Why do we do this? Why don't we do that?—*and often there isn't a good one. So you say, simply, because. Or you tell a story that you know isn't true. And whether or not your face reddens, you blush. The shame of parenthood—which is a good shame—is that we want our children to be more whole than we are, to have satisfactory answers. My son not only inspired me reconsider what kind of eating animal I would be, but shamed me into reconsideration. And then there's George, asleep at my feet while I type these words. […] Sometimes she'll wake from a dream panting, jump to her feet, get right up near me—her hot breath pushing against my face—and look directly into my eyes. Between us is …* what?[1296]

Between human and human as much as between human and animal, Foer suggests, is the same face-to-face encounter that initiates, or necessitates, ethical response to the other.

Besides shame, the other moral term that pervades the topic of eating animals is sentimentality. Habit, to the extent that it forms taste, desires, dislikes, actions, is also a story that sustains a self. Foer has established that factory farm companies like Tyson Foods, KFC, … etc. misrepresent the truth about meat production; the same holds true for government institutions that are in part funded by the corporations; even the language of reform in this area (free-range, fresh, organic, etc.) is ridden with lies. While there is a commercial story, and a bureaucratic story, about eating animals that controls the language on this topic, there are also other stories and languages such as the ancient notion of kosher, which compels us to kill animals humanely, to approach them with humility, and to cause no "unnecessary suffering," or the late modern position of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), which holds that "animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use for entertainment."[1297] Ironically, in daily language, those people who choose to act in accordance with majority values on animals and the environment by refusing to eat animals are called "marginal or even radical."[1298] This is at root the difference between being a sentimentalist or a realist:

[1296] Foer, pp.40-41.
[1297] Foer, pp.69-72.
[1298] Foer, p.74.

> *Is caring to know about the treatment of farmed animals a confrontation with the facts about the animals and ourselves or an avoidance of them? Is arguing that a sentiment of compassion should be given greater value than a cheaper burger (or having a burger at all) an expression of emotion and impulse or an engagement with reality and our moral intuitions?*
>
> *Two friends are ordering lunch. One says, "I'm in the mood for a burger," and orders it. The other says, "I'm in the mood for a burger," but remembers that there are things more important to him than what he is in the mood for at any given moment, and orders something else. Who is the sentimentalist?*[1299]

Foer's question compels us to think about the difference between a person who confronts the facts of animal/meat production and acts on it by changing his/her life, and another person who disregards animal mistreatment and allows his/her mood or taste to overrule reality and ethics.

Foer notes that the great writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, who has escaped from Nazi occupation in Poland, compared the human bias against animals to Nazi racism. According to Singer, animal rights advocacy is based on the most basic, the purest form of social justice; animals are "the most vulnerable of all the downtrodden," and we have no right to consider our food preferences as more important than the fundamental and significant interests of animals—we cannot simply decide that their suffering does not matter.[1300] For Singer, "mistreating animals was the epitome of the 'might-makes-right' moral paradigm."[1301] Moreover, given the fact that eating animals participates in an industrial system (factory farming) that is cruel, wasteful, and destructive of the environment, what can we do personally and communally? What is our ethical obligation? What if we knew that "animal agriculture makes a 40% greater contribution to global warming than all transportation in the world combined."[1302] Foer decides to become a vegetarian and to feed his child no product that is factory farmed. Next he proceeds to dream of newly-invented stories to replace our unethical, "animal forgetting" stories:

> *What kind of world would we create if three times a day we activated our compassion and reason as we sat down to eat, if we had the moral imagination and the pragmatic will to change our most fundamental act of consumption? Tolstoy famously argued that the existence of slaughterhouses and battlefields is linked. Okay, we don't fight wars because we eat meat, and some wars should be fought—which is not to mention that Hitler was a vegetarian. But*

[1299] Foer, p.74.
[1300] Foer, p.213.
[1301] Foer, p.213.
[1302] Foer, p.43.

compassion is a muscle that gets stronger with use, and the regular exercise of choosing kindness over cruelty would change us.[1303]

In this sense, if Baker questions our acceptance of the destruction of the library card catalogs as well as rare books and newspapers on the basis of an unquestioning acceptance of, or blind faith in, the so-called advances technology brings to human life, and challenges our approval of space constraints as a reasonable excuse for such destruction, Foer questions the irrational primacy we give to our habits, the unethical, unquestioned, almost ungrounded basis of most of our tastes and likes and dislikes. Foer shows that we cannot present, neither to ourselves nor to others, our choice of food as based on taste, habit, and mood. We cannot present such choice as rational and therefore as something that cannot bear discussion. His point is that our irrational make-up of selves and our choices are precisely what must be questioned in a properly ethical self-examination. "Take me as I am, this is how I feel, this is who I am" is exactly what is meant by an unethical stance.

For Foer, human beings are capable of telling new and more ethical stories about themselves and the world, transforming, in the meantime, the unethical into ethical. To illustrate, Foer points out the irony of the Thanksgiving story, which is the distinctly American story of "conscientious consumption" or "ethical consumerism," yet what is consumed at the Thanksgiving dinner is factory farmed, that is, genetically modified, cruelly constrained, mutant turkeys.[1304] He suggests that each American can start by rethinking the Thanksgiving story; each Jew can rethink what the moral mandate of the kosher really means. Like what his grandmother said, there must be circumstances under which one cannot eat pork (unkosher meat) even to save one's life; there must be circumstances under which it must be unethical to eat cruelly produced food. Otherwise there would not be anything to save. Foer, accepting that the factory farm is "inhuman," feels that he would "not be himself" any more if he "walked away in the face of such suffering."[1305] And socially, our communal response to the factory farm is ultimately "a test" of how we "respond" to the suffering and the fate of the "powerless, the most distant, the voiceless—it is a

[1303] Foer, pp.257-258.
[1304] Foer, p.266.
[1305] Foer, p.267.

test of how we act when no one is forcing us to act one way or another."[1306] As Foer quotes Martin Luther King Jr., "one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular."[1307] It is our "conscience" that will tell us that position.[1308] In the process, we can use our capability of telling new stories, truly ethical stories, as Foer does in *Eating Animals*.

To conclude, for Foer, our dietary habits are essentially ethical problems in that they define us: "The question of eating animals is ultimately driven by intuitions about what it means to reach an ideal we have named, perhaps incorrectly, 'being human.'"[1309] The driving force of his quest is quite personal, but undeniably human, and universal: how can we attain moral integrity while at the same time facing reality and responding ethically, and how can we pass on valid morals to our children? As much as Foer relies on investigative journalism to learn and expose, he also undertakes a discussion of the human in its ethical bearing that is inherently connected to the stories we tell ourselves, the stories through which we create our selves. In this sense, when taken together for their reportorial nonfiction that attracts attention to ethically bothering social, cultural, and political problems, Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, and Jonathan Safran Foer offer revitalizing opportunities for the American writer who is open to a rigorous, meticulous, and extensive discussion and analysis of contemporary but timelessly important issues that define the human.

2.3. DIAGNOSTIC AND CONSTRUCTIVE ARGUMENTATION IN ESSAYS

This part shall focus on essays of Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace. The guiding principle in the following discussion shall be that the fact these writers use the medium of the essay as an integral part of their aesthetic and ideological programs of literature. We find literary manifestoes, elegies for the declining significance of literature, analyses of the ills of American culture; suggestions for readers and writers alike, for the right treatment of the power of

[1306] Foer, p.266.
[1307] Foer, p.258.
[1308] Foer, p.259.
[1309] Foer, p.264.

literature, mementos for everybody valuing literature that the pervasive influence of culture, technology, and entertainment need not detain anybody from continuing to engage with literature. In this part, Franzen and Wallace's essays that deal with culture shall be discussed, and Chapter Three shall turn to the essays of the these novelists on literature.

The ideas and arguments we find on the socially and culturally engaged, ethically informed and responsible essays of Franzen and Wallace may seem to stand as antitheses to the alleged postmodernist affiliations of their novels. However, as Chapter Three shall attempt to demonstrate, it is not possible to evaluate formal experimentalism and the questioning of metanarratives as the definitive markers for a classification of postmodernism. It would, on the one hand, foster a simplified definition of postmodernism, and on the other hand, cause great injustice to the efforts of these novelists to move beyond the entrapping forces of irony, solipsism, indifference, detachment, and nihilism; if anything, their works move us toward literature's liberating potential for the human by way of opening up of possibilities for engaging with life in a more sensible, sensitive, and ethical manner.

The works under scrutiny in the following discussion shall demonstrate how these writers work toward that task by way of examples from the writers' nonfictional output. Reserving the essays of Franzen and Wallace on literature to the fiction-based discussions of Chapter Three, this part shall investigate the most refined, intellectually rigorous, morally concerned writings in contemporary American literature on diagnosis of problems in American culture. In this sense, this part hopes to find its mirroring counterpart in the first part of the next chapter where Franzen's and Wallace's theoretical approaches to literature shall be discussed.

2.3.1. Jonathan Franzen's World of Words

In Jonathan Franzen's career, which now includes four novels, three volumes of nonfiction, and various contributions to magazines and newspapers, expression of ideas always come with feverish argumentation. Whether it is the diminishing importance of the American novel, the inefficiency of the U.S. postal service, the social damages of technoconsumerism, the ecological damage of SUVs, the slaughter

of birds in Cyprus and Italy, or the deceitful nature reservations in Japan, Franzen conveys his thoughts in passionate discussion. His insights on American culture will be the focus in the following discussion.

Franzen's "Pain Won't Kill You"[1310] (2011) stands as a nice compendium to Wallace's *This is Water* (2005). Both are commencement speeches delivered at Kenyon College and both draw on the personal experiences of the writers who wish to impart some wisdom to the graduating class, in empathetic yet warning tones, about some existential remedies. Wallace's *This is Water* shall be noted in the following section, but it would suffice here to say that Wallace advises the graduates to learn to control their feelings and thoughts, and avoid, in this way, getting lost in the hectic, frustrating, alienating demands of modern life. Similarly, Franzen urges the graduates to discover what they truly love in life and to devote their lives to it in order to have a meaningful life, which requires, above all things, a critical distance to "the world of technoconsumerism."[1311] Franzen's implied message, that comes rather heavy-handed in contrast to the gentle approach of Wallace's message, is as straightforward as possible: do not allow technology and consumerism to turn you into desiring machines; put aside the Internet and Facebook, and re-connect to the world through discovering something to devote your life to.

Of course, technology, electronic devices, and the Internet have unprecedented importance on almost every phase of life, and it is exactly for this reason that Franzen wants to take a step back and weigh the pros and cons of their importance. What he observes convinces Franzen that technologically-enhanced human life is fraught with serious but ignored problems. Worth noting is that far from being technophobic, Franzen is positive about the ways technology improves our lives on a daily basis. He cherishes the convenience of checking e-mails on his BlackBerry phone, the perfection of his sound-proof headphones, and the DVD player for providing the best conditions ever for watching movies at home. However, what he is negative about technology sounds alarmingly accurate: from assisting our lives, it has turned into a lethally dangerous and jealous lover in its infinite capacity to respond to us and furnish our existence. Like a perfectly responsive lover, in fact

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[1310] Jonathan Franzen, "Pain Won't Kill You", **Farther Away: Essays**, Fourth Estate, New York, 2012, (Pain).
[1311] Franzen, Pain, p.6.

as the ideal lover, technology has forced us into a relationship with it "in which a beloved object asks for nothing and gives everything, instantly, and makes us feel all-powerful."[1312] Do not love your enemy, Franzen preaches, not incorrectly.

The love-affair analogy sounds apt because in Franzen's opinion, technology tries to "replace a natural world that's indifferent to our wishes" by becoming "a mere extension of the self," a service of instant-gratification that mutilate our conceptions of feeling. [1313] He illustrates by an acute observation:

> *A related phenomenon is the ongoing transformation, courtesy of Facebook, of the verb* to like *from a state of mind to an action that you perform with your computer mouse: from a feeling to an assertion of consumer choice. And liking, in general, is commercial culture's substitute for loving. The striking thing about all consumer products—and none more so than electronic devices and applications—is that they're designed to be immensely likable. This is, in fact, the* definition *of a consumer product, in contrast to the product that is simply itself and whose makers aren't fixated on your liking it. I'm thinking here of jet engines, laboratory equipment, serious art and literature.*[1314]

In an eerie evocation of one of David Foster Wallace's main preoccupations in fiction, Franzen connects the like-love dichotomy in contemporary culture of technology to a greater evil: narcissism.

> *But if you consider this in human terms, and you imagine a person defined by a desperation to be liked, what do you see? You see a person without integrity, without a center. In more pathological cases, you see a narcissist—a person who can't tolerate the tarnishing of his or her self self-image that not being liked represents, and who therefore either withdraws from human contact or goes to extreme, integrity-sacrificing lengths to be likable.*
>
> *If you dedicate your existence to being likable, however, and if you adopt whatever cool persona is necessary to make it happen, it suggests that you've despaired of being loved for who you really are. And if you succeed in manipulating other people into liking you, it will be hard not to feel, at some level, contempt for those people, because they've fallen for your shtick.*[1315]

The value of Franzen's analysis is that he identifies a relatively easy solution to this grave problem of the "cool persona," a solution that draws its source from a fundamental, empowering human potential: the ability to love. In other words, far from taking a defeatist stance in the face of technologic and electronic life, Franzen calls for a revolution of the human heart that would liberate it from the needs,

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[1312] Franzen, Pain, p.6.
[1313] Franzen, Pain, p.6.
[1314] Franzen, Pain, p.7.
[1315] Franzen, Pain, p.7.

desires, and constant insecurities of the self—most of them induced by this new culture. As Franzen puts it, "to love a specific person, and to identify with their struggles and joys as if they were your own, you have to surrender your own, you have to surrender some of your self."[1316] Overhearing a person's "honest-to-God fight with a person they love" on the phone, for instance, gives Franzen "hope for the world" although this person is "behaving in a very, very uncool way."[1317] Fighting is neither necessarily a good thing nor an indication of love in itself, yet the amount of care and seriousness a fight requires is enough for Franzen to notice the existence of love. Hence, he envisions the "cool" way of life as a great impediment to true human life.

His opinion on the saving potential of love is not philosophical musing as he takes pains to clarify. In fact, Franzen gives an impressive amount of examples from his personal life, some too private, some more general, to explain how he has acquired his insights about love. Writing, especially writing fiction, of course, holds a major place in his personal "cure" from an "obsession with how I appeared to other people."[1318] Fiction renders fraudulence impossible and works only when it can "reflect you as you really are."[1319] In his opinion, "engagement with something you love compels you to face up to who you really are, may apply particularly to fiction writing, but it's true of just about any work you undertake in love."[1320] In contrast, lack of love will lead one to feel "rage or sneer or shrug your shoulders," or to an existential abyss due to one's not knowing the self's "less-centered part."[1321] Love, caring with serious and sincere attention, will fulfill our lives by severing our lives from its detached, ironic, cool version that can forever remain content with the satisfaction consumer culture provides.

His personal change from "cool persona" to sincerely attentive and loving person happens when he "fell in love with birds."[1322] As he admits in a rather

[1316] Franzen, Pain, p.9.
[1317] Franzen, Pain, p.9.
[1318] Franzen, Pain, p.10.
[1319] Franzen, Pain, p.10.
[1320] Franzen, Pain, p.11.
[1321] Franzen, Pain, pp.14,13.
[1322] Franzen, Pain, p.12.

defensive tone,[1323] this has been difficult change, and he seems to have suffered from a crippling sense of self-consciousness and from his personal barometer of coolness:

> *I did this not without significant resistance, because it's very uncool to be a birdwatcher, because anything that betrays real passion is by definition uncool. But little by little, in spite of myself, I developed this passion. […] And so, yes, I kept a meticulous list of the birds I'd seen, and, yes, I went to inordinate lengths to see new species. But no less important, whenever I looked at a bird, any bird, even a pigeon or a sparrow, I could feel my heart overflow with love.*[1324]

Deep down, finding an outlet to connect with the world through something to love is a way of countering the most troublesome issue that governs human life: our finitude, and the ensuing existential questionings of the meaning of life, and the accordingly escalating feelings of "anger and pain and misery. And you can either run from this fact, or by way of love, you can embrace it."[1325]

Worth noting here is Franzen's ideas on his close friend David Foster Wallace's suicide in his essay "Farther Away."[1326] During a trip they take together, Franzen observes Wallace's indifference to birds that he himself cherishes in and concludes: "I understood the difference between his unmanageable misery and my manageable discontents to be that I could escape myself in the joy of birds and he could not."[1327] For Franzen, Wallace's suicide seems to point at the great malaise of the culture, one that Wallace himself struggled with both on a personal level and by way of fiction. For Franzen, Wallace never convinced himself that he was worthy of being loved by others and he had serious "doubt in the possibility of love" so much that the characters populating his fiction never attained "ordinary love."[1328] Franzen explains,

> *[c]lose loving relationships, which for most of us are a foundational source of meaning, have no standing in the Wallace fictional universe. What we get,*

[1323] Which is not without basis, as he reveals in *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History* (2006). On mentioning seeing "a green woodpecker eating ants in Hyde Park," an English friend of Franzen who is a "book editor" and "a stylish dresser," reacts with a "horrible face" and exclaims, "Oh, Christ, don't tell me you're a twitcher" (Franzen, 2006, p.183). Another friend who is also an editor and "a sharp dresser," "similarly clutche[s] her head" and says in protesting disbelief, "No, no, no, no, no, no. You are *not* going to be a birdwatcher. […] Because birdwatchers—*ucch*. They're all so—*ucch*" (Franzen, 2006, p.183). It would seem that these sharp dressers are the kinds of "cool" people Franzen recommends the graduating class of Kenyon College not to become.

[1324] Franzen, Pain, p.12.

[1325] Franzen, Pain, p.13.

[1326] Jonathan Franzen, "Farther Away", **Farther Away: Essays**, (Farther). (The essay was published originally in the *New Yorker* in 2011.)

[1327] Franzen, Farther, p.38.

[1328] Franzen, Farther, p.39.

> *instead, are characters keeping their heartless compulsions secret from those who love them; characters scheming to* appear *loving or to prove themselves that what feels like love is really just disguised self-interest.*[1329]

Although there is a point to Franzen's diagnosis, these assertions are not really fair because Wallace constantly sought the possibility of extending the limits of the self, and his struggle goes beyond the resigned acceptance that Franzen portrays here.

The accuracy of Franzen's evaluation aside, it would not be wrong to think that "Pain Won't Kill You" is a direct response to the so-called hipster culture that defines the ironic and disinterested youth born after the 1990s, also known as the Millennials or the Generation Y. Much of Franzen's advice seems to address this particular, endemic, and faulty contemporary character. At this point, we could take a moment to observe an essay by Christy Wampole of Princeton University that appears in the *New York Times* and creates a stir on the topic at hand. The title of Wampole's essay, "How to Live Without Irony," is in itself telling: "irony is the ethos of our age" Wampole explains, and that "the hipster is our archetype of ironic living."[1330] Like Franzen, Wampole identifies self-consciousness, pretentious indifference, ironic scorning and scoffing, obsession with coolness, evasion of serious commitment and personal intimacy, narcissism, and sarcasm as the defining characteristics of this culture and suggests a solution that echoes Franzen's:

> *What would it take to overcome the cultural pull of irony? Moving away from the ironic involves saying what you mean, meaning what you say and considering seriousness and forthrightness as expressive possibilities, despite the inherent risks. It means undertaking the cultivation of sincerity, humility and self-effacement, and demoting the frivolous and the kitschy on our collective scale of values. It might also consist of an honest self-inventory.*[1331]

As the impressive number of reader commentary to Wampole's essay demonstrates, it is not easy to revise the notion of irony as an antidote to the rampant values of the commercial and material culture. Yet it is this notion of irony that positions itself as a defense-mechanism that both Franzen and Wampole try to argue against.

[1329] Franzen, Farther, p.39.
[1330] Christy Wampole, "How to Live Without Irony", **New York Times**, 17.11.2012, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/how-to-live-without-irony/?_r=0, (18.11.2012), n.pag.
[1331] Wampole, n.pag.

Franzen's constructive albeit critical engagement with culture can also be observed in two other essays: "Imperial Bedroom" (1998)[1332] and "I Just Called to Say I Love You" (2008).[1333] Both essays deal with the reasons and consequences of the erasure of the border between public and private life. In his introductory remarks to his essay collection, *How to be Alone: Essays* (2002), Franzen explains that "the underlying investigation" of a major number of his essays concerns "the problem of preserving individuality and complexity in a noisy and distracting mass culture: the question of how to be alone."[1334] As Franzen explains in "Imperial Bedroom," this question points out "an elemental principle of American life": "the right to privacy" which means, in its original definition "the right to be alone."[1335] In contemporary culture, however, the notion of privacy has been distorted to such a degree that nobody is actually able to be alone, even when in privacy.

In "Imperial Bedroom," Franzen argues that the right to privacy is "the New American obsession."[1336] At the same time, however, privacy has become an empty signifier: it is "espoused as the most fundamental of rights, marketed as the most desirable of commodities, and pronounced dead twice a week."[1337] For Franzen, American society, culture, and politics have been, and are, undergoing severe changes due to the change in the understanding of privacy, which now means uninhibited execution of private life in the public sphere.

A certain event compels Franzen to realize the astonishing transformation of the word private. The details of former President Bill Clinton's impeachment that appear on news materialize for Franzen the true nature of the scandal over the public-private debate:

> *On the Saturday morning when the* Times *came carrying the complete text of the [Kenneth] Starr report,*[1338] *what I felt as I sat alone in my apartment and tried to eat my breakfast was that my own privacy—not Clinton's, not Lewinsky's—was being violated. I love the distant pageant of public life. I love*

[1332] Jonathan Franzen, "Imperial Bedroom", **How to be Alone: Essays**, Picador, New York, 2002, (Bedroom).
[1333] Jonathan Franzen, "I Just Called to Say I Love You", **Farther Away: Essays**, (Called).
[1334] Jonathan Franzen, **How to be Alone: Essays**, (Alone), p.6.
[1335] Franzen, Bedroom, p.42.
[1336] Franzen, Bedroom, p.39.
[1337] Franzen, Bedroom, p.39.
[1338] Kenneth Starr, as a member of United States Office of the Independent Counsel, carried out the investigation on Clinton and his report was criticized for exposing highly private details concerning the controversy.

> *both the pageantry and the distance. Now a President was facing impeachment, and as a good citizen I had a duty to stay informed about the evidence, but the evidence here consisted of two people's groping, sucking, and mutual self-deception. […] I wasn't offended by the sex quo sex. […] What I felt I felt personally. I was being intruded on.*[1339]

The intrusion happens easily, almost naturally, and it happens everywhere. The fact that it can and *is* happening everywhere is what genuinely bothers Franzen. In his opinion, the underlying reasons for such easy-intrusion are to be found in the changing understandings of community, of anonymity, of liberty, of visibility and invisibility, all of which are being distorted by the same variant: privacy.

To begin, privacy has brought about a new understanding of community in urban life. A century ago, privacy had been limited to private property[1340] since people "typically lived in a small town under conditions of near-panoptical surveillance."[1341] Life in small town, of course, created such tight-knit community that records of purchases, travels, life histories, and diseases of the townsfolk were kept by the townsfolk, duties which government is criticized for performing now. In contrast, typical contemporary American life of suburbia places "tiny nuclear families" into "enormous houses" of maximum privacy not for the whole family but also for every family member.[1342] Franzen writes, "[c]ompared even with suburbs in the sixties and seventies, when I was growing up, the contemporary condominium development or gated community offers a striking degree of anonymity. It's no longer the rule that you know your neighbors."[1343] Growing up in Midwest and settling in New York later in his life, Franzen clearly longs for, in a nostalgic manner, of bygone times of large-scale intimacy. It is possible to support his argument with another recent example which demonstrates a similar loss of community-by-proximity. In many metropolitan cities in many countries, gated apartment complexes are squeezing impressive numbers of anonymous-neighbors into Ikea-style modular flats neatly aligned like boxes into single buildings, offering almost unlimited anonymity within what looks like a place of community.

[1339] Franzen, Bedroom, pp.40-41.
[1340] An all-American term, if you will.
[1341] Franzen, Bedroom, p.47.
[1342] Franzen, Bedroom, p47.
[1343] Franzen, Bedroom, p.47.

Anonymity is a word that requires further elaboration in the public-private debate Franzen carries out. Public space, in contrast to the intimacy, recognition, or acquaintance of community, requires that every private individual remain anonymous, or retain anonymity. In other words, public space requires the willful, consenting withholding of the private. In Franzen's definition, "[a] genuine public space is a place where every citizen is welcome to be present and where the purely private is excluded or restricted."[1344] For instance, a museum is a public space: there is "the enforced decorum and the hush, the absence of in-your-face consumerism."[1345] Likewise, the street, sidewalks, buses, trains are public spaces where a certain way of behaving takes place contractually. Franzen praises the public space for the opportunity of

> *the promenading, the seeing and being seen. Everybody needs a promenade sometimes—a place to go when you want to announce to the world (not the little world of friends and family but the big world, the real world) that you have a new suit, or that you're in love, or that you suddenly realize you stand a full inch taller when you don't hunch your shoulders.*[1346]

For most Americans, unfortunately, the workplace is the only public space where privacy is withheld. At the workplace, "codes of dress and behavior are routinely enforced, personal disclosures are penalized, and formality is still the rule."[1347] Franzen is definitely not concerned with behavior regulation; he is interested in the ways privacy seeps out onto public space.

Basically, the private-public division is based on a contract of "invisibility."[1348] In Franzen's words, "[I]f privacy depends upon an invisibility, the expectation of *visibility* is what defines a public space."[1349] In other words, private space is the place where the individual may become unseen and unheard by the public. Accordingly, in public space, the presence of the individual is acknowledged but it is not seen and heard on an individual basis. Hence, the anonymity of the individual in the public space. Franzen is adamant in maintaining this distinction:

> *A kind of mental Border collie [dog] yelps in distress when I feel that the line between the two has been breached. This is why the violation of a public space*

[1344] Franzen, Bedroom, p.50.
[1345] Franzen, Bedroom, p.50.
[1346] Franzen, Bedroom, p.50.
[1347] Franzen, Bedroom, p.51.
[1348] Franzen, Bedroom, p.48.
[1349] Franzen, Bedroom, p.48.

> *is so similar, as an experience, to the violation of privacy. I walk past a man taking a leak on a sidewalk in broad daylight, and although the man with the yawning fly is ostensibly the one whose privacy is compromised by the leak, I'm the one who feels the impingement. Flashers and sexual harassers […] and self-explainers on the crosstown bus all similarly assault our sense of the "public" by exposing themselves.*[1350]

A person's exposing his or her privacy in public may have many forms, among which Franzen includes the toes employees sport at workplace in "Birkenstocks" on casual-dress Fridays, and the inclination to share the most specific details regarding "diseases, rents, antidepressants" and all other possible highly personal, private, details.[1351] "Reticence," Franzen insists, "has become an obsolete virtue."[1352] In fact, America has become "the ugly spectacle of a privacy triumphant."[1353]

A related problem concerns the interchangeability of privacy with liberty. Franzen explains that "[w]hat really undergirds privacy is the classical liberal conception of personal autonomy or liberty."[1354] Euthanasia, abortion, collection of medical history by the government, electronic communication, and "paparazzi" are topics that revolve around privacy issues and privacy rights. Perhaps even worse is the way the public sphere has become terrifyingly adept at enabling the private to impose itself. Television, for instance, is populated by people exercising their right to freedom of speech. Yet "televised space is the premier public space," and Franzen expresses his lack of tolerance for much of what he hears on television.[1355] "You rarely hear a person on the subway talking loudly about, say, incontinence, but on television it's been happening for years. TV is devoid of shame, and without shame there can be no distinction between public and private."[1356]

Not surprisingly, the collapse of the meaning of privacy and its expansion into new and mistaken understandings of community, liberty, and visibility have culminated at his fury on a Saturday breakfast. Franzen explains,

> *[t]he last big, steep-walled bastion of public life in America is Washington, D.C. Hence the particular violation I felt when the Starr Report crashed in. Hence the feeling of being intruded on. It was privacy invasion, all right:*

[1350] Franzen, Bedroom, pp.48-49.
[1351] Franzen, Bedroom, p.50.
[1352] Franzen, Bedroom, p.50.
[1353] Franzen, Bedroom, p.50.
[1354] Franzen, Bedroom, p.43.
[1355] Franzen, Bedroom, p.49.
[1356] Franzen, Bedroom, p.49.

> *private life brutally invading the most public of spaces. I don't want to see sex on the news from Washington. There's sex everywhere else I look—on sitcoms, on the Web, on dust jackets, in car ads, on the billboards at Times Square. Can't there be one thing in the national landscape that isn't about the bedroom? […C]an't we act like grownups and […p]retend not that "no one is looking" but that* everyone *is looking?*[1357]

Therefore, reading the obsessive discourse on privacy from an odd angle, Franzen demonstrates that the new understanding of privacy inflicts historical damage on the public sphere. Put differently, what is really at stake is not private but public life. In a way, Franzen undertakes a defense of decorum, the unwritten conventions of public behavior, politeness, appropriateness in the conduct of our behavior in public. Entering public space in contemporary America means entering the very private spaces of people who unabashedly share their privacy with others who have not in any way consented to do so by entering the public space in the first place. In his passionate engagement with and sincere worry over what he observes, Franzen's pessimism and irritation does not disturb. His keen observation of an important change in society and the value he finds in addressing it is significant. He reminds us that rather than drifting into oblivious indifference when great a change happens in social fabric, we should take note of it, and think about it. In addition, Franzen may as well have drawn a fictional character embodying the contemporary malaise of privacy, but in addressing it in an essay, he not only seems to take a more concerned and immediate interest in the subject but also strengthens the role and impact of nonfiction in addressing contemporaneous matters.

Equally significant is the fact that he analyzes the same problem from other perspectives and discovers its various implications. Such sense of continuity is most visible in his essays on literature, and it underlines Franzen's valuable contribution to American intellectual and literary scene. It is also worth mentioning how Franzen returns to his concerns in "Imperial Bedroom" with a fresh outlook in an essay he writes ten years later. In "I Just Called to Say I Love You," Franzen updates his worries on the private sphere and looks at them in light of technological advances that the first essay in this discussion elaborates on. It might even be possible to say

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[1357] Franzen, Bedroom, p.51.

that "I Just Called to Say I Love You" brings together the concerns of "Pain Won't Kill You" and "Imperial Bedroom."

At the center of Franzen's argument in "I Just Called to Say I Love You" is again the breach between the private and the public, but he has a specific target to demolish: the cell phone, which, he argues, "has done lasting harm of social significance."[1358] The incessant talk, or his word of choice, "yak" has completely invaded New York City where he resides.[1359] Until a decade ago, the city "still abounded with collectively maintained public spaces in which citizens demonstrated respect for their community by not inflicting their banal bedroom lives on it."[1360] There are worse results, more direct and morally compromising in their damage:

> *One currently worsening national plague is the shopper who remains engrossed in a call throughout a transaction with a checkout clerk. […] Given the repetitive and low-paying nature of her job, she's allowed to treat you with boredom or indifference; at worst, it's unprofessional of her. But this does not relieve you of your own moral obligation to acknowledge her existence as a person. And while it's true that some clerks don't seem to mind being ignored, a notably large percentage do become visibly irritated or angered or saddened when a customer is unable to tear herself off her phone for even two seconds of direct interaction.*[1361]

This apt and ethically responsible observation might be extended to many other areas of daily life where a call seems to absorb the recipient of the call so completely from his or her surroundings that the urgency of a phone ringing—often with personalized ringtones that escalate the importance of an incoming call, relegates face-to-face interactions merely secondary in importance to cellular communication not bounded by time and space constraints. In other words, the call may seem to induce suspension of the worldly matters falling outside the requirements of the call, or causing total isolation from surrounding environments and people. In a sense, there could be no better intruder than a cell phone on both the public and the private, and achieving this task simultaneously: being called is justification enough to halt face-to-face conversations, to talk loudly if necessary, and inflict maximum *me* and *I* on others. This indeed is a mode of conquest as Franzen puts it, and a completely new

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[1358] Franzen, Called, p.145.
[1359] Franzen, Called, p.145.
[1360] Franzen, Called, p.145.
[1361] Franzen, Called, p.147.

stage in human interaction, and America is experiencing a "national orgy of connectedness."[1362]

One implication of the frenzy over "connectedness" may be that it actually disconnects people from their social environments. This reverse-logic can be seen in Franzen's supermarket transaction example where "connectedness" redefines human interaction in social, public space with all its new accompanying sets of rules for social behavior: human interaction exists on cellular level, that is, on the cell-phone level. Unfortunately, this might be the final (perhaps winning) battle of the breach of the private-public border Franzen laid out in "Imperial Bedroom." People have become obsessed about their cell phones. Franzen even defines New York as "a city of phone addicts sleepwalking down the sidewalks in off-putting little clouds of private life."[1363] The "little clouds" are not metaphorical; they are intended to emphasize how Franzen considers the cell phone as the successor of a previous addiction.[1364] Franzen writes,

> *[t]he world ten years ago was not yet fully conquered by yak. It was still possible to see the use of Nokias as an ostentation or an affectation of the affluent. Or, more generously, as an affliction or a disability or a crutch. There was unfolding, after all, in New York in the late nineties, a seamless citywide transition from nicotine culture to cellular culture. One day the lump in the shirt pocket was Marlboros, the next day it was Motorola. One day the vulnerable unaccompanied pretty girl was occupying her hands and mouth and attention with a cigarette, the next day she was occupying them with a very important conversation with a person who wasn't you. […] Although the irritant changed overnight, the suffering of a self-restrained majority at the hands of a compulsive minority, in restaurants and airports and other public spaces, remained eerily constant.*[1365]

If the cell phone is the latest form of a dangerous addiction, it is also the explosion of a self-therapy culture manifesting itself through another addictive "habit," or "national plague."[1366]: "ending cell-phone conversations by the words 'LOVE YOU!' Or, even more oppressive or grating: 'I LOVE YOU!' It makes me want to go and live in China where I don't understand the language."[1367] A major part of Franzen's irritation is related to what he perceives as the inherent insincerity

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[1362] Franzen, Called, p.150.
[1363] Franzen, Called, p.146.
[1364] Franzen, Called, p.145.
[1365] Franzen, Called, p.145.
[1366] Franzen, Called, pp.148,149.
[1367] Franzen, Called, p.148.

of this routine. After all, he titles the essay after the lurking sense of insincerity behind sincerity. Franzen finds it nice that Stevie Wonder claims to have "called to say I love you," yet when the singer ends the song with a clarification and explains, "And I mean from the bottom of my heart," Franzen finds it unpleasant and argues that "[a]vowing sincerity is more or less diagnostic of insincerity."[1368] What is more, since an average person makes many calls a day, "love-yous" are uttered many times. Franzen wonders how the phrase can be "so common and routine and easily achieved that it can be reexperienced and reexpressed many times in a single day without significant loss of power."[1369] He concludes that it can only be a performance that is "overperformed; publicy performed; defiantly inflicted."[1370] Perhaps one underlying reason in these performances is to cure oneself out of the trauma of a parent who never said the words to the performer; maybe another is declaring to the world—by letting others hear—that the person is a very loving and caring parent or friend.

The more likely theory regards a national trauma:

> *The cell phone came of age on September 11, 2001. Imprinted that day on our collective consciousness was the image of cell phones as conduits of intimacy or the desperate. In every too-loud I-love-you that I hear nowadays, […] it's difficult not to hear an echo of those terrible, entirely appropriate I-love-yous uttered on the four doomed planes and in the two doomed towers. And it's precisely this echo, the fact that it's an echo, the sentimentality of it, that so irritates me.*[1371]

Franzen's perception of the terrorist attacks differs from the majority of Americans. He does not own a television and he is not subjected to the televised images "of the attacks and the ensuing collapses and fires [that were] shown again and again, interspersed with long segments on the emotional toll on ordinary citizens and their impressionable children."[1372] He listens to the news on the radio, or reads them on the Internet. He continues with the normal course of his life. The night of the attacks, he dines out; the next day, he observes others continuing on with their lives, like "buying fall clothes."[1373] Not having seen the images on television yet, he tries to imagine how people on the crashed planes and the collapsed towers might have felt.

[1368] Franzen, Called, p.149.
[1369] Franzen, Called, p.149.
[1370] Franzen, Called, p.150.
[1371] Franzen, Called, p.150.
[1372] Franzen, Called, p.151.
[1373] Franzen, Called, p.152.

Three days later, he realizes that the nation is reacting in a completely different manner. He is invited to a news program on television where he is "asked to confirm widespread reports that Tuesday's attacks had profoundly changed the personality of New Yorkers."[1374] Franzen is a New Yorker,[1375] yet he fails to confirm this belief, causing the program's host to "frown" and confirm it himself.[1376] Noticing the images of the attacks on television for the first time in the news studio, Franzen realizes, "I didn't understand that the worst damage to the country was being done not by pathogen but by the immune system's massive overresponse to it, because I didn't have a TV."[1377] The incessant broadcasting of the horrible details of the attacks was causing nation-wide "actual real-time trauma."[1378] He inadvertently missed "the national televised group therapy session, the vast techno-hug-a-thon, that followed in the following days and weeks and months in response to the trauma of exposure to televised images."[1379]

Because Franzen remains an outsider to the televised version of the event, he is able to detect "the sudden, mysterious, disastrous sentimentalization of American public discourse."[1380] A major part of this sentimentalization is "the national foregrounding of the personal" where suddenly everyone in America was "entitled to express his or her opinion," share in the suffering of the surviving victims, completely identify with the families of the victims. "And everybody agreed that irony was dead. The bad, empty irony of the nineties was simply 'no longer possible' post-9/11; we'd stepped forward into a new age of sincerity."[1381] Franzen not only thinks that this so-called sincerity is completely false but also that it has grown into the daily, in fact hourly, national testimony of *in*sincerity in the form of the "love-yous." With this last argument, Franzen also contributes to the death of irony and the birth of a new sincerity argument that has currency in contemporary thought (Kelly),

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[1374] Franzen, Called, p.152.
[1375] In fact, Franzen is an acknowledged New Yorker; Matt Weiland and Sean Wilsey, the editors of *State by State: A Panoramic Portrait of America, Fifty Writers Fifty States* (2008) commission the New York chapter to Franzen who is actually a Midwesterner. Many other city entries are written by the natives of the states, for instance, William T. Vollmann writes the California chapter.
[1376] Franzen, Called, p.152.
[1377] Franzen, Called, p.152.
[1378] Franzen, Called, p.152.
[1379] Franzen, Called, p.153.
[1380] Franzen, Called, p.154.
[1381] Franzen, Called, p.153.

yet his contribution is one that decries the falsity of what is deemed sincerity. It is nothing more than "hysteria" for Franzen.[1382]

As we see in Franzen's essays we have discussed so far, criticism should always come with suggestions; not only diagnosis but also constructive argumentation is vital for any meaningful intervention to the culture. It is significant that all his troubles with contemporary culture direct us to the fundamental problems with how humans interact with each other. In this way, he transforms a complaint on the pervasiveness of cellular phones to an elegy to the disappearance of true, one-to-one, heart-to-heart human communication. Similarly, his objection to technology's conquest of daily life is at root his protest against the technoconsumer's unrealistic, deceptive sense of gratification that creates the illusion of the self's needs and desires as the constitutive aspects of life. Franzen is deeply bothered by the course humanity has taken: we risk forgetting how to communicate, how to be human. Rather than being conservative, Franzen seems like a visionary who reminds that we are becoming too self-centered, too narcissistic, too "private" in all our communal acts that we jeopardize the possibility of a sensible, sensitive, and ethical life in our unquestioned dedication to the grand desirer, the self.

2.3.2. David Foster Wallace and Thoughts on Everything

David Foster Wallace rose to prominence effortlessly in American letters with his highly acclaimed novels and short stories. He also wrote an impressive number of extraordinarily well-crafted essays, journalism, and literary criticism. It would not be wrong to argue that it is not very common for a novelist to produce creative nonfiction that is as engaging, full of intelligent and perceptive treatment of culture, emotionally overwhelming, and entertaining as his fictional output. This section shall discuss Wallace's critical essays on an astonishing variety of issues of in modern American life with a focus on his approach to irony,[1383] language, the American youth as well as the self-destructive propensity for entertainment.

[1382] Franzen, Called, p.159.

[1383] See Adam Kelly's "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction" (2010) for the ongoing debate on what is called "New Sincerity" and Wallace's relationship to it.

All of the essays considered in this section can be seen as vectors in Wallace's cultural criticism of post-war American culture. The central argument throughout Wallace's essays is that the 1960s and 1970s created an empty resistance to authority and a self-obsessed culture. Most of his essays discuss the varying manifestations of these and other cultural ills in, for instance, matters of language and usage, fiction, politics, and culinary habits. To begin, and to connect to Franzen's reading of the national hysteria after September 11, we could note Wallace's essay "The View from Mrs. Thompson's"[1384] (2001) which originally appeared in *Rolling Stone*. Like Franzen, Wallace also observes an almost impulsive sense of community bonding in the aftermath of the attacks, which he calls "the Horror."[1385] At the time he writes the essay, Wallace resides in Bloomington, Illinois.

> *In true Midwest fashion, people in Bloomington aren't unfriendly but do tend to be reserved. A stranger will smile warmly at you, but there normally won't be any of that strangerly chitchat in waiting areas or checkout lines. But now, thanks to the Horror, there's something to talk about that overrides all inhibition, as if we were somehow all standing right there and just saw the same traffic accident.*[1386]

Wallace himself participates in this new bonding and exchanges casual remarks with his next-door neighbor who usually keeps to himself. Also, surprised at the overnight sprouting of flags that adorn even abandoned houses and closed shops, Wallace talks informally, and comfortably, to strangers and inquires their opinions on "the purpose of the flags."[1387]

Wallace's personal community in Bloomington comprises of his friends from church. "Like most Midwest towns," he explains, the greatest "public community" in Bloomington is the church, and other than the church, community usually refers to the circle of family, friends, and neighbors. What is perhaps most unusual about community relationships in Bloomington is that its glue is television: "what you do in Bloomington is all get together at somebody's house and watch something."[1388] In other words, the major "social phenomenon" in Bloomington is television. Like Franzen, Wallace does not own a television and learns about the terrorist attacks from news on the radio. Halting his shower, he goes over to a friend's house to watch

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[1384] David Foster Wallace, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's", **Lobster**, (Mrs. Thompson's).
[1385] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.128.
[1386] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.128.
[1387] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.130.
[1388] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.134.

television with "shampoo in [his] hair."[1389] His friend is the Mrs. Thompson of the title, who happens to be his seventy-four year old friend from church.

Mrs. Thompson's house is crammed with women, and altogether they watch the "dots detaching from the building" which a sudden close-up of the camera reveals to be people jumping from the burning North Tower.[1390] All the women present in Mrs. Thompson's living room "sat back and looked at one another with expressions that seemed somehow both childlike and terribly old. I think one or two people made some sort of sound."[1391] While these women watch television silently, Wallace begins to feel a growing distance between him and them.

While trying to convince and thereby console one of Mrs. Thompson's guests that her relative in New York cannot be in danger because where she works is very far from Manhattan, Wallace realizes that these women, who are knowledgeable enough to observe that "11 September is the anniversary of the Camp David Accords, which was news to me," do not have any idea about New York's basic geographical details.[1392] They do know the New York skyline or various other things about the city, but they know whatever they know from watching television. Yet the sum total of their reaction to what they are watching reveals for Wallace an unpleasant fact: they are not meta-watchers like almost everybody Wallace knows. The people gathered at Mrs. Thompson watch the disaster unfold and behave in the most human way possible by registering it as *real*. Wallace writes,

> *[w]hat these Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem to me, is innocent. There is what would strike many Americans as a marked, startling lack of cynicism in the room. It does not, for instance, occur to anyone here to remark on how it's maybe a little odd that* all three *network anchors are in shirtsleeves, or to consider the possibility that [the reporter's] hair's being mussed might not be wholly accidental, or that the constant rerunning of horrific footage might not be just in case some viewers were only now tuning in and hadn't seen it yet. None of the ladies seem to notice the president's odd little lightless eyes appear to get closer and closer together throughout his taped address, nor that some of his lines sound almost plagiaristically identical to those uttered by Bruce Willis (as a right-wing wacko, recall) in [the movie]* The Siege *a couple years back. Nor that at least some of the sheer weirdness of watching the Horror unfold has been how closely various shots and scenes have mirrored the plots of everything from* Die Hard I-III *to* Air Force One. *Nobody's near hip enough to lodge the sick and obvious po-mo complaint: We've Seen This Before. Instead, what they*

[1389] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.135.
[1390] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.136.
[1391] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.136.
[1392] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.137.

> *do is all sit together and feel really bad, and pray. No one in Mrs. Thompson's crew would ever be so nauseous as to try to get everybody to pray aloud or form a prayer circle, but you can still tell what they're all doing.* [1393]

What they are doing is, in its simplest and truest form, facing reality and behaving like real people would do. Moreover, their life spent watching television seems neither to have severed their connection to reality nor aligned their worldview with the highly ironic one of television to which they are continuously subjected. In this sense, Wallace rediscovers how "decent," and "innocent" people really behave. The view from Mrs. Thompson's living room presents him two Americas existing in one: "Some part of the horror of the Horror was knowing, deep in my heart," Wallace writes, "that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my America […] than it was these ladies."[1394]

His America is what Wallace struggles against throughout his oeuvre. He returns repeatedly, from *Infinite Jest* to nearly all his short fiction, from his thoughts on Kafka to John McCain's presidential candidacy in his nonfiction, to the ways in which the version of America not seen in the living room of Mrs. Thompson's can be understood and perhaps improved. However, the view from Mrs. Thompson lays bare an irresolvable duality in modern American life. We read about it *Infinite Jest*; "[s]entiment equals naïveté on this continent, […] that queerly persistent myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive."[1395] Similarly, in "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace writes, "[c]ulture-wise, shall I spend much of your time pointing out the degree to which televisual values influence the contemporary mood of jaded weltschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference, and the delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive?"[1396] At Mrs. Thompson's home, they are indeed mutually exclusive because nobody in that home is afraid to have emotions or to display it. For the majority of the nation, however, the equation is not the same.

Although of course one could argue that Wallace's companions in Bloomington are people of a certain age, regular church attendees, and are not the

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[1393] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.140.
[1394] Wallace, Mrs. Thompson's, p.140.
[1395] Wallace, Jest, p.694.
[1396] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", **A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments**, Back Bay, New York, 1997, (Unibus), p.63.

most likely victims of cultural cynicism, it might not in the end be their innocence that really matters; it might be Wallace's own realization of the exceptionality of this situation within modern American life. This is not to say that he is pessimistic. As we observe in "Some Remarks of Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed" (1999) and *This is Water*, Wallace always tries with great hope to convey some sense of a more meaningful and true life to his audience.

Both "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness" and *This is Water* are collected texts of speech delivered at special occasions, yet, as coherent and well thought-out pieces of nonfiction writing, they prove indispensable arguments within Wallace's oeuvre. In 1999, Wallace delivers a speech at a PEN American Center gathering for the new translation of Kafka's *The Castle*, and the text of this speech is published as "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness." [1397] This speech, which we shall call an essay for clarity's sake, elaborates on the limits of and impediments to Kafka's appreciation in contemporary America. For Wallace, an understanding of Kafka's humor and his sense of the struggle of the human soul is not available to the young adults of America with whom Wallace spends sufficient time as a college instructor.

Reading the essay, we realize that Wallace's students seem the opposite of the women in Bloomington in that most young adults of America are not able to understand basic truths about life without turning them into metaphors or without receiving them sugarcoated within entertaining, mocking, ironizing formulations. This is exactly what is missing in Kafka whose works comprise of "some kind of radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical."[1398] For instance, the theme of escape in Kafka's short story "A Little Fable" cannot be truly understood by his students, so Wallace unhappily removes the story from his syllabus. In the story, an anxious mouse meets a cat;

> *'Alas,' said the mouse, 'the world is growing smaller and smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into.' 'You only need to change your direction,' said the cat, and ate it up*.[1399]

[1397] David Foster Wallace, "Some Remarks of Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed", **Lobster**, (Kafka).
[1398] Wallace, Kafka, p.63.
[1399] Wallace, Kafka, p.60.

The power of this story resides in the tragic force of its humor, but Wallace cannot convey to his students this humor because in their minds, humor itself comprises the futility and absurdity of the escape the mouse has inadvertently seeks. In other words, his students are similar to the mouse, avoiding life and seeking escape, but they do it through mindless entertainment, and something funny is merely another aid in their flight. The tragic funniness inherent in the flight of the mouse is something they miss because they are acting in some way like the mouse.

Wallace acknowledges the particular difficulty of college years and how adolescence can be especially vexing as responsibility and maturity press themselves. In Wallace's opinion, it is not "a coincidence that college is when many Americans do their most […] ecstatic Dionysian-type reveling."[1400] College students are "terrified, and they're dealing with their terror in a distinctively US way" when they drown themselves in alcohol at weekend parties because, as adolescents, they "are simply trying to buy a few hours' escape from the grim adult stuff that any decent school has forced them to think about all week."[1401] The sense of entertainment as escape from life is exactly what makes it impossible to study Kafka with these students. If only this impossibility were limited to students:

> *Our present culture is, both developmentally and historically, adolescent. And since adolescence is acknowledged to be the single most stressful and frightening period of human development—the stage when the adulthood we claim to crave begins to present itself as a real and narrowing system of responsibilities and limitations (taxes, death) and when we yearn inside for a return to the same childish oblivion we pretend to scorn—it's not difficult to see why we as a culture are so susceptible to art and entertainment whose primary function is* escape*, i.e., fantasy, adrenaline, spectacle, romance, etc. jokes are a kind of art and because most of us Americans come to art now essentially to escape ourselves—to pretend for a while that we're not mice and walls are parallel and the cat can be outrun—it's understandable that most of us are going to view "A Little Parable" as not all that funny, or maybe even see it a repulsive instance of the exact sort of downer-type death-and-taxes reality for which "real" humor serves as a respite.*[1402]

The students miss Kafka's humor because they are trained by the escapist entertainment culture of America to treat humor as something that numbs one's mind by offering relief from the troubles of daily life, not to mention existential troubles.

[1400] Wallace, Kafka, p.64.
[1401] Wallace, Kafka, p.64.
[1402] Wallace, Kafka, p.64.

The humor in Kafka, in contrast, is something that makes you think seriously about some important issues. Rather than giving comfort, it disturbs you. In Wallace's opinion, it is sad and inevitable that "the really central Kafka joke" is rigorously avoided: "that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home."[1403] With a brilliant suggestion, Wallace concludes:

> *You can ask [the students] to imagine [Kafka's] stories as all about a kind of door. To envision us approaching and pounding on this door, increasingly hard, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission but needing it; we don't know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter, pounding and ramming and kicking. That, finally, the door opens ... and it opens* outward—*we've been inside what we wanted all along. Das ist komisch.*[1404]

Then, the real struggle is against the self in which we unconsciously lock ourselves. Unfortunately, both realizing this and overcoming this imprisonment is difficult. Nevertehless, not impossible as Wallace suggests in *This is Water*.

This is Water is the text of Wallace's commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005. In this speech, which also reads like a coherent essay, Wallace refers to many themes that occupy this entire oeuvre like the importance of the simple truths in ordinary clichés, the role of conscious decision-making, and the dangers of the narcissistic imprisonment within the cage of one's self. The title of the speech refers to a parable and it gives the argument a forceful start. An old fish greets two young fish as it passes them by and remarks, to the surprise of the young fish, "Morning boys. How's the water?"[1405] "What the hell is water?" one of the young fish wonders as the old fish swims away. Throughout *This is Water*, Wallace tries to convey what water, that is, life, can mean. "The immediate point of the fish story" he explains, "is merely that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about."[1406] He acknowledges the cliché-ridden wisdom of these remarks but insists, "in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life-or-death importance."[1407] Hence, the real

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[1403] Wallace, Kafka, p.65.
[1404] Wallace, Kafka, p.65.
[1405] David Foster Wallace, **This is Water**, Little Brown, New York, 2005, (Water), p.3.
[1406] Wallace, Water, p.8.
[1407] Wallace, Water, p.9.

function of liberal arts education, neatly presented in another cliché, is "teaching you how to think."[1408]

The most important part of thinking is that it means making choices in what to think about. The meaning we grant to anything, from the most trivial idea to the most fundamental belief, is a "conscious decision" that may also imply "arrogance, blind certainty, a closed-mindedness."[1409] He elaborates:

> *Here's one example of the utter wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of. Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. […] It is our default setting, hardwired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you've had that you were not at the absolute center of […* that you*] see and interpret through this lens of self.*[1410]

Therefore, the real lesson in learning to think is learning to realize the habitual methods and the filtering subjectivity at work in the act of thinking. "It means being conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience."[1411] Otherwise, he guarantees the graduates that they may, like a vast majority of adults, experience their "comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult li[ves] dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone, day in and day out."[1412]

To illustrate, he gives the graduates a sense of what he means by "day in and day out": working all day, trying to food-shop on the way home while traffic jams, crowded supermarkets, spoiled children blocking the aisles, long checkout lines, more traffic jams on the way home all work united against you and your happiness especially when you are most tired, hungry and in need of solitude. More or less, adult life is full of such tedious routines, but thinking each incident as an intervention to our personal self can be changed if we choose to think differently. "It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type

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[1408] Wallace, Water, p.12.
[1409] Wallace, Water, pp.28,32.
[1410] Wallace, Water, pp.36,39,44.
[1411] Wallace, Water, p.54.
[1412] Wallace, Water, p.60.

situation" not as an attack against you, your being, your happiness, but a fact of life that happens on a daily basis to everybody.[1413]

The difficulty about choosing what to think, and therefore, to consciously decide how to experience the part of life that is outside us is of course related to a more serious problem: narcissism. Putting the self at the center of our thoughts, and experiencing everything through the self's filter is, simply put, worshipping the self. Wallace reminds that like every other choice, "[y]ou get to decide what to worship."[1414] In fact, the biggest asset of adult life is the fact that we are free to choose what to worship, which asset might be destructive or life-saving with regard to its object. Like Franzen, Wallace also warns of the dangers of worshipping material things which "will eat you alive."[1415] Similarly, worship of intellect is dangerous because "you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out."[1416] He grants that "we all know this stuff already—it's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story."[1417] However, he explains, "I have learned this the hard way, as I predict you graduates will, too," and insists that "[t]he trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness."[1418] All the dangerous forms of worship are dangerous because they are chosen unconsciously. "They are default settings."[1419] Moreover,

> *the so-called "real-world" will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called "real-world" of men and women and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of the self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation.*[1420]

The real freedom, therefore, is connecting to what is outside the self. In order to achieve that, we need to be attentive, aware, disciplined, and caring toward other

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[1413] Wallace, Water, p.93.
[1414] Wallace, Water, p.96.
[1415] Wallace, Water, p.102.
[1416] Wallace, Water, p.110.
[1417] Wallace, Water, p.107.
[1418] Wallace, Water, pp.34, 108.
[1419] Wallace, Water, p.113.
[1420] Wallace, Water, pp.115-117.

people, willing "to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day," as we chant to ourselves, "[t]his is water," this is life.[1421]

In light of the arguments of this speech, we could look more closely at Wallace's thoughts on the issues of caring about others and sacrificing oneself, and having a cause other than self-interest through the unusual topic of politics in "Up, Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate" (2000).[1422] In 1999, the *Rolling Stone* magazine commissions Wallace to cover the Republican Presidential Candidate John McCain's campaign during the primary elections. Wallace is a self-declared Democrat who has a low opinion in general of politics and politicians due to some perceived hypocrisy. Nonetheless, he agrees to write the piece for the magazine after watching McCain on a television show where McCain appears to Wallace as "either incredibly honest and forthright or else just insane."[1423] He borrows from a friend a "battered old black leather jacket" to adequately "project the kind of edgy, vaguely dangerous vibe I imagined an *RS* reporter ought to give off. (You have to understand that I hadn't read *Rolling Stone* in quite some time.)"[1424] For a week, Wallace joins the press following McCain's campaign trail buses that travel from state to state. This journalistic article turns into an eighty-page analysis of a very important part of American culture and politics. *Rolling Stone* makes, of course, serious cuts to publish the article in the magazine in order to open up space, as Wallace puts it, for "lush photos of puffy-lipped girls with their Diesel [jeans] half unzipped."[1425]

In his "Optional Foreword" to the uncut article, Wallace clarifies that he is neither for nor against McCain. In fact, the whole article is about

> *what McCain's candidacy and the brief weird excitement it generated might reveal about how millennial politics and all its packaging and marketing and strategy and media and spin and general sepsis actually makes us US voters feel, inside, and whether anyone running for anything can even be "real" anymore—whether what we actually want is something real or something else.*[1426]

[1421] Wallace, Water, p.120.
[1422] David Foster Wallace, "Up, Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate", **Lobster**, (Simba). (The essay appears in its uncut form in the essay collection.)
[1423] Wallace, Simba, p.157.
[1424] Wallace, Simba, p.158.
[1425] Wallace, Simba, p.158.
[1426] Wallace, Simba, p.159.

The most striking thing about "Up, Simba" is that it defines the presidential candidate an "anticandidate" because McCain "wants your vote but won't whore himself to get it, and wants you to vote for him *because* he won't whore."[1427] Young Voters seem to respond to this call as McCain wins the New Hampshire primary by a great margin that "nearly wipes the smirk off Bush²'s[1428] face."[1429] The next primary is in South Carolina where something of historical proportions, not to mention significance, happens: "a good 500 South Carolina college students are waiting to greet him, cheering and waving signs and dancing and holding a weird kind of [Grand Old Party] rave. Think about this—500 kids at 3:00 AM out of their minds with enthusiasms for […] a politician."[1430]

Wallace reminds that Young Voter (ages 18-35) turnout in elections is usually very low. The lowest turnout of the nation's history had taken place in the previous election, in 1996, when Clinton won. Wallace is careful to emphasize that although he will eventually lose the 2000 Republican presidential candidacy to Bush, McCain was drawing the votes, in the primaries, of "first-time and never-before voters; he drew Democrats and Independents; Libertarians and soft socialists and college kids and soccer moms"[1431,1432] Wallace addresses the Young Voters reading *Rolling Stone* and anticipates their "enormous shuddering yawn" at the prospect of reading an article about politics.[1433] In fact, he sympathizes with them:

> *The political process tends to evoke in us now in this post-Watergate-post-Iran-Contra-post-Whitewater-post-Lewinsky era, an era in which politicians' statements of principle or vision are understood as self-serving ad copy and judged not for their truth or ability to inspire but for their tactical shrewdness, their marketability. And no generation has been marketed and spun and pitched to as relentlessly as today's demographic Young.*[1434]

[1427] Wallace, Simba, p.160.
[1428] Wallace's idiosyncratic shorthand for George W. Bush.
[1429] Wallace, Simba, p.160.
[1430] Wallace, Simba, p.161.
[1431] It is possible to find a similarity with Barack Obama's victory against McCain in 2008, when not only Young Vote but also general voting was historically high. When Wallace died in 2008, he was commissioned by a magazine to write a piece along the line of "Up, Simba" for Obama.
[1432] Wallace, Simba, p.160.
[1433] Wallace, Simba, p.161.
[1434] Wallace, Simba, p.161.

Despite all these, however, Wallace gives the benefit of the doubt to McCain who claims extraordinary things that compels Wallace to test against the above quote's arguments.

McCain claims, "I run for president not to Be Somebody, but to Do Something," and his purpose is 'to inspire young Americans to devote themselves to causes greater than their own self-interests."[1435] In a truly cynical fashion, Wallace writes that people usually do not believe such claims. In fact, "we're beyond believing," Wallace writes, "mostly we don't even hear it now, dismissing it at the same deep level, below attention, where we also block out billboards and Muzak"[1436,1437] Nevertheless, he finds McCain's claims "harder to dismiss" because McCain "sometimes says things that are manifestly true but which no other mainstream candidate will say."[1438] For instance, McCain publicly derides Congress's plans regarding health-care reform on the basis that the Republican Party—*his* party—"is in the pocket of pharmaceutical and HMO[1439] lobbies and the Democrats are funded by the trial lawyers' lobbies, and it is in these backers' self-interest to see that the current insane US health-care system stays just the way it is."[1440] The otherwise political nature of health-care signifies for Wallace, in McCain's approach to it, the possible presence of "something underneath politics," perhaps a sign of "something riveting and unspinnable and true."[1441]

Wallace's suspicion is fuelled by McCain's military background and his "off-the-charts dramatic" accident when his bomber plane is shot in Vietnam in 1967.[1442] McCain ejects from the plane before it crashes and he makes a terrible fall to Hanoi as his chute malfunctions. The ejection breaks McCain's arm and both of his legs, and as soon as he lands enemy territory, the North Vietnamese soldiers beat him to death, stab him in the groin, and break his shoulder, and put him into a solitary cell without giving medical attention to his severe, fatal wounds. While Wallace recounts this story, he frequently pleads empathy: "Try to imagine for a second how much this

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[1435] John McCain, 1999 quoted in Wallace, Simba, pp.161.
[1436] Muzak is customized music broadcast by corporations or business firms.
[1437] Wallace, Simba, p.162.
[1438] Wallace, Simba, p.162.
[1439] Health Maintenance Organization.
[1440] Wallace, Simba, p.162.
[1441] Wallace, Simba, p.163.
[1442] Wallace, Simba, p.163.

would hurt and how scared you'd be," Wallace writes, "[t]ry for a moment to feel this."[1443] After several months, McCain's father becomes the head of the US Navy's Pacific division, and North Vietnam decides to release McCain in an opportunistic move. Yet McCain refuses to leave and follows the military code that orders prisoners of war be released in the order they were imprisoned. He is beaten again, his teeth are broken, and still he refuses. In the end, he stays four more years in the North Vietnam prison, "much of the time in solitary, in the dark, in a special closet-sized box."[1444] Wallace writes, "[f]orget how many movies stuff like this happens in and try to imagine it as real: a man without teeth refusing release."[1445] Wallace fails to find how this act could be explained other than, as McCain's campaign states, devotion to causes greater than one's self-interest. Everything about McCain's decision is against self-interest. Wallace writes,

> *[th]e fact is that John McCain is a genuine hero of maybe the only kind Vietnam has to offer us, a hero because of not what he did but what he suffered—voluntarily, for a Code. This gives him the moral authority both to utter lines about causes beyond self-interest and to expect us, even in this age of spin and lawyerly cunning, to believe he means them. And yes, literally: "moral authority," that old cliché, like so many other clichés—"service," "honor," "duty"—that have become now just mostly words, slogans invoked by men in nice suits who want something from us.*[1446]

These details turn the presidential primaries into a very personal process of choosing between two things: is McCain genuinely sincere, or is he just a marketed image of sincerity? Wallace tries to reason with the cynic in him, the cynic that became cynical because the politicians have always lied. He does want to believe in McCain, yet cannot be so sure whether what inspires trust in McCain is another instance of advertising.

The task Wallace sets up for himself is both difficult and risky because he opens himself to the possibility of changing a fundamental part of his life by believing a politician. Like most Americans, Wallace is actually not very interested in politics, a disinterest that is, as he admits, both cynical and ironic. In general, the following is how he feels with regard to politicians in general:

[1443] Wallace, Simba, p.164.
[1444] Wallace, Simba, p.165.
[1445] Wallace, Simba, p.164.
[1446] Wallace, Simba, p.166.

> *Men who aren't enough like human beings even to hate—what one feels when they loom into view is just an overwhelming lack of interest, the sort of deep disengagement that is often a defense against pain. Against sadness. In fact, the likeliest reason why so many of us care so little about politics is that modern politicians make us sad, hurt us deep down in ways that are hard even to name, much less talk about. It's way easier to roll your eyes and not give a shit. You probably don't want to hear about all this, even.*[1447]

Wallace's interest in McCain's heroic, inhumanly tragic story of his military background as a prisoner of war is not enough to account for Wallace's serious effort to understand McCain. Wallace constantly analyzes how McCain behaves, acts, and compares his impressions of McCain to those of the other press staff and television reporters and technical staff in the campaign trail. It would not be an overstatement to say that everybody likes McCain very much, and everybody more or less praises how much he talks and acts like "a real human being."[1448] Most of the time, McCain is available for conversation with anybody that tries to talk to him and Wallace observes, "[i]n conversation he's smart and alive and human and seems actually to listen and respond directly to you instead of to some demographic abstraction you might represent."[1449] Let alone a politician, these traits are not that common with people we come across in our everyday lives.

In addition, McCain closes every public address with the same remarks: "I'm going to tell you something. I may have said some things here today that maybe you don't agree with, and I might have said some things you hopefully agree with. But I will always. Tell you. The truth."[1450] Wallace is amazed that crowds "cheer so wildly at a simple promise not to lie."[1451] The cheer is not so much about McCain, Wallace realizes, as it is about "how good it feels to believe him […] because we've been lied to and lied to. It's ultimately that complicated. It hurts."[1452] In a list of grievances, Wallace dismantles the psychology of a whole generation of Americans.

> *[Young Voters] may not personally remember Vietnam or Watergate, but it's a good bet you remember "No new taxes" and "Out of the loop" and "No direct knowledge of any impropriety at this time" and "Did not inhale" and "Did not have sex with that Ms. Lewinsky" and etc. etc. It's painful to believe that the would-be "public servants" you're forced to choose between are all phonies*

[1447] Wallace, Simba, p.187.
[1448] Wallace, Simba, p.186.
[1449] Wallace, Simba, p.215.
[1450] John McCain, 1999, quoted in Wallace, Simba, p.188.
[1451] Wallace, Simba, p.188.
[1452] Wallace, Simba, p.188.

> *whose only real concern is their own care and feeding and who will lie so outrageously and with such a straight face that you know they've just got to believe you're an idiot. So who wouldn't yawn, trade apathy and cynicism for the hurt of getting treated with contempt? And who wouldn't fall all over themselves for a top politician who actually seemed to talk to you like you were a person, an intelligent adult worthy of respect? A politician who all of a sudden out of nowhere comes on TV as this total long-shot candidate and says that Washington is paralyzed, that everybody there's been bought off, and that the only way to really "return government to the people" as all the other candidates claim they want to do is to outlaw huge unreported political contributions from corporations and lobbies and PACs […] all of which are obvious truths that everybody knows but no recent politician anywhere's had the stones to say. Who wouldn't cheer, hearing stuff like this, especially from a guy we know chose to sit in a dark box for four years instead of violate a Code? Even in AD 2000, who among us is so cynical that he doesn't have some good old corny American hope way down deep in his heart, lying dormant like a spinster's ardor, not dead but just waiting for the right guy to give it to?*[1453]

Nevertheless, this portrait is too good to be true. After all, McCain lost presidential candidacy to George W. Bush.

Wallace then turns to discussing McCain's position with regard to the issue of advertising and marketing that skyrocketed since the 1960s. He believes that John F. Kennedy is "the last real leader we had as US president."[1454] He was not faultless, but "had that special leader-type magic, and when he said things like 'Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country,' nobody rolled their eyes or saw it as just a clever line. Instead, a lot of them felt inspired."[1455] By the 1980s, selling and marketing have become so proficient that Ronald W. Reagan was himself "a great salesman. What he was selling was the idea of himself as a leader."[1456] In 2000, McCain becomes an anticandidate for Wallace because his priority is not so much being elected as proving that he does not care that much whether he is elected. Wallace wonders whether "some very shrewd, clever marketers are trying to market this candidate's rejection of shrewd, clever marketing. Is this bad? Or just confusing?"[1457] Wallace concludes,

> *[t]he fact of the matter is that if you're a true-blue, market-savvy Young Voter, the only thing you're certain to feel about John McCain's campaign is a very modern and American type of ambivalence, a sort of interior war between your deep need to believe and your deep belief that the need to believe is bullshit,*

[1453] Wallace, Simba, p.189.
[1454] Wallace, Simba, p.225.
[1455] Wallace, Simba, p.225.
[1456] Wallace, Simba, p.227.
[1457] Wallace, Simba, p.229.

> *that there's nothing left anywhere but sales and salesmen. At the times your cynicism's winning, you'll find that it's possible to see even McCain's most attractive qualities as just marketing angles. His famous habit of bringing up his own closet's skeletons, for example […] could be real humility, or it could be a clever way to make himself seem both heroic* and *humble.*[1458]

The fact that Wallace himself goes through this "internal war" is what makes "Up, Simba" a significant piece of nonfiction: Wallace ventures upon a philosophical quest that has politics at its focus. In addition, his meditation is more than a personal quest because he manages to address the concerns of all his fellow cynics, who are, he believes, equally tired of not caring. However, he also believes that his generation is in need of discovering something to care about. He resolves that, even if the root cause of their detachment might be external, it might be possible to turn inward when trying to decide about McCain: "whether he's truly 'for real' now depends less on what is in his heart than on what might be in yours."[1459] In his heart, Wallace knows that he wants to believe, and this is a decision he wants to make despite himself.

This genuine attempt can also be observed in another essay where Wallace again inquires the possibility of political redemption. The subject matter of this other essay, however, renders this proposition almost oxymoronic in its claim; after all, how could a review of a dictionary be political, let alone politically redemptive?

In April 2001, *Harper's* assigns Wallace to write an uncommon kind of book review. It is uncommon because the book is uncommon: the book under review is *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (1998) by Bryan A. Garner,[1460] recently published by Oxford University Press. Wallace writes a brilliant review by all standards, titled "Authority and American Usage."[1461] Similar to the ingenious shape Wallace's presidential campaign journalism assignment has acquired with Wallace's overarching perspective and criticism, this book-review assignment proves very insightful in the expansive horizon Wallace offers on the topic. In addition, rather than putting his reader into the position of a potential "customer" for the given

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[1458] Wallace, Simba, pp.229-230.
[1459] Wallace, Simba, p.234.
[1460] The review leads to a great friendship and Garner's very recently released book is titled, *Quack This Way: David Foster Wallace & Bryan A. Garner Talk Language and Writing*.
[1461] David Foster Wallace, "Authority and American Usage", **Lobster**, (Authority). (The original *Harper's* title of the essay is "Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage." For the essay's collection in *Consider the Lobster,* Wallace changes the title into "Authority and American Usage.")

book/dictionary, Wallace undertakes a comprehensive analysis of dictionary-writing.[1462] In the end, he does promote Garner's dictionary over many alternatives[1463] because Wallace understands that Garner has made an immense contribution to the world of the American dictionary and American democracy. Therefore, although Wallace's undertaking seems a little too specific in focus, it proves to be unexpectedly relevant, in fact essential, for understanding and thinking critically about contemporary American culture and politics.

"Authority and American Usage" is extremely satisfactory in that it reveals many unknown things about the world of dictionaries and gives us a brief but enlightening analysis of the history of dictionary-making in the U.S. As Wallace claims and as we agree upon reading, Garner's dictionary (or any other dictionary for that matter, we realize) can best be assessed with some background information, with some awareness of the ideological borderlines drawn in the field of lexicography. Thus, besides being a review of a particular dictionary, the essay also comprises of Wallace's observations and criticisms on issues of language in the U.S., taking its critical force from its rich blend of political, ideological, linguistic, and pedagogical insights on the matter of usage.

Before moving on with the essay's incisive analysis, it is necessary to establish the scope of Wallace's interest in language and matters of language usage, as one of Wallace's most interesting intellectual interests. While reading Wallace, especially his fiction, one cannot help notice that the lexical richness of his writing is the result of a mind devoted to the nuances in precise usage of language. It might be argued that this is one of the defining factors that separate him from the postmodernist lexical-acrobats with whom he is usually associated. His interest in correct usage of English is also telling in the way it helps us situate Wallace in the historical period he lives in, as we shall observe shortly, with regard to the post-60s Crisis of Authority in language through Wallace's seemingly strict, elitist stance with

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[1462] Wallace, Authority, p.68.

[1463] Wallace thinks that Garner's dictionary is "the most comprehensive usage guide" that manages to surpass its popular predecessors like *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, *Writing: Grammar, Usage, and Style,* and *The American Heritage Book of English Usage* (Wallace, Authority, p.68). Yet comprehensiveness is the least of Wallace's criteria in this favorable assessment—although the ever-vigilant Wallace expresses disappointment over how Garner omits the differences between *conversant in* and *conversant with*, *hereby* and *herewith*.

regard to traditional usage. Throughout his fiction, we meet characters that are somewhat unclassifiably passionate about the lexical precision of their language, such as Hal Incandenza and his mother Avril Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*. In Wallace criticism, Hal Incandenza is often read as a fictional counterpart of Wallace; both are successful tennis players, academically over-achieved in mathematics, philosophy, and various other academic subjects, and obsessed about lexicography to the point of reciting from dictionaries—the bible for the lexical-minded. Avril Incandenza is described as "a continental mover and shaker in the prescriptive-grammar academic world," and the founder of the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts.[1464] Like Avril Incandenza, Wallace's mother has a penchant for language; she is the author of "remedial usage books" and a lexical-minded person, in Wallace's words, "of the most rabid and intractable sort":

> *for years my mom brainwashed us in all sorts of subtle ways. Here's an example. Family suppers often involved a game: if one of us children made a usage error, Mom would pretend to have a coughing fit that would go on and on until the relevant child had identified the relevant error and corrected it. It was all very self-ironic and lighthearted; but still, looking back, it seems a bit excessive to pretend that your small child is actually* denying you oxygen *by speaking incorrectly. The really chilling thing, though, is that I now sometimes find myself playing this same "game" with my own students, complete with pretend pertussion.*[1465]

Behind this caricaturization is of course a great love of language. Reading Wallace's work does guarantee regular visits to the dictionary inasmuch as demonstrating his preoccupation with the dictionary. Nevertheless, his lexical richness does not give the impression of a mind showing off, or an intellect being condescending but rather a mind exploring the possibilities of the correct and optimum use of language.

According to Michael Pietsch, who is Wallace's long-time editor, especially of his posthumous (and unfinished) *The Pale King*, "David's love affair with the English language was one of the great romances of our times, both a scholarly learn-every-nuance love and a wildly passionate flights-and-flourishes love."[1466] To elaborate on this matter we could mention how James Wood notes a love of language in Melville. In "The All and the If: God and Metaphor in Melville" Wood writes,

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[1464] Wallace, Jest, p.30.
[1465] Wallace, Authority, p.171.
[1466] Michael Pietsch, "Tribute", **Five Dials, Celebrating the Life and Work of David Foster Wallace**, Hamish Hamilton, New York, 2008, p.11.

"[w]hen it comes to language, all writers want to be billionaires. […] What writer does not dream of touching every word in the lexicon once? In *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville nearly touched every word once, or so it seems."[1467] In this sense, Wood argues, Melville's novel has become "every writer's dream of freedom. It is as if he painted a patch of sky for the imprisoned."[1468] It might be possible to say that Wallace's glimpses of the sky Melville painted can be observed in his posthumously published collection *Both Flesh and Not, Essays* (2012) in which the publisher, Little Brown, honors Wallace's life-time passion with an ingenious design. The Publisher's Note informs,

> *[r]eaders familiar with David Foster Wallace's work know that he possessed an insatiable love for words and their meanings. On his computer he constantly updated a list of words that he wanted to learn, culling from numerous sources and writing brief definitions and usage notes. A selection from this vocabulary list appears before each essay of* Both Flesh and Not. *It was one of the great thrills of Wallace's life to be invited to serve on the Usage Panel of* The American Heritage Dictionary *[Fourth Edition]. The definitions in his vocabulary list reprinted here are quoted or paraphrased from that excellent reference work.*[1469]

Perhaps the most valuable companion to a David Foster Wallace book is a good English dictionary, and most favorably the wonderful *The American Heritage Dictionary* to which he contributed as member of the Usage Panel in the dictionary's fourth edition. Wallace makes the reader admire his knowledge of unfamiliar or neglected words whose nuances best describe the precise meaning he wants to convey. To this end, he may even make up words.

We could first note how Wallace himself diagnoses his particular devotion to precise usage in language. The endless, albeit difficult, possibility of language to give and explicate the meaning of life is one of the fundamental theories of Wallace. Another side of his interest in language is about the correct use of words and correct syntax for given meanings. He is, however, a bit too passionate on this matter. As he explains in "Authority and American Usage," he even has his own term for his 'condition': Snoot. In his definition, snoot is a "highly colloquial term" originating in his own nuclear family of "really extreme usage fanatic[s]," his mother being the

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[1467] James Wood, "The All and the If: God and Metaphor in Melville", **Broken**, (The All), p.42.
[1468] Wood, The All, p.43.
[1469] David Foster Wallace, "The Publisher's Note," **Both Flesh and Not: Essays**, Little Brown, New York, 2012, (Flesh), p.vii.

leading snoot of the family, whose passion we noted above.[1470] The Wallaces use the word as an acronym, standing for "Sprachgefühl Necessitates Our Ongoing Tendance" or "Syntax Nudniks Of Our Time."[1471] Snoots are also known as "Grammar Nazis, Usage Nerds, Syntax Snobs, the Grammar Battalion, the Language Police."[1472] They feel the same "wincing despair and sneering superiority" when they notice, for example, misplaced participles and the incorrect usage of double modals, or when they read "EXPRESS LANE—10 ITEMS OR LESS" at the supermarket, or realize that the people who named a motel chain "Super 8" do not know the existence of the verb *suppurate.*[1473] The phrase "the reason is because" is enough to make Wallace "dig [his] nails into [his] palms."[1474] Throughout the essay, Wallace does not hesitate to correct some usage problems, for instance, an advertisement for Garner's dictionary that appears on the *New York Review of Books* reads, "[i]f you like to WRITE … Refer to us'" and Wallace objects: "Your Snoot reviewer cannot help but observing, w/r/t this ad, that the opening *r* in Refer shouldn't be capitalized after a dependent clause + ellipsis."[1475] Snoots do not hesitate to correct wrongs and judge others on their mastery of correct usage. This, for Wallace, makes the snoots "just about the last remaining kind of truly elitist nerd."[1476] This elitism is justified on the basis of the inescapable centrality of language to "interhuman life."[1477]

This belief, or pathological obsession as he calls it, forces Wallace to re-arrange his literature classes when his undergraduate students demonstrate ignorance of the grammatical function and meaning of a clause, or, do not realize that a misplaced *only* in a sentence alters meaning. During remedial grammar sessions that interrupt his literature syllabus, he advises the students to sue their previous teachers for sending them off to college without teaching them the basics of grammar. About his rather passionate reaction in the classroom, he admits "elements of fanaticism and rage to it, plus a snobbishness that I know I'd be mortified to display about anything

[1470] Wallace, Authority, p.69.
[1471] Wallace, Authority, p.69.
[1472] Wallace, Authority, p.69.
[1473] Wallace, Authority, p.69.
[1474] Wallace, Authority, p.99.
[1475] Wallace, Authority, p.84.
[1476] Wallace, Authority, p.70.
[1477] Wallace, Authority, p.70.

else."[1478] However, such claim to authority has its roots in an intellectual pursuit. In contrast to the dogmatism of ideology, the blind belief that turns more and more aggressive toward the opposing camp, the intellectual basis of a Snoot is very different. This is how he explains the passion of the Snoot:

> *Snoots' attitudes about contemporary usage resemble religious/political conservatives' attitudes about contemporary culture. We combine a missionary zeal and near-neural faith in our beliefs' importance with a curmudgeonly hell-in-a-handbasket despair at the way English is routinely defiled by supposedly literate adults.*[1479]

Considering such focus on lexical precision, one could ask whether Wallace is prudish and snobbish on matters of usage. However, as "Authority and American Usage" demonstrates, Wallace is motivated by an unorthodox belief in the role of language to maintain and strengthen democracy. Moreover, it is Garner's success in brilliantly embodying this belief that informs the essay's arguments. To elaborate on how Wallace extracts a lesson in democracy through language use, it shall be necessary to outline the particular arguments and controversies surrounding language usage in America.

To be precise, there is a name to the arguments and controversies about language usage: "Usage Wars."[1480] Wallace begins his essay with the following provocative remarks:

> *Did you know that probing the seamy underbelly of US lexicography reveals ideological strife and controversy and intrigue and nastiness and fervor on a near-Lewinskian scale?*
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> *For instance, did you know that some modern dictionaries are notoriously liberal and others notoriously conservative, and that certain conservative dictionaries were actually conceived and designed as corrective responses to the "corruption" and "permissiveness" of certain liberal dictionaries? That the oligarchic device of having a special "Distinguished Usage Panel […] of outstanding professional speakers and writers" is some dictionaries' attempt at a compromise between the forces of egalitarianism and traditionalism in English, but that most linguistic liberals dismiss the Usage Panel device as mere sham-populism, as in e.g. "Calling upon the opinions of the elite, it claims to be a democratic guide"?*
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> *Did you know that US lexicography even* had *a seamy underbelly?*[1481]

[1478] Wallace, Authority, p.70.
[1479] Wallace, Authority, p.71.
[1480] Wallace, Authority, p.74.
[1481] Wallace, Authority, p.67.

The argumentative prefaces, introductions, and critical essays that comprise dictionaries' front matter are usually ignored by most dictionary users. For Wallace, "it's not just their six-point type or the fact that dictionaries tend to be hard on the lap. It's that these intros aren't actually written for you or me or the average citizen who goes to The Dictionary just to see how to spell."[1482] These pieces are written by and for other dictionary editors, and "they're not really introductory at all, but polemical. They're salvos in the Usage Wars."[1483] Therefore, for the majority of readers, the first reaction to Wallace's forceful and compact insight into the "seamy underbelly" could possibly be an anxious/eager visit to the nearest dictionary to see with one's own eyes how this controversy really takes place. Wallace's own position with regard to Usage Wars is that he identifies it as essentially a conflict over political and social matters:

> *If words' and phrases' meanings depend on transpersonal rules and these rules on community consensus, then language is not only non-private but also irreducibly* public*,* political*, and* ideological*. This means that questions about our national consensus on grammar and usage are actually bound up with every last social issue that millennial America's about—class, race, sex, morality, tolerance, pluralism, cohesion, equality, fairness, money: you name it.*[1484]

Although these issues do not appear in the introductory pieces of dictionaries, they inform the ideologies behind them.

It is interesting to note that Usage Wars begins with one of these introductory pieces. In 1961, Philip Gove writes to his introduction to *Webster's Third* that lexicography may utilize from "value-neutral principles of structural linguistics."[1485] In line with Gove's claim, *Webster's Third* includes the entries *OK* and *ain't*, and describes them as words "used colloquially by educated speakers in many regions of the United States," and the Usage Wars begins.[1486] "Blistering reviews and outraged editorials [came] from across the country—from the *Times* and the *New Yorker* and the *National Review* and good old *Life.*"[1487] Philip Gove replies these criticisms in a letter he writes to *New York Times,* in which he insists that "[a] dictionary should

[1482] Wallace, Authority, p.78.
[1483] Wallace, Authority, p.78.
[1484] Wallace, Authority, p.88.
[1485] Wallace, Authority, p.79.
[1486] Wallace, Authority, p.79.
[1487] Wallace, Authority, p.79.

have no truck with artificial notions of correctness or superiority. It should be descriptive and not prescriptive."[1488] The terms Gove uses "stuck and turned epithetic, and linguistic conservatives are now formally known as Prescriptivists and linguistic liberals as Descriptivists."[1489]

In Wallace's opinion, what really underlies the differences in opinion regarding language usage and lexicography between Prescriptivists and Descriptivists is none other than the ideological conflict between the political right and left. In other words, matters of language, and the making of dictionaries is another arena to analyze American politics. The liberal-conservative divide applies to dictionary-making under the guise of the egalitarianism of Descriptivists—linguistic liberals—and the traditionalism of Prescriptivists—linguistic conservatives.[1490] For Wallace, any conflict based on the clash of egalitarianism and traditionalism is "at root political" and these camps are driven by ideology rather than relying on intellectual arguments on usage.[1491] Further, however "putatively disinterested" they may seem, dictionaries are linguistic authorities and are therefore "accountable to the same basic standards of sanity and honesty and fairness as our political authorities."[1492] Yet defining what authority means in lexicography proves more difficult than demanding sanity and honesty. "Whence the authority of dictionary-makers" Wallace asks, "to decide what's OK and what isn't? Nobody elected them after all."[1493] It is here that the question of authority arises.

To state briefly, Prescriptivists, who are mostly "old man grumbling about the vulgarity of modern mores," hold that there are standard, long-standing rules of usage that should govern language.[1494] In their opinion, liberal dictionaries debase language by warranting personal choice on usage. Descriptivists, who are mostly "hard-core academics, mostly linguists or Comp theorists," argue that Prescriptivist dictionaries are written by elitists, namely, by Distinguished Usage Panel which

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[1488] Wallace, Authority, p.79.
[1489] Wallace, Authority, p.79.
[1490] Edwin L. Battistella's *Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others?* (2005) carries out a detailed discussion, as well as similar defenses, of the matters Wallace discusses in this essay. See especially Battisella's chapter, "Bad Language: Realism versus Relativism."
[1491] Wallace, Authority, p.72.
[1492] Wallace, Authority, p.69.
[1493] Wallace, Authority, p.75.
[1494] Wallace, Authority, p.79.

Wallace personally considers an "oligarchic device" that attempts to balance the egalitarian and traditional tendencies of usage.[1495] Wallace finds a problem with Prescriptive emphasis on tradition. "It's the millennium, post-everything" Wallace writes, "simply appealing to precedent or tradition won't work, because what's considered correct changes over time."[1496] Likewise, Descriptivism is misguided in its claim to understand the changes in language: "how many people have to deviate from how many conventions before we say the language has actually changed? Fifty percent? Ten percent? Where do you draw the line? Who draws the line?"[1497]

A further problem with Descriptivists is the particular ideology they represent, to be noted below. In the opposition about language usage and the mission of the dictionary, Wallace finds a problem of authority. Wallace considers the "revolution" of Descriptivists within the context of the "protracted Crisis of Authority in matters of language America is in the midst of."[1498] According to Descriptivists, whose "ideological roots [are] firmly in the US Sixties," language constantly evolves and usage rules are fluid, adapting to generations and situations.[1499] As Edwin Battistella explains, the opposition between Prescriptivists and Descriptivists is "part of a much broader debate between those who advocate recognizing and promoting just a single cultural tradition and those who advocate the value of competing traditions in language, the arts, history, and literature."[1500] In Wallace's opinion, there are serious problems with regard to democracy in both the Descriptivist and the Prescriptivist arguments.

To begin, Wallace considers Descriptivists a product of a certain age and a certain ideology. Wallace asserts that they are the results of "the same sorts of political upheavals that produced everything from Kent State to Independent Counsels."[1501] In their reactionary protest, Descriptivists have emerged as "an influential contra-SNOOT school for whom normative standards of English grammar and usage are functions of nothing but custom and the ovine docility of a populace

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[1495] Wallace, Authority, pp.80, 67.
[1496] Wallace, Authority, p.75.
[1497] Wallace, Authority, pp.83-84.
[1498] Wallace, Authority, pp.83, 75.
[1499] Wallace, Authority, p.80.
[1500] Edwin Battisella, **Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others**?, Oxford U. P., Oxford, 2005, p.11.
[1501] Wallace, Authority, p.75.

that lets self-appointed language experts boss them around."[1502] On the specific influence Descriptivists on American culture, Wallace writes,

> *[f]or one thing, Descriptivism so quickly and thoroughly took over English education in this country that just about everybody who started junior high after c. 1970 has been taught to write Descriptively—via "freewriting," "brainstorming," "journaling"—a view of writing as self-exploratory and self-expressive rather than as communicative, an abandonment of systematic grammar, usage, semantics, rhetoric, etymology. For another thing, the very language in which today's socialist, feminist, minority, gay, and environmental movements frame their sides of political debates is informed by the Descriptivist belief that traditional English is conceived and perpetuated by Privileged WASP Males and is thus inherently capitalist, sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, elitist: unfair. Think Ebonics. Think Proposition 227. Think of the involved contortions people undergo to avoid using* he *as a generic pronoun, or of the tense, deliberate way white males now adjust their vocabularies around non-w.m.'s. Think of the modern ubiquity of spin or of today's endless rows over just the* names *of things — "Affirmative Action" vs. "Reverse Discrimination," "Pro-Life" vs. "Pro-Choice," "Undocumented Worker" vs. "Illegal Alien," "Perjury" vs. "Peccadillo," and so on.*[1503]

In fact, Politically Correct English comprises an immensely important part of Wallace's criticism of Usage Wars.

> *Today's most powerful influence on the norms of public English is actually a stern and exacting form of liberal Prescriptivism. I refer here to Politically Correct English (PCE), under whose conventions failing students become "high-potential" students and poor people "economically disadvantaged" and people in wheelchairs "differently abled" and a sentence like "White English and Black English are different, and you better learn White English or you're not going to get good grades" is not blunt but "insensitive" […] under the beady scrutiny of a whole new kind of Language Police.*
>
> *From one perspective, the rise of PCE evinces a kind of Lenin-to- Stalinesque irony. That is, the same ideological principles that informed the original Descriptivist revolution—namely, the rejections of traditional authority (born of Vietnam) and of traditional inequality (born of the civil rights movement)—have now actually produced a far more inflexible Prescriptivism, one largely unencumbered by tradition or complexity and backed by the threat of real-world sanctions (termination, litigation) for those who fail to conform. This is funny in a dark way, maybe, and it's true that most criticisms of PCE seem to consist in making fun of its trendiness or vapidity. This reviewer's own opinion is that prescriptive PCE is not just silly but ideologically confused and harmful to its own cause.*[1504]

The erroneous belief underlying all Politically Correct English, fostered by both Descriptivists and Prescriptivists, is that it conflates language use as reflecting

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[1502] Wallace, Authority, p.75.
[1503] Wallace, Authority, pp.81-82.
[1504] Wallace, Authority, pp.110-111.

change and performing change. The confusion of these two separate things "enables the bizarre conviction that America ceases to be elitist or unfair simply because Americans stop using certain vocabulary that is historically associated with elitism and unfairness."[1505] In other words, the error of Political Correctness is that it fails to understand that certain expressions can only be the products of certain social and political attitudes; employing particular expressions does not produce the attitudes that produce them in the first place. Furthermore, Wallace observes this widespread and faulty thinking in the two major claims of both linguistic camps: while Prescriptivists' claim that careless use of language "signifies the Decline of Western Civilization," Descriptivists assert that language sensitive to Identity Politics enables social progress.[1506]

In its actual applications, however, Politically Correct English proves significantly dangerous because it efficiently distracts us from the really important matters. While Politically Correct English "purports to be the dialect of progressive reform," it cannot go beyond being an "Orwellian substitution of the euphemisms of social equality for social equality itself" which helps, in the end, to preserve "the US status quo."[1507] Wallace explains,

> *[w]ere I, for instance, a political conservative who opposed using taxation as a means of redistributing national wealth, I would be delighted to watch PC progressives spend their time and energy arguing over whether a poor person should be described as "low-income" or "economically disadvantaged" or "pre-prosperous" rather than constructing effective public arguments for redistributive legislation or higher marginal tax rates. (Not to mention that strict codes of egalitarian euphemism serve to burke the sorts of painful, unpretty, and sometimes offensive discourse that in a pluralistic democracy lead to actual political change rather than symbolic political change. In other words, PCE acts as a form of censorship, and censorship always serves the status quo.)*[1508]

It is both ingenious and highly remarkable that Wallace develops these arguments to discuss the essay's main focus, Brian A. Garner's dictionary. Against the ideological background of American lexicography, Garner emerges, for Wallace, as a true hero.

[1505] Wallace, Authority, p.111.
[1506] Wallace, Authority, p.111.
[1507] Wallace, Authority, p.111.
[1508] Wallace, Authority, pp.111-112.

After reading Garner's dictionary from beginning to end, Wallace writes how and why he decides that Garner is "a genius"[1509]:

> *it struck me that I had no idea whether Bryan A. Garner was black or white, gay or straight, Democrat or Dittohead. What was even more striking was that I hadn't once wondered about any of this up to now; something about Garner's lexical persona kept me from ever asking where the guy was coming from or what particular agendas or ideologies were informing what he had admitted right up front were "value judgments." This seemed very odd indeed. Bland people can have axes to grind, too, so I decided that bland probably wasn't the right word to describe Garner's [*A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*] persona. The right word was probably more like* objective*, but with a little* o*, as in "disinterested," "reasonable." Then something kind of obvious occurred to me, but in an unobvious way—this small-*o *kind of objectivity was very different from the metaphysical, capital* O*–type Objectivity whose postmodern loss had destroyed (I'd pretty much concluded) any possibility of genuine Authority in issues of usage. Then it occurred to me that if* Objectivity *still had a lowercase sense unaffected by modern relativism, maybe* Authority *did as well.*[1510]

In Garner's dictionary, Wallace contentedly re-discovers both Objectivity and Authority and in this, he seems to declare the end of Usage Wars. Garner's methodology in achieving such success is that his approach is characterized by what Wallace calls Ethical Appeal, which comprises a rhetoric based on trust and credibility. Wallace assures us that "nobody before Garner seems to have figured it out—that the lexicographer's challenge now is to be not just accurate and comprehensive but *credible.*"[1511] Garner proves his credibility by demonstrating that he "is willing to acknowledge that a usage dictionary is not a bible or even a textbook but rather just the record of one bright person's attempts to work out answers to certain very difficult questions."[1512] For Wallace, Garner's willingness is a sign of what he calls "Democratic Spirit":

> *A Democratic Spirit is one that combines rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus a sedulous respect for the convictions of others. As any American knows, this is a difficult spirit to cultivate and maintain, particularly when it comes to issues you feel strongly about. Equally tough is a DS's criterion of 100 percent intellectual integrity — you have to be willing to look honestly at yourself and at your motives for believing what you believe, and to do it more or less continually.*[1513]

[1509] Wallace, Authority, p.120.
[1510] Wallace, Authority, p.119.
[1511] Wallace, Authority, p.122.
[1512] Wallace, Authority, p.72.
[1513] Wallace, Authority, p.72.

Therefore, at the core of Garner's genius is his membership to "advanced US citizenship" that is a result of the rigor, the humility, and the self-honesty of a true "Democratic Spirit." Though in the prescriptive side by inclination, Garner is an unorthodox one: his dictionary does not have Editorial Staff or Distinguished Panel. He is the only authority. In his preface to the dictionary, Garner announces that he does avoid making judgments when certain issues require judgment, that is passing judgment. The issue of subjectivity and authority are at the center of usage wars. For Wallace, "the big things to recognize here are (1) that Garner wouldn't be doing any of this if he weren't *keenly* aware of the Authority Crisis in modern usage, and (2) that his response to this crisis is—in the best Democratic Spirit—rhetorical."[1514] Garner's work is valuable because it offers solutions to the problems that Usage Wars have created: Garner shows that "the purposes of the expert authority and the purposes of the lay reader are identical, and identically rhetorical—which I submit is about as Democratic these days as you're going to get."[1515]

In concluding Chapter Two, it is possible to say that, as each part and their respective sections tried to demonstrate, American creative nonfiction is witnessing a massive flow of intellectual energy geared toward ethically responsible, historically aware, diagnostic as well as constructive discussions of historical, cultural, social, and political issues. Working within impressive ranges of interest and methodologies of treatment, Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace re-define the significance, mission, and function of creative nonfiction. In a brief but necessary reference, Jonathan Safran Foer, too, contributes the contemporary American nonfiction's quest for ethical investigation. In their essays, Franzen and Wallace reveal the pitfalls of modern American culture of technoconsumerism, political shallowness and hypocrisy, cynicism, ironic nihilism, and worship of the self. Against existential vacuum, indifferent recklessness, erasure of human communication and compassion, Franzen and Wallace remind us of the biggest asset we have for a meaningful life: our awareness and responsible treatment of the world around us. In their totality, these works deploy a rich variety of subject matter and are united in the common purpose of making our lives more meaningful

[1514] Wallace, Authority, p.77.
[1515] Wallace, Authority, p.124.

through an emphasis on ethical reflection, on intersubjectivity, willingness to encounter the other, and readiness to accept literature's response to such willingness.

CHAPTER THREE
THE LIVED LIFE AND "RADIANTLY HUMAN FICTION"

3.1. "THE 'FORM' OF LITERARY REVOLUTION" AFTER POSTMODERNISM

Since the late 1980s, Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace have been sketching the contours of a new literary program after postmodernism in their essays that both read like literary criticism and constitute works of literary history. It is possible to posit their essays as literary criticism because they examine novels, and carry out passionate discussions on the recent state and direction of the American Novel and the American literary culture as well cultural changes at large that affect and shape literary production. Meanwhile, since the arguments of these essays have in fact been subtly declaring an end to postmodernist irony and formal difficulty, and tending toward an ethical turn in literary sensibility, it might also be possible to see the essays as records of changes in literature, hence, works of literary history. Furthermore, since part of the change in literature comes by way of their own arguments, Franzen and Wallace *write*, in the literal sense of the word, literary history because they actually perform the change, or contribute to it, by way of their essays.

It is possible to argue that while Franzen and Wallace repeatedly diagnose the corrosive effects of postmodernist tropes of detached irony, nihilism, and solipsism, they also propose a new literary agenda to restore the vital functions of literature such as its inherently redemptive project in portraying human follies and vulnerabilities, and its attempt at understanding life in all forms of its miseries and beauties. Therefore, their works go beyond elegies for a fading or failing literature because the authors outline new methodologies for the novel to recover from the negative effects of postmodernism. Of course, this is not to say that they denounce postmodernism completely; rather, considering it a certain literary outcome of a certain historical outlook, they seek ways to re-connect literature to what they perceive as its true center: the human. In this sense, it is possible to see that an awareness of the postmodern loss of subjectivity, authority, and representation of

meaningful lives informs their literary programs, both in their essays, and, as we shall see in the next parts of this chapter, their fiction. Operating under the multiple instances of loss generated by postmodernism, the authors devise ways for literature to re-engage with the human heart and the human mind.

More specifically, the literary essays of Franzen and Wallace are important in at least three senses. First, they offer a theoretical horizon for literature after postmodernism. Both Franzen and Wallace establish reader and writer as companions, analyze the effect of the changing morality of the everyday life on the perception and function of literature. Second, the map of contemporary literature they draw also becomes the map of the contemporary self, or the postmodern individual. Against atomization (Franzen) and solipsism (Wallace), the authors posit reading as a communication and an act of connection with the world outside the human self, whether it is an imaginary dialogue with the writer or with other readers. Third, as the title of this part announces, these authors can be seen as revolutionaries of a new literary sensibility, and their literary revolution comprises not only their fiction but also their coherent and rigorous nonfiction. That is to say, their essays figure in this revolution as centrally as their fictional output, thereby increasing the argumentative significance, rhetorical importance of nonfiction in contemporary American literature. In fact, the essay form helps the authors articulate their own personal struggles with regard to both literature and writing, and dealing with the culture that is increasingly under the influence of technology, and the consumer and entertainment culture.

The matter of the essay's centrality leads us to another important issue with regard to contemporary American literature: the place of literary criticism. Both Franzen and Wallace have degrees in literature; they are readers and critics by training, they are in full command of the theoretical schools of literary criticism as they may remark on post-structuralism or deconstruction in the most casual way. Casual, indeed, because when, for instance, Franzen examines the novels of Christina Stead, Franz Kafka, or William Gaddis, or Wallace discusses David Markson's *Wittgenstein Mistress* in detail, neither Franzen nor Wallace applies strict theoretical readings or evaluates literary works by some hierarchical evaluative criteria. Furthermore, when they talk about American literary scene or discuss the works of

their contemporaries, they do not exert literary authority but engage with their topics in an intellectual analysis that posits them as novelists who care about literature and as readers who want to read good and serious literature. Their literary criticism, therefore, is different from those practiced by literary scholars or literary critics by vocation in the sense that Franzen and Wallace are creative writers taking active role in intellectual debates about literature, and that they are employing nonfiction to make ethical and rhetorical argumentation on topics that concern them.

In line with this fact, there is also the issue of the medium these essays meet their audience. In other words, another way to assess the importance of the essays of Franzen and Wallace might be where their essays are published: national magazines. Most of Franzen's collected essays appear originally on the high-profile publications like *Harper's*, the *New Yorker*, the *Guardian*, and the *New York Times Book Review,* while Wallace's essays appear on the *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and the *Rolling Stone.*[1516] Hence, their audience is not specifically literary scholars and critics but general readers that enjoy reading serious analyses of literature by credible critics. Among recent magazine literary critics we may mention Michiko Kakutani[1517] and A. O. Scott of the *New York Times*, and David Remnick, James Wood, D. T. Max, and Adam Gopnik of the *New Yorker*, and Laura Miller of the *Salon* who write as prolifically and as competently on contemporary American literature as academics and professional critics do. That is not to say that magazine criticism is on par with scholarly publishing. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that high-profile magazine critics write too expertly to be dismissed as mere journalistic book reviewing, and their informed, well-read, well-discussed essays generate many comments from readers genuinely interested in the novels the essays discuss. Although of course it would be wrong to think of these critics as the arbiters of national literary taste once performed by William Dean Howells' weekly columns on *Harper's* around 1900s since they have no claim on being novelists (except Wood) or cultural authorities, it would nonetheless be correct to argue that they are contributing to the serious discussion of serious fiction through print organs of national media.

[1516] Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" appears on the literary journal *Review of Contemporary Fiction* and this is an exception.

[1517] Notorious for her sharp reviews. Wallace admits, "the Japanese lady haunts my dreams" (Wallace, Conversations, p.115).

At this point, it would be useful to note a recent work on the critical reception of literary criticism. In "The Decline of Literary Criticism" (2008), Richard A. Posner offers an evaluation of the character of contemporary literary criticism. Posner observes a recent tendency among scholars toward announcing yet another demise; literary criticism is discussed to be in "moribund" state by scholars like Mark Bauerlin in *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy* (1997), John Ellis in *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of Humanities* (1997), Victor David Hanson's *Bonfire of the Humanities: Rescuing the Classics in an Impoverished Age* (2001), and Ronan McDonald in *The Death of the Critic* (2007).[1518] It is inevitable to assess this death notice against other death notices, namely, of the author, the novel, and postmodernism, and assume that the alleged decline of literary criticism might in some sense be related to postmodernism.

Posner writes that the scholars noted above distinguish literary criticism in its traditional form—established by T.S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, Cleanth Brooks—from "both academic and journalistic writing about literature."[1519] One part of the problem, for these critics, is the lack of heirs for the figures above. In other words, there is not a new generation of literary critics to replace the Eliot, Wilson, and Brooks. Another factor for the decline of literary criticism is the fact that "postmodern literary theory" has become synonymous with, if not completely replaced by, the otherwise all-encompassing term literary criticism.[1520] Posner refers extensively to *The Death of the Critic* where Ronan McDonald argues that "postmodern literary theory" has categorically replaced the meaning and function of literary criticism.[1521] For McDonald, while literary criticism relies on imaginative depth and the creative endeavor of literature, postmodern literary theory evaluates a literary work on the basis of its social and political contexts, therefore turning literary criticism into mere "social activism."[1522] The output of such sociopolitical analysis usually contains "'impenetrable jargon' which erects a barrier between literary

[1518] Richard A. Posner, "The Decline of Literary Criticism", **Philosophy and Literature**, Volume:32, 2008, p.385.
[1519] Posner, p.385.
[1520] Posner, p.385.
[1521] Posner, p.385.
[1522] Posner, p.386.

theory and literature."[1523] This view seems to posit two categories; theory-free and theory-based criticism. Taking cultural studies to task, McDonald further asserts that "[t]he well-documented decline in the reading of literature has many causes but one may be the obscurantist and politicized style of teaching literature that is in vogue in many colleges."[1524] The widespread and unwavering attack on cultural studies that has been going on at least since the nineteen-nineties seems to have acquired another front in the defense of the English departments specifically and the humanities in general through the discourse of the decline of literary criticism.

Although he seems to be less conservative than the critics he refers to, to some extent, Posner nonetheless agrees with these views. One point he differs from McDonald and others is that Posner argues that a great number of "literary teachers are not postmodernists. What has happened is the professionalization, in not altogether a good sense, of literary studies."[1525] Here, he problematizes the notion of a "book of literary criticism" on the basis of its intended audience, and its effects on the audience. In Posner's opinion, the professionalization of criticism materializes in the scholarly journal produced and read by scholars. Yet he prefers criticism not confined to a limited audience. He argues that academic critics may as well address non-academics. For instance, a close reading of a poem by a canonical poet, in the hands of one academic literary critic, may carry its discussion in such a way that it invites not only professors and students but also "the general reader," or "the nonacademic members of that audience" to "read," "read more," and "re-read" the poet under discussion. In the hands of another academic literary critic, in contrast, the discussion of the same poem, or the same poet, may appear reserved for fellow academic researchers only, who share the critic's area of expertise. In Posner's opinion, it is the *publish or perish* discourse that puts pressure on "college and university teachers of English" by "evaluat[ing] them on the basis of their publications."[1526] Most of these publications "shift from criticism to the more conventional form of academic scholarship that involves writing for each other."[1527] For instance, highly specific applications of theory to a literary work would require

[1523] Posner, p.386.
[1524] Posner, p.386.
[1525] Posner, p.386.
[1526] Posner, p.387.
[1527] Posner, p.387.

the general reader interested in that work to be an equal expert on the said branch of said theoretical approach. Moreover,

> *[t]he resulting decline in literary criticism retards the prospects for a renewal of literary creativity by reducing the audience for serious literature, so there is unfortunately something of a vicious cycle, though it seems doubtful that literary criticism has ever been much of a spur to literary creativity.*[1528]

In this sense, Posner is against the isolation of literary criticism within its own sphere of academic existence and expertise that banishes non-experts, including students and the non-academic audience.

In Posner's opinion, the underlying cause for the creation of a coterie audience, and hence the decline, of literary criticism regards what the academy deems a sign of "intellectual rigor," which is nothing other than the evaluation of literary works according to hierarchical value systems that seem to impose the critic's taste as superior through his or her judgmental statements.[1529] He insists that "evaluation is not the essence of literary criticism," and that "[c]ritics can point to the features of literary works that they like or dislike."[1530] In other words, in simply explaining what and why one has admired in a work without imposing one's tastes, the critic might invite the reader to enjoy the work along with him or her, and better literary criticism can be written. Posner seems to argue that the critic's task is to attract attention to a given work through demonstrating how a particular work has impressed and influenced the critic. For instance, Posner refers to Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) and praises Brooks's efforts at "explaining" to the reader his personal interpretations of poems with vivid supporting arguments and then "leav[ing] it to reader to decide whether to read any of these poems."[1531] Posner imagines how the ideal critic may encourage the reader and thereby truly influence literary taste, and decides that, his ideal critics, Lionel Trilling, William Empson, and C.S. Lewis would, presumably, entice the reader in the following way:

> *You should try reading Donne, because he does things that when you understand him may cause you as it has caused me to prefer him to Milton, and he has a more mature, a more comprehensive conception of the human*

[1528] Posner, p.387.
[1529] Posner, p.388.
[1530] Posner, p.390.
[1531] Posner, p.389.

> *condition than Shelley (though less so than Dante did), as well as more exact metaphors.*[1532]

The underlying force of this imaginary voice is of course its desire to communicate with the reader. Conveying to the reader his or her own experiences with a literary work, the critic is provoking in the reader a desire to experience the work firsthand. As difficult as the work may be, with the gentle guidance of literary criticism, difficulty loses its discouraging force. Therefore, as Posner diagnoses, "what has been lost is literary criticism that helps people understand and enjoy serious literature."[1533]

In the following passage, Posner provides us with an example relevant to the purposes of this part's discussion:

> *A recent issue of the New Yorker contains a terrific article on Milton by a journalist (who is also the author of a novel appropriately titled* Eve's Apple*). The* New Yorker *has a large circulation and the article will persuade some of the magazine's subscribers to read or re-read Milton's poetry, but not because Jonathan Rosen is an "authority." The great writers are little read in the United States, but this is not because they are not agreed to be great writers. College teachers influenced by modern-day literary theory to trash great literature and feed their captive audience a diet of obscurantist theoretical writings and deservedly obscure literary works are doubtless a factor in the decline of the literary culture. […] If there were less pretentious literary theory and no evaluative criticism, but more readable literary criticism in the style of Cleanth Brooks or F. R. Leavis, the literary culture would be in a lot better shape than it is.*[1534]

Accordingly, essays of Franzen and Wallace that appear on national magazines reach a wide audience, and as exemplary works of literary criticism, they restore the essential task of literary criticism to convey to the readers the urgent and deserving necessity to take literature seriously. Of course, the critic's main criteria cannot be as Posner suggests the effort of convincing a reader to read this or that particular work nor preserve a reader's interest in literature. The critic should first of all do justice to the work itself through rigorous analysis, by examining the work through theoretical approaches where necessary, and demonstrate the work's literary worth and significance. None of these should essentially be impediments to literary criticism's meeting its audience. In fact, as we shall observe below, both Franzen and Wallace,

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[1532] Posner, p.389.
[1533] Posner, pp.389-390.
[1534] Posner, pp.390-391.

though they do not write strictly in the academic article format, have produced serious examples of literary criticism.

3.1.1. Jonathan Franzen and Revitalizing the "High Art" of the Novel

This section will focus on Franzen's essays collected in *How to be Alone: Essays* (2002) and *Farther Away: Essays* (2012), all of which originally appeared elsewhere, in order to assess how Franzen's ideas relate and contribute to contemporary literature. It will be argued that Franzen's insights on contemporary culture and literature as well as the dynamics of the relationship between them are dark but not pessimistic. He writes about literature with a religious faith, and no matter how gloomy the present state of literature appears to him, Franzen always manages to bring to light, or shine new light on, fundamental and vital aspects of literature. In Franzen's words, "[f]iction is the most fundamental human art. Fiction is storytelling, and our reality arguably consists of the stories we tell about ourselves."[1535] He will prove these claims right as we shall observe him below receiving great support from certain novels in devising his literary program: reading fiction will serve this novelist to understand better and convey a better and more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of life.

The following discussion will focus on two underlying frameworks that shape Franzen's essays. First, Franzen demonstrates some responsibilities the writer, the reader, the critic, and the scholar have toward one another. That is to say, he compels us to think about the author's responsibility toward the reader as well as toward the critic and the scholar. Similarly, he urges us to think about the responsibilities of the reader toward the author. In addition, he opens to debate the responsibilities of the critic and the scholar toward an author and toward a book. These emerging networks of responsibility shall be one way of structuring Franzen's essays, and they will attest to the essentially interpersonal, ethically defined nature of literature that Franzen champions.

The second framework shall consist of Franzen's ideas on the complicated relationship between culture and the novel. A sharp and unforgiving critic of

[1535] Jonathan Franzen, "Mr. Difficult", **How to be Alone: Essays**, (Mr. Difficult), p.258.

contemporary American culture, Franzen tries to understand what the novel means, if not what it should mean, to the culture at this historical juncture of pervasive technology and media-saturated existence. He is interested in the ways we can enhance our perception of the novel's role in our lives and what we can do to make the novel more central to culture.

The networks of responsibility that emerge in Franzen's essays rely on the premise that subjective criteria shaped by certain cultural and literary norms of a given historical period may have debilitating effect on the reception of novels as well as the function and mission assigned to literature. As a reader, Franzen notices that a masterpiece may remain obscure for many decades because it does not address a society's particular expectations from the novel. As a critic, he may try to break the spell of obscurity. For instance, in an attempt to attract attention to Australian novelist Christina Stead's novel *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), Franzen notes in dismay that the novel's brilliant psychological portrayal of family drama is ignored by a reading public bent on escapism and literary scholars, especially feminist critics, for reasons unknown to him. In another argument, Franzen outlines what the author owes to the reader by devising two models of literary production and communication and assesses the novels of William Gaddis according to these models, thereby undertaking a critique of the tenets of literary postmodernism. He at once questions his own readership and authorship, and the function of literary criticism in general.

To begin with one of Franzen's most earnest attempts at promoting a novel, we may refer to his essay "The Greatest Family Ever Storied." The essay appears originally on the *New York Times* magazine on May 27, 2010 with the title "Rereading Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*." Apart from a change of the title and some minor editorial revisions, the essays are identical. Briefly, the novel is about a family who lives in Washington. The father of the family is a peculiar "patriarch," a "hyperkinetic lord" who is insanely narcissistic and dangerously dominating.[1536] Stylistically, Franzen finds the novel's prose "fabulously good," its plot "unobtrusively masterful," and cherishes Stead's

[1536] Jonathan Franzen, "The Greatest Family Ever Storied", **Farther Away: Essays**, (Family), p.58.

observations and descriptions that are abundant in "feeling, meaning, subjectivity."[1537]

Franzen talks passionately about this novel and praises its many virtues. However, he is disheartened by the incredible and continuing lack of interest in this masterpiece. For him, this novel belongs to the Canon of Masterpieces. Nevertheless, it remains curiously unread. Most curiously, it remains unread by scholars. Franzen refers to a 1980 study of the most cited novelists from the twentieth century and Stead's absence from this list of scholarly criticism completely baffles Franzen since the novel "cr[ies] out for academic criticism of every stripe."[1538] One reason, he thinks, might be that the novel is too "difficult to allow into your heart," but he is sure that "it's certainly less difficult than other novels common to college syllabuses."[1539] A subtle criticism in these remarks of Franzen might regard experimental, stylistically challenging modernist and postmodernist works that occupy syllabi. As he explains in "On Autobiographical Fiction," he does not hide how unaffected he remains by these writers, and he admits that "it's a prejudice of mine that literature cannot be a mere performance."[1540] As shall be observed in his essay "Mr. Difficult," Franzen is highly critical of the elevation of stylistic difficulty to become a marker of literary significance, a mistake to which he has yielded in his early career. Yet as he writes in the above quote, *The Man Who Loved Children* is a novel that requires emotional engagement; it has to be allowed into the heart, and it is not merely about the stylistically cerebral engagement of reading required by stylistically difficult books. In fact, Franzen believes "that there are tens of thousands of people in this country who would bless the day the book was published, if only they could be exposed to it."[1541] He more than happily undertakes this task.

Franzen's attempt at attracting attention to the *The Man Who Loved Children* has two precedents. The first one is the introduction the American poet Randall Jarrell writes to the novel's first reissue in 1965. The second one is the foreword English novelist Angela Carter writes to the novel's 1982 Capuchin Classics edition.

[1537] Franzen, Family, pp.55, 56.
[1538] Franzen, Family, p.57.
[1539] Franzen, Family, p.63.
[1540] Jonathan Franzen, "On Autobiographical Fiction", **Farther Away: Essays**, (Autobiographical), pp.123, 130.
[1541] Franzen, Family, p.63.

Franzen mentions Randell's "long and dazzling introduction" that carries out the best praise Stead's novel can ever be given. Jarrell posits Stead as a novelist in the ranks of Tolstoy and tries to "[i]nstall her in the Western canon, and in this he clearly fail[s]."[1542] In a defeatist tone, Franzen writes, "if an appeal as powerful as [Jarrell's] couldn't turn the world on to the book, back in the day when our country still took literature halfway seriously, it seems highly unlikely that anybody else can now."[1543] In Franzen's opinion, Jarrell's introduction adds further importance to the novel in the sense that the introduction constitutes a testimony for "what outstanding literary criticism used to look like: passionate, personal, fair-minded, thorough, and intended for ordinary readers. If you still care about fiction, it might make you nostalgic."[1544]

Accordingly, Franzen's nostalgic dismay regarding the neglect of *The Man Who Loved Children* is so strong that it could be possible to call this review essay not a book review but an anti-review in the sense that it is arranged like a review but aspires to being more than one. In fact, Franzen does not so much briefly analyze the novel's finest details as making a case on the urgency of analyzing them, of bringing the novel alive out of an undeserving neglect. The force of his argument may also render the essay a work of literary criticism that diagnoses particular problems with the literary scene. For Franzen, a major problem is the academia's lack of interest in Stead's novel that is ripe for scholarly criticism. In fact, since general reading public has little interest in *any* serious novel and in case one attracts attention, family sagas are not popular choices. Therefore, the academy seems to be the only venue for the appreciation of a serious, sophisticated novel like Stead's. It should also be noted that Franzen's penchant for criticizing the literary scene as well as the reading public is well-established by 2010 when he writes this essay, and he seems equally unsubtle in his predicaments in this essay as he was in his earlier essays such as "Why Bother?" and "Mr. Difficult," which shall be discussed below. In this sense, "The Greatest Family Ever Storied" reads like another front in Franzen's ongoing war with the culture, or another manifesto on the significance of the novel in contemporary culture.

[1542] Franzen, Family, p.57.
[1543] Franzen, Family, p.57.
[1544] Franzen, Family, p.57.

It is possible to say that one of the reasons of Franzen's great admiration for Stead's novel is that *The Man who Loved Children* is autobiographical in the manner Franzen's novels are autobiographical. This is not to say that Franzen is biased toward fictional endeavors similar to his. Rather, Franzen appreciates Stead's efforts to come to terms with the unpleasant facts about her childhood, especially with her father that she fictionalizes in the novel. These efforts comprise for Franzen the essential task of the writer: to learn to face your true self through writing. For Franzen, the novelist cannot write fiction without facing, and exorcising, his or her inner demons. In fact, when asked to list his personal rules for writing fiction, he includes the following two rules: "[t]he most purely autobiographical fiction requires pure invention. Nobody ever wrote a more autobiographical story than *The Meta-morphosis*," and "[f]iction that isn't an author's personal adventure into the frightening or the unknown isn't worth writing for anything but money."[1545]

"The Greatest Family Ever Storied" opens with possible reasons for not reading *The Man Who Loved Children*, and these remarks immediately set the tone for a possible anti-review. Franzen informs—or warns—the reader:

> *There are any number of reasons you shouldn't read* The Man Who Loved Children.[1546] *It's a novel, for one thing; and haven't we all secretly sort of come to an agreement, in the last year or two or three, that novels belonged to the age of newspapers and are going the way of newspapers, only faster? […] To read* The Man Who Loved Children *would be an especially frivolous use of your time, since, even by novelistic standards, it's about nothing of world-historical consequence. It's about a family, and a very extreme and singular family at that. […] And then there's your e-mail: shouldn't you be dealing with your e-mail?*[1547]

Even if people were to lend the novel (as a genre, or pastime) credibility, there is still the problem of what *The Man Who Loved Children* is about, namely, family, and Franzen stresses the novel's truthful representation of the violence and

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[1545] Jonathan Franzen, "Ten Rules for Writing Fiction", **The Guardian**, 25 Oct 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/20/ten-rules-for-writing-fiction-part-one, (23 Oct 2011), n.pag.

[1546] In the original *New York Times* version of the essay, the first sentence reads, "There are any number of reasons you shouldn't read *The Man Who Loved Children* this summer." The omission of "this summer" in the collected version of the essay may be related to the essay's original appearance on May and the cut may have been made for clarity's sake since Franzen apparently ended the sentence that way to disqualify his review for a summer-reads essays. Lack of a temporal marker, however, adds power to Franzen's point by generalizing the claim.

[1547] Franzen, Family, pp.55-56.

the psychological burden of the family life. Regarding Stead's focus on family dynamics as well as the characters' inner lives, Franzen states,

> *[i]sn't the nuclear family, at least the psychologically violent side of it, the thing we're all trying to escape from—the infernal reactor into which, when outright escape is not an option, we've learned to stick our new gadgetry and entertainments and after-school activities like graphite rods, to cool the action down.* The Man Who Loved Children *is so retrograde as to accept what we would call "abuse" as a natural feature of familial landscape. […] The book intrudes on our better-regulated world like a bad dream from the grandparental past.*[1548]

In Franzen's opinion, it is exactly the perfect exploration of this now-defunct theme that makes Stead's novel a masterpiece. For instance, praising Stead's truthful portrayal of inter-family conflict, Franzen asserts that "the book operates at a pitch of psychological violence that makes *Revolutionary Road* look like *Everybody Loves Raymond.*"[1549] This is an interesting claim since Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* received immense attention when it was published in 1961, was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1962, and it was adapted to the screen in 2008. On a thematic level, both Stead and Yates deal with similar topics, but in order to emphasize Stead's surpassing but neglected success, Franzen scorns at the highly acclaimed *Revolutionary Road* by comparing it to a television sitcom. In this sense, if we are talking about the war between married couples and the plight of children in this war, the unrelenting conflict within a nuclear family in *Revolutionary Road* seems, for Franzen, similar to the kind found in the pseudo-dysfunctional family life of a popular television sitcom, *Everybody Loves Raymond,* where inter-family violence takes place merely through the rolling of eyes and well-meaning sarcasm.

While it is true that Franzen mentions Stead in many previous essays and always counts her among his literary influences as well as among literary giants like Kafka, what motivates Franzen to devote a full essay to a novel he has been deeply fond of for almost twenty years may be the fact that he feels personally and professionally obliged. As a reader, he emphasizes how the book has grown on him with every successive reading and claims that "it's the kind of book that, if it is for you, is *really* for you."[1550] In a way, Franzen is recommending the novel based on his

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[1548] Franzen, Family, p.56.
[1549] Franzen, Family, p.56.
[1550] Franzen, Family, p.63.

pleasant experience with it. However, there is also a seemingly unpleasant experience, whose unpleasantness marks it as truly human and strictly vital. Franzen invites the readers to the recognition that what the entertainment and escapism oriented culture is deeming invalid, or forcing us to forget, is the essential nature of our ordinary human lives fraught with "ugly" wars of sexes, generations, tragedies of the nuclear family, "high-mindedly domineering males" and "children as accessories to their parents' narcissism."[1551] Reading such a novel as Stead's is an act of "looking into the mirror of a novel" to rediscover ourselves in all our tragedies and salvations.[1552]

Similarly, as a critic, he is fulfilling his responsibility of introducing the readers to a novel worthy of their time and promising a pleasant literary experience. In his scorn at scholars and critics for neglecting the novel, however, he is so completely discouraged that he cannot even explain the reasons for the serious neglect of *The Man Who Loved Children.* He thinks of one reason, though not related to the novel itself, but to the literary persona of Christina Stead. Franzen wonders whether Stead has remained an obscure novelist because of her

> *ambition was to write not "like a woman" but "like a man": her allegiances are dubious for the feminists, and she's not* enough *like a man for everybody else. [Her previous novel] more resembles a Gaddis novel, even a Pynchon novel, than it does any novel by a twentieth-century woman. Stead wasn't content to make a separate peace for herself, in a room of her own. She was competitive like a son, not a daughter.*[1553]

It shall be the task of literary critics and scholars to challenge Franzen at these arguments, which bear the weight of the well-read as well as the intelligent outlook required of scholarly criticism. For Franzen's part, he seems to prefer not to do it himself because he prefers to go bird-watching lately as part of his recent responsibility to the world: he chases immigrant bird slaughterers in South Cyprus, travels to Japan to save birds imprisoned in nature preservations, and publishes his observations in other essays.

In "Mr. Difficult," which appears originally in the *New Yorker* on September 30, 2001, with the title "Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-

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[1551] Franzen, Family, p.63.
[1552] Franzen, Family, p.63.
[1553] Franzen, Family, p.64.

Read Books," we see Franzen in three roles: a novelist retrospectively questioning his literary allegiances; a reader coming to terms with a sad infatuation with postmodernism; a literary critic laying a theoretical basis for the essentially disruptive course of that love affair. All these coherently interwoven personas give us many insights about Franzen's ideas on both literature and postmodern literature.

The underlying motivation behind "Mr. Difficult" is the negative response Franzen receives from his readers after his controversial disinvitation from Oprah Winfrey's televised Book Club show. As Franzen says in "Meet Me in St. Louis" (2001), Winfrey chooses *The Corrections* for her immensely popular show and invites Franzen to appear on it. Agreeing to this appearance, Franzen also agrees, albeit half-heartedly, to be filmed in St. Louis, which is one of the settings of *The Corrections* and his hometown from where he has been away for twenty years as a Manhattanite. The filming proves not only disastrous but also extremely alienating for Franzen who is asked to pose as a Midwesterner coming back to his hometown, looking dreamily at the skyline of the city, driving slowly while he is "trying to appear—what? writerly? curious? nostalgic?"[1554] As the filming team tells Franzen the contemplative mood he should adopt, because they want him to appear to "reexamine his roots," Franzen resents being "a dumb but necessary object, a passive supplier of image" for television which is "propelled by images."[1555] Nonetheless, he tries to cooperate as best as he can.

After the filming, Franzen continues with his novel's promotional tour. A major part of the tour is book-signings at bookstores. By now, the cover of *The Corrections* sports a shiny Oprah Book Club logo and people at the signing line insistently comment of the novel's selection for the Oprah Book Club. Some readers endorse, while others display disappointment for *The Corrections*' being an Oprah book. Franzen complains about the logo to one of the disappointed readers. In Franzen's words "[t]he problem in this case is some of Oprah's picks. She's picked some good books, but she's picked enough schmaltzy, one dimensional ones that I cringe, myself, even though I think she's really smart and she's really fighting the

[1554] Jonathan Franzen, "Meet Me in St. Louis", **How to be Alone**: **Essays**, (St. Louis), p.288.
[1555] Franzen, St. Louis, pp.287, 290.

good fight."[1556] A couple of days later an interviewer asks a very tired and bored Franzen about his literary influences, and Franzen wants to say that he likes the high modernists but he makes a slur. As he explains,

> *in a moment of exhaustion […] I conflate "high modern" and "art fiction" and use the term "high art" to describe the importance of Proust and Kafka and Faulkner to my writing. […] Winfrey will disinvite me from her show because I seem "conflicted." I'll be reviled from coast to coast by outraged populists. […] I'll be called an "ego-blinded snob" in the Boston Globe, and a "spoiled, whiny little brat" in the* Chicago Tribune.[1557]

It is under these condemnations of elitism and demeaning superiority that Franzen pens "Mr. Difficult." He decides to answer some letters by recommending the senders to read his novel rather than condemning him for elitism based on news from the media. Franzen takes the idea from Gaddis, "an old literary hero of mine […] who had long deplored the reading public's confusion of the writer's work and the writer's private self."[1558] One of these senders complies with Franzen's suggestion, reads *The Corrections,* and sends Franzen a list of "fancy" words and phrases from the novel, such as "diurnality, antipodes, and electro-pointillist Santa Claus faces," and asks "the dreadful question: 'Who is it you are writing for? It surely could not be the average person who just enjoys a good read.'"[1559] The sender goes on to define her personal idea of Franzen's audience: "the elite of New York, the elite who are beautiful, thin, anorexic, neurotic, sophisticated, don't smoke, have abortions tri-yearly, are antiseptic, live in lofts or penthouses, this superior species of humanity who read *Harper's* and the *New Yorker.*"[1560] In defining Franzen's audience, the sender certainly defines Franzen, too, but Franzen dismisses this image as sad "caricature."[1561] In fact, one thing Franzen's nonfiction proves is that he is not even remotely what the sender imagines him to be. He is a proud middle-class Midwesterner, technologically obsolete and even conservative, and mainly economically dire throughout his life.

[1556] Jonathan Franzen, 2001 quoted in Dave Weich, "Jonathan Franzen Uncorrected", **Powells**, 2001, http://powells.com/authors/franzen.html, (11.05.2012), n.pag.
[1557] Franzen, St. Louis, p.300.
[1558] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.238.
[1559] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, pp.238-239.
[1560] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.239.
[1561] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.239.

In the unforgiving tone of the letter Franzen detects a "subtext" that defines "difficulty in fiction [as] the tool of socially privileged readers and writers who turn up their noses at the natural pleasure of a 'good read' in favor of the invidious, artificial pleasure of feeling superior to other people."[1562] Announcing Franzen an elitist based on his use of "fancy" words, especially in a novel like *The Corrections,* which is definitely a good read and great achievement by all literary standards, would be great injustice. However, as a novelist, Franzen is impelled to question why his readers should feel "excluded by [his] language" which they seem to take as a sign of him "showing off" and exerting "superiority" over readers by way of difficulty.[1563] This questioning leads him to realize that as a novelist he "subscribe[s] to two wildly different models of how fiction relates to its audience."[1564]

The first model, which Franzen calls "the Status model," follows from Flaubert's idea that "best novels are great works of art, the people who manage to write them deserve extraordinary credit, and if the average reader rejects the work it's because the average reader is a philistine."[1565] This model identifies literary value in the "genius" of the novelist and therefore posits that literary merit "exists independent of whether people are able to enjoy" any given novel.[1566] The second model, which Franzen calls "the Contract model," defines the novel as "a compact between the writer and the reader, with the writer providing words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience."[1567] The position of the writer is that, through writing, he or she both expresses him or herself and creates the possibility of "communication within a group, whether the group consists of *Finnegans Wake* enthusiasts or fans of Barbara Cartland."[1568] In this model, the writer's primary allegiance is to "a community of readers," a community of which he is "a member."[1569] Accordingly, both the writing and the reading of a novel serve "to

[1562] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.239.
[1563] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.289.
[1564] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.239.
[1565] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, pp.239-240.
[1566] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.240.
[1567] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.240.
[1568] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.240.
[1569] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.240.

sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness; and so a novel deserves a reader's attention as long as the author sustains the reader's trust."[1570]

Franzen identifies himself with the Contract model in the sense that in his novels, he wants to engage with the readers and he has a very idealistic vision of readers and writers becoming friends. Franzen writes, "[a]s a reader, I seek a direct personal relationship with art. The books I love, the books on which my faith in literature rests, are the ones with which I can have this kind of relationship."[1571] In addition, he expresses his belief in the traditional notion of literature as "soul-to-soul contract between reader and writer."[1572] However, the Contract model's emphasis on pleasurable reading would narrow Franzen's sense of literature's mission and function. In Franzen's opinion, the novel's primary assignment is to explore how we struggle with the meaning of human life, how we grant meaning to our existence, and how we behave in the meantime. In undertaking this task, the novel may seem a little bit heavy-handed for those readers that seek escapist pleasure and want light-weight treatment of troublesome issues. As he argued above with regard to Christina Stead's novel, a disturbingly real and true account of a nuclear family tragedy may fulfill the requirements of a good novel but since it depicts enormous psychological burden, it may hinder pleasurable reading in the sense of representing a bitter, harsh slice of life.

Significantly, Franzen is aware of some possible problems regarding these models. He writes, "[t]o an adherent of Contract, the Status crowd looks like an arrogant connoisseurial elite. To a true believer in Status, on the other hand, Contract is recipe for pandering, aesthetic compromise, and a babel of competing literary subcommunities."[1573] Beyond these basic differences lies a further discrepancy that Franzen understands to be the ideology of the reader who derides Franzen's "fancy" words for his elitism and difficulty. In Franzen's words,

> *the two models diverge tellingly when readers find a book difficult. According to the Contract model, difficulty is a sign of trouble. In the most grievous cases, it may convict an author of violating the contract with his own community: of placing his self-expressive imperatives or his personal vanity or his literary-club membership ahead of the audience's legitimate desire for connection. […]*

[1570] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.240.
[1571] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.268.
[1572] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.258.
[1573] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.240.

> *Taken to its free-market extreme, Contract stipulates that if a product is disagreeable to you, the fault must be the product's. If you crack a tooth on a hard word in a novel, you sue the author. If your professor puts Dreiser on your reading list, you write a harsh student evaluation. If the local symphony plays too much twentieth-century music, you cancel your subscription. You're the consumer; you rule.*[1574]

When Franzen made the mistake, unwillingly of course, of talking about the "high art" of Proust, Kafka, and Faulkner, there was an excitement surrounding his being an Oprah Book Club member, and the mention of his literary influences was received within the very context of this excitement. Against Oprah's novels of choice—which are mostly "domestic melodramas and paraliterary narratives of recovery, as well as children's books," Franzen seemed to clarify his true allegiances and he deeply offended the show's followers who were buying *The Corrections* on the premise that Franzen belonged to their literary community.[1575] In fact, although he was not reiterating a Status model argument as a practicing novelist, it was interpreted in that way by the adherents of the Contract model.

In "Turncoat: Why Jonathan Franzen Finally Said 'No' to Po-Mo" (2007), Robert Rebein explains that Jonathan Franzen's career is divided into two stages: the aspiring postmodernist who becomes, after his first two novels, a dedicated realist. Rebein explains this unconventional shift between two opposing literary tendencies with Franzen's personal maturation in his artistic sensibilities along with his realization that he was merely responding to the literary climate of the period he grew up in, which championed postmodernism and created a hype out of it. For Rebein, some readers of Franzen saw in this change "the mea culpa of a misguided young writer who had finally come to his senses, while others, especially those still committed to the po-mo cause, tended to view the move as a cynical grab for money and fame."[1576] In Rebein's opinion, this change may relate to a generational problem because, otherwise, how could Franzen's early distance to realism for which he has great penchant could be explained? Growing up in the 1970s, for Rebein, Franzen's "tastes and tendencies were formed" during "the absolute highwater mark of literary

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[1574] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.241.
[1575] Green, p.81.
[1576] Robert Rebein, "Turncoat: Why Jonathan Franzen Finally Said 'No' to Po-Mo", Brooks and Toth, Eds., p.201.

postmodernism."[1577] In his first two novels that have strong postmodernist tendencies, however, Franzen exposes his realist orientations. For instance, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, "beneath all the po-mo machinery" such as "absurdist plot and carefully rendered themes of conspiracy and apocalypse, [in fact] offers up as earnest a depiction of place and regional mannerisms as anything we might find in Chopin, Joyce, or Faulkner."[1578] This hidden stream of realism continued with *Strong Motion* but Franzen did not surrender to it.

In his essay "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World" (2008), Robert L. McLaughlin shares the agonies of Franzen and writes that Franzen and Wallace suffer from the loss of "the literary artist's confidence in the ability of literature to engage with and have an impact on the social world."[1579] For McLaughlin, both Franzen and Wallace "desire their work to intervene in the social arena, but they fear that their work—and literature in general—is increasingly irrelevant."[1580] Giving them credit for that anxiety, McLaughlin nevertheless clarifies that, "[i]magining a time past when fiction, poetry, and drama were central to cultural life in the U.S. may be false nostalgia; nevertheless, now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, they may never have been less central."[1581]

For Jonathan Franzen, the novel is, and indeed must be, central to the culture, especially the mainstream. Yet the national taste in fiction is more and more guided by mass media as well as the needs and choices of the 'masses' and the resulting loss of importance in serious fiction bothers Franzen. He wants his book to become a cultural event in the sense of bearing the influence of Howellsian seriousness of fiction, importance of fiction, not in the sense of becoming a celebrity writer who is commercially manipulated on TV shows or televised book clubs like an entertainer.

In order to clarify his position as a novelist toward the alleged elitism based on difficulty, Franzen recounts his experience as a reader with a difficult novelist, William Gaddis. Franzen writes,

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[1577] Rebein, Brooks and Toth, Eds., p.202.
[1578] Rebein, Brooks and Toth, Eds., p.204.
[1579] Robert L. McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World", Berry and Di Leo, Eds., p.101.
[1580] McLaughlin, Berry and Di Leo, Eds., p.102.
[1581] McLaughlin, Berry and Di Leo, Eds., p.102.

> *[a]s much as any American writer of his generation, he frankly endorsed Status and disdained Contract. His methods were increasingly postmodern, but he had old-fashioned Romantic and high-modern notions of the artist as savior and the work of art as singular and sacred; the plight of both art and artist in a commercially mad America was at the center of his work. Which work is, itself, quintessentially difficult.*[1582]

There are some key facts that require elaboration in this brief quote. For instance, by the time Franzen reads *The Recognitions* (1955), his Status model college education is only a few years back. Therefore, considering the fact that he writes the essay almost ten years after he reads *The Recognitions*, it is important to observe the contrast between his earlier and later ideas on the Status model, Gaddis, and his expectations from literature. By the time he graduates from college, Franzen is erudite in the art of "unlock[ing] difficulty[: …] to learn about irony, ambiguity, symbol, voice, and point of view, it made sense to read the most sophisticated texts."[1583] Wanting to be a writer, Franzen thinks of the fiction he aspires to write not as "stories" but "literary Art."[1584] He believes that "the greatest novels were tricky in their methods, resisted casual reading, and merited sustained study."[1585] In other words, from the perspective of the Status model, Franzen desires uncompromising, visionary artistic production and equates pleasure with hard, demanding work. Moreover, he "also assumed that the highest compliment this Art could be paid was to be taught in a university."[1586] Accordingly, he devises a plan to follow:

> *I identified a canon of intellectual, socially edgy, white-male American writers. The same names—Pynchon, DeLillo, Heller, Coover, Gaddis, Gass, Burroughs, Barth, Barthelme, Hannah, Hawkes, McElroy, and Elkin—kept showing up together in anthologies and in the respectful appraisals of contemporary critics. Though various in their styles, they all seemed to take as a given that something was new and strange and wrong about postwar America. They shared the postmodern suspicion of realism, summarized by the critic Jerome Klinkowitz: "If the world is absurd, if what passes for reality is distressingly unreal, why spend time representing it?" To prove to myself […] that I was engaged in a serious professional pursuit, I tried to join this guild.*[1587]

In applying this plan, however, he realizes that he enjoys reading only DeLillo's works while he returns the novels of other writers to the library unread except a few

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[1582] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.242.
[1583] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.245.
[1584] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.245.
[1585] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.245.
[1586] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.245.
[1587] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.246.

pages. Although he "craved academic and hipster respect of the kind that Pynchon and Gaddis got," Franzen "didn't particularly *like*" their works.[1588] He admits to himself that he likes novels that offer flesh and blood portrayals of characters as in Saul Bellow, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Christina Stead, who are the novelists he truly likes. In contrast, in postmodern novels, characters "weren't even supposed to exist. Characters were feeble, suspect constructs, like the author himself, like the human soul. Nevertheless, to my shame, I seemed to need them."[1589]

After abandoning his project of "join[ing] the guild," Franzen tries his hand at writing a screenplay for financial reasons.[1590] Yet feeling hypocritical for forcing himself to write "audience-friendly narrative, of well-made plot and lovable characters," Franzen buys *The Recognitions* on an impulse, intent on reading the novel "as a kind of penance."[1591] This point brings us to the other important detail regarding Franzen's relationship with Gaddis. Franzen identifies with Gaddis's sense of the artist's sacred mission and the desperate state of both art and the artist in contemporary America. In *The Recognitions*, Franzen identifies with the novel's protagonist, Wyatt Gwyon, who is a great painter doomed to forge old paintings and sells his counterfeit art rather than create genuine art in a culture where the counterfeit and the genuine lack distinction. In fact, it is only on the basis of his identification with Wyatt Gwyon's struggle for personal and artistic integrity that Franzen manages to finish the 946-page novel full of "blizzards of obscure references, […] all-dialogue word-storms that raged for scores of pages, [and] page-long paragraphs in which oxygen was at a premium."[1592] Nevertheless, when he finishes the novel after ten-days of secluded reading, Franzen restores some sense of strength to face the private troubles of his life: an impending divorce, the final days of his terminally ill father, and a literary career that is still wavering between postmodernist and realist impulses. As a reader, he is fulfilled in his companionship with Wyatt Gwyon. As a novelist, he is empowered by Gaddis's success at dealing

[1588] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.247.
[1589] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.247.
[1590] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.246.
[1591] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.242.
[1592] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.243.

with his own artistic conflicts and disillusions through portraying the delicate struggle of Wyatt Gwyon.

Nevertheless, the later novels of Gaddis embody for Franzen the most serious problem of literary postmodernism. He argues that "[a]fter *The Recognitions,* […] something happened to Gaddis. Something went haywire."[1593] In "the hidden pinnacle" of *The Recognitions* was "the loss of personal integrity and the difficult work of regaining it."[1594] In other words, there was pessimism that did not yield to nihilism. In Franzen's opinion, Gaddis's "wit and passion and seriousness" in cultural critique was sincere.[1595] However, when Franzen tries to read Gaddis's National Book Award recipient *JR* (1975), he is deeply disappointed. The novel's protagonist, the eleven-year old JR, uses the pay phone at his school to conduct business and heap capital upon capital as dictated by the free-enterprise system. For Franzen, the novel does not go beyond mimicking current capitalism: JR "pursues what his country teaches him is worth pursuing. He's devoid of charm, compassion, and scruples, but he doesn't know any better, and so you root for him against the novel's many corporate and legal sharks, who should know better but behave just as badly."[1596] In fact, the novel "suffers from the madness it attempts to resist. The first ten pages and the last then pages and every ten pages in between bring the 'news' that American life is shallow, fraudulent, venal, and hostile," which renders the novel "as chilly, mechanistic, and exhausting as the system it describes."[1597] Furthermore, Franzen manages to read only half of *JR*'s 726 pages and in that he fails in his Status model faith. Yet conversely, he honors his Contract model allegiance by taking Gaddis to task for not engaging the reader.

Gaddis's third novel amplifies Franzen's dissatisfaction with Gaddis's second novel. Franzen writes that "[i]f *JR* is dedicated to the proposition that America basically sucks, the message of Gaddis's third novel, *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), is that it really, really, really sucks."[1598] This is precisely the problem he identifies with

[1593] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.268.
[1594] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, pp.243, 244.
[1595] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.242.
[1596] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.256.
[1597] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.262.
[1598] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.264.

postmodernism: giving up hope on the world, transforming a "modern cry of pain" into "the postmodern bitter joke."[1599]:

> *Gaddis began his career with a modernist epic about the forgery of masterpieces. He ended it with a pomo romp that […] punishes the reader who tries to stay with it and follow its logic. When the reader finally says, Hey, wait a minute, this is a mess, not a masterpiece, the book instantly morphs into a performance-art prop: its fraudulence is the whole point! And the reader is out twenty hours of good-faith effort.*[1600]

The real difficulty of a novel, for Franzen, is worthy of attention only if "the difficulty is the difficulty of life itself."[1601] Having endured, so to speak, *The Recognitions'*s formally complex structure due to his identification with a character and his appreciation of the novel's theme, Franzen fails to be the patient and hard-working reader when the message is not appealing.

Moreover, in an argument that puts forth some sense of debilitation of postmodernism, Franzen writes,

> *to sign on with the postmodern program, to embrace the notion of formal experimentation as a heroic act of resistance, you have to believe that the emergency that Gaddis and his fellow pioneers were responding to is still an emergency five decades later. You have to believe that our situation as suburbanized, gasoline-dependent, TV-watching Americans is still so new and urgent as to preempt old-fashioned storytelling.*[1602]

The "emergency" Franzen talks about is crucial in understanding his perspective on postmodernism. In his words,

> *one defense of Gaddis and his difficulty is that conventional fiction, driven by substantial characters and based on soul-to-soul contract between reader and writer, was simply inadequate to the social and technological crises that twentieth-century writers saw developing all around them. Both the moderns and the postmoderns resorted to a kind of literature of emergency. The modern employed new, self-conscious methods to address the new reality and preserve the vanishing old one. The postmodern enterprise was even more radical: to resist absorption or co-optation by an all-absorbing, all-co-opting System. Closure was the enemy, and the way to avoid it was to refuse to participate in the System. For Pynchon this meant flight and paranoia; for Burroughs it meant transgression. For Gaddis it meant being very angry—so angry that, at a certain point, he stopped making sense. But in avoiding formal closure Gaddis risked a blunter sort of closure: exhausted readers closing his books. I was*

[1599] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.268.
[1600] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.265.
[1601] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.269.
[1602] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.259.

halfway through JR *when I bailed out. Even then, though, his anger made me wonder: had he betrayed me, or had I betrayed him?*[1603]

These remarks shall carry the discussion in the direction of Franzen's personal literary program and its complicated relationship to the culture in "Why Bother?" that comprises the second framework in the analysis of Franzen's essays. It is possible to say that Franzen inherits the "literature of emergency" from the modernists and postmodernists in the sense that he tries to respond critically to culture in his early career. Franzen is determined to leave behind his early efforts at "depressive realism" that leads only to "despair about the American novel."[1604] He embarks on a detailed self-investigation that tries to reconcile literary productivity and culture by moving beyond his sense of "depressive realism." This move draws its force from the novel's task to "encapsulate the culture and satirize its flaws."[1605] In this way, Franzen moves away from "depressive realism" toward what he calls "tragic realism" that defines the novel's in-depth treatment of character and their struggle with universal human tragedies.[1606] Franzen believes that through "tragic realism" he can "disengage his fiction from the burden of embattled cultural critique, and to root it firmly in his own proper milieu."[1607] Remaining stuck in "depressive realism," however, cannot go beyond reiterating a single message: "technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine…"[1608]

"Why Bother?" is the slightly revised version of Franzen's 1996 *Harper's* essay, "Perchance to Dream: In an Age of Images, A Reason to Write Novels." In this essay, Franzen reworks his expectations from the novel and revises his ideas of social realist novels that convey a political message through dense plot and well documented fact.[1609] Although he has attempted to follow this idea in his first two novels *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion,* Franzen now seeks a different form of realism that can connect "the personal and the social" in the particular cultural climate of America around the turn of the century that privileges the image,

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[1603] Franzen, Mr. Difficult, p.258.
[1604] Jonathan Franzen, "Why Bother?", **How to be Alone: Essays**, pp.72, 55.
[1605] Green, p.92.
[1606] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.91.
[1607] Green, p.92.
[1608] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.69.
[1609] Green, p.91.

the consumer, and erodes the cultural importance of literature.[1610] Franzen exemplifies this new sense of realism with Paula Fox's 1970 novel *Desperate Characters*, which serves Franzen as a catalyst for discovering new possibilities in his fictional endeavors. The desperation of Fox's characters, a married couple, stems from familial disputes, and Franzen reads the family's troubles as a vivid reflection of the troubles of the culture they inhabit: without openly criticizing the culture, Fox manages to re-stage the ills of the culture at micro level, in the family. As Jeremy Green observes, in *Desperate Characters*,

> *Franzen finds an aesthetic model, a way to assume social significance while pursuing the novelist's traditional aims of depicting character and milieu. In other words, the link between private and public dimensions is not obtrusive, but is rather underwritten by the virtues of literary craft, of sharp perception, and of rounded character.*[1611]

The reason Franzen seeks new novelistic possibilities stems from his belief that the novelist is shunned by the culture. Prior to discovering Fox's novel, Franzen is bitterly disappointed with the 1990s America's pervasive lack of moral criteria, a severe loss of interest beyond the everyday consumerism. In Franzen's words,

> *[t]he country was preparing for war ecstatically, with rhetoric supplied by George Bush: "Vital issues of principle are at stake." In Bush's eighty-nine-percent approval rate, as in near-total absence of public skepticism about the war, the United States seemed to me hopelessly unmoored from reality—dreaming of glory in the massacre of faceless Iraqis, dreaming of infinite oil for hour-long commutes, dreaming of exemption from the rules of history. And so I, too, was dreaming of escape. I wanted to hide from America.*[1612]

Franzen's early novels reflect his views from this specific period of his life when he thought that "American political economy was a vast cabal whose specific aim was to thwart [his] artistic ambitions, exterminate all that [he] found lovely in civilization, and also rape and murder the planet in the process."[1613] This attitude, which we observe in his essays and arguments, is clearly reflected in his early novels.

Yet in Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters*, Franzen finds hope, or becomes hopeful because he comes across a fictional character with whose wish to hide from

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[1610] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.57.
[1611] Green, p.91.
[1612] Franzen, Why Bother?, pp.55-56.
[1613] Franzen, **How to be Alone: Essays**, p.5.

the surrounding cultural reality he identifies. Franzen writes that "[w]ith its equation of a crumbling marriage with a crumbling social order, *Desperate Characters* spoke directly to the ambiguities that I was experiencing."[1614] As a reader, Franzen "find[s] company and consolation and hope" in the novel; nonetheless, he wonders how he can be saved, "as a novelist, [from] despair about the possibility of connecting the personal and the social."[1615] Could the difficulty with this connection be related in some way to the imaginary content of the novel?

> *We live in the tyranny of the literal. The daily unfolding stories of O. J. Simpson, Timothy McVeigh, and Bill Clinton have an intense, iconic presence that relegates to a subordinate shadow-world our own untelevised lives. In order to justify their claim on our attention, the organs of mass culture and information are compelled to offer something "new" on a daily basis, indeed hourly, basis. Although good novelists don't deliberately seek out trends, many of them feel a responsibility to pay attention to contemporary issues, and they now confront a culture in which almost all issues are burned out almost all the time. The writer who wants to tell a story about society that's true not just in 1996 but in 1997 as well can find herself at a loss for solid cultural referents. What topically relevant while she's planning the novel will almost certainly be passé by the time it's written, published, distributed, and read.*[1616]

With these ideas, Franzen also takes Tom Wolfe to task. In "Stalking the Billion-footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" (1989), Wolfe challenges novelists who retreat from "social description" and Franzen argues that Wolfe is mistaken because he ignores the fact that novelists "can no longer depend on their material, as Howells and Sinclair and Stowe did, but only on their own sensibilities, and with the expectation that no one will be reading them for news."[1617]

In "Stalking the Billion-footed Beast," Wolfe expresses anxiety about "the big realistic fictional novels that were sure to be written about phenomena that had played a major part in American life."[1618] It may be possible to hear an echo of these words in Franzen's anxieties over the "big social novel that would engage with mainstream culture and rejuvenate American literature."[1619] After the publication of his first two novels that were politically charged, however, Franzen feels despair about the possibility of "engag[ing] with a culture in crisis when the crisis consists in

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[1614] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.57.
[1615] Franzen, Why Bother?, pp.57, 58.
[1616] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.67.
[1617] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.67.
[1618] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.46.
[1619] Franzen, **How to be Alone: Essays**, p.3.

the impossibility of engaging with the culture."[1620] Franzen is as concerned as Wolfe is with socially engaged novels that represent, in Wolfe's words, "rich slices of contemporary life."[1621] Yet Franzen revises his ideas and accepts them to be futile because the dynamics of the culture are rapidly shifting and documenting them while they are still new is impossible. For Wolfe, in contrast, "[t]he future of the fictional novel would be in a highly detailed realism based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted, a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him."[1622]

The sense of realistic representation Wolfe has in mind has a tangled relationship to reality and the events taking place in the society and culture at large. Wolfe refers to Philip Roth's 1961 lamentation in "Writing American Fiction"—a complaint shared also by Franzen—about the failure of the imagination of the novelist to catch up with the actual events that are taking place. In 1961 Roth wrote that "the imagination of the novelists lies helpless before what he knows he will read in tomorrow morning's newspaper. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures daily that are the envy of any novelist."[1623] As Robert Rebein explains, Franzen's efforts at writing social fiction with incisive critiques of the culture were disrupted by "the stranger-than-fiction content and frenetic pace of contemporary culture."[1624]

Establishing an opposition between the real and the imaginary, or, limiting the imaginary's quality of realistic portrayal to fiction's adherence to reality may present some problems. According to Mikhail Epstein's article "Tom Wolfe and Social(ist) Realism" (1992), an alternative to Roth's statements can be found in Dostoevsky for whom "realism includes the boundless play of imagination since reality itself is far from being everyday occurrence susceptible to reporting devices."[1625] Epstein writes that Dostoevsky

> *appreciate[d] the newspaper chronicle as a source for the novel, claiming that everyday facts, in their unbelievable logic, are superior to any fantasy. […] For*

[1620] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.58.
[1621] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.47.
[1622] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.50.
[1623] Philip Roth, 1961 quoted in Green, p.50.
[1624] Rebein, Brooks and Toth, Eds., p.30.
[1625] Mikhail Epstein, "Tom Wolfe and Social(ist) Realism", **Common Knowledge**, Volume:1, No:2, 1992, p.153.

> *Dostoevsky, the fantastic nature of reality did not prevent but argued for the most wild fantasy penetrating into the substance of fiction. […] Dostoevsky did not doubt that reality itself is shaped by human fantasy. […] In other words, the fictional element is a constituent part of the reality and the writer is all the more a realist the more he gives freedom to his own imagination.*[1626]

This line of thought is antithetical to Wolfe's insistence on reportorial realism. For Epstein, the true realism of fiction resides not in its ability, as Wolfe suggests, to report, but in confidence on the creative imagination's ability to represent life in all its aspects. "Today's literary works," Epstein argues, "must vie for a reader's attention on the basis of their artistic quality and not the information contained therein."[1627] Franzen more or less reaches a similar conclusion in "Why Bother?," and not fully agreeing with Wolfe, Franzen maintains that the novel's task is to provide access to the inner lives of characters and imaginary lives rather than bringing news to the readers. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that Franzen shares with Wolfe a belief in the novel's engagement with society and differs from him on the centrality of reportorial realism to fiction. Franzen cares deeply about representing the follies and vulnerabilities of the human character and he seems fond of psychological portrayal. In addition, the aesthetic and imaginative qualities of fiction seem to him as important as forceful plot and beauty of prose.

James Wood's analysis of Tom Wolfe in "Tom Wolfe's Shallowness and the Trouble with Information" might present another perspective for Franzen's distance from Wolfe. According to James Wood, there is a problem with both the novels and the literary ideas of Wolfe whom he charges with creating emotionally challenged characters that can easily be seen as "advertisements for the self: Greed! Fear! Hate! Love! Misery!"[1628] The exclamation marks speak for themselves; Wood disparages the one-dimensionality of Wolfe's characters who quickly fade away amid "huge, twisted plots, their adventures hammered out in a banging and brassy prose."[1629] The "curious" fact about Wolfe, for Wood, is that the novelist "thinks his fiction is realistic, and has used it as an example of how the American novel should develop" as he outlined in his "bouncy manifesto," that is, "Stalking the Billion-Footed

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[1626] Epstein, p.152.
[1627] Epstein, p.159.
[1628] Wood, Shallowness, p.210.
[1629] Wood, Shallowness, p.210.

Beast."[1630] The essay-manifesto refers us back to Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1988) as the exemplary American novel that is based on reportorial realism. For Wood, "Wolfe is not in search of realism; he wants hot, brothy journalism."[1631] As Wood makes explicit in his other critical essays, Wolfe, like many other novelists, is also mistaken about the definition and function of literary realism:

> *The kind of "realism" called for by Wolfe, and by writers like Wolfe, is always realism about society and never realism about human emotions, motives, and secrecies. To be realistic about feeling is to acknowledge that we may feel several things at once, that we massively waver. This is Shakespearean realism—Shakespeare, who has never moved Tom Wolfe—that he sees how eloquently unfinished our inner lives are, how disappointed we are in the stories we tell, and how private and unknowable are our tragedies and comedies—or rather our tragicomedies, for a realism about emotion acknowledges that human stories are always junctions of difference, never merely one thing or the other. But Wolfe's characters have only their simplicities.*[1632]

Returning to Franzen's ideas in "Why Bother?," we could refer to a deeper and more serious problem with the culture Franzen identifies besides the culture's replacing the literal with the imaginary, and rendering the novel's ability to bring news to the culture impossible. Adopting Flannery O'Connor's descriptions of "'mystery' (how human beings avoid or confront the meaning of existence) and 'manners' (the nuts and bolts of how human beings behave)," Franzen argues that contemporary culture renders these two "primary concerns" of the novel "moot."[1633] The most obvious reason is that in a world ruled by advertising and purchasing, human behavior is reduced to "rudeness, irresponsibility, duplicity, and stupidity."[1634] Moreover, the meaning of life revolves around such issues as "high prices, inconvenience, lack of choice, lack of privacy, heartburn, hair loss, slippery roads."[1635] What choice would the novel have, Franzen urges us to imagine, other than offer relief to such problems or recoil in defeat. In other words, the culture is

> *changing both our expectations of entertainment (the book must bring something to us, rather than our bringing something to the book) and the very content of that entertainment. The problem for the novelist is not just that the average man or woman spends so little time F2F [that is, face to face] with his or her fellows. […] The real problem is that the average man or woman's entire*

[1630] Wood, Shallowness, p.210.
[1631] Wood, Shallowness, p.212.
[1632] Wood, Shallowness, pp.217-218.
[1633] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.68.
[1634] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.69.
[1635] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.69.

> *life is increasingly structured to avoid the kinds of conflicts on which fiction, preoccupied with manners, has always thrived.*
>
> *Here, indeed, we are up against what truly seems like the obsolescence of serious art in general. Imagine that human existence is defined by an Ache: the Ache of our not being, each of us, the center of the universe; our desires forever outnumbering our means of satisfying them. If we see religion and art as the historically preferred methods of coming to terms with this Ache, then what happens to art when our technological and economic systems and even our commercialized religions become sufficiently sophisticated to make each of us the center of our own universe of choices and gratifications?*[1636]

Not surprisingly, one result may be the shelves overflowing with of self-help books in bookstores: literature in the mode of medicine for the soul, a delicious treat to the narcissism of the Self, or the defeat of art in the face of technology and the new religion of the Self.

In Franzen's opinion, literature's offering of solace to the troubles of the Self should be thought in terms of its "formal aesthetic rendering of the human plight redemptive."[1637] In other words, Franzen suggests that the novelist adopt a tragic worldview in which the novel serves to "rais[e] more questions than it answers."[1638] This is an ethical endeavor in its penchant for questioning. In this way, the novel may differentiate itself from "the rhetoric of optimism that so pervades our culture" and may penetrate "the sorrow behind the pop-cultural narcosis."[1639] This is not to say that "tragic realism" fosters another gloomy outlook; in the manner that Oedipus's deafness to the oracle's warnings is a fault that belongs to the humankind, every human conflict, ethical dilemma, unbearable predicament we witness in a novel reminds us that we have "company in this great human enterprise."[1640] Therefore, literature guarantees "ethical [and] intellectual integrity" by not providing easy solutions to universal human problems.[1641] In contrast to this, Franzen comments on the fallacy of "depressive realism" to which both postmodernist cultural critique and social realism surrender: "Expecting a novel to bear the weight of our whole disturbed society—to help solve our contemporary problems—seems to me a

[1636] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.70.
[1637] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.91.
[1638] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.91.
[1639] Franzen, Why Bother?, pp.91, 92.
[1640] Franzen, Why Bother?, pp.91, 93.
[1641] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.82.

peculiarly American delusion."[1642] As an antidote to this delusion, he proposes "tragic realism":

> *What emerges as the belief that unifies [novelists] is not that a novel can change anything but that it can* preserve *something. […] Whether they think about it or not, novelists are preserving a tradition of precise, expressive language; a habit of looking past surfaces into interiors; maybe an understanding of private experience and public context as distinct but interpenetrating; maybe mystery, maybe manners. Above all, they are preserving a community of readers and writers, and the way in which members of this community recognize each other is that nothing in the world seems simple to them.*[1643]

The essay's effort at finding (or founding) a fresh understanding for the role of the novel as well as the roles of the writer and the reader leads Franzen to conclude that he should "distanc[e] himself from both the social vocation of fiction and from a postmodern approach to form."[1644]

Therefore, Franzen turns away both from postmodernist cultural critique and from social realism toward a realism that defines the development of character and the psychological representation of character as its central mission, and establishing the reader's connection to universal values and thereby defining the reader's existential and ethical questionings as the novel's central function. It is possible to read his literary agenda as part of his efforts to become a better novelist. In the literary revolution he champions, Franzen fulfills the task Don DeLillo defines for the novelist: "Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals."[1645] In the next section, David Foster Wallace will wage his own war against myriad crushing forms and ideologies of contemporary literature and will claim that the next literary rebels will feel a heartfelt need to re-connect literature to the true representation of the human.

[1642] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.84.
[1643] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.90.
[1644] Green, p.80.
[1645] Don DeLillo quoted in Franzen, Why Bother?, pp.95-96.

3.1.2. "A Patriarch for my Patricide": David Foster Wallace and Artistic Rebellion

In contrast to Jonathan Franzen's nonfiction that takes its impetus from a personal despair about the current states of literature and culture, David Foster Wallace's essays offer a more comprehensive analysis of the American literary and cultural scene after World War II. Wallace is equally distressed about the same forces of ironic detachment, nihilistic trajectory, empty formalism informing contemporary American literature, but his treatment of this distress acquires a more compelling urgency in his all-inclusive approach to post-war American literary scene.

It might be possible to evaluate the force and precision of Wallace's essays with regard to his successful application of the rhetoric of "Ethical Appeal."[1646] "Ethical Appeal" is the rhetoric Wallace diagnoses as the driving force in Bryan Garner's dictionary in the essay "Authority and American Usage" which was discussed in the previous chapter. Ethical Appeal is a traditional rhetorical tactic of appealing to an audience, and its purpose is to establish a relationship of trust between the speaker and the listener. Wallace opposes Ethical appeal to "Pathetic Appeal" which draws its force from addressing, in a manipulative mode, only the emotions, fears, and other sentiments of the addressees to convince them.[1647] In contrast, Ethical Appeal, which is "the boldest, most ambitious" of rhetorical appeals, obliges the rhetor to make his plea based on his or her credibility as well as sincerity with regard to the issues addressed. In Wallace's words, "it requires the rhetor to convince us not just of his intellectual acuity or technical competence but of his basic tendency and fairness and sensitivity to the audience's own hopes and fears."[1648]

In his essays, Wallace radiates incredible passion for literature. His enthusiasm for novels is evinced in the connections he establishes between them across centuries and geographies, in his informed ideas on the mission and function of novels as well as his convincing arguments on certain shortcomings of

[1646] Wallace, Authority, p.77.
[1647] Wallace, Authority, p.121.
[1648] Wallace, Authority, p.77.

contemporary literature. As a ferocious reader, a hyper-articulate writer, and an insightful critic, Wallace talks about the dynamics between tradition and innovation and thinks hard about the present and future of better literature that knows and represents it main subject, the human, better. His essays, as masterful examples of the rhetoric of Ethical Appeal, unwaveringly demonstrate the ways in which nonfiction, with its focus on fiction, can write convincingly of what literature can say about the world we live in. His grasp of his subject matter merges with his gentle care and turns into a series of brilliant meditations, perhaps the best among his peers, on contemporary literature. Therefore, understanding Wallace's nonfiction with regard to his use of Ethical Appeal may help better reveal his acute grasp of and sensible approach, as well as urgent and immediate attention, to American literature. Wallace's wide-ranging treatment of the problems and solutions in contemporary American literature can be observed through an analysis of five key pieces of nonfiction and a crucial interview. Written between 1988 and 1998, these works of nonfiction shall attest to the consistency and the gradual refinement of Wallace's ongoing literary revolution and establish him as one of the most distinctive voices of American literature at the turn of the twentieth century.

It might be useful to begin with one of the best diagnoses of and solutions to the thematic and stylistic shortcomings of contemporary American literature in Wallace's essay on Fyodor Dostoevsky titled "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" (1996). Part book review, part literary manifesto, the arguments of this essay prove essential in understanding Wallace's literary sensibility. In an unconventional manner, Wallace posits that the example of Dostoevsky may deliver contemporary American novel from the throes of nihilistic irony. Significantly, it is Joseph Frank's approach to Dostoevsky that opens up this possibility for Wallace.

Joseph Frank is a professor of Comparative Literature at Princeton University. In the late 1950s, he turns an effort at preparing a lecture on Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) into a massive undertaking of a five-volume biographical study of Dostoevsky. The occasion for Wallace's essay is the publication of Professor Frank's fourth volume of this study in 1996. Wallace spends two months reading all of the four volumes in print to compose a review. Wallace also re-reads Dostoevsky's major novels because Professor Frank offers meticulous

analyses of many novels of Dostoevsky, and a refreshed reading of the novels yields an immensely pleasurable experience and a deeper understanding of biography's purposes. Professor Frank's readings of Dostoevsky's novels, in Wallace's words, are "explicative rather than argumentative or theory-driven."[1649] In this sense, Wallace argues that Professor Frank's effort cannot be undermined to a generic work of biography. Wallace writes that in terms of its methodology, Professor Frank is

> *interested in using Dostoevsky's fiction as a kind of bridge between two distinct ways of interpreting literature, a purely formal aesthetic approach vs. a social-dash-ideological criticism that cares only about thematic and the philosophical assumptions behind them. […] Of course, contemporary literary theory is all about showing that there's no real distinction between these two ways to read—or rather it's about showing that aesthetics can pretty much always be reduced to ideology. For me, one reason Frank's overall project is so worthwhile is that it shows a whole different way to marry formal and ideological readings, an approach that isn't nearly as abstruse and (sometimes) reductive and (all too often) joy-killing as literary theory.*[1650]

What Wallace finds immensely important in Professor Frank's methodology is the insight it may bring to a literary work by understanding the ideological, social, cultural, and intellectual circumstances surrounding it. In other words, the biography of Dostoevsky concerns both the writer's life and the close readings of his novels as actual products of Dostoevsky's response and contribution to his milieu. In a nod to New Criticism's notion of Intentional Fallacy that renders such explicative reading dubious, Wallace asserts that Professor Frank's work "seems prima facie justified" because he tries "to trace and explain the novels' genesis out of Dostoevsky's own ideological engagement with Russian history and culture."[1651] According to Professor Frank, understanding the formal aspects and ideologically informed thematics of Dostoevsky's novels enables a better understanding of the novelist's merging of the universal and the particular, because, as Wallace puts it, Dostoevsky is "a writer whose 'evident desire,' Frank says, is 'to dramatize his moral-spiritual themes against the background of Russian history.'"[1652] This outlook proves invaluable for Wallace who decides to apply a similar argument to contemporary

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[1649] David Foster Wallace, "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky", **Lobster**, (Dostoevsky), p.258. (The essay originally appears, in slightly different form, in *the Village Voice Literary Supplement in* 1996, the year Wallace's *Infinite Jest* appears.)
[1650] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.256.
[1651] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.259.
[1652] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.258.

American literature. What is rather unusual, however, is that Wallace ends up applying Dostoevsky's particular ideas of morality and spirituality.

Wallace grants that Dostoevsky's "time and culture are alien to us" but he does not refrain from discussing "why Dostoevsky's novels ought to be important to us as readers in 1996 America."[1653] To begin, he observes his immensely gifted storytelling that manages to be both "great" and "fun":

> *His novels almost always have ripping plots, lurid and intricate and thoroughly dramatic. There are murders and attempted murders and police and dysfunctional-family feuding and spies, tough guys and beautiful fallen women and unctuous con men and wasting illnesses and sudden inheritances and silky villains and scheming and whores.*[1654]

Gifted storytelling might be common, evident in the commercial successes of such novelists as "Judith Krantz and John Grisham," yet Dostoevsky's storytelling is "artistically good" because of his talent in and attention to characterization.[1655] Dostoevsky's novels abound in characters that are "*alive*" not because

> *they're successfully realized or developed or "rounded." The best of them live inside us, forever, once we've met them. Recall the proud and pathetic Raskolnikov [of* Crime and Punishment*], or the unbelievably repellent Smerdyakov [of* The Brothers Karamazov*], that living engine of slimy resentment in whom I personally see parts of myself I can barely stand to look at.*[1656]

Or, the connection Wallace establishes between Dostoevsky's character Nastasya of *The Idiot* with Faulkner's Caddy Compson: Nastasya "was, like Faulkner's Caddie,[1657] 'doomed and knew it,' and her heroism consists in her haughty defiance of a doom she courts. [Dostoevsky] seems like the first fiction writer to understand how deeply some people love their own suffering, and how they use it and depend on it."[1658]

In marrying the particular with the universal, Dostoevsky's characters become "*alive*" against the background of "plausible and morally compelling plots, [and] they dramatize the profoundest parts of all humans, the parts most conflicted,

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[1653] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.261.
[1654] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.264.
[1655] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.264.
[1656] Wallace, Dostoevsky, pp.264-265.
[1657] Wallace's (mis)spelling is preserved in the quote.
[1658] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.264.

most serious—the ones with the most at stake."[1659] Their particularity relies on the extent they "embody whole ideologies and philosophies of life: Raskolnikov the rational egoism of the 1860s' intelligentsia, Myshkin mystical Christian love, the Underground Man the influence of European positivism on the Russian character."[1660] Wallace underlines the fact that these characters are never reduced "to mouthpieces" because Dostoevsky's "concern was always what it is to be a human being—that is, how to be an actual *person*, someone whose life is informed by values and principles, instead of just an especially shrewd kind of self-preserving animal."[1661]

Wallace devotes some insightful and sympathetic pages to Dostoevsky's life which "was full of incredible suffering and drama and tragedy and heroism," but he is most interested in the writer's moral and spiritual change after he suffers a "mock execution" on his arrest for an alleged rebellion against the tsar in 1849.[1662] Facing death leads the "weak, neurotic, self-involved young writer" to experience "a type of conversion" and transforms "a typically vain and trendy young writer—a very talented writer, but still one whose basic concerns were for his literary glory—into a person who believed deeply in moral/spiritual values."[1663] In fact, beyond believing in these values, Dostoevsky treats their absence as the sign of life "not just incomplete but depraved."[1664] Read in the context of Wallace's remarks on his self-conscious anxieties over his possible vanity and morally unattached life that surface through his interviews, it is possible to say that his reading of Dostoevsky also bears traces of identification with the writer. Wallace wages a war with himself on not being self-centered and tries constantly to keep a balance between his growing popularity and celebrity status after *Infinite Jest*—which, as mentioned above, coincides with the composition of this essay—and his self-image of an unyielding serious artist. However, his chronic and decade-long treatment for depression keeps him constantly at bay because until he commits suicide in 2008, he tries incredibly hard to establish a life that would grant optimum sense and meaning to his existence,

[1659] Wallace, Dostoevsky, pp.264, 265.
[1660] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.265.
[1661] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.265.
[1662] Wallace, Dostoevsky, pp.266, 267.
[1663] Wallace, Dostoevsky, pp.268, 270.
[1664] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.271.

with literature and its communicative, redeeming potential at the center of his endeavors.

In line with this is the fact that Wallace develops a certain interest in religion late in his life. He turns to Dostoevsky to illustrate the ways in which moral and spiritual vacuum of the contemporary American culture and literature can be filled. Granted, Dostoevsky's morality is informed by Christianity, but it signifies for Wallace an essential guide. Wallace, raised an atheist, turns to religion and joins churches. He explains, "[t]he more I believe in something, and the more I take something other than me seriously, the less bored I am, the less self-hating. I get less scared."[1665] The importance o religion for him is its life-organizing power, one that fits nicely within his literary project. In fact, he explains *Infinite Jest*'s focus on drug addiction along this line: "drug addiction is really a form of religion, albeit a bent one. An addict gives himself away to this substance utterly. He believes in it and trusts it, and his love for it is more important than his place in the community, his job, or his friends."[1666] Accordingly, this could also explain the force of the clichés in Alcoholics Anonymous in *Infinite Jest*: it is like a church. As Wallace explains: "I'm interested in religion, only because certain churches seem to be a place where things can be talked about. What does life mean? Do you believe in something bigger than you? Is there something gratifying every single desire you have that is harmful?."[1667]

Without rendering it too crude, it may be possible to say that in Dostoevsky's turn to the moral and the spiritual, Wallace finds strength and a good moral model to follow. Indeed, his insistence on this model's possible deliverance of his fellow writers' nihilism signifies how much he appreciates the example of Dostoevsky, and Professor Frank's brilliant rendering of it.

The morality and spirituality at stake in Dostoevsky is not one based on moral norms but it is rather "a question of the existence or nonexistence of the distinction between good and evil and, consequently, a question of the fate of mankind."[1668] For Wallace, this is "invaluable for American readers and writers" because Dostoevsky "appears to possess degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral

[1665] Wallace, Conversations, p.69.
[1666] Wallace, Conversations, p.68.
[1667] Wallace, Conversations, p.79.
[1668] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.271.

issues that we—here, today—cannot or do not permit ourselves."[1669] For him, this lack is none other than a "nihilist spell."[1670] On this basis, Wallace recommends Professor Frank's books because after reading them, he believes,

> *any serious American reader/writer will find himself driven to think hard about what exactly it is that makes many of the novelists of our own place and time look so thematically shallow and lightweight, so morally impoverished, in comparison to Gogol and Dostoevsky (or even to lesser lights like Lermontov and Turgenev). Frank's bio prompts us to ask ourselves why we seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions, so that contemporary writers have to either make jokes of them or else try to work them in under cover of some formal trick like intertextual quotation or incongruous juxtaposition, sticking the really urgent stuff inside asterisks as part of some multivalent defamiliarization.*[1671]

To give an idea of what those "deep convictions or desperate questions" that receive ironic treatment within asterisks could be, if not should be, Wallace disperses seven paragraph blocks throughout the essay, placing each within double asterisks. Until the underlying motivation of this intertextual playfulness becomes explicit in the above quote that appears near the end of the essay, Wallace's paragraphs intrude the main text and give the impression of an inner monologue accompanying the main text in a crucial, supplementary way. The paragraphs are inconclusive in their arguments; they raise certain issues and ask acute questions about them.

For instance, the first paragraph muses over the moral definition of being a good person while the second elaborates on the possible meanings of faith and its entangled relationship to human need, hence human selfishness. In the third one, Wallace wonders, "[i]s the real point of my life simply to undergo as little pain as much pleasure possible? My behavior sure seems to indicate that this is what I believe, at least a lot of the time. But isn't this kind of a selfish way to live? Forget selfish—isn't it awful lonely?"[1672] There is a compelling force of honesty in these instances of self-questioning: what is commonly treated in a cynical, detached manner requires sincerity both toward oneself and toward others, some transparency that manages to ignore the debasement of irony, and the reduction of the morally serious to frivolous. Perhaps, the honest self-interrogation these questions require is

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[1669] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.271.
[1670] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.271.
[1671] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.271.
[1672] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.261.

on its own the real difficulty: is not understanding the human itself the biggest, endless challenge of literature? After all, one has to have a certain experience with pain (could be first-hand or through reading, of course) as well courage to be able to ask the following questions that appear in the fourth paragraph:

> *** Is it possible really to love other people? If I'm lonely and in pain, everyone outside me is potential relief—I need them. But can you really love what you need so badly? Isn't a big part of love caring more about what the other person needs? How am I supposed to subordinate my own overwhelming need to somebody else's needs that I can't even feel directly? And yet if I can't do this, I'm damned to loneliness, which I definitely don't want. […] So I'm back at trying to overcome my selfishness for self-interested reasons. Is there any way out of this bind? ***[1673]

In Wallace's opinion, any inquiry of this kind is likely to meet "one raised eyebrow and a very cool smile" and in case it appears in the work of a well-known novelist, he would receive "a dry bit of mockery in the *New Yorker"* and then "the novelist would be (and this is our own age's truest vision of hell) laughed out of town."[1674]

In fact, for Wallace, the importance of Dostoevsky is exactly his openness, his courage, his earnestness in "promulgating unfashionable stuff in which he believed."[1675] Dostoevsky makes the sincere integral to his work "not by ignoring (now a.k.a. 'transcending' or 'subverting') the unfriendly cultural circumstances in which he was writing, but by confronting them, engaging them, specifically and by name."[1676] Wallace does not limit contemporary literature's spiritual poverty to its own historical conjuncture and traces a literary and historical background for it. He argues that

> *part of the explanation for our own lit's thematic poverty obviously includes our century and situation. The good old modernists, among their other accomplishments, elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics—maybe even metaphysics—and Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity. Such is the modernist legacy that we now presume as a matter of course that "serious" literature will be aesthetically distanced from real lived life. Add to this the requirement of textual self-consciousness imposed by postmodernism and literary theory, and it's probably fair to say that Dostoevsky et al. were free of certain cultural expectations that severely constrain our own novelists' ability to be "serious."*[1677]

[1673] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.265.
[1674] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.273.
[1675] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.272.
[1676] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.272.
[1677] Wallace, Dostoevsky, pp.271-272.

These remarks reveal how Professor Frank's methodology in his biographical study of Dostoevsky proves urgent to a renewed, or revised, approach to contemporary literature: severing the formal aspect of a work from its unnatural collapse into the different category of ethics. In other words, not treating aesthetic quality as the basic constituent comprising the moral, ideological, social, or cultural program of literature could enable looking beyond postmodern experimentalism and irony. For Wallace, the problem is not so much that literature lacks moral, ideological, social, or cultural concerns. It is that they are deployed not to be defended, established, or advanced but to be crushed and buried in the postmodernist impulse to "parody, ridicule, debunk, or criticize."[1678] Wallace concludes that it might be difficult to face up the challenge of the laugh, nevertheless, he believes that nobody would

> *laugh if a piece of morally passionate, passionately moral fiction was also ingenious and radiantly human fiction. But how to make it that? How—for a writer today, even a talented writer today—to get up the guts to even try? There are no formulas or guarantees. There are, however, models. Frank's books make one of them concrete and alive and terribly instructive.*[1679]

Here, we have Wallace's literary program in its most condensed and concise form: "morally passionate, passionately moral fiction [that is] also ingenious and radiantly human fiction." As he implies, such fiction is yet to be achieved and established, in fact defended, against a pervasive ironic literary sensibility. At this point, it would be necessary to understand how Wallace configures the literary and cultural circumstances that prove antithetical to his literary program and hostile to "radiantly human fiction."

In his essay written eight years prior to the Dostoevsky piece, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,"[1680] Wallace commences a perceptive analysis of the state of American literature in the late 1980s. What makes his insight especially valuable is his immediate grasp of and instantaneous response to some pressing changes and issues in the literary scene, and the soundness of his evaluations that he develops and supports with a wide range of examples in a brilliant example of the Ethical Appeal. At the time Wallace writes this essay, he had

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[1678] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.274.
[1679] Wallace, Dostoevsky, p.274.
[1680] The essay is composed in 1987 and published in 1988 with the same title in *Review of Contemporary Fiction.*

just made his debut as a novelist with the publication of *The Broom of the System* as a graduate student and a teaching assistant at University of Arizona Creative Writing Program. The young and successful Wallace radiates the spirit of the age. As David Streitfeld explains,

> *[d]uring the mid-'80s, it was hip to be a writer just out of puberty. The Brat Pack, led by Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis, was in full flower. The publicity surrounding a writer was often more important than his work. Dozens of wannabes published their first novels to a brief flurry of attention, and were never heard from again.*[1681]

Wallace, as a young novelist, is positively appraised as a member of this young new generation of American writers. However, rather than as a member of the Brat Pack, he is hailed as the heir to Thomas Pynchon. Wallace begins his essay by calling the young writers in question "Conspicuously Young" and establishes a critical distance to the hype surrounding them:

> *The metronome of literary fashion looks to be set on presto. Beginning with the high-profile appearances of David Leavitt's* Family Dancing*, Jay McInerney's* Bright Lights, Big City*, and Bret Ellis's* Less Than Zero*, the last three-odd years saw a veritable explosion of god-willed critical and commercial interest in literary fiction by Conspicuously Young writers. During this interval, certain honored traditions of starvation and apprenticeship were inverted: writers' proximity to their own puberty seemed now an asset; rumors had agents haunting prestigious writing workshops like pro scouts at Bowl games; publishers and critics jockeyed for position to proclaim their own beardless favorite "the first voice of a generation." Too, the upscale urban young quickly established themselves as a bona fide audience (and market) for Conspicuously Young fiction [writers who] enjoy a popularity with their peers unknown since the relative popular disappearance of the sixties' hip black humor squad.*[1682]

Wallace thinks that the deserving success of Leavitt, McInerney, and Ellis generated so much excitement that critics greeted their imitators equally eagerly. Of course, as Franzen remarks, "no bubble remains unburst."[1683] These critics assumed an unsympathetic attitude toward them in a short time. In Wallace's words, "[m]any of the same trendy reviewers who in the mid-eighties were hailing the precocity of a New Generation now bemoan the proliferation of a literary Brat Pack."[1684] One common complaint in the voices of these detractors is how similar the new fiction

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[1681] David Streitfeld quoted in Wallace, Conversations, p.67.
[1682] David Foster Wallace, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young", **Flesh**, (Futures), pp.37-38.
[1683] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.59.
[1684] Wallace, Futures, p.38.

sounds in its adherence to creative writing program standards that shall be discussed below. In Wallace's opinion, this "quick reversal in mood," although it is "not wholly unjustified," requires close analysis in its implications because "condescending critical indulgence and condescending critical dismissal inhabit the same coin."[1685]

Wallace grants that creative writing programs inform these new works to the point of unpleasant standardization and stereotyping.[1686] Yet he tries to offer a more detailed account of the constituents of the Conspicuously Young fiction and argues that not all of the work by young writers fall wholesomely under these rubrics. In other words, he offers three markers of delineation for Conspicuously Young fiction that is not worthy of attention. He identifies "three dreary camps" that more or less define Conspicuously Young fiction:

> *(1) Neiman-Marcus Nihilism, declaimed via six-figure yuppies and their salon-tanned, morally vacant offspring, none of whom seem to be able to make it from limo door to analyst's couch without several grams of chemical encouragement;*
>
> *(2) Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a. Bad Carver, in which suburbs are wastelands, adults automata, narrators blank perceptual engines, intoning in run-on monosyllables the artificial ingredients of breakfast cereal and the new human non-soul;*
>
> *(3) Workshop Hermeticism, fiction for which the highest praise involves the words "competent," "finished," "problem-free," fiction over which Writing-Program pre- and proscriptions loom with the enclosing force of horizons: no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past, without near-diagnostic physical description; no image undissolved into regulation Updikean metaphor; no overture without a dramatized scene to "show" what's "told"; no denouement prior to an epiphany whose approach can be charted by any Freitag on any Macintosh.*[1687]

Briefly, the first category refers to the young fiction that addresses, and is composed by, Yuppies, and deals with materialism, celebrity culture, and fashion. The second connotes deficient imitations of Raymond Carver's minimalist works, and the third perfected not by experience but by dogma fiction produced in creative writing programs at universities.

[1685] Wallace, Futures, pp.38, 39.
[1686] As Marshal Boswell notes, "[u]nlike the vast majority of his contemporaries, most of whom honed their craft by subjecting streams of apprenticeship short fiction to nitpicking critique in undergraduate and graduate writing workshops, Wallace started out as a novelist" (Boswell, 2012, p.264).
[1687] Wallace, Futures, p.40.

In order to unpack the deeper implications of these camps, we could note why Wallace proposes them in the first place. In his opinion, one merit of these delineations is that it makes possible to recognize Conspicuously Young fiction that does not fall into these categories. For instance, Wallace counts Pinckney Benedict, Lorrie Moore, Debra Spark, William T. Vollmann, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jay McInerney—and by implication of the third person plural below, himself—as the "unique and worthy talents" that should not be "lumped together" with the other young writers. Nevertheless, due to an urgency to define a definite New Generation, many otherwise unrelated writers are grouped together. For Wallace, such a group can be better understand as "conjoined less by chronology than by the new and singular environment in which we try to write fiction."[1688] In other words, Wallace takes literary criticism to task for acting on an impulse to name the new and being indeliberate in the process. In his opinion, the new generation of his contemporaneous writers should be considered in terms of their milieu:

> *For a young fiction writer, inclined by disposition and vocation to pay some extra attention to the way life gets lived around him, 1987's America is not a nice place to be. The last cohesive literary generation came to consciousness during the comparatively black-and-white era of Vietnam. We, though, are Watergate's children, television's audience, Reagan's draft-pool, and everyone's market. We've reached our majority in a truly bizarre period in which "Wrong is right," "Greed is good," and "It's better to look good than feel good"—and when the poor old issue of trying to be good no longer even merits a straight face.*[1689]

Wallace grants that there are plausible reasons for the wholesome, indistinguishing treatment of all young writers of the late 1980s. More specifically, he points out "three specific contemporary American phenomena" that render literary productivity "radically different for young American writers now": "the impacts of television, of academic Creative Writing Programs, and of a revolution in the way educated people understand the function and possibility of literary narrative."[1690] These facts constitute "undeniable and cohesive influences on this country's 'New Voices'" while simultaneously detaching them "from much of an Establishment—literary, intellectual, political—that reads and judges our stuff from [… a] generation

[1688] Wallace, Futures, p.41.
[1689] Wallace, Futures, pp.67-68.
[1690] Wallace, Futures, pp.41, 42.

gap."[1691] Put differently, the nondiscerning critical attention new fiction of this period receives is closely related to willful ignorance of major changes in the literary scene, some of which are adequately responded to by certain young writers and inadequately recognized by literary authorities.

Television, as we shall observe later in another influential essay, "E Unibus Pluram," is immensely important in Wallace's understanding of contemporary fiction, both in terms of a new sense of aesthetic it fosters and its gradual damage to narrative possibilities of fiction. He argues that whereas for the previous generation television is an intruder that turns into a welcome guest in houses, for his generation, television becomes "as much a part of reality as Toyotas and gridlock."[1692] Perhaps the automobile brand appearing in this sentence is as explicative as it could ever be of the point Wallace is trying to make: life is understood and represented on an unprecedented scale through brand names, images, and new forms of entertainment. While reference to popular culture is taken as a form of degradation toward fiction by the previous generation, Wallace posits that it has created a new aesthetic sensibility that renders such automatic dismissing of pop references as low art a form of "hypocrisy."[1693] In fact, as Wallace tells Laura Miller in 1996, and makes a nod to his years at University of Arizona creative writing program—another important factor in his analysis,

> *I have always thought of myself as a realist. I can remember fighting with my professors about it in grad school. The world that I live in consists of 250 advertisements a day and any number of unbelievably entertaining options, most of which are subsidized by corporations that want to sell me things. The whole way the world works on my nerve endings is bound up with stuff that the guys with leather patches on their elbows would consider pop or trivial or ephemeral. I use a fair amount of pop stuff in my fiction, but what I mean by it is nothing different than what other people mean in writing about trees and parks and having to walk to the river to get water a hundred years ago. It's just the texture of the world I live in.*[1694]

In this sense, rather than making a case for the postmodernist commingling of low and high, Wallace posits a new understanding of reality, hence realistic presentation

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[1691] Wallace, Futures, p.42.
[1692] Wallace, Futures, p.42.
[1693] Wallace, Futures, pp.43, 45.
[1694] Wallace, Conversations, p.60.

based on his generation's relation to mass entertainment, popular culture, and television.

In terms of "artistic values and expectations," possible reflections of this new television culture in fiction include the writers'

> *experience as consummate watchers. E.g., events often refracted through the sensibilities of more than one character; short, dense paragraphs in which coherence is often sacrificed for straight evocation; abrupt transitions in scene, setting, point of view, temporal and causal orders; a surfacy, objective, "cinematic" third-person narrative eye. Above all, though, a comparative indifference to the imperative of mimesis, combined with an absolute passion for narrative choices that conduce to what might be called "mood." For no writer can help assuming that the reader is on some level like him: already having seen, ad nauseum, what life* looks *like, he's far more interested in how it* feels *as a signpost toward what it means.*[1695]

It would suffice here to say that *Infinite Jest* shall illustrate the aesthetic at issue in this paragraph on both formal and thematic levels, and it is possible to turn to an analysis of what Wallace means by Catatonic Realism in the above delineation of Conspicuously Young writing.

In Wallace's opinion, the form of Minimalism established by Raymond Carver is turned into what he calls "Ultraminimalism" that positions itself directly against "the aesthetic norms of mass entertainment."[1696] In fact, a "crude inversion of these norms" singlehandedly defines "Ultraminimalism."[1697] While television and advertising uses "hyperbole" and exaggerates actions and representations toward a manic rendering of movement, Ultraminimalist writer "describes an event as one would an object, a geometric form in statis; and he always does so from an emotional remove of light-years."[1698] Wallace dislikes this type of writing on the basis of its "naïve pretension" because its practitioners "seem to feel that simply by inverting the values imposed on us by television, commercial film, advertising, etc., they can automatically achieve the aesthetic depth popular entertainment so conspicuously lacks."[1699] Perhaps worse is the extent Raymond Carver's minimalism has been misunderstood by aspiring young writers and reproduced unsuccessfully by them. As Wallace tells Larry McCaffery, Carver was an "artist" and that

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[1695] Wallace, Futures, pp.46-47.
[1696] Wallace, Futures, p.47.
[1697] Wallace, Futures, p.47.
[1698] Wallace, Futures, p.47.
[1699] Wallace, Futures, p.48.

> *his case is like Joyce, or Nabokov, or early Barth and Coover—he's using formal innovation in the service of an original vision. Carver invented the techniques of minimalism in the service of rendering a world he saw that nobody'd seen before. It's a grim world, exhausted and empty and full of mute, beaten people, but the minimalist techniques Carver employed were perfect for it; they created it. And minimalism for Carver wasn't some rigid aesthetic program he adhered to for its own sake. Carver's commitment was to his stories, each of them. And when minimalism didn't serve them, he blew it off. If he realized a story would be best served by expansion, not ablation, he'd expand, like he did to "The Bath," which he later turned into a vastly superior story.*[1700]

Ultraminimalism's struggle with the aesthetics of popular entertainment, therefore, denies stories their imaginative existence and a solid connection to the world. In trying to become dense and clear version, hence antithesis of life as presented in popular culture, ultraminimalism disdains "narrative personality" and "tries to pretend there *is* no narrative consciousness in its text."[1701] Wallace considers the annulling of narrative consciousness extremely damaging, especially since television is based on narrative that has a single purpose: to give pleasure without being demanding.

For one thing, the pleasure of television narratives, for instance, in dramas, depends entirely on not submitting the audience to ugly truths of life, such as death. Encouraging the audience to identify with characters that do not die, or face death in their much more important daily problems, the audiences

> *lose any sense of eschatology, thus of teleology, and live in a moment that is, paradoxically, both emptied of intrinsic meaning or end and quite literally eternal. If we're the only animals who know in advance we're going to die, we're also probably the only animals who would submit so cheerfully to the sustained denial of this undeniable and very important truth. The danger is that, as entertainment's denials of the truth get even more effective and pervasive and seductive, we will eventually forget what they're denials of. This is scary. Because it seems transparent to me that, if we forget how to die, we're going to forget how to live.*[1702]

Then, does not ultraminimalism become what it fiercely attacks? Moreover, this argument might serve as a precondition for any effect Dostoevsky might have on American literature because how could morality and spirituality take root without an imperative to face truth in its myriad forms, including, before all else, death.

[1700] Wallace, Conversations, p.46.
[1701] Wallace, Conversations, p.45.
[1702] Wallace, Futures, p.51.

Furthermore, Wallace's critique of Updike below will also make a case out of this unwillingness, or perhaps willful denial, of facing more true and urgent problems in life, and connect Wallace's arguments over the postwar American fiction.

Wallace is dismayed, however, that television's imperative to provide undemanding and infinitely entertaining narratives (which will culminate in *Infinite Jest*'s piercing satire of the entertainment culture) is causing irreversible changes in general reader's expectations from literary narrative. Meanwhile, he considers it an inevitable result of a peculiarly American resistance to pain and suffering. In his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace argues that it would be "shortsighted to blame TV" considering the "strong and distinctive American distaste for frustration and suffering": television is simply going to avoid any sign of frustration and suffering "like the plague in favor of something anesthetic and easy."[1703] Wallace elaborates,

> *in most other cultures, if you hurt, if you have a symptom that's causing you to suffer, they view this as basically healthy and natural, a sign that your nervous system knows something's wrong. For these cultures, getting rid of the pain without addressing the deeper cause would be like shutting off a fire alarm while the fire's still going. But if you just look at the number of ways that we try like hell to alleviate mere symptoms in this country—from fast-fast-fastrelief antacids to the popularity of lighthearted musicals during the Depression—you can see an almost compulsive tendency to regard pain itself as the problem. And so pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself.*[1704]

Jonathan Franzen also makes an argument along these lines in "Why Bother?":

> *I suspect that art has always had a particularly tenuous purchase on the American imagination because ours is a country to which so few terrible things have ever happened. The one genuine tragedy that befall us was slavery, and it's probably no accident that the tradition of Southern literature has been strikingly rich and productive of geniuses. (Compare the literature of the sunny, fertile, peaceful West Coast.) Superficially at least, for the great white majority, the history of this has consisted of success and more success.*[1705]

The problem, for both Franzen and Wallace, is that some superficial problems are treated as important and worthy of novelistic inquiry. Furthermore, Wallace does not consider an analysis of the plight of humanity in the grip of materialism as a true inquiry. He explains in a 2004 interview with Steve Paulson,

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[1703] Wallace, Conversations, p.23.
[1704] Wallace, Conversations, p.23.
[1705] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.92.

> *For me, art that's alive and urgent is art that's about what it is to be a human being. And whether one is a human being in times of enormous profundity and depth and challenge, or one is trying to be a human being in times that appear to be shallow and commercial and materialistic, really isn't all that relevant to the deeper project. The deeper project is: what is it to be human?*[1706]

Television proves an expert in marginalizing the question of the human by undermining it to its need to be entertained. Wallace writes, "[t]elevision's greatest appeal is that it is engaging without being demanding at all": television provides fun, easy and non-demanding consumption all at the same time without offering any chance for the audience "to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient" their ideas or outlooks.[1707] The danger is that "most television is not just entertainment: it's also narrative. And it's so true it's trite that human beings are narrative animals. […] We need narrative like we need space-time."[1708] Televised narrative's constant gratification of a passive audience's desire to be entertained and engaged, therefore, comes at too high a price: in changing "people's tastes in narrative art," it transfigures "the very *expectations* of readers in virtue of which narrative art is art."[1709] Wallace notes a relative, but "dark and curious thing"[1710]:

> *at a time when there are more decent and good and very serious fiction writers at work in America than ever before, an American public enjoying unprecedented literacy and disposable income spends the vast bulk of its reading time and book dollar on fiction that is, by any fair standard, trash. Trash fiction is, by design and appeal, most like televised narrative: engaging without demanding. […] My complaint against trash isn't that it's vulgar art, or irritatingly dumb art, but that, given what makes fiction art at all, trash is simply* unreal*,* empty*—and that (aided by mores of and by TV) it seduces the market writers' need and the culture that needs writers away from that is real, full, meaningful.*[1711]

The reception of "trash fiction" in the American institutions of fiction, that is, the creative writing programs at universities, makes for Wallace the whole complicated and "dark" issue more complicated and dark. He draws interesting and intricate parallels between the state of American literature in the late 1980s and the underlying principles of these writing programs. Words like demanding, engaging, artistic, and serious gain new, unpleasant contexts in these institutions that have been enjoying

[1706] Wallace, Conversations, p.131.
[1707] Wallace, Futures, p.52.
[1708] Wallace, Futures, p.52.
[1709] Wallace, Futures, p.52.
[1710] Wallace, Futures, p.52.
[1711] Wallace, Futures, pp.53-54.

immense popularity and increasing incessantly in number around the time Wallace writes the essay.

As mentioned earlier, Wallace composes "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" when he is enrolled in a creative writing Master's program. In the following quotes, Wallace implies a similarity between the relationship of the "trash fiction" writer and his or her reader, and that of the creative writing teacher and student:

> *The writer of trash fiction, often with admirable craft, affords his customer a narrative structure and movement, and content that engages the reader—titillates, repulses, excites, transports him—without demanding of him any of the intellectual or spiritual or* artistic *responses that render verbal intercourse between writer and reader an important or even* real *activity. So when our elders tell our graduate fiction class (as they like to do a lot) that a war for fictional art's soul is being waged in the 1980s between poetry on one side and trash on the other—to this admonishment we listen, at this we take pause. Especially when television and advertising have conditioned us to equate net worth with human worth. Sidney Sheldon, a gifted trash-master, owns jets; more people in this country write poetry than read it.*[1712]

The war, for Wallace, is not between high and low art: it is within fiction itself, and it is taking place over narrative's demanding and non-demanding forms.

However, given the circumstances of the writing programs, Wallace is not surprised. First of all, creative writing departments serve as sanctuaries for writers who may teach their profession and not "resort to more numbing or time-consuming employment."[1713] As in many other departments, however, the writers in creative departments carry out "faculty power struggles that summon images of sharks fighting for control of a bathtub, the dispiriting hiss of everybody's egos in various stages of inflation or deflation."[1714] The students are also on the plus side of financial security in the forms of fellowships and assistantships they may receive from these departments. Wallace finds these programs interesting as a phenomenon, because as he explains, they have been steadily proliferating at least since the 1960s, and most of the young writers of the 1980s are almost without exception graduates of these writing programs. As Wallace puts it, "[n]ever has a 'literary generation' been so thoroughly and formally trained, nor has such a large percentage of aspiring fiction

[1712] Wallace, Futures, p.54.
[1713] Wallace, Futures, p.55.
[1714] Wallace, Futures, p.57.

writers eschewed extramural apprenticeship for [I]vy [League colleges] and grades."[1715]

The central product of the writing workshop phenomenon is the short story. Indeed, Wallace notes the alleged "renaissance of the American short story" inaugurated by these workshops.[1716] He is skeptical of the merits of this supposed renaissance because he has serious doubts about the honesty and efficiency, artistic-wise, of these programs. He explains,

> *[f]or one thing, the pedagogical relation between fiction professor and fiction student has unhealtiness built right in. Writing teachers are by calling writers, not teachers. The fact that most of them are teaching not for its own sake but to support a separate and obsessive calling has got to be accepted, as does its consequence: every minute spent on class and department business is, for Program staff, a minute not spent on working on their own art, and must to a degree be resented. [… Many] take the resentment out in large part on the psyches of their pupils—for pupils represent artistic time wasted. […] [Therefore] it's usually the very-low-profile, docile,* undemanding *student who is favored, recruited, supported, and advanced by a faculty for whom demand equals distraction. In other words, the fact that creative writing teachers must wear two hats has unhappy implications for the quality of both M.F.A. candidates and the education they receive in Programs.*[1717]

Considering the fact that demanding students either leave the program or, like Wallace himself, "gut out a couple years during which the door is always being pointed to, throats cleared, Fin. Aid unavailable," the remaining students mostly remain as long as they "make the instructors' dicta their own" and produce "solid, quiet work, most of which lands neatly in Dreary Camp #3, nice, cautious, boring Workshop Stories, stories as tough to find technical fault with as they are to remember after putting them down."[1718] As for the type of novels these programs would produce, Wallace playfully remarks: "fiction by academics who were taught by academics and teach aspiring academics; novel after critique-resistant novel about tenure-angst, coed-lust, cafeteria-*schmerz.*"[1719] For Wallace, the real danger is the possibility of "a McStory chain" posed by the "literary patronage" system of creative writing departments.[1720]

[1715] Wallace, Futures, p.56.
[1716] Wallace, Futures, p.56.
[1717] Wallace, Futures, p.58.
[1718] Wallace, Futures, p.60.
[1719] Wallace, Futures, p.62.
[1720] Wallace, Futures, p.61.

Another aspect of the creative writing department's possible damage to the fiction student regards the antagonism the creative writing department holds toward the English department and the teaching of literature. Therefore, for Wallace, the real "disease" affecting contemporary young American writers, hence the future of American fiction is as follows:

> *In terms of rigor, demand, intellectual and emotional requirement, a lot of Creative Writing Programs are an unfunny joke. Few require of applicants any significant preparation in history, literature, criticism, composition, foreign languages, art, or philosophy; fewer still make attempts to provide it in curricula or require it as a criterion for graduation. […] Way too many students are being "certified" to go out there and try to do meaningful work on the cutting edge of an artistic discipline of whose underpinnings, history, and greatest achievements they are largely ignorant. The obligatory survey of "Writers Who Are Important to* You*" at the start of each term seems to suggest that Homer and Milton, Cervantes and Shakespeare, Maupassant and Gogol—to say nothing of the Testaments—have receded into the mists of Straight Lit; that, for far too much of this generation, Salinger invented the wheel, Updike internal combustion, and Carver, and [Jayne Anne] Philips drive what's worth chasing.*[1721]

Wallace later revises his idea of the curriculum in writing programs in his interview with two creative writing students at Cleveland State University. Wallace tells Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk in 1993 that he distinguishes "two kinds of graduate writing programs."[1722] The first group, including Cleveland State University and Syracuse University, offers "a Master's with a concentration in creative writing, where there are actual academic requirements."[1723] Wallace appreciates these programs in which "[y]ou are required to learn to be a writer as part of a broader education in the humanities."[1724] The second group, which includes writing programs at Arizona, Iowa and Stanford universities, presents problems for Wallace because "[t]hey really disparag[e] the idea of learning how to take part in the tradition of Western letters," and he claims that they "only pretend to be schools."[1725] However, having seen more programs and having noticed some enhancements that enable students to improve themselves as readers of literature does not keep Wallace from repeating his claim that "[t]he M.F.A. factories are really covert forms of patronage.

[1721] Wallace, Futures, p.62.
[1722] Wallace, Conversations, p.15.
[1723] Wallace, Conversations, p.15.
[1724] Wallace, Conversations, p.15.
[1725] Wallace, Conversations, p.15.

For the Faculty, they afford the comfort and security, usually of lifetime employment."[1726] Furthermore, he challenges the workload of writing workshop teachers on the basis that they do not have to prepare for their lectures in the arduous, disciplined way a history or literature teacher would have to prepare for lectures.

However controversial all these claims may seem, they are indicative of Wallace's seriousness and comprehensive thinking on the matter of American literature's trajectory. Wallace's arguments on the creative writing programs in 1988 is in fact very visionary when we consider Mark McGurl's treatment of the subject with equal immediacy in 2005 in his influential essay "The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction." For McGurl, the sudden increase in the number of these programs in the second half of the twentieth century is "about as close to a genuine literary historical novelty as one could hope to see" in that manifests a "striking reversal of attitudes":

> *Once perceived as the stuffy enemy of modernist innovation in the arts, the last place a self-respecting artist would want, or be welcomed, to ply his or her trade, the university has with the rise and spread of classroom instruction in creative writing—and with it the creative writing professorship and other forms of writer-in-residency—become perhaps the most important patron of artistically ambitious literary practice in the United States, the sine qua non of countless careers.*[1727]

Both Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace are representative members of this institutionalization in the sense that they are both employed as creative writing teachers at various stages in their careers, and Wallace once enrolled in a graduate writing program.

In light of McGurl's essay, it is possible to realize the special recognition Wallace deserves for his immediate analysis of the writing programs within the context of its importance for the present and future of fiction. McGurl expresses his surprise at lack of attention from literary scholars on the "transformation of the institutional context of literary production" through these programs.[1728] One reason for this disregard, he thinks, could be "a result of its occurring at too close range."[1729] Yet this cannot be a valid justification since Wallace was as close as one could

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[1726] Wallace, Conversations, p.15.
[1727] Mark McGurl, "The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction", **Critical Inquiry**, Volume:32, No:1, 2005, p.102.
[1728] McGurl, p.103.
[1729] McGurl, p.103.

possibly be to these programs and he responded promptly. McGurl notes that criticism of writing programs "has been confined to the domain of literary journalism," for instance, to figures like Tom Wolfe and John W. Aldridge. In his well-known *Harper's* essay "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," Wolfe dismisses the idea of fiction written by writers who look at pages in enclosed spaces rather than looking at real life and being outside.[1730] Similarly, in *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (1992), John W. Aldridge criticizes writing programs for isolating writers from "the manifold stimulations of the real world" and for erasing "authorial voice" and instilling instead an "assembly-line" voice, echoing what Wallace said five years ago and McGurl writes that Aldridge finds fault with these programs for creating

> *standardized aesthetic, a corporate literary style that makes a writer identifiable as, say, an Iowa writer. The claim here is that the collective pursuit of perfectly crafted, "workshopped" prose has the effect of eliminating the salutary unpredictability of the students in question, ironically reproducing the machine-made quality of formulaic genre fiction on another, slightly more elevated or rarefied cultural level. The result, according to Aldridge, is that products of the writing program become, not writers, but "clonal fabrications of writers" who can only be expected to produce "small, sleek, clonal fabrications of literature."*[1731]

Wallace's arguments may even seem prophetic while reading about these later remarks by scholars. Before moving on with further comments on the writing programs, we could note why Wallace so ardently disagrees with the idea of the perfunctory process of writing at work in these programs. For instance, referring to his M.F.A. program in Arizona, Wallace says in an interview that "[t]here is a lopsided emphasis in writing programs on hermetic fiction, the mechanicalness of the craft, technique, and point of view, as opposed to the occult or spiritual side of writing—taking joys in the process of creation."[1732] Here, Wallace is consistent with his critique of the principles of the program and highlights another issue: by referring to writing as an "occult and spiritual" practice, Wallace shows that he preserves the sense of the magical, mysterious, and nonmaterial aspects of the craft that cannot be taught or learnt but can only be loved and devoted to by heart. In a sense, he implies that confining fiction to sets of rules and methods of creating and developing

[1730] McGurl, p.104.
[1731] McGurl, pp.104-105.
[1732] Wallace, Conversations, p.6.

characters, weaving plots, however perfectly articulated in and passed on by methodology, can never achieve perfection without true devotion. Indeed, as McGurl wonders, "do we not bear daily witness to a surfeit of literary excellence, an embarrassment of riches?"[1733]

In his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace notes the "vital and sacred" aspect of writing which may qualify as the "occult and spiritual" aspects he mentions above.[1734] Writing gains its essential vitality through the special relationship it establishes with the reader:

> *the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It's got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved. I know this doesn't sound hip at all. But it seems like one of the things really great fiction-writers do—from Carver to Chekhov to Flannery O'Connor […]—is give the reader something. The reader walks away from real art heavier than she came to it. Fuller. […] Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself in spiritual and emotional ways that risk you making you look banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something.*[1735]

Undeniably, these things cannot be taught in a classroom: they would require personal reading experience. However, the student equation in the writing workshops present another problem in this regard. Wallace's comments in a 1997 interview with Donn Fry, for instance, while Wallace is employed as a creative writing teacher at Illinois State University, sound disheartening. Wallace complains about his students' aversion to reading, which they claim to be "boring."[1736] For Wallace, reading is not as boring as it is difficult for these students because they find "the ratio of work to pleasure too hard."[1737] It is terribly shocking that aspiring fiction writers would disdain reading because reading excessively, omnivorously, preferably from very early ages onward, is common to many a good writer, and there should be a wisdom to it. Moreover, many points Wallace makes about fiction's purpose seem to come by way of his experience as a reader and the strong sense of communication he achieves with the imaginary worlds and characters. For Wallace, perhaps worse is the

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[1733] McGurl, p.129.
[1734] Wallace, Conversations, p.50.
[1735] Wallace, Conversations, p.50.
[1736] Wallace, Conversations, p.74.
[1737] Wallace, Conversations, p.75.

students' ingrained tendency for self-expression in fiction which might not only hinder reading's, hence writing's, essentially communicative power, but undermine literature to an of monologue, situating the writer as the one and only source of a one-sided dialogue:

> *The bigger problem with college students is that in high school they have been taught something called "expressive writing"—where any thought you have is considered good and valid—and you have to convince them that just because it's their opinion it doesn't necessarily mean it's interesting or that anyone wants to read it. The biggest problem I have is converting them from "expressive writing" to communicative writing.*[1738]

At its core, this argument could be to traced back to the previous chapter's analysis of Wallace's essay "Authority and American Usage" where Wallace associates the almost viral emphasis on the newly introduced concepts of freewriting and brainstorming after 1970, and the quick establishment in American education of "a view of writing as self-exploratory and–expressive rather than as communicative, an abandonment of systematic grammar, usage, semantics, rhetoric, etymology."[1739] One inevitable effect of this kind of education appears to fall on the future of American fiction and when Donn Fry expresses fears about the competency of the next generation of writers, Wallace does not reassure him but remarks on their prejudice and aversion to "well-crafted composition."[1740] Wallace cannot overemphasize the importance of the communicative task of fiction which he belabors in his essays to establish as the most fundamental task of fiction. Another problem with expressive writing could be that it may stand as bulwark against any impact of, for instance, Dostoevsky may have that Wallace deeply desires: after all, unattached, ungrounded, or undefended personal ideas might serve as the biggest enemy to the morally and spiritually guided writing and reading. Wallace's endless war with the self's obsessive attention to its needs, desires, and ideas proves vital once more.

If we return to "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," we could note how Wallace posits the promising young writers he mentioned earlier, (namely, Pinckney Benedict, Lorrie Moore, Debra Spark, William T. Vollmann, Bret Easton

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[1738] Wallace, Conversations, pp.74-75.
[1739] Wallace, Authority, p.81.
[1740] Wallace, Conversations, p.74.

Ellis, and Jay McInerney) as inheritors of both modernist and postmodernist traditions and establishes their difference in an affirming manner from the other young writers. If there is a New Generation of American Writers, Wallace implies, it is not to be sought in the works of Yuppies and their nihilistic works, neither in the rigid realism of Carver imitators, nor in the "story-every-three-weeks workshop assembly lines."[1741] In his opinion, "our generation is lucky enough to have been born into an artistic climate as stormy and exciting as anything since Pound and Co. turned the world-before-last on its head."[1742] With a sense of awareness of the tide of theory changing language, Wallace writes,

> *[t]he last few generations of American writers have breathed the relatively stable air of New Criticism and an Anglo-American aesthetics untainted by Continental winds. The climate for the "next" generation of American writers is aswirl with what seems like long-overdue appreciation for the weird achievements of such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man. The demise of structuralism has changed a world's outlook on language, art, and literary discourse; and the contemporary artist can no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers—no matter how stratospheric—as divorced from his own concerns.*[1743]

Therefore, the New Generation of American writers proceed from the world that was "refracted" in the works of Marcel Proust, Jorge Luis Borges, and William Faulkner and that "exploded into diffraction" after World War II in the works of, to name a few, Vladimir Nabokov, Gilbert Sorrentino, John Barth, Carlos Fuentes, William Burroughs, Robert Coover, Ursula Le Guin, Kathy Acker, William Gaddis, and J. M. Coetzee.[1744] "It's a freaking maelstrom," Wallace writes, "and the Conspicuously Young writer who still likes to read a bit can't help feeling torn: if the Program is maddening in its statis, the real world of serious fiction just *won't hold still.*"[1745]

The direction Wallace is hinting at, therefore, is, or, should be informed, by the altered relationships among the writer, language and the work. He grants that metafiction works on this "excited new attention to language," yet he does not consider it the driving impetus of, or "the direction in, which the serious fiction of 'whole new generations' will move."[1746] Metafiction, for Wallace, is

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[1741] Wallace, Futures, p.61.
[1742] Wallace, Futures, p.63.
[1743] Wallace, Futures, p.63.
[1744] Wallace, Futures, p.64.
[1745] Wallace, Futures, p.65.
[1746] Wallace, Futures, p.65.

> *an early symptom of a dark new enlightenment, that quite soon no truly serious Conspicuously Young writer will be able to pretend anymore that the use of literary expression for the construction of make-believe is a straightforward enterprise. We are the recipients of a knife unprecedentedly vulnerable to its own blade, and all the Writing Program prizes and* Mary Tyler Moore Show *reruns in the world can't hide what's in our hands forever.*[1747]

At this point, a nice compendium to Wallace's discussion of his contemporaries in "Fictional Futures" would be "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think" (1998) where Wallace discusses the previous generation of writers and takes John Updike, the great realist of the postwar American novel, for completely bypassing the pressing changes of the literary scene Wallace urgently brings to attention and for surrendering to a dangerous self-indulgence in his later fiction. The occasion for this essay is a review of Updike's 1997 novel *Toward the End of Time.* Wallace's trademark approach of enlarging a review of a work toward explaining the great picture informing it is at work in this essay, too.

Toward the End of Time is a dystopian novel taking place in the future in the wake of nuclear wars and America is under invasion by other countries, on the brink of total collapse. The country's dissolution is reflected in its elderly protagonist, Ben Turnbull. In his youth, Turnbull suffers from many existential crises and always takes refuge in extramarital affairs. In old age, "he persists in the bizarre, adolescent belief" that sexual freedom "is a cure for human despair."[1748] The novel devotes "a lot of pages of Turnbull brooding about senescence, mortality, and the tragedy of the human condition, and even more pages of Turnbull talking about sex and the imperiousness of the sexual urge, and detailing how he lusts after" women around him.[1749] Wallace expresses his distaste for Updike's apocalyptic setting that "serves as a grand metaphor for [Ben Turnbull's] own personal death" and even more distaste for the novel's climax that consists of "a prostate operation that leaves Turnbull impotent and extremely bummed."[1750] For Wallace, the protagonist of *Toward the End of Time* is "such a broad caricature of an Updike protagonist that he helps clarify what's been so unpleasant and frustrating about this author's recent

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[1747] Wallace, Futures, pp.65-66.
[1748] David Foster Wallace, "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think", **Lobster**, (Certainly), p.59.
[1749] Wallace, Certainly, p.55.
[1750] Wallace, Certainly, pp.57, 58.

characters."[1751] What is even worse is that "Updike makes it plain that he views the narrator's final impotence as catastrophic, as the ultimate symbol of death itself, and he clearly wants us to mourn it as much as Turnbull does."[1752]

Wallace finds it impossible to sympathize with a character so vainly engaged with his sexuality, not to mention his impending death. "Ben Turnbull's unhappiness is obvious right from the novel's first page. It never once occurs to him, though, that the reason he's so unhappy is that he's an asshole."[1753] Turnbull seems to suffer from what Wallace calls our default self-centeredness in *This is Water:* the belief in being "the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence."[1754] Wallace concludes that *Toward the End of Time* is so "self-indulgent that it's hard to believe the author let it be published in this kind of shape.[1755]

The reason Wallace focuses especially on this intermingling of death and sex is closely related to his general complaint about the later works of Updike and his fellow writers. In reading Updike's treatment of Turnbull against the background of the novelist's life and milieu, Wallace argues:

> *Mailer, Updike, Roth—the Great Male Narcissists who've dominated postwar American fiction are now in their senescence, and it must seem to them no coincidence that the prospect of their own deaths appears backlit by the approaching millennium and online predictions of the death of the novel as we know it. When a solipsist dies, after all, everything goes with him. And no US novelist has mapped the inner terrain of the solipsist better than John Updike, whose rise in the 1960s and '70s established him as both chronicler and voice of probably the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV. As were Freud's, Updike's big preoccupations have always been with death and sex (not necessarily in that order), and the fact that his books' mood has gotten more wintry in recent years is understandable—Updike has always written mainly about himself, and since the surprisingly moving* Rabbit at Rest *he's been exploring, more and more overtly, the apocalyptic prospect of his own death.*[1756]

Wallace does not make further comments on any novelist other than Updike, and despite his critical tone, there is definitely some sense of disappointment in Wallace's criticism of these novelists' disturbing association of death with

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[1751] Wallace, Certainly, p.58.
[1752] Wallace, Certainly, p.59.
[1753] Wallace, Certainly, pp.58-59.
[1754] Wallace, Water, p.36.
[1755] Wallace, Certainly, p.52.
[1756] Wallace, Certainly, pp.51-52.

sexuality.[1757] At this point, it would be useful to establish Wallace's relationship to Updike. He classifies himself a long-time admirer of Updike, and having read almost his entire oeuvre, believes that

> The Poorhouse Fair*,* Of the Farm*, and* The Centaur *are all great books, maybe classics. And even since '81's* Rabbit Is Rich*—as his characters seemed to become more and more repellent, and without any corresponding sign that the author understood that they were repellent—I've continued to read Updike's novels and to admire the sheer gorgeousness of his descriptive prose.*[1758]

Nevertheless, he notes a "violent dislike" of Updike among his peers who are "literary readers" under forty.[1759] Women readers, especially, express strong dislike for Updike's male characters that constantly and unabashedly treat women as sexual objects, and for Updike's vulgar and demeaning portrayal of women's sexuality. For Wallace, one explanation for the aversion to Updike's novels among his peers would be "the fact that many of our parents revere Updike and it's easy to revile what your parents revere."[1760] Another, and more plausible, explanation relates to Updike's, "radical self-absorption, and with [his] uncritical celebration of this self-absorption both in [himself] and in [his] characters."[1761] John Updike, Wallace elaborates,

> *has for decades been constructing protagonists who are basically all the same guy (see for instance Rabbit Angstrom, Dick Maple, Piet Hanema, Henry Bech, Rev. Tom Marshfield,* Roger's Version's *"Uncle Nunc") and who are all clearly stand-ins for Updike himself. They always live in either Pennsylvania or New England, are either unhappily married or divorced, are roughly Updike's age. Always either the narrator or the point-of-view character, they tend all to have the author's astounding perceptual gifts; they think and speak in the same effortlessly lush, synesthetic way that Updike does. They are also always incorrigibly narcissistic, philandering, self-contemptuous, self-pitying … and deeply alone, alone the way only an emotional solipsist can be alone. They never seem to belong to any sort of larger unit or community or cause. Though usually family men, they never really love anybody—and, though always heterosexual to the point of satyriasis, they especially don't love women. The very world around them, as gorgeously as they see and describe it, tends to exist*

[1757] In *The Modern American Novel*, Malcolm Bradbury also notes Updike's growing preoccupation with sexuality and divorce in his later novels: "A precise recorder of social and historical change, Updike's fiction too began to change as the Sixties developed. The domestic scene increasingly begins to shatter and apocalyptic feelings intensify in the age of moon-shot and Vietnam […] marriages grow fragile and adulteries and divorces increase [… and] adultery turns into a complex blasphemy, a substitute for lost faith … [where] sex [is] sacrament" (Bradbury, 1992, pp.183-184).
[1758] Wallace, Certainly, p.52.
[1759] Wallace, Certainly, p.52.
[1760] Wallace, Certainly, p.53.
[1761] Wallace, Certainly, p.53.

for them only insofar as it evokes impressions and associations and emotions and desires inside the great self.[1762]

It is possible to read these remarks as part of Wallace's artistic rebellion toward the values of the previous generation that he believes began to lose ground to personal anxieties coming with age. His argument also draws on differences among generations: Wallace's generation reacts against Updike's generation, who have themselves reacted against their previous generation:

I'm guessing that for the young educated adults of the sixties and seventies, for whom the ultimate horror was the hypocritical conformity and repression of their own parents' generation, Updike's evection of the libidinous self appeared refreshing and even heroic. But young adults of the nineties— many of whom are, of course, the children of all the impassioned infidelities and divorces Updike wrote about so beautifully, and who got to watch all this brave new individualism and sexual freedom deteriorate into the joyless and anomic self-indulgence of the Me Generation—today's subforties have very different horrors, prominent among which are anomie and solipsism and a peculiarly American loneliness: the prospect of dying without even once having loved something more than yourself. Ben Turnbull, the narrator of Updike's latest novel, is sixty-six years old and heading for just such a death, and he's scared. Like so many of Updike's protagonists, though, Turnbull seems scared of all the wrong things.[1763]

This is in fact a very dismayed observation in that it reveals the inability of Wallace's peers to find consolation, guidance, and insight regarding their fears in the works of established figures of American letters.

One significant thing, however, might be that Wallace and his peers—at least the ones who are interested in good fiction—are uncomfortable with the uncritical and continuing treatment of America's "decline into decadence and selfish individualism—the Me generation."[1764] The form of artistic rebellion, then, takes place not on a formal but on thematic level, and Wallace treats it in a more explicit way as we observe in his interview with Larry McCaffery. In words that could be read as background to Updike's sexuality-based relationships that do not establish true connection between people but rather intensifies self-centeredness and loneliness, Wallace argues,

our dread of both relationships and loneliness, both of which are like sub-dreads of our dread of being trapped inside a self (a psychic self, not just a

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[1762] Wallace, Certainly, pp.53-54.
[1763] Wallace, Certainly, p.54.
[1764] David Foster Wallace, **The Pale King**, Hamish-Hamilton, New York, 2011, p.132.

> *physical self), has to do with angst about death, the recognition that I'm going to die, and die very much alone, and the rest of the world is going to go merrily on without me. I'm not sure I could give you a steeple-fingered theoretical justification, but I strongly suspect a big part of real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny.*[1765]

In this sense, the ironic metafiction that constantly parodies and mocks and further empties cultural values finds its mirroring in the mature works of a major postwar writer's rather one-dimensional treatment of human life's most complicated issues of death, love, and meaning of life but rigorously deferring confrontation with them.

Within Wallace's analyses of American literature, television's gradual co-optation of metafictional irony holds an important place, so Wallace revises his ideas on the course of American literature in light of new developments in the novel's strange relationship to television. In his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," Wallace's ideas on postmodernist literature and irony find their best articulation and can be seen as a demonstration of Wallace's critical approach to postmodernism. "E Unibus Pluram" clarifies Wallace's evaluation of postmodernism and his ideas on metafiction's self-consciousness, which he clearly did not consider the future of American fiction in "Fictional Futures": metafiction, Wallace argues, was at its best a "simple engin[e] of self-reference" that has reached its "horizon of […] possibility" by the late eighties.[1766] In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace discusses the complicated relationship of textual self-referentiality from another perspective and carries out a discussion on American fiction's past, present, and future from the perspective of the 1990s. In this sense, it would be useful to assess Wallace's take on irony in "E Unibus Pluram" as a continuation, another receptive response to the new developments in literature, hence a next step in his definition of fiction as art that he has developed to a great extent in the essays discussed so far. It is also notable that Wallace's interview with Larry McCaffery that coincides with the publication of "E Unibus Pluram" is almost as comprehensive as this essay and the interview has so far served to highlight the importance of several points Wallace makes in his essays. In the rest of the discussion, it would be useful to note Wallace's considerations first in

[1765] Wallace, Conversations, p.32.
[1766] Wallace, Futures, p.65.

"E Unibus Pluram" and then conclude with further remarks about his ideas from the McCaffery interview.

"E Unibus Pluram" relies on the premise that writing fiction and watching television depend essentially on the act of observation. Writing fiction, besides relying on the imaginative faculty, is also a product of watching people and situations. "Fiction writers as a species," Wallace writes, "tend to be oglers. They are born watchers. They are viewers."[1767] In emphasizing this feature of writing, Wallace also wants to highlight the innately self-conscious nature of writing: "[d]evoting lots of productive time to studying closely how people come across to them, fiction writers also spend lots of less productive time wandering nervously how they come across to other people."[1768] Self-consciousness about being the object of others' watching may render fiction writers susceptible to "dislike being objects of people's attention. Dislike being watched."[1769] At this point, television may help the fiction writer. One, "television, does a lot of our predatory human research for us," presenting "an incredible gauge of specific" American life that might not be available to a writer in his her mundane circumstances.[1770] There is also culturally valuable, and somewhat ironic insight of the common American life seen on television. Wallace writes,

> *if we want to know what American normality is—i.e. what Americans want to regard as normal—we can trust television. For television's sole raison is reflecting what people want to see. It's a mirror. Not the Stendhalian mirror that reflects the blue sky and mudpuddle. More like the overlit bathroom mirror before which the teenager monitors his biceps and determines his better profile. This kind of window on nervous American self-perception is simply invaluable in terms of writing fiction.*[1771]

The possibility television offers with regard to watching people, then, is one not available under other circumstances: television enables observing people the way they want to be observed. It exposes their self-consciousness about being watched and the image of themselves they want to project. The unnatural way a nation acts on television may give a better understanding of their unwatchable or unwatched, natural selves.

[1767] David Foster Wallace, Unibus, p.21.
[1768] Wallace, Unibus, p.21.
[1769] Wallace, Unibus, p.21.
[1770] Wallace, Unibus, p.22.
[1771] Wallace, Unibus, p.22.

The second way television may help fiction writers is to ease their self-consciousness of being themselves watched by the people they watch. In Wallace's words, "television looks to be an absolute godsend for human subspecies that loves to watch people but hates to be watched itself."[1772] Of course, this particular "subspecies" also includes "lonely people, […] the voluntary shut-ins" who tend to watch staggering amounts of television compared to others.[1773] Wallace proposes something interesting about them: he claims that most lonely people are lonely not due to physical "deformity or odor or obnoxiousness" but rather "because they decline to bear the psychic cost of being around other humans."[1774] This cost, undeniably, is none other than "the strain of self-consciousness," the presence that "real human beings" induce.[1775] Nevertheless, "lonely people, at home, alone, still crave sights and scenes, company. Hence television."[1776]

In case a fiction writer is not aware of these two points, however, television does more damage than good. Rather than constituting "a substitute for true espial," television offers illusory images.[1777] The watched know they are watched, and the seemingly real situations they appear in are heavily fictionalized "in highly formalized narratives."[1778] Wondering "why these unrealities are so swallowable," Wallace opines that television performers are "absolute *geniuses* at seeming unwatched. Make no mistake—seeming unwatched in front of TV camera is an art. […] And we love to laugh at how stiff and fake non-pros appear on television. How unnatural."[1779] Self-consciousness about being watched is fended off by ridiculing the seeming unnaturalness of the object of the gaze that remains uncomfortably self-conscious about being watched. In this sense, television may be "toxic for writers because it leads us to confuse actual fiction-research with a weird kind of fiction-*consumption.*"[1780] It is vital that the fiction writer be aware of all these facts and take television "seriously enough as both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural

[1772] Wallace, Unibus, p.22.
[1773] Wallace, Unibus, p.22.
[1774] Wallace, Unibus, p.22.
[1775] Wallace, Unibus, p.23.
[1776] Wallace, Unibus, p.23.
[1777] Wallace, Unibus, p.24.
[1778] Wallace, Unibus, p.24.
[1779] Wallace, Unibus, p.25.
[1780] Wallace, Unibus, p.26.

atmosphere we breathe and process."[1781] The problem is that, as Wallace puts it, "many of us are so blinded by constant exposure that we regard TV […] as just another appliance, 'a toaster with pictures.'"[1782]

These are just the preliminary contours of the connection Wallace establishes between television and fiction. The true inspiration of "E Unibus Pluram" is the connection Wallace establishes between self-conscious fiction of the first wave of postmodern literature, "Metafiction," that emerged in the 1960s and television.[1783] Wallace argues that

> *Metafictionists may have had aesthetic theories out the bazoo, but they were also sentient citizens of a community that was exchanging an old idea of itself as a nation of do-ers and be-ers for a new vision of the U.S.A. as an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers. For Metafiction, in its ascendant and most important phases, was really nothing more than a single-order expansion of its own great nemesis, Realism: if Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called itself seeing itself see it. This high-cultural postmodern genre, in other words, was deeply informed by the emergence of television, and the metastasis of self-conscious watching. And (I claim) American fiction remains deeply informed by television … especially those strains of fiction with roots in postmodernism, which even at its rebellious Metafictional zenith was less a "response" to televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV. Even back then, the borders were starting to come down.*[1784]

This is not to say that metafiction, or Metafiction as Wallace puts it, borrowed self-consciousness from television. In fact, it was not until the televised scandal of Watergate in 1974 and President Nixon's resignation that television became ironically self-conscious

> *as remorseless lenses opened to view the fertile "credibility gap" between the image of official disclaimer and the reality of high-level shenanigans. A nation was changed, as Audience. If even the president lies to you, whom are you supposed to trust to deliver the real? Television, that summer, got to present itself as the earnest, worried eye on the reality behind all images. The irony that television is itself a river of image, however, was apparent even to a twelve-year-old, sitting there, rapt. After '74 there seemed to be no way out. Images and ironies all over the place. It's no coincidence that Saturday Night Live, that Athens of irreverent cynicism, specializing in parodies of (1) politics and (2) television, premiered the next fall (on television).*[1785]

[1781] Wallace, Unibus, p.27.
[1782] Wallace, Unibus, p.27.
[1783] Wallace, Unibus, p.34.
[1784] Wallace, Unibus, p.34.
[1785] Wallace, Unibus, p.36.

In the 1960s, in contrast, television, mostly through sitcoms, "celebrated what then was a deeply hypocritical American self-image" through "lone-gunman westerns, paternalistic sitcoms, and jut-jawed law enforcement"; in actuality, "manly individualism" was becoming increasingly powerless "in a period of corporate ascendance, bureaucratic entrenchment, foreign adventurism, racial conflict, secret bombing, assassination, wiretaps, etc."[1786] For Wallace, then, television around the 1960s was useful for the fiction writer because it offered "a comprehensive view of how hypocritically the U.S.A. saw itself," and in this sense,

> *early television helped legitimize absurdism and irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to a ridiculous world. For irony—exploiting gaps between what's said and what's meant, between how things try to appear and how things really are, is the time-honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy.*[1787]

In other words, early postmodern fiction was ironic because it targeted the 1960s' television's portrayal of America as "naïve, sentimental, simplistic, and conservative."[1788] This was rebellious irony and it had a social use. Wallace illustrates,

> *Kesey's black parody of asylums suggested that our arbiters of sanity were often crazier than their patients; Pynchon reoriented our view of paranoia from deviant psychic fringe to central thread in the corpora-bureaucratic weave; DeLillo exposed image, signal, data and tech as agents of spiritual chaos and not social order. Burrough's icky explorations of American narcosis exploded hypocrisy; Gaddis's exposure of abstract capital as deforming exploded hypocrisy; Coover's repulsive political farces exploded hypocrisy.*[1789]

What is rebellious and useful in these novels of the first wave of postmodernism is that their irony had the agenda of "a grim diagnosis of a long-denied disease" and held that "a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom."[1790]

From the 1960s to the 1990s, from these early works of postmodernism to contemporary metafiction, Wallace wonders, "how have irony, irreverence, and rebellion come to be not liberating but enfeebling in the culture today's avant-garde tries to write about?."[1791] The possible answer regards the never-ceasing presence of

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[1786] Wallace, Unibus, pp.65, 66.
[1787] Wallace, Unibus, p.65.
[1788] Wallace, Unibus, p.66.
[1789] Wallace, Unibus, p.66.
[1790] Wallace, Unibus, p.67.
[1791] Wallace, Unibus, p.67.

irony which is "bigger than ever after 30 years as the dominant mode of hip expression."[1792] Its damage lies in its continuity: having "an almost exclusively negative function," its destructive criticism, when used for prolonged periods, annuls its one positive outcome of replacing what it exposes with an alternative.[1793] On a personal level, Wallace finds "persistent irony" and "sardonic exhaustion" in an acquaintance, for instance, or in a novel, simply unbearable because after exposure to too much and prolonged irony, "one ends up feeling not empty but somehow … oppressed."[1794] In an interview, Wallace mentions that although he considers the highly ironic television series *The Simpson*s "important art," he finds it "relentlessly corrosive to the soul, [because] everything is parodied, and everything's ridiculous. Maybe I'm old, but for my part I can be steeped in about an hour of it, and I sort of have to walk away and look at a flower or something."[1795] Yet in case someone gets tired of so much irony, television also offers relief. For example, the 1990s television series *Alf* that features "a fat, cynical, gloriously decadent puppet (so much like Snoopy, like Garfield, like Bart, like Butt-Head)" suggests that the audience "[e]at a whole lot of food and stare at the TV" and gives the viewer "an ironic permission-slip to do what I do best whenever I feel confused and guilty: assume, inside, a sort of fetal position, a pose of passive reception to comfort, escape, reassurance. The cycle is self-nourishing."[1796] This is an instance of perfect postmodern irony that television has adopted and adapted to perfection.

At the crux of the matter is that irony has become a tormenter in its oppressive nourishing:

> *Irony tyrannizes us. The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is* impossible to pin down. *All U.S. irony is based on an implicit "I don't really mean what I'm saying." So what* does *irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it's impossible to mean what you say? […] Most likely, I think, today's irony ends up saying: "How totally* banal *of you to ask what I really mean." Anyone with a heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like a hysteric or a prig. And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the* question *without attending to its*

[1792] Wallace, Unibus, p.67.
[1793] Wallace, Unibus, p.67.
[1794] Wallace, Unibus, p.67.
[1795] Wallace, Conversations, p.134.
[1796] Wallace, Unibus, p.41.

> subject *is, when exercised, tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself.*[1797]

This fact in itself is ironic: the reason behind the weakening of avant-garde fiction's use of "irony and rebellion" is the fact that "they have been absorbed, emptied, and redeployed by the very televisual establishment they had originally set themselves athwart."[1798] No fiction can effectively criticize cynicism and narcissism when television "regularly celebrates just these features in itself and its viewers."[1799]

Wallace illustrates this point with television commercials that increasingly become advertisements about advertisements and their use of "self-reference" render them "too hip to hate."[1800] In this way, they gradually shift from "oversincerity to a kind of bad-boy irreverence."[1801] Rather than encouraging the consumption of certain products through a display of ostensible earnestness about the benefits of certain products, commercials now mock the phoniness of such outright encouragements. Wallace refers to a commercial for Isuzu cars of the late 1980s where an unattractive, disheveled, and "Satanic-looking" car salesman lies candidly about the Isuzu car's qualities, claiming it to have "genuine Ilama-skin upholstery and ability to run on tapwater."[1802] The commercial becomes very popular; it is awarded some advertising prizes and the Isuzu sales increase. The commercial, although it does not suggest why or how Isuzu cars are good, succeeds to the extent it parodies car commercials and the lying salesmen. Furthermore, it "invite[s] viewers to congratulate Isuzu's [commercial] for being ironic, to congratulate themselves for getting the joke, and to congratulate Isuzu Inc. for being 'fearless' and 'irreverent' enough to acknowledge that car ads are ridiculous and Audience is dumb to believe them."[1803] Driving an Isuzu car, for anyone that has watched the commercial, becomes an opportunity to make an "anti-advertisement statement," a statement about not *buying* the deceptions of the advertising industry.[1804] For Wallace, this self-conscious irony can be considered "a tactic of heaping scorn on pretensions to those old commercial values

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[1797] Wallace, Unibus, pp.67-68.
[1798] Wallace, Unibus, p.68.
[1799] Wallace, Unibus, p.69.
[1800] Wallace, Unibus, p.60.
[1801] Wallace, Unibus, p.59.
[1802] Wallace, Unibus, p.61.
[1803] Wallace, Unibus, p.61.
[1804] Wallace, Unibus, p.61.

of authority and sincerity—thus (1) shielding the heaper of scorn from scorn and (2) congratulating the patron of scorn for rising above the mass of people who still fall for outmoded pretentions."[1805] Wallace writes, succinctly, "[y]ou can now find successful television ads that mock TV-ad conventions almost anywhere you look."[1806]

For Wallace, the phenomenon seen in the Isuzu advertisement

> *in turn reflected a wider shift in U.S. perceptions of how art was supposed to work, a transition from art's being a creative instantiation of real values to art's being a creative rejection of bogus values. And this wider shift, in its turn, paralleled both the development of the postmodern aesthetic and some deep and serious changes in how Americans chose to view concepts like authority, sincerity, and passion in terms of our willingness to be pleased. Not only are sincerity and passion now "out," TV-wise, but the very idea of pleasure has been undercut.*[1807]

The self-conscious irony of television seemingly exposes how pretentious and how hypocritical old-fashioned values are. In this way, television "can train viewers to laugh at characters' unending put-downs of one another, to view ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art-form."[1808] For those viewers that do not realize how television trains them in the decorum of self-conscious irony, "the most frightening prospect … becomes leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability. Other people become judges; the crime is naïveté."[1809] To avoid the judging, one need only watch more of television's "lessons in the blank, bored, too-wise expression" that one could "wear for tomorrow's excruciating ride on the brightly lit subway, where crowds of blank, bored-looking people have little to look at but each other."[1810] For Wallace, this is nothing other than "TV's institutionalization of hip irony."[1811]

This mode of "hip irony" has deep effects on fiction because fiction concerns itself with this very ironic culture and people. "Culture-wise," Wallace writes, "shall I spend much of your time pointing out the degree to which televisual values

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[1805] Wallace, Unibus, p.61.
[1806] Wallace, Unibus, p.61.
[1807] Wallace, Unibus, p.59.
[1808] Wallace, Unibus, p.63.
[1809] Wallace, Unibus, p.63.
[1810] Wallace, Unibus, p.63.
[1811] Wallace, Unibus, p.63.

influence the contemporary mood of jaded weltschmerz,[1812] self-mocking materialism, blank indifference, and the delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive?"[1813] In light of these facts, Wallace seems right in depicting both the state of culture and literature's ability with dealing with this culture in the 1990s "as grim."[1814] He argues that

> *the culture's TV-defined pop ethic has pulled a marvelous touché on the postmodern aesthetic that originally sought to co-opt and redeem the pop. Television has pulled the old dynamic of reference and redemption inside-out: it is now* television *that takes elements of the* postmodern*—the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion—and bends them to the ends of spectation and consumption.*[1815]

Wallace talks about three possible stances the contemporary fiction writer may adopt to protest "television's commercialization of the modes of literary protest."[1816] However, none seems to offer likely solutions. First, becoming a "fundamentalist" and denouncing both television and culture "evil" might be an option but this would entail a nostalgic, and impossible, return to the 1950s and earlier.[1817] The second option might regard "political conservatism that exempts viewer and networks alike from any complicity in the bitter statis of televisual culture and which instead blames all TV-related problems on certain correctable defects in technology," such as its lack of choices in terms of availability of channels and its imposing passivity on the viewer due to a lack of interactivity while watching.[1818]

The third option concerns the fiction writer's "celebrating" the very televisual culture that cannot be transcended but can be bowed down to.[1819] Mark Leyner's novel *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* is representative of such response literature can give to the ironic culture of television. The novel, as Wallace defines it, is a strange mixture of "pop pastiche, offhand high tech, and dazzling televisual parody, formed with surreal juxtapositions and grammarless monologues and flash-cut

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[1812] In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace writes about "the Romantic glorification of *Weltschmerz*, which means world-weariness or hip ennui" (Wallace, Jest, p.694).
[1813] Wallace, Unibus, p.63.
[1814] Wallace, Unibus, p.64.
[1815] Wallace, Unibus, p.64.
[1816] Wallace, Unibus, p.69.
[1817] Wallace, Unibus, p.69.
[1818] Wallace, Unibus, p.70.
[1819] Wallace, Unibus, p.76.

editing, and framed with a relentless irony designed to make its frantic tone seem irreverent instead of repellent."[1820] Reading the novel gives not so much the impression of reading but watching "witty, erudite, extremely high-quality prose television. Velocity and vividness replace development. People flicker in and out; events are garishly there and then gone and never referred to."[1821] In other words, Leyner's novel adopts from television the self-mockery, ironic and self-conscious reference to commercial culture, features which television itself has adopted from the early works of postmodern metafiction. In this sense, *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* "seems like the ultimate union of U.S. television and fiction."[1822] Yet as a literary project, this novel is "doomed to shallowness by its desire to ridicule a TV-culture whose mockery of itself and all value already absorbs all ridicule."[1823] The novel ends up "dead on the page."[1824]

Nevertheless, imagining some kind of a release from this pervasive irony both in fiction and television, Wallace envisions a new kind of literary rebellion:

> *The next literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and the squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool simile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how banal." To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows. Today's most engaged young fiction does seem like some kind of line's end's end. I guess that means we all get to draw our own conclusions. Have to.*[1825]

At the center of this proposal is establishing "single-entendre principles" against the ironic binds of double-entendre principles, such as sincerity, empathy,

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[1820] Wallace, Unibus, p.76.
[1821] Wallace, Unibus, p.80.
[1822] Wallace, Unibus, p.81.
[1823] Wallace, Unibus, p.81.
[1824] Wallace, Unibus, p.81.
[1825] Wallace, Unibus, pp.81-82.

suffering, love, and truth. Turning to Wallace's interview with Larry McCaffery, we may observe how, against television's purpose of giving pleasure, Wallace reminds that suffering is as central a part of human life as pleasure is, and art can offer more freedom in terms of dealing with suffering and pain than television's easy obliteration of it through pleasure. "We all suffer alone in the world," Wallace writes, "true empathy is impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside."[1826] In achieving this, fiction need not, indeed does not, remain confined to the presentation of the unpleasant in order to encourage facing it. He explains,

> *probably most of us [would] agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR*[1827] *to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this dark world* and *to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.*[1828]

Of course, Wallace is not devising a program of active sociopolitical engagement for fiction. He is rather opposing a general tendency in many novels toward depicting soulless, loveless, half-human lives amid an obviously materialistic culture. Fiction should proceed, in his opinion, from the assumption that culture is hideously materialistic, and investigate how "we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price."[1829]

The difficulty would have been easier to solve if the presentation of the human was the sole problem of fiction. Having inherited from the first generation of postmodernists a freedom to experiment with form without constraints, fiction gained a sense of consciousness that proved immensely dangerous. As Wallace puts it, "postmodernism is fiction's fall from biblical grace."[1830] The freedom to be infinitely self-conscious and experimental created

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[1826] Wallace, Conversations, p.22.
[1827] Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation
[1828] Wallace, Conversations, p.26.
[1829] Wallace, Conversations, p.27.
[1830] Wallace, Conversations, p.30.

> *continual avant-garde rush forward without anyone bothering to speculate on the destination, the* goal *of the forward rush. The modernists and the early postmodernists—all the way from Mallarmé to Coover—broke most of the rules for us, but we tend to forget what they were forced to remember: the rule-breaking has got to be for the* sake *of something. When rule-breaking, the mere* form *of renegade avant-gardism, becomes an end in itself, you end up with bad language poetry and* American Psycho. *[…] Shock stops being a byproduct of progress and becomes an end in itself.*[1831]

In Wallace's opinion, the shock value of experimental writing has now come to haunt the writers themselves. Lack of authority and the unhindered impulse to try every narrative possibility have culminated in a chaos and a need for order. For Wallace, most of postmodernist experimentation can be seen not as works of literary rebellion, acts of patricide, but as sad instances of a generation lost, and aimless: "The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout their formative years."[1832] Perhaps worse than the realization that his generation hopes for "parents" that would return and restore order is that "parents in fact aren't coming back—which means *we're* going to have to be the parents."[1833] He even likens his generation to a group of teenagers throwing a wild house party when their parents, the first generation of postmodernists like Pynchon, Gaddis, Coover, and Barth, have gone on a vacation. The excitement of the party gives way to so much destruction and chaos that the teenagers wish the parents would come back and clean up the disorder and scold them into order. Yet the parents are gone for good. The teenagers have to do the cleaning-up.

This feeling pervades Wallace's constant efforts to define and redefine "the art's heart's purpose" through essays that try to make the best of every opportunity to address his fellow writers.[1834] He seems, however, to have set himself a relatively difficult task: too heroic and courageous in its honest passion to face up to a very big challenge, and considerably lonely in his endeavor. In their entirety, Wallace's essays on literature shed light on the purposes and blunders of contemporary American literature from the late 1980s onward, and Wallace demonstrates the substance artistic response in its fatherless-rebellion may take. As *Infinite Jest* will

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[1831] Wallace, Conversations, pp.27-28.
[1832] Wallace, Conversations, p.52.
[1833] Wallace, Conversations, p.52.
[1834] Wallace, Conversations, p.50.

demonstrate below, a certain sense of sadness informs this rebellion. As Wallace states in an interview with Laura Miller, he has two main purposes in *Infinite Jest:*

> *I wanted to do something sad. […] I wanted to do something real American, about what it's like to live in America around the millennium. There's something particularly sad about it, something that doesn't have very much to do with physical circumstances, or the economy, or any of the stuff that gets talked about in the news. It's more like a stomach-level sadness. I see it in myself and my friends in different ways. It manifests itself as a kind of lostness. Whether it's unique to our generation I really don't know. […] The sadness that* [Infinite Jest] *is about, and that I was going through, was a real American type of sadness. I was white, upper-middle-class, obscenely well-educated, had had way more career success than I could have legitimately hoped for and was sort of adrift. A lot of my friends were the same way. Some of them were deeply into drugs, others were unbelievable workaholics. Some were going to singles bars every night. You could see it played out in 20 different ways, but it's the same thing.*[1835]

Infinite Jest's sincere treatment of these myriad ways of lostness, however, reaches toward a nourishing confrontation with the self and it is to this novel's unyielding struggles with sadness and loneliness that the study now turns.

3.2. DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST:* REPRESENTATIONS OF "PLAIN OLD UNTRENDY HUMAN TROUBLES"

If there is "something sad" to *Infinite Jest* as Wallace claims at the end of the previous part, it is the crushingly slow emergence, or willful suppression, of human warmth throughout the novel. As Dave Eggers writes in his 2006 Foreword to the novel, after reading *Infinite Jest* and witnessing such sadness, "your heart is sturdier."[1836] By and large an account of how easily we waste love and hope, denounce universal truths of human sentiment and reciprocity, exalt recklessly the needs and desires of the self without any moral value system to guide it, *Infinite Jest* offers a cautionary tale about the consequences of a life lived outside the peripheries of human emotion and connectedness that is instead mired in ironic nihilism and happy/compulsive pleasures of the escape from the self. This warning turns into a lesson on the dangers of the lack of moral terms to live by: dishonesty is in essence

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[1835] Wallace, Conversations, pp.58-59.
[1836] Dave Eggers, "Foreword", Wallace, **Jest**, p.xiv.

the denial of the self's relationship to the other and its dangerous worship of the self; sympathy and empathy are the glue that bind humanity together if not a validate a single human soul's subsistence; both physical and psychological integrity is impossible where the self's war against itself does not cohere into a form of kenosis (Hassan) that requires self-emptying and connecting spiritually to some higher truth and trustingly give oneself away to it. In this way, *Infinite Jest* dramatizes the importance of ethical reflection both for literature and for each of us.

Before discussing how the novel undertakes its ethical investigations, we could note some details about the novel and Wallace. When *Infinite Jest* appeared in 1996, David Foster Wallace had published his first novel *The Broom of the System* and his first story collection *Girl with Curious Hair*, and he "firmly established himself as a precocious new talent with ambition, originality, and energy to burn."[1837] *Infinite Jest* brought Wallace the MacArthur Genius Grant and his talent was prestigiously crowned. The novel's publisher, Little, Brown, began promoting the novel a year before it appeared in print and teased the literary scene with exciting details about this new, big American novel. Big, indeed, with its 1079 pages, and American, in its biting satire of a nation in the throes of entertainment culture and a peculiar loneliness. Wallace has been repetitively hailed as the new Thomas Pynchon since *Broom of the System*, yet he always kept his distance from his postmodernist forebears. As Boswell argues,

> *although Wallace is often labeled a "postmodern" writer, in fact he might best regarded as a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism. He confidently situates himself as the direct heir to a tradition of aesthetic development that began with the modernist overturning of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism and continued with the postwar critique of modernist aesthetics. Yet Wallace proceeds from the assumption that* both *modernism and postmodernism are essentially "done." Rather, his work moves resolutely forward while hoisting the baggage of modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on its back.*[1838]

Like the modernists, Wallace is extremely interested in the "individual subjective experience," and his fiction demonstrates the modernist's "intense tracing of consciousness in all its contingent manifestations."[1839] With *Infinite Jest*, his

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[1837] Marshall Boswell, Understanding David Foster Wallace, University of South Carolina Press, South Carolina, 2003, (Understanding), p.116.
[1838] Boswell, Understanding, p.1.
[1839] Boswell, Understanding, p.10.

difference from postmodernism becomes clear, although he seems to work stylistically within the postmodernist encyclopedic novel of digressive narratives, episodic narrative of broken plot lines, switching, at times unreliable, narrative voice, and a benign metafictional self-consciousness, and thematically of exhaustive scientific language of tennis, filmmaking, optics, and pharmaceuticals. Despite these aspects, as Eggers notes, the novel is surprisingly approachable, readable, and enjoyable. The allusion to the complexity seen in *Gravity's Rainbow*, or *The Recognitions* creates an intimidating shadow that hovers over this book. Yet as Eggers argues,

> *as verbose as it is, and as long as it is, it never wants to punish you for some knowledge you lack, nor does it want to send you to the dictionary every few pages. And yet, while it uses a familiar enough vocabulary, make no mistake* Infinite Jest *is something* other. *That is, it bears little resemblance to anything before it, and comparisons to anything since are desperate and hollow. It appeared in 1996* sui generis*, very different from virtually anything before it. It defied categorization and thwarted efforts to take it apart and explain it.*[1840]

What makes *Infinite Jest* "something *other*" is its readability, its relentless effort to communicate with the reader, its "epic writerly ambition": not once "while reading *Infinite Jest* are you unaware that that this is a work of complete obsession, of a stretching of the mind of a young writer to the point of, we assume, near madness."[1841] Eggers likens Wallace's madness to Marcel Proust rather than the substance-induced madness of a Burroughs, because in Wallace, as in Proust, "[t]here is the same sense that the writer wanted (and arguably succeeds at) nailing the consciousness of an age."[1842] Indeed, Wallace scholars often compare *Infinite Jest* with such giants as Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Boswell situates the novel in its milieu and writes that *Infinite Jest* "stands on its own as a work of tireless invention and lasting importance, standing shoulder to shoulder with such works as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow,* Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, and Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* without for a moment seeming derivative or ancillary."[1843]

[1840] Eggers, Foreword, p.xii.
[1841] Eggers, Foreword, p.xiii.
[1842] Eggers, Foreword, p.xii.
[1843] Boswell, Understanding, p.118.

The truest contribution of Wallace to American literature with *Infinite Jest* could possibly be that his treatment of the ironic nihilism of his generation that he ardently fights against in his creative nonfiction gains a forceful embodiment that immediately moves him beyond postmodernism. The novel's approach to clichés in the discourse of Alcoholics Anonymous forms a counter argument against the postmodernist loss of belief and the annihilation of the possibility of objective systems of value and meaning. According to Michael Luntley, postmodernism eradicated "rational standards of belief," and it is possible to say that Wallace proceeds from this assumption.[1844] Nonetheless, he presents clichés as an inverse standard of belief that is still absolved from reason but firmly placed within an objective system of truth and trust that exists "independently of what we may hope, wish, believe."[1845] Luntley argues,

> *[i]t takes little reflection to recognize the threat posed by the postmodernist fragmentation of the concepts of truth, rationality, and the self. It also takes little reflection to realize the importance of trying to legitimize concepts of truth and rationality that apply to the perspectival claims of human morality. […] The task before us is one of legitimation. We need to legitimize a use of the concepts of truth, rationality, and self against the postmodern critique.*[1846]

Wallace, aware both of the threat and the importance Luntley points out, is preoccupied with the possibility of establishing a value system that re-centers the self and re-establishes truth. His unique form of legitimization is the spiritually rich orientation of the common wisdom hidden in clichés. As we shall observe below, clichés will figure as the antidote to the adrift human self's war against itself, against a world floating with meaninglessness. In a way, Wallace, reinvents and reminds, as Ihab Hassan urges in the first chapter of this study, the forgotten notions of "truth, trust, spirit, all uncapitalized, in addition to words like reciprocity and respect, sympathy and empathy."[1847]

It is evident that no summary would do justice to a novel dense with hundreds of characters, multiple threads of plot, exquisitely rendered non-linear episodic style that takes 981 pages and 388 endnotes covering 98 pages to convey its message. Any

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[1844] Michael Luntley, **Reason, Truth, Self: The Postmodern Reconditioned**, Routledge, New York, 1995, p.xiii.
[1845] Luntley, p.3.
[1846] Luntley, pp.20-21.
[1847] Hassan, Beyond, p.6.

attempt to summarize it would be no more than a crude simplification of its complexity and thematic richness. Risking simplification, however, it is possible to say that *Infinite Jest* tells the story of the Incandenza family and their life at the Enfield Tennis Academy,[1848] and the recovering drug addict Don Gately and his life at Ennet Recovery House. Multiple characters and a plethora of plot lines emerge from these two major stories and each one on its own testifies and contributes to the overall argument of the novel. Limiting the discussion to certain members of the Incandenza family as well as Don Gately, however, the following discussion will attempt at illuminating the basic themes of the novel with regard to the overall purpose of this study, and shall refer to other characters and plot threads where necessary.

The Incandenza family, as one character close to the family remarks, "was lousy with secrets. […] From each other, themselves, itself. A big one being this pretense that overt eccentricity was the same with openness. i.e., that they were all 'exactly as crazy as they seem.'"[1849] The eccentricity is not so much a mask as an efficient method of hiding their lonely and troubled selves, because when we look at them closely, we see nothing but great inner turmoil. James and Avril Incandenza's marriage yields two academically and athletically overachieving sons, Orin and Hal, and a physically deformed son, Mario. The parents are themselves extremely successful academicians with such a deep interest in tennis and education that they found Enfield Tennis Academy, or shortly E.T.A. The strict discipline of E.T.A. is clear in the schedule for a typical day at E.T.A. that includes, intoning the extent of almost mechanical routine; "A.M. drills, shower, eat, class, lab, class, class, prescriptive-grammar exam, lab/class, conditioning run, P.M. drills, play challenge match, play challenge match, upper-body circuits in weight room, sauna, shower, slump to locker-room floor w/ other players."[1850] Classes include "History of Entertainment I and II," "Deviant Geometries," "Introduction to Athletic

[1848] The frame of tennis provides in *Infinite Jest* could be compared to the significance of baseball in DeLillo's *Underworld.* As Catherine Morley explains, baseball is "deeply inscribed upon the American consciousness and encapsulat[es] the mythologies of American success, individualism, sportsmanship, paternalism" (Morley, 2009, p.119).
[1849] Wallace, Jest, p.751.
[1850] Wallace, Jest, p.95.

Spreadsheets," and "The Personal Is the Political Is the Psychopathological: the Politics of Contemporary Psychopathological Double-Binds."[1851]

The only setback to the cult of success surrounding the Incandenza family is their son Mario who has severe physical deformities, which, in contrast to the emotional deformities of other family members, seems invisible and even benign. James Incandenza, an excellent theoretician of optics and renowned avant-garde filmmaker, commits suicide at the age forty-four after a prolonged period of alcoholism. He explodes his head in the microwave and is found by his son, Hal, who pretends for most of the novel, not to be deeply troubled by his father's loss and never grieves his father's death. Orin, the eldest son, leaves his family and switches from tennis to football, and spends his life wooing young mothers and ignores his unresolved issues with his father and mother in the most self-destructive and alienating oedipal obsessions. Mario, as will be discussed below, is haunted by the possibility that he is illegitimate but nonetheless forgives his mother and attends to his family with a sincerity and love rarely glimpsed among the characters of this novel.

Called by his sons the Moms, Avril Incandenza is a tall, alluring woman who is obsessed with hygiene to the point of not being able to change her sons' diapers when they were babies. She is an academic who worked at Massachusetts Institute of Technology before founding E.T.A. with her husband. Her area of expertise is grammar, more specifically prescriptive grammar: she is "a continental mover and shaker in the prescriptive-grammar academic world," and she founds the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts.[1852] She radiates a "high-watt maternal love" that oppresses her sons.[1853] Orin and Hal call Avril's excessive attention the "Politeness Roulette":

> *This Moms-thing that makes you hate yourself for telling her the truth about any kind of problem because of what the consequences will be for her. It's like to report any sort of need or problem is to mug her. Orin and Hal had this bit, during Family Trivia sometimes: "Please, I'm not using this oxygen anyway." "What, this old limb? Take it. In the way all the time. Take it." "But it's a* gorgeous *bowel movement Mario—the living room rug* needed *something, I didn't know what till right this very moment." […] Orin believed she did it all*

[1851] Wallace, Jest, pp.96, 306.
[1852] Wallace, Jest, p.30.
[1853] Wallace, Jest, p.738.

> *on purpose, which was way too easy. He said she went around with her feelings out in front of her with an arm around the feelings' windpipe and a Glock 9 mm. to the feelings' temple like a terrorist with a hostage, daring you to shoot.*[1854]

Behind the façade of glamorous academic and athletic success is a seriously dysfunctional family in terms of emotional and spiritual connection, which proves, as we shall discuss below, almost fatally damaging.

Another central character is Don Gately. First a patient then a staff at the Ennet Recovery House, Gately's story connects various characters and plot lines. He is as sympathetic, as lovable as an ex-con and drug addict can ever be and along with Mario, Gately establishes the novel's outline for spiritual recovery and the unlimited human potential to attain moral integrity.

The following discussion will try to chart its way cautiously toward the enigmas of this novel and, in the process, will focus on some of the novel's multitudinous interpretive layers that are relevant to the scope and intent of this study. In this way, the discussion shall demonstrate how *Infinite Jest* comprises Wallace's fictional treatment of the ideas and critiques that we have so far observed in his essays, namely, the "plain old untrendy human troubles" plaguing the contemporary individual such as loneliness, cynicism, and spiritual emptiness.[1855] In a strong sense, the novel portrays loneliness as the main drive of life—not love, not death, but everything about every character is shaped around his or her loneliness, an inability to feel and express what we might deem as the basics of human existence: genuine human interaction, affection and trust given and received, genuine care and love and their true expressions. In every character, whether central or peripheral to the few main plot lines, we can see solitude turning into a shelter to be strengthened by addictions, obsessions, and all kinds of pathological behavior. None of the characters gives us a happy memory from their past; they have nothing that gives them a sense of belonging, nothing to cling to—whether a moment in the past when they felt happy, secure, assured or the presence of someone that made them content. Suck lack makes the reader's heart break. It is difficult but enlightening to witness

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[1854] Wallace, Jest, p. 523.
[1855] Wallace, Unibus, p.81.

the human effort to transcend loneliness, connect with others, and exceed the limits of the self, stop being a prisoner within one's self.

In *Infinite Jest*'s futuristic mediascape, every possible obstacle exerts itself fully in the way of emotional and moral integrity. The novel's word of choice for communication, "interface," establishes the unbearable insularity of characters that populate the novel and that live in the world of InterLace, an uncanny echo of the word "interface." In *Infinite Jest*'s fictional U.S., InterLace replaces broadcast television—because of its alleged insufficiency at offering enough choices to viewers—and operates through rentable cartridges and provides a literally infinite variety of entertainment (broadly defined as everything watchable television offers) to choose from. The U.S. of *Infinite Jest* becomes a realm of "very much private watching of customized screens behind drawn curtains in the dreamy familiarity of home"; the country becomes "[a] floating no-space of personal spectation" that offers [t]otal freedom, privacy, choice."[1856]

Community as we know it disappears, and people, when they are not working in their daily jobs, are compelled to leave their living rooms and their comfortable viewing recliners only to gather outside for "public spectation opportunities, 'spect-ops,' the priceless chance to be part of a live crowd, watching" real-time accidents, explosions, and robberies that InterLace notifies them.[1857] This gruesome form of community relies on "an almost nucleic force, watching together" that defines "fellowship" as the gathering of "a mass of eyes all not at home, all out in the world and pointed the same way."[1858] Not surprisingly, the definition of "interface" seems apt for any sense of human communication possible in such a world. As defined in *The American Heritage Dictionary*, the word "interface" means, first, "[a] surface forming a common boundary between adjacent regions, bodies, substances, or phases," and second, "[a] point at which independent systems or diverse groups interact."[1859] Then, communal interaction during "spect-ops" takes place through the fundamental basis of the (shared) activity of watching. The individuals, though adjacent by proximity, never lose their foremost allegiances, or form common

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[1856] Wallace, Jest, p.620.
[1857] Wallace, Jest, p.620.
[1858] Wallace, Jest, p.621.
[1859] *The American Heritage Dictionary* (Third Edition), p.3785.

boundaries because they have lost any sense of boundary in their unlimited drive (and freedom) to be entertained individually and privately: although they are in public, their minds are still preoccupied with entertainment, with the pleasure to be taken from the act of watching rather than companionship. Therefore, when communication, or interaction happens in *Infinite Jest*, it reassures the inherent separation of individuals whose personal activities cannot be subsumed for the public activity, for community; they only momentarily shift from one form of entertainment to another, that is, from the personal to the public.

The central characters of *Infinite Jest* are citizens of this new state of technology and mass entertainment, and they bear every possible mark of emotional and communicational deficiency it causes. Yet we meet them not in their homes and amid their spectatorial activities but in the closed spaces of institutions. There are two important settings in this novel: E.T.A and a substance-recovery treatment facility located nearby, namely, the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. We meet the residents of these two institutions and observe their not-so-unique human tragedies backlit against the U.S. of InterLace that is threatened by an imminent threat shockingly appropriate for its mode of existence. The central characters of the novel may seem somewhat secure from this threat in their institutional enclosure, but their sufferings are best understood within the terms and nature of this threat.

The threat to the U.S. of *Infinite Jest* is a "lethal entertainment" that the novel refers simply as "the Entertainment": a film, directed by the late father of the novel's central family, the Incandenzas.[1860] The purpose of the film and its actual effects are antithetical. James Incandenza, a prolific avant-garde filmmaker and the founder of the tennis academy we mentioned above, is obsessed about not being able to communicate with Hal. Before he commits suicide, he quits drinking, and he spends three sober months making this film, and when he finishes the film he kills himself. Titled "Infinite Jest" in a mirroring effect, the film is James Incandenza's final attempt to have "intergenerational interface" with Hal, who, the father believes, is

[1860] Wallace, Jest, p.90.

invisible, mute, and "*hidden.*"[1861] In order to find something that could "induce [Hal] to open his mouth and come *out*," James resorts to "entertainment":

> *something so bloody compelling it would reverse the thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him "out of himself," as they say. […] An entertainment so thoroughly engaging it'd make even an in-bent figurant of a boy laugh and cry out for more.*[1862]

We never learn whether Hal watches "Infinite Jest" but we learn that it is completely engaging as James Incandenza intended it to be. The film is secretly disseminated by unknown parties, and it turns anyone who watches it into a vegetable: it is so entertaining, so engaging that the viewers cannot divert their eyes from it. As a result, they cease to eat, move, go to the restroom, and watch the film until they starve and dehydrate and eventually die on their soiled recliners. "Infinite Jest*"* acquires political significance, hence becomes a threat, as a Quebecois terrorist group called Wheelchairs Assassins tries to locate the film with the intention of disseminating it on a massive scale and effectively destroying the U.S.

The source of the Quebecois hostility to the U.S. is the political union of Canada, the U.S., and Mexico under the banner Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N). This union, also called "Territorial Reconfiguration," is triggered by the U.S.A.'s inability to cope with its increasing amount of waste that it carelessly dumps on the northeastern part of the country, covering much of the area of New England.[1863] This land of waste is called "the Great Concavity" and designed as the site of "Empire Waste Displacement."[1864] It is an environmental hazard with herds of giant, mutated, feral hamsters populating its barren lands.[1865] The U.S. gives this wasteland as a "gift" to Canada, which is granted in turn by Canada to Québec that understandably revolts for separation from Canada.[1866]

The Territorial Reconfiguration of the continent is also the onset of the reorganization of calendar. After the union, North American Nations adopt "revenue-enhancing subsidized time" starting with 1997, Year of the Whopper, and followed

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[1861] Wallace, Jest, p.839.
[1862] Wallace, Jest, p.839.
[1863] Wallace, Jest, p.1032.
[1864] Wallace, Jest, p.93.
[1865] Wallace, Jest, p.93.
[1866] Wallace, Jest, p.93.

chronologically by Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad, Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar, Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken, Year of the Wisper-Quiet Maytag Dishmaster, Year of the Yushitsu, Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland, Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, and Year of Glad.[1867] At the turn of each year, that year's product is placed on the aloft hand of "Liberty Island's gigantic Lady."[1868] During Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, the product cannot be held but worn: "the idolatrous West's most famous and self-congratulating idol, the colossal Libertine Statue [is] wearing some type of enormous adult-design diaper, a hilariously apposite image popular in the news photos of so many international journals."[1869]

Infinite Jest's sharpest critique of the U.S. comes from a Quebecois Separatist spy, Remy Marathe who is pursuing the film "Infinite Jest." Marathe articulates and builds on Wallace's core criticisms in "E Unibus Pluram," "Fictional Futures," and *This is Water*, thereby locating *Infinite Jest* within Wallace's oeuvre as the culmination of a novelist's unceasing engagement with his culture. Marathe's criticisms of the U.S. convey the tone of an existentialist's philosophical critique of the consumer and entertainment culture, and his diagnoses illuminate the treatment of the novel's spiritual predicaments. In a way, Marathe is *Infinite Jest*'s spiritualist that reminds, relentlessly and with deep belief, the importance of a compassionate, morally fulfilled life whose lack the novel points at. He is almost a sharp echo of Wallace in *This is Water* with his emphasis on choosing, forms of worship, and the dangers of solipsism and worship of the self.

Remy Marathe is a legless member of the Quebecois terrorist cell, Les Assassins des Fauteuils Roulents, also known as the A.F.R. or "Wheelchair Assassins" that is "pretty much Quebec's most dreaded and rapacious anti-O.N.A.N. terrorist cell."[1870] They wish to separate Quebec from Canada and take vengeance on the U.S. for imposing on Canada the Concavity. "[A]lthough legless and confined to wheelchairs," the members of this organization pose great threat to the U.S. and O.N.A.N. because their aim is "the total return of all Reconfigured territories to

[1867] Wallace, Jest, p.223.
[1868] Wallace, Jest, p.367.
[1869] Wallace, Jest, p.33.
[1870] Wallace, Jest, p.994.

American administration, the cessation of all Empire Waste Displacement […] and the secession of Canada *in toto* from the Organization of North American Nations."[1871] These and further details concerning A.F.R. are presented through a seven-page footnote that concerns an Enfield Tennis Academy student's highly-plagiarized "post-Midterm termpaper" on A.F.R. for a course titled "History of Canadian Unpleasantness."[1872] From the student's research we learn why the A.F.R. members lack limbs and are in wheelchairs.

A.F.R. is described as an essentially "obscure, adolescent, nihilistic Root Cult" that evolves into "one of the most feared cells in the annals of Canadian extremism."[1873] The cell's "political *raison d'etre*" and "philosophical *dasein*" is the reversal of the formation of "the O.N.A.N.ite governance and continental Interdependence."[1874] The founders of A.F.R. are winners of a cult game where boys compete in groups of six, lie on railroad tracks when a train is approaching, and the last boy to jump off the tracks before the train reaches wins the game. The winner usually loses limbs but proves his self-sacrificing willpower. This cult game is of special interest to Americans who fail to grasp the game's "reverent fealty toward principles [that are] *opposed* to the cultists' own individual pleasure, comfort, […] or entertainment."[1875] In a way, the game promotes everything the U.S. denounces or ignores, or simply cannot even comprehend any more.

Marathe has a wife that needs medical care and in exchange of the coverage of her expensive treatment, Marathe pretends to betray A.F.R. and collaborates with the American spy Hugh Steeply of the U.S.A. Office of Unspecified Services. In fact, he is only pretending to betray A.F.R, who is aware of Marathe's scheme and tolerates it since this also grants the organization to follow America's progress in terms of locating the film. Marathe and Steeply carry out long conversations when they are on mission together looking for a copy of "Infinite Jest." As mentioned above, the Quebecois terrorist group A.F.R. Marathe belongs to is after the film because they want to distribute it all around the U.S. and induce a coma on a national scale, and Steeply, working for the U.S., also wants to locate the film and prevent its

[1871] Wallace, Jest, pp.1056, 1057.
[1872] Wallace, Jest, p.1055.
[1873] Wallace, Jest, p.1057.
[1874] Wallace, Jest, p.1057.
[1875] Wallace, Jest, p.1058.

dissemination around the country. Their conversations give Marathe the opportunity to express his ideas on the entertainment culture of the U.S.

For Marathe, the prized value and the basic teaching of the U.S culture is "spectation" but this education lacks criteria in its careless and undifferentiating drive for entertainment.[1876] In fact, entertainment has turned into the primary object of the American pursuit of happiness, and, in its undiscriminating drive for amusement, the right to entertainment is presented as the basic freedom for the American individual. Given this, Marathe finds it ridiculous that the U.S. fears that the film shall be located and used by the A.F.R. to damage its citizens. He even argues that "[y]ou cannot kill what is already dead" because the nation is already in a vegetative state in its compulsive need to watch and be entertained in the privacy of their homes.[1877]

Marathe thinks that "Infinite Jest," made by an American man, is American all-around in "[t]he appetite for the appeal of it."[1878] Marathe means that Americans are so prone to having pleasure that this has become an insatiable, almost blind appetite: "this appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose—this *appetite* of your people unable to choose appetites, *this* is the death."[1879] Therefore, Marathe understands that the threat of "Infinite Jest" is nothing more than the outcome of a nation who "choose[s] nothing over themselves to love, each one. A U.S.A. that would die—let its children die, each one—for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film. Who would die for this chance to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons."[1880] In other words, the essence of the threat is that "Infinite Jest," once made available to American homes, shall be chosen over other entertainments without any guiding principle and in that, it is not essentially different from other entertainments already available to Americans. Therefore, the film "Infinite Jest" differs from other mind-numbing entertainments not in kind but in degree because it will accomplish what other films or entertaining programs leave out of the equation: the ability to carry on basic bodily functions while being entertained. "Infinite Jest" shall leave the viewers forever on their couches or

[1876] Wallace, Jest, p.318.
[1877] Wallace, Jest, p.319.
[1878] Wallace, Jest, p.318.
[1879] Wallace, Jest, p.319.
[1880] Wallace, Jest, p.318.

recliners, not able to eat or go to the restroom because the film is *that* entertaining, such completely gripping, in the literal sense of the world.

As Marathe tells Steeply, this tendency for infinite entertainment separates the U.S.A. from every other country:

> *Forget for a moment the Entertainment, and think instead about a U.S.A. where such a thing could be possible enough for your Office to fear: can such a U.S.A. hope to survive for a much longer time? To survive as a nation of peoples? To much less exercise dominion over other nations of other peoples? If these are other peoples who still know what it is to choose? who will die for something larger? who will sacrifice the warm home, the loved woman at home, their legs, their life even, for something more than their own wishes of sentiment? who would choose not to die for pleasure, alone?*[1881]

These serious questions are completely dismissed by Steeply, and Marathe brilliantly diagnoses in Steeply's indifference the very American manifestation of discomfort when presented with expressions of nonconformist belief, an indifference that is accompanied by the very American derision and ironic distance. In fact, Steeply is aware of this: "Steeply's face had assumed the openly twisted sneering expression which he knew well Quebecers found repellent on Americans."[1882] It could also be a reflection of what Marathe believes is the American deficiency in making conscious choices regarding important matters: as entertainment is presented as the only choice for a fulfilling life and nobody questions the validity of this imposition, any challenge to this notion also goes unquestioned, and Steeply does not register the deeper meaning of the issue Marathe is raising and in Marathe's words, "pass[es] over what is important."[1883]

Marathe's insight on the American proclivity for entertainment is also valuable in that he identifies the gradual change in national consciousness as one that is closely related to the bigger picture of national politics and authority. Marathe tells Steeply,

> *[s]omeone or some people among your own history sometime killed your U.S.A. nation already, Hugh. Someone who had authority, or should have had authority and did not exercise authority. I do not know. But someone sometime let you forget how to choose, and what. Someone let your peoples forget it was the only thing of importance, choosing. So completely forgetting that when I say* choose *to you you make expressions with your face such as "*Herrrrrre we are going*." […] And you all stumble about in the dark, this confusion of*

[1881] Wallace, Jest, p.318.
[1882] Wallace, Jest, p.108.
[1883] Wallace, Jest, p.319.

> *permissions. The without-end pursuit of a happiness of which someone let you forget old things which made happiness possible.*[1884]

Steeply's response remains at the level of a superficial defense of American freedom, to which Marathe offers a crushing analysis of the American creed of freedom: "Your freedom is the freedom-*from*: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress."[1885] When reduced to the individual's relationship to outside factors, freedom refers to "a child's greedy choices" made on the basis of the self's needs and desires. In order for a person to be free, and to choose freely, that is to say, have the "freedom-*to*," there should be a "loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose."[1886] In the excessive, and definitely meaningless freedom from boredom and unpleasantness, the U.S. succumbs to entertainment. In fact, in this current state, the American notion of freedom may signify nothing other than freedom from the oppressive, needy, bored self: "American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels."[1887] In order to escape the self's need to be pleased and entertained, they indulge in excessive amounts of pleasure and entertainment that manages to empty out the self, create freedom from its constant troubles and needs.

Conversely, in fulfilling the self's need for pleasure, Americans have created a "temple" of the self, becoming ever-abiding servants to the self:

> *Your U.S.A. word for fanatic, "fanatic," do they teach you it comes from the Latin for "temple"? It is meaning, literally, "worshipper at the temple." […] Our attachments are our temple, what we worship, no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith. […] I say only what you of the U.S.A. only pretend you do not know. Attachments are of great seriousness. Choose your attachments carefully. Choose your temple of fanaticism with great care, […] choose with care. Love of your nation, your country and people, it enlarges the heart. Something bigger than the self. […] Make amusement all you wish. But choose with care. You are what you love. No? You are, completely and only, what you would die for without, as you say, the* thinking twice. *[…] Who teaches you USA children how to choose their temples? What to love enough not to think two times? […] For this choice determines all else. No? All other of our—you say—*free *choices follow from this: what is our temple. What is the temple, thus, for U.S.A.'s?*[1888]

[1884] Wallace, Jest, pp.319-320.
[1885] Wallace, Jest, p.320.
[1886] Wallace, Jest, p.320.
[1887] Wallace, Jest, p.53.
[1888] Wallace, Jest, pp.107-108.

Steeply responds with a romanticized understanding of love that exerts itself with such force that it is not possible to choose not to love. For Marathe, this is the worst case of a temple because it creates a temple of the "self and sentiment" which makes a person

> *a fanatic of desire, a slave to your individual subjective narrow self's sentiments: a citizen of nothing. […] You are by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself, […] you become the slave who believes he is free. The most pathetic form of bondage. […] You would die only for your alone self, its sentiment.*[1889]

In this understanding, the U.S. culture of endless entertainment and gratification of the self's need for pleasure "stand[s] on nothing. Nothing of ground or rock beneath your feet. You fall; you blow here and there."[1890]

The novel dramatizes this lack of ground to stand on and state of being adrift through drug addiction, which is another act of being a slave to the self and is as strong as the national malaise of entertainment. In the two institutional spaces of the novel, the tennis academy and the recovery house, entertainment is curiously absent, but it is replaced by some other form of addiction, of slavery to the self. Hal, who is "a lexical prodigy" and "the fourth-best tennis player under age eighteen in the United States of America and the sixth-best on the continent," is a severe addict of marijuana.[1891] Although most of his time is consumed by academic tasks and tennis drills, he manages to spend considerable time for his hazardous recreational activity. His addiction takes a lot of time because he needs complete privacy, and organizing the secretive environment for his intakes becomes more important than the intake itself. Wondering why his "obsession" with secrecy "is almost irresistible in its force," Hal illustrates Marathe's point: "Like most North Americans of his generation, Hal tends to know way less about why he feels certain ways about the objects and pursuits he's devoted to than he does about the objects and pursuits themselves."[1892] This vague sense of intimation, however, cannot go beyond a flicker of understanding of his lostness as Hal soothes himself, "[i]t's hard to say for sure

[1889] Wallace, Jest, p.108.
[1890] Wallace, Jest, p.108.
[1891] Wallace, Jest, p.155.
[1892] Wallace, Jest, p.54.

whether this is even exceptionally bad, this tendency."[1893] In the absence of examples to follow, Hal thinks it is natural to love and to value without having an underlying principle to the love and value. Furthermore, Hal also suffers from another problem Marathe identifies with his lack of "loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose."[1894] Hal has never had a close relationship with his father, and his suicide was merely the next phase in their alienation from each other. Hal's temple is naught, because although he seems to be on a secure path of athletic success, and hence, seems to have an organizing principle for his life, he has also chosen as the most important thing for his life an extremely destructive path, and worse, he does not know what he is doing or why he is doing it.

As the novel progresses toward the end, Hal is faced with a big problem. While preparing for the upcoming national tennis tournaments, Hal learns that he has to submit a clean urine test for sports-related abusive substances. The test is so efficient and inclusive that he risks revealing marijuana in his system if he does not take action immediately. He has thirty days until he takes the test, and he begins a very dangerous "total and abrupt withdrawal," because more than an end to his tennis career, he fears hurting his father's memory and breaking his mother's trust in him if he is exposed.[1895] Guilt over having lied to his parents overwhelms him and although Hal does not realize it, he is experiencing emotions so compelling in their force that he is acting like a human being with moral integrity for the first time throughout the novel. He fears that his sudden withdrawal will create "a huge hole" taking away his athletic performance in the upcoming tournament.[1896] Hal faces complete spiritual and professional collapse and bears it boldly.

In the first twenty-four hours of his substance withdrawal, Hal performs terribly in a tennis match and is scorned by the coach. He spends time watching some films of his late father and as Greg Carlisle notes, "Hal watches his father's cartridges as he has no father to go to when he is depressed."[1897] This symbolic act of trying to reach his father in the usual manner of children seeking comfort and guidance in their parents gives more weight to his increasing pain over feeling

[1893] Wallace, Jest, p.54.
[1894] Wallace, Jest, p.320.
[1895] Wallace, Jest, p.784.
[1896] Wallace, Jest, p.785.
[1897] Wallace, Jest, p.347.

lonely. Surprisingly, Hal connects his crushing sense of loneliness with a lack of emotional guidance and sense of security and understands this to be the predicament of his generation that is deeply mired in some foul ethics of ironic detachment, of soul-emptying entertainment and self-evasion:

> *It's of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia[1898] and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It's maybe the vestiges of the Romantic glorification of* Weltschmerz*, which means world-weariness or hip ennui. Maybe it's the fact that most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people and then consumed by younger people who not only consume art but study it for clues on how to be cool, hip—and keep in mind that, for kids and younger people, to be hip and cool is the same as to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone. […] We enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded encagement in the self. Once we've hit [biological puberty,] we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, to be part-of, not be Alone, we young. The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté. Sentiment equals naïveté on this continent, […] that queerly persistent myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive.*[1899]

Hal is standing at an important threshold: he acknowledges that he lack emotions and, in that way, thinks that he is not really a human being. However, his critical awareness of hip cynicism that debases emotion as the source of his generation's emotional deficiency makes his salvation possible. He understands that behind cynicism lies "some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic."[1900] The definition of the human that Hal formulates is eerily reminiscent of the physical description of Mario: "some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool."[1901] The narrator proposes that "[o]ne of the really American things about Hal is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need,

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[1898] Anhedonia is described in footnote number 280 to be "coined by Ribot, a Continental Frenchman, who in his 19th-century *Pscychologie des Sentiments* says he means it to denote the psychoequivalent of *analgesia*, which is the neurologic suppression of pain" (Wallace, Jest, p.1053).
[1899] Wallace, Jest, p.694.
[1900] Wallace, Jest, p.695.
[1901] Wallace, Jest, p.695.

that pulses and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia."[1902] As he clears his mind from the drug's fog, however, the layers of his "hideous internal self" are peeled off one by one. In the last hundred and sixty pages of the novel, Hal abstains from his addiction through sheer willpower, and what gives him strength is his gradual and painful connection with his emotions.

To observe the change Hal goes through, we could look at his ideas in the early days of his withdrawal:

> *Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like* joie *and* value *to be like so many variables in rarefied equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being—but in fact he's far more robotic.*[1903]

It is remarkable that substance withdrawal takes him back to the days when he was tiny, and all the troubling memories that he has repressed and willfully ignored from his childhood on emerge with such clarity that Hal carries out monologues in his head about these facts as he has never done in his life. He thinks at length about his father, his suicide, and his relationship to him. With great sympathy and love, he tries to empathize with his father's troubles and comes close to forgiving him for killing himself and inflicting so much pain on his family. More importantly, Hal finally begins to grieve his father's loss as he feels closer to him.[1904] He also thinks about his mother at length, unusually explicitly and knowingly about her infidelities, and forgives her, too. In short, he attains an emotionally intense interior life and becomes human in the way he figures as he wears himself off his addiction.

Substance withdrawal, however, causes terrible chemical imbalance and he becomes an infant that cannot speak and control bodily movements. He also fulfills what his father dreamed of regarding him: salvaged from his anhedonia, an infant of a human being of pure emotion and feeling. At the chronological end of the novel, which appears as the opening episode in the circular logic of *Infinite Jest*, Hal is

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[1902] Wallace, Jest, p.695.
[1903] Wallace, Jest, p.694.
[1904] Seeing Hal's inability to grieve his father's death, he is forced by his family to visit a Grief Therapist. Truly disconnected from his feelings, Hal studies a textbook on grief psychology, and pretends to the therapist that he suffers from these symptoms. Such calculated manipulation of emotion and self-conscious fraudulence is one of the recurrent themes throughout Wallace's fiction and can also be observed in Orin Incandenza, as well as in the protagonist of Wallace's short story, "The Depressed Person" which is collected in *Oblivion: Stories* (2004).

eighteen and completely clear of drugs. He attends a university admission meeting as a promising tennis player and an academically gifted student. Contrary to his expectations, Hal's performance at the court continues and he is still "gorgeous. Possibly a genius."[1905] However, since he has quit drugs in the past few months, he has regressed in other ways: he cannot type because his typing resembles "an infant's random stabs on a keyboard," and he cannot speak because when he utters sentences they produce the sounds of "a drowning goat. […] A goat, drowning in something vicious."[1906] Aware of his psychological collapse, his tennis coaches accompany Hal to the meeting and take pains to keep the university staff from talking to Hal. They praise his tennis skills, and answer all the questions directed to him. Meanwhile, the narrative recounts Hal's thoughts that observe his surroundings in perfect perception. Hal's thoughts are articulate, sane. When the university staff insists on talking to Hal himself, which he does, the meeting turns into a disaster. Hal's facial features and sounds frighten the university staff when he responds. The tennis coaches protest, "Hal here *functions.*"[1907] At the sight of his "*sub*animalistic sounds and noises," Hal is wrestled down to the floor and constrained.[1908] As he "taste[s] floor," his thoughts flow at incredible clarity:

> *"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. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex. "I read," I say. "I study and read. I bet I've read everything you've read. Don't think I haven't. I consume libraries. I wear out spines. […] 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. […] I'm in here. I am not what you see and hear […] I'm not.*[1909]

The last thing we learn about Hal is that he is taken to the hospital on a psychiatric stretcher. At the hospital, "a tired Cuban orderly" asks Hal, "So yo then man what's *your* story?," which question is of course ironic in the sense that the rest of the book is in part Hal's story, and the importance of this opening chapter increases, if not

[1905] Wallace, Jest, p.14.
[1906] Wallace, Jest, pp.9, 15.
[1907] Wallace, Jest, p.15.
[1908] Wallace, Jest, p.14.
[1909] Wallace, Jest, pp.12-13.

makes perfect sense, once we finish the book and return to the beginning and see Hal clean and human.[1910] *Infinite Jest* becomes, in a sense, the story of how a lost boy regains his integrity by looking deep into his heart. Wallace not only portrays the lostness but also the ways, albeit difficult, of not being lost and fulfills his idea of literature going beyond mere diagnosis.

Hal's brother, Mario Incandenza offers another story of the wretched beauties of the human condition. Through Mario's story, we also gain better understanding of Hal. Mario is a figure that stands as a bulwark against the nihilism and ironic detachment of his milieu and in his embodiment of sincerity and his critical awareness of their corrosive effects, Mario comprises a brilliant portrayal of the rare emotionally competent Wallace character.

The prematurely born Mario is congenitally deformed to the point of being crippled. It is almost exhaustive to account for his deformities: he is "leptosomatic, […] so damaged that he can't even grip a stick, much less flail at a moving ball with one"[1911]; he is "a small hunched shape" with an "oversized skull"[1912] (32); his hands resemble "claw[s]"[1913]; he is "a homodont: all his teeth are bicuspids and identical, front and back, not unlike a porpoise," and he has "bradykinesia" which gives "an exaggerated slowness" to all his movements"[1914]; he has "block[s for] feet: not only flat but perfectly square" and walks with a "lurchy half-stumble of a vaudeville inebriate"[1915]; he has "khaki-colored skin, an odd dead gray-green that in its corticated texture and together with his atrophic in-curled arms and aracnodactylism gave him, particularly from a middle-distance, an almost uncannily reptilian/dinosaurian look"[1916]; he also has hereditary "dysautonomia, a neurological deficit whereby he can't feel physical pain very well."[1917] As Marshall Boswell puts it, Mario is "[a] horrible grotesque exaggeration of some sentimental Dickinsian cripple—Tiny Tim turned into a toxic nightmare," and Mario's characterization

[1910] Wallace, Jest, p.17.
[1911] Wallace, Jest, p.79.
[1912] Wallace, Jest, p.32.
[1913] Wallace, Jest, p.79.
[1914] Wallace, Jest, p.1022.
[1915] Wallace, Jest, p.313.
[1916] Wallace, Jest, p.314.
[1917] Wallace, Jest, p.589.

demonstrates "Wallace parodying what he is embarrassed about, but still committed to, loving and affirming."[1918]

Against all odds, Mario is cognitively normal. Emotionally, he is far more superior to everyone at E.T.A, including both grown-ups and peers. Significantly, never once do we see in Mario signs of self-pity or nervous reflections regarding the cult of athletic perfection surrounding him. His physical boundaries do not seem to inflict any wound on his psyche, for he does not manifest any signs of envy or feelings of inferiority. Content with his life to the point of selflessness in terms of lack of ego, Mario is the saintly Incandenza child, the only one without athletic success. Yet "[n]o one who knows Mario could imagine that this fact would ever even occur to him."[1919] This is not to say that Mario is unaware of his physical deformity. In fact, Mario has keen perceptions regarding the results of his irregularity. For instance, he knows that people can talk to him easily and he knows the reasons of this ease:

> *Mario is a born listener. One of the positives to being visibly damaged is that people can sometimes forget you're there, even when they're interfacing with you. You almost get to eavesdrop. It's almost like they're like: If nobody's really in there, there's nothing to be shy about. That's why bullshit often tends to drop away around damaged listeners, deep beliefs revealed, diary-type private reveries indulged out loud; and, listening, the beaming and brady-kinetic boy gets to forge an interpersonal connection he knows only he can truly feel, here.*[1920]

His insight on the gifts of his condition show that Mario is very sensitive to his surroundings, and he observes with care how people feel and behave. While he understands the lack of "interpersonal connection" around E.T.A., he also knows that when people talk to him, they assume he is not "in there," which echoes Hal's claim to being human with the phrase "in here." Rather than trying to prove, like Hal, that he is "in here," Mario remains content, at peace with his connection to a rich interior life of feelings, an interior life full of what he calls "real stuff."[1921]

Mario and Hal share a room at the tennis academy. Although "Hal almost idealizes Mario secretly" and believes Mario to be "a (semi) walking miracle," their

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[1918] Boswell, Understanding, p.158.
[1919] Wallace, Jest, p.155.
[1920] Wallace, Jest, p.80.
[1921] Wallace, Jest, p.592.

rooming together does not bring the usual brotherly bonding and the intimacy surrounding it.[1922] This is mostly because Hal carefully bypasses Mario's efforts to talk to him about "real stuff," and despite all his love for Mario, Hal remains somewhat detached from him. This is not to say that he shuts Mario off; Mario tries constantly to talk to Hal about issues with which Hal is uncomfortable and Hal has either to confront what he evades or answer Mario. Mario is aware of this as he thinks that whenever he "brought up real stuff Hal called him BooBoo [which is his nickname] and acted like he'd wet himself and Hal was going to be very patient about helping him change."[1923] In fact, Hal's treatment of Mario like an infant is telling because as we observed above, Hal associates being human and having emotion with the figure of the infant.

Mario's questions regarding "real stuff" are noteworthy. For instance, early in the novel, Hal has won a tennis match with a spectacular performance and Mario asks whether it made Hal "felt like [he] believed in God."[1924] Hal dismisses Mario for inquiring about his belief in God "once a week" and urges him not to "think fuzzy thoughts."[1925] In mild protest, Mario says, "I don't get how you couldn't feel like you believed, today, out there. It was so *right there*. You moved like you totally believed."[1926] As he desperately needs to find traces of some inner power enabling the outer excellence, Mario asks, once again, "How do you feel inside."[1927] The connection Mario establishes between the emotional and the spiritual with the physical and the external is completely unintelligible to Hal who is conditioned to attain athletic perfection for its own sake. In addition, Hal is severely cut off from his feelings, let alone surrendering to some outer source of meaning and feeling. Mario, in contrast, prays every night for "an hour and sometimes more" and does not consider praying "a chore" but thinks of it as "more like a conversation" with God.[1928]

[1922] Wallace, Jest, p.316.
[1923] Wallace, Jest, p.592.
[1924] Wallace, Jest, p.40.
[1925] Wallace, Jest, p.40.
[1926] Wallace, Jest, p.41.
[1927] Wallace, Jest, p.41.
[1928] Wallace, Jest, p.590.

Mario's fixation on the physical manifestation of emotions and beliefs gets more complicated when he extends his inquiries to the recent death of their father. He thinks that because their mother never cried after their father died, "she never got sad."[1929] Hal affirms Mario that "she did get sad" and tries to distract Mario by changing the subject without shunning Mario in his usual dismissive way.[1930] Hal's protective and swift move is important because this is the closest the brothers come in terms of articulating their mother's possible, and long-time, infidelity to their father as well as discussing their father's suicide. The likeliest candidate for their mother's partner in infidelity is her half-brother who also works at the tennis academy and there is, throughout the novel, unresolved and unuttered doubts over him being Mario's biological father. In assuring Mario about Avril's sadness, Hal protects him from delving deeper into a topic that eats away both of them.

For all his futile efforts at connecting with Hal, Mario remains by far the only person in Hal's life that makes an effort to talk to him seriously about matters that seem serious. When their father was alive, Hal was more or less the same in terms of his introversion, and there was an unbridgeable lack of communication between James and Hal. Mario, in contrast, was very close to their father, and he also has another father figure, both as a close friend and as a mentor, in his life: the seventy year-old German head tennis coach of E.T.A., Gerhardt Schtitt. Schtitt, very disciplined and hence unpopular among students, "was wooed fiercely by E.T.A. Headmaster Dr. James Incandenza, just about begged to come on board" when E.T.A was founded.[1931] Schtitt and James Incandenza share the same philosophical approach to tennis that emphasizes tennis as a personal "improvement and key to excellence" rather than seeing it as a game based on statistics and technics.[1932]

When Schtitt and Mario are together, which is not rare, they spend leisurely time that is nonetheless filled with serious conversations. Of course it is usually Schtitt speaking and Mario listening, but their strolls for ice-cream, or walk in the woods, comprise the novel's rare instances where an intergenerational bonding occurs. Schtitt's understanding of tennis amazes Mario because it extends to offer an

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[1929] Wallace, Jest, p.42.
[1930] Wallace, Jest, p.43.
[1931] Wallace, Jest, p.79.
[1932] Wallace, Jest, p.82.

understanding of life itself. In fact, Schtitt's ideas on tennis are important to the novel's overall argument in the sense that they seem to converge with Marathe's ideas at the essential level of choosing and being aware of the self's struggle with the will. For Schtitt, competitive tennis is not a technical game dependent on solving problems and statistics as it is defined by every other coach at E.T.A. For him, tennis is better understood as based on a philosophy of a

> *continuum of infinities of possible move and response [… and] infinity of infinities of choice and execution, mathematically uncontrolled but humanly* contained*, bounded by the talent and imagination of self and opponent, bent in on itself by the containing boundaries of skill and imagination that brought one player finally down, that kept both from winning, that made it, finally, a game, these boundaries of self.*[1933]

The gem of Schtitt's understanding of tennis is that he humanizes an otherwise mechanical act—at least as it is presented in the novel. In fact, as Hal later claims that he is not a "machine," he reveals his deeply ingrained sense of being a mechanical game player constantly isolating his feelings from his performance and exercising a strict separation between body and soul.[1934] For Mario, completely exempt from any game whatsoever by his physical limitations, Schtitt's reference to "boundaries of self" is extremely appealing in its connotations of choosing and conscious thinking, exercising control over anxiety, fear, and anger that may grip a player on court. In this way, Schtitt opens Mario to the principles that guide any and every endeavor in life by configuring tennis as "life's endless war against the self you cannot live without."[1935] In Schtitt's opinion, tennis is like life in the way the players are required to "mee[t] the self" in every step: "[y]ou compete with your own limits to transcend the self in imagination and execution. […] All life is the same, as citizens of the human State: the animating limits are within, to be killed and mourned, over and over again."[1936] In this sense, the opponent in a tennis match, like any obstacle that life brings on our way, far from being a "foe," actually gives us the opportunity to face truly the self's limits, abilities, weaknesses: in struggling with the obstacle emerges the possibility "to improve and grow."[1937] In contrast, Hal thinks of

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[1933] Wallace, Jest, p.82.
[1934] Wallace, Jest, p.12.
[1935] Wallace, Jest, p.84.
[1936] Wallace, Jest, p.84.
[1937] Wallace, Jest, p.84.

tennis as a life-and-death struggle against an enemy: as he tells other students and his tennis rivals, "[w]e're all on each other's food chain. All of us. It's an individual sport."[1938] If there is some individuality to tennis, Hal misses its essence and figures tennis as another way of getting away from the self, which is waiting to be acknowledged through a confrontation with emotions and fears.

As a nameless third person narrator explains in metafictional asides and through the filter of self-defensive irony against possible hostility to the prized notion of American freedom, Schtitt's ideas are rooted in his un-American upbringing, hence values. Worth quoting at length, we are informed:

> *The thing with Schtitt: like most Europeans of his generation, anchored from infancy to certain permanent values which—yes, OK, granted—may, admittedly, have a whiff of proto-fascist potential about them, but which do, nevertheless (the values), anchor nicely the soul and course of a life—Old World patriarchal stuff like honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit—Gerhardt Schtitt does not so much dislike the modern O.N.A.N.ite U.S. of A. as find it hilarious and frightening at the same time. Probably mostly just* alien*. This should not be rendered in exposition like this, but Mario Incandenza has a severely limited range of verbatim recall. Schtitt was educated in pre-Unification* Gymnasium *under the Kanto-Hegelian idea that jr. athletics was basically just training for citizenship, that jr. athletics was about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self—the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will—to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the State) and a set of delimiting rules (OK, the Law). It sounds almost frighteningly simple-minded, though not to Mario, [… who is learning] the virtues that pay off directly in competitive games, the well-disciplined boy begins assembling the more abstract, gratification-delaying skills necessary for being a "team player" in a larger arena: the even more subtly diffracted moral chaos of full-service citizenship in a State. Except Schtitt says* Ach*, but who can imagine this training serving its purpose in an experialist and waste-exporting nation that's forgotten privation and hardship and the discipline which hardship teaches by requiring? A U.S. of A. where the State is not a team or a code, but a sort of sloppy intersection of desires and fears, where the only public consensus a boy must surrender to is the acknowledged primacy of straight-line pursuing this flat and short-sighted idea of personal happiness. The happy pleasure of the person alone.*[1939]

Hal, a marijuana addict, hence devoted his "happy pleasure of the person alone," completely misinterprets the pressure of self-confrontation tennis puts on the individual and believes tennis to be an aggressive assault on the players' psyches. His determined evasion of confronting his self's true boundaries leads him to think of tennis as defining an enemy, the opponent in the match, and inducing hatred toward

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[1938] Wallace, Jest, p.112.
[1939] Wallace, Jest, pp.82-83.

the opponent as the motivation for triumph. Failing to meet his self, as Schtitt argues, Hal remains fixed on the outside, the outer enemy, and feels threatened. One day, after an exhaustive drill, Hal tells the other students, "it's not about the physical anymore. The physical stuff's just pro forma. It's the heads they're working on here. […] They always give us something to hate."[1940] Later in the novel, he contradicts these remarks and reveals that he is indeed aware what is really at stake in his distortion of tennis's purpose: by immersing himself so completely in his physical boundaries, Hal tries to avoid, as Schtitt remarks, "meeting the self."[1941] In a voice-over to a film Mario directs, Hal opines, accidently revealing his thoughts, that playing tennis is the most efficient way of evading heartbreak and sadness:

> *"[h]ere is how to avoid thinking[: …] by practicing and playing until everything runs on autopilot and talent's unconscious exercise becomes a way to escape yourself, a long waking dream of pure play. The irony is that this makes you very good, and you start to become regarded as having a prodigious talent to live up to.*[1942]

Hal's athletic success, therefore, is at root his psychological weakness, and this proposition would easily correspond to the common way people indulge themselves in extremely time consuming or physically draining activities after events that have psychologically seismic effects like the loss of a loved one. The bitter implication, therefore, is that Hal is completely alienated from his life's major preoccupation.

In contrast, Mario knows what he wants deep in his heart: human connection that does not alienate his feelings. For instance, we learn that he is obsessed with a particular radio program that is hosted by another important character of the novel, Joelle van Dyne, who speaks for hours with a flat but emotionally touching voice about films or her own opinions regarding various subjects. When Mario listens to this program,

> *he felt like he was listening to someone sad read out loud from yellow letters she'd taken out of a shoebox on a rainy p. m., stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, stuff that was real. It is increasingly hard to find valid art that is about stuff that is real in this way. The older Mario gets, [who is now nineteen], the more confused he gets about the fact that everyone at E.T.A. […] finds stuff that's really real uncomfortable and they get*

[1940] Wallace, Jest, pp.112-113.
[1941] Wallace, Jest, p.84.
[1942] Wallace, Jest, p.173.

> *embarrassed. It's like there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy.*[1943]

After a failed suicide attempt, Joelle, who is a cocaine addict, begins treatment at Ennet Recovery House. The abrupt termination of her radio show makes Mario insomniac, and he sneaks out of E.T.A. at nights and goes for walks on the Enfield Hospital Complex where both the tennis academy and recovery house are located. Mario neither knows Joelle in person nor knows that she is at Ennet House. On two previous visits, he has been invited to the Ennet House, and the experience has been enlightening for him:

> *Mario likes the place: it's crowded and noisy and none of the furniture has protective plastic wrap, but nobody notices anybody or else comments on a disability and the Headmistress is kind to the people and the people cry in front of each other. The inside of it smells like an astray, but Mario's felt good both times in Ennet's House because it's very real; people are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard somebody say* God *with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way where you could tell they were worried inside.*[1944]

Having arrived in the vicinity after the recovery house's midnight curfew, Mario stands in the garden of the building and observes the inside of the house. The outside he is in by proximity can also be seen as the psychological outside Mario is in: an outside to whose interior he actually belongs, as he possibly senses, and desires. In other words, Mario really belongs to the sincere, unpretentious, unironic life at the Ennet House and as he stands outside it, he is isolated from a place he fits in. The life at the recovery house Mario glimpses at from the windows is the ideal interior Mario would like to be part of; a place where people make human noise (Avril's obsessive irritation of sound makes even listening to the radio an excruciatingly difficult endeavor); the body and its sweat and drools and all other spills are normal (recall Avril's obsession with hygiene); the ease people radiate about being around other people; and the striking, blissful lack of ironic sneering and demeaning attitude Mario finds unbearable at E.T.A. If Mario had not waited for her mother to sleep before he left E.T.A., he could possibly be talking to the figure he observes from afar, whom he describes as if he were describing himself:

[1943] Wallace, Jest, p.592.
[1944] Wallace, Jest, p.591.

> *the last thing Mario can see, before the hillside's trees close behind him and reduce the Ennet House to shattered yellow lightning, is a wide square-headed boy bent over something he's writing at the Headmistress's black desk, licking a pencil-end and hunched all uncomfortably with one arm curled out around what he's writing in, like a slow boy over a class theme at Rindge and Latin Special.*[1945]

The following episode takes up from where Mario brokenheartedly leaves behind as he returns home. The boy Mario sees is Don Gately, the twenty eight-year old staff at Ennet House who is filling the "the picayune Daily Log" at the desk and gnawing at the pencil with boredom.[1946] Mario is not wrong at identifying aspects of himself (big head, hunch, slowness) at Gately. In fact, it would strike a reader rather sad that Mario cannot be friends with Gately who is as gentle a soul as Mario is and who is similar to Mario not only in his physical awkwardness but also in his outlook on life and his capacity for love.

Therefore, it is possible to say that, like Mario Incandenza, another physically awkward but nonetheless warm, emotionally competent, and sympathetic character with a huge head is Don Gately. Both Mario and Don Gately stand out as the promise of a possible salvation the novel intimates. Physically, Gately is "the size of a young dinosaur, with a massive and almost perfectly square head."[1947] Although his body looks "intimidating" in its size, "Gately looks less built than poured, the smooth immovability of an Easter Island statue."[1948] Like Mario's "beaming" smile, Gately has a soothing laugh, and it is "[t]he best noise Gately produces […] which booms and reassures, and a certain haunted hardness goes out of his face when he laughs."[1949] Still, he has the potential to resolve conflicts by "star[ing] hard at a point just behind [people's] heads until they move off."[1950]

Gately appears in twenty-two sections of the total one hundred and ninety-two sections of the novel.[1951] He enters the novel as "a twenty-seven-year-old oral narcotics addict" with a criminal background, and he is seen robbing a house.[1952]

[1945] Wallace, Jest, p.593.
[1946] Wallace, Jest, p.593.
[1947] Wallace, Jest, p.55.
[1948] Wallace, Jest, p.277.
[1949] Wallace, Jest, pp.80, 362.
[1950] Wallace, Jest, p.436.
[1951] In this estimate, Greg Carlisle's outline to the novel which appears at the end of his *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (2007) was consulted.
[1952] Wallace, Jest, p.55.

Gately's next appearance occurs about one hundred and forty pages later, and until the novel's last hundred and sixty pages, the narrative returns to Gately after similar intervals. Gately's story comprises one of the central themes of the novel and highlights the main problems Wallace identifies with respect to addiction of all kinds, and the possibility of recovery from the self's confining desires.

The second time we see Gately, he is working at one of the novel's central settings, Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House which was founded by a former addict who wanted to share and spread his "experience of total self-surrender and spiritual awakening."[1953] The recovery house is one of the seven units, or buildings, of Enfield Marine Public Health Hospital Complex. Right across the complex, atop a hill, Enfield Tennis Academy is located, and Ennet House's sheer proximity to the tennis academy offers a nice comparison: life at the Enfield Tennis Academy does not differ much from the life at Ennet Halfway House because both are populated with addicts. Both tennis and drugs are addictions, and there is a pervasive loss of outlets to dedicate one's life without falling into the traps of addiction. Furthermore, many students, like Hal, are severe drug addicts that somehow manage both the recreation and the sports.

The facility offers, in the fashion of a re-birth, "a nine-month period of closely supervised residency and treatment."[1954] Gately has successfully "graduated treatment and took the offer of a live-in Staffer's job at Ennet House."[1955] He is appreciated and respected at Ennet House, popular with his meatballs and the comforting, brotherly wisdom he offers.

Gately also seems to have acquired wisdom about the recovery process. While thinking about the various forms of addiction of the Ennet House residents, Gately always catches himself passing judgments on others and corrects himself and acknowledges that it is not his place to judge anybody. In fact, one thing Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) that Gately religiously attends to even after he is sober, is the nonjudgmental, completely open and sincere acceptance of everybody. He knows that newcomers at the rehabilitation program are always "cynical" and consider the recovery program's methods of praying and sharing extremely "*retrograde*" and

[1953] Wallace, Jest, p.137.
[1954] Wallace, Jest, p.137.
[1955] Wallace, Jest, p.196.

ridicule the program's dictum to "learn to live by clichés"[1956,1957] Gately acknowledges how the early shallowness of these clichés "all of a sudden drops off and deepens," and, while the newcomers push the limits of being insufferable in their questioning and undermining, the staff has to consider them "as valuable teachers of patience, tolerance, self-discipline, restraint."[1958] However, "[i]t's the newcomers with some education that are the worst" because "[t]hey identify their whole selves with their head, and the Disease [that is, the addiction] makes its command headquarters in the head."[1959] This argument is reiterated in *This is Water* where Wallace emphasizes that the head may become a "terrible master" and that most suicides aim the gun at the head for this reason.[1960] *Infinite Jest* opens up the possibility of subduing this master through controlling thoughts, and through the banal wisdom of the otherwise wise clichés. Gately knows that "clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do*. To try and live by instead of just say."[1961] The best things about clichés are that they are "soothing"; they remind us that there is such a thing as "common sense" that defies the addict's efforts at self-deceiving explanations of the relevance and necessity of the addiction.[1962] After all, recovery program teaches that "logical validity is not a guarantee of truth" and that most drug-addicts "are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking."[1963]

The head metaphor of the above paragraph works on another level to explain what the human mind goes through during recovery, and it certainly illuminates the dreaded and lethal effect of the film "Infinite Jest" on viewers:

> *a little-mentioned paradox of Substance addiction is: that once you are sufficiently enslaved by a Substance to need to quit the Substance in order to save your life, the enslaving substance has become so deeply important to you that you will all but lose your mind when it is taken from you. Or that sometime after your Substance of choice has just been taken away from you in order to save your life, as you hunker down for required A.M. and P.M. prayers, you will*

[1956] Some of which include, "One Day At a Time; Easy Does It; First Things First; Ask For Help; It Works If You Work It; Grow Or Go; Keep Coming Back; I Didn't Know That I Didn't Know, Come In, Keep Coming" … etc. (Wallace, Jest, pp.270-271).
[1957] Wallace, Jest, pp.196, 180, 270.
[1958] Wallace, Jest, p.271.
[1959] Wallace, Jest, p.272.
[1960] Wallace, Water, p.56.
[1961] Wallace, Jest, p.273.
[1962] Wallace, Jest, p.278.
[1963] Wallace, Jest, pp.202, 203.

> *find yourself beginning to pray to be allowed literally to lose your mind, to be able to wrap your mind in an old newspaper or something and leave it in an alley to shift for itself, without you.*[1964]

Afraid that the addiction/entertainment may come to a sudden halt, the addict of drugs/entertainment is compelled to consume more and more to prevent possible separation. In light of this, Hal's solitary struggle with withdrawal seems almost majestic.

In a vivid account of a regular AA meeting, we realize the importance of clichés for the recovery program. The meetings are based on the simple principle of communal sharing of experience and hope: different AA groups visit each other and talk to the other group's members, and these visits are called "Giving It Away."[1965] Sobriety remains precious as long as it is shared and to the extent that it leads to empathy among fellow addicts. As mentioned in the previous part, Wallace makes a similar claim regarding fiction's ability to establish empathy which may help us identify our own suffering in other characters and thus feel less alone and more hopeful about enduring the suffering. The speakers in these meetings share their suffering and everybody identifies versions of their sufferings in others. These speeches underline the importance of choosing: after losing jobs, families, and health to their addiction, addicts confront the urgency of revising their priorities. "It's all optional; do it or die."[1966] Every newcomer to the recovery program has reached a "no-choice point and surrender[s] his will to staying straight at any cost."[1967] In a way, even before sobriety, addicts realize the importance of choosing, and echoing Marathe, they reconsider their temples of devotion. Another major asset of these meetings is that the speakers learn to see each other "dependable as death" as they "bon[d] and interfac[e] in a bizarre system of catchphrases."[1968]

Without a doubt, the clichés arouse suspicion in every addict attending the meetings. They represent the postmodern cynicism, the ironic derision. Gately, now sober for three years, recounts how he doubted the success of a program dependent completely on commonplace wisdom. Four months into his recovery treatment at

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[1964] Wallace, Jest, p.201.
[1965] Wallace, Jest, p.344.
[1966] Wallace, Jest, p.357.
[1967] Wallace, Jest, p.435.
[1968] Wallace, Jest, pp.355, 360.

Ennet House, Gately realizes that he has not thought about ingesting drugs for a week and feels both gratitude and doubt:

> *The idea that AA might actually somehow work unnerved him. He suspected some sort of trap. Some new sort of trap. […] Gately couldn't for the life of him figure out how just sitting there on hemorrhoid-hostile folding chairs every night looking at nose-pores and clichés could work. […] The newcomers who abandon common sense and resolve to Hang In and Keep Coming and then find their cages all of a sudden open, mysteriously, after a while, share this sense of deep shock and possible trap. […] And so this unites them, nervously, this tentative assemblage of possible glimmers of something like hope, this grudging move toward maybe acknowledging that this unromantic, unhip, clichéd AA thing—so unlikely and unpromising, so much the inverse of what they'd come too much to love—might really be able to keep the lover's toothy maw at bay.*[1969]

Perhaps the success resides in the "benign anarchy" of the program that addicts slowly understand to be governed not by obligations and regrets but "only [by] love and support and the occasional humble suggestion born of shared experience."[1970] Empathy enables each recovering addict to feel "sincere compassion" to each other's trials and errors, whether explained by cliché or not.[1971] The essentially "spiritual approach" of the recovery process handles "actual experience" of recovery as spiritual in that recovering addicts have a "shared mode of discourse" when they talk in meetings.[1972] AA meetings foster "identification between teller and listener" that draws its force from "cathartic emotional reaction."[1973]

In the process, as the participants of the AA meetings discover the importance of sincerity and openness, they develop an aversion to any manifestation of irony and insincerity. This irritation is at root caused by their discovery that the ego at work behind irony is a calculating enemy and will distort truth at all costs. In Gately's understanding,

> *[a]n ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications*

[1969] Wallace, Jest, pp.439.
[1970] Wallace, Jest, p.356.
[1971] Wallace, Jest, p.356.
[1972] Timothy Richard Aubry, **Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans**, University of Iowa Press, Iowa, 2006, pp.97-98.
[1973] Aubry, p.98.

they'd had to construct in order to carry on [their addictions prior to recovery].[1974]

The novel's approach to AA shows that the cliché-laden steps of recovery champion the supremacy of truth, and simplicity—the hidden power of the commonplace, the cliché. As Aubry notes, Wallace deploys AA as "a model for the aesthetic, affective, and interpretive practices that he would like to promote."[1975] The "simplicity, empathy, and faith" as well as the "tight-knit community" AA meetings and recovery programs champion form the basis of a move beyond irony in its usual and somewhat distorted meaning of empty, frivolous sarcasm. AA is "commit[ted] to fixed principles, unquestioned pieties, and unmediated empathy."[1976]

Another powerful AA truism regards the surrendering of one's will to a "Higher Power" and the program urges everyone to develop their "own understanding of God or a Higher Power or Whom-/Whatever" and kneel to pray for its help and guidance every morning and every night.[1977] In the tenth month of his treatment, despite wonderful progress, Gately admits in a meeting how "he's so totally clueless" about what God or Higher Power could possibly mean and complains about his lack of "access to the Big spiritual Picture."[1978] He does pray, but "feels Nothing—not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he Came In with."[1979] In response, every recovering addict in the meeting "stands up and applauds and the men give two-finger whistles," and during the break they "tell him how good it was to hear him and to for God's sake Keep Coming, for them if not for himself."[1980] During leave-taking, a motorbiker approaches Gately, praises his "struggles with the God component" and asks Gately "if by any chance he's heard the one about the fish."[1981] He goes on to tell Gately the fish story Wallace tells the graduating students at Kenyon College in *This is Water*: "This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' and swims away; and the

[1974] Wallace, Jest, p.369.
[1975] Aubry, p.106.
[1976] Aubry, p.108.
[1977] Wallace, Jest, p.442.
[1978] Wallace, Jest, p.443.
[1979] Wallace, Jest, p.443.
[1980] Wallace, Jest, p.444.
[1981] Wallace, Jest, p.445.

three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, 'What the fuck is water?' and swim away."[1982] Wallace's return to this story after nine years attests to the power of the water imagery in Wallace's understanding of life and in accordance with this, water begins to figure in Gately's dreams and ideas from this point on in the novel.

Although Gately does not seem to pay any attention to the fish story, he immediately begins thinking about his life and the particular sufferings that have led him to use drugs. In a way, the wisdom of the fish story works and is registered by Gately because he suddenly realizes that, now that he is completely sober and determined to remain so, he has to fulfill the last task of his treatment: honest confrontation with himself, his feelings, and his life. In Hal's case, recovery comes more or less without outside help, and he reverses the process by confronting his feelings first. Yet near the end, Hal and Gately will reach a parallel in terms of confrontation with the self.

Gately's self-investigation begins with the acknowledgment of "sober pain" replacing "the pointless pain of addiction."[1983] The only way AA gestures toward this pain is through the cliché Get in Touch with Your Feelings, but "[t]hey neglect to tell you that after the urge to get high magically vanishes […] you'll begin to start to 'Get In Touch' with why it was you used Substances in the first place."[1984] For Gately, this dictum actually "mask[s] something ghastly deep and real," and he understands that "the vapider the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers."[1985] As he lets himself finally confront himself, he is amazed that he not only remembers but "almost reexperience[s] things that he'd barely even been there to experience, in terms of emotionally, in the first place."[1986] He recollects how at age eleven, his alcoholic mother wasted her life in front of the television, drinking, or how his step-father brutally beat his mother, or how his biological father, before abandoning his pregnant mother, beat her terribly—even while she was pregnant. That night, after he talks about his problem with the notion of the Higher Power and hears the fish story, Gately falls asleep remembering many painful details about his

[1982] Wallace, Jest, p.445.
[1983] Wallace, Jest, p.446.
[1984] Wallace, Jest, p.446.
[1985] Wallace, Jest, p.446.
[1986] Wallace, Jest, p.446.

mother, his own youth. His dreams "seem to set him under a sort of sea, at terrific depths, the water all around him silent and dim and the same temperature he is."[1987] That night, in his eighth month of treatment, Gately, who "hadn't probably consciously thought of [his mother] once for three years" returns to her womb in his dreams that mark the onset of his first and truest investigation of his life, his identity, his purpose in life.[1988]

In the last hundred and sixty pages of the novel, Gately, along with Hal, will figure more than any other character does in sum total in the novel. He will enter a coma-like state after an accidental gunshot wound caused by a mayhem by the Ennet House residents, and will dream and continue his confrontation with his past. While he is in hospital, unconscious, "effectively paralyzed and mute," his friends will spend hours by his bed, telling him their innermost fears and feelings.[1989] Like Mario, Gately will be a passive listener, provoking people to open up much more easily. When he wakes up from the dream-state, he will be purified, reborn[1990] in the very last sentence of the novel: "And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out."[1991]

In order to understand the significance of the novel's closing, however open-endedly, with Gately's rebirth, we could reconsider how the novel circles back on itself and begins with Hal's latest stage in his recovery that is the chronological endpoint of the novel. One way to approach this matter is considering the ingenious thematic and structural parallelism of the last hundred and sixty pages. As the novel progresses toward its end, both Hal and Gately are struggling with various stages of lack of consciousness and pain. Shortly after Hal confesses to Mario his addiction and withdraws from marijuana, his withdrawal symptoms escalate. What we glimpse in the above discussion of anhedonia regarding Hal's predicament turns into a series of intense interior monologues as Hal loses and regains consciousness and

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[1987] Wallace, Jest, p.449.
[1988] Wallace, Jest, p.449.
[1989] Wallace, Jest, p.828.
[1990] Critics have varying interpretations of this uncertain ending. For Marshall Boswell, Gately "has been reborn from the womb of his addiction" (Boswell, Understanding, p.179), and for Greg Carlisle, Gately "wakes up alone, like driftwood on a beach" (Carlisle, 2007, 471).
[1991] Wallace, Jest, p.981.

incessantly thinks about his father's death, his relationship to his father and mother, and many painful but suppressed realities of his life. Hal, who is deprived of the recovery group's community-support that the novel has so far detailed efficiently, is waging the novel's most sincere war against the self. Although Hal may miss it, he is giving himself away for the first time to something that is larger than himself. Simultaneously, Gately is hospitalized for a gunshot wound and multiple stabs he receives after bravely protecting the house residents in a fight they get involved in. Gately, sober for three years, while fighting with severely infected wounds, and the accompanying fever, heroically endures numbing pain because, determined to remain clear of his former addiction to oral narcotics, he refuses morphine or any other painkillers with gestures of clumsy protest he makes with whatever limb he manages to move.

As Hal and Gately struggle, their respective episodes yield, in upbeat prose and vividly rendered narratives of stream of consciousness, realistic accounts of the wounds that their hearts spill out in agonizing truthfulness. Meeting their selves, both Hal and Gately come close to salvation. When we next see Hal, in the first section that opens the novel, he is claiming, for the first time, that he is "in here." This was something he denied both in himself and others before he quit marijuana and now that he is clean, he feels for the first that he is human, in his words, "in here." The price Hal pays, however, is complete but hopefully temporary setback in his communication with the outside, which will probably return to normal once his brain's chemistry recovers from sudden chemical withdrawal and he asks for help. The price Gately pays is also considerable; pain and fever that puts him in and out of consciousness. However, the possibility of choosing and prioritizing, being in contact with the self's emotions rather than its slaving desires, makes meaningful, human, moral, and full life more than possible terms to live by: they become real in their spirituality, in their heartfelt sincerity.

Some lessons of truth learned by staying at Ennet House, as told by an anonymous resident, include: "there might not be angels, but there are people who might as well be angels. […] God speaks and acts entirely through the vehicle of

human beings, if there is a God."[1992] We may each act as our own and as others' angels. Or, as Wallace tells David Lipsky,

> *[i]f you can think of times in your life that you've treated people with extraordinary decency and love, and pure uninterested concern, just because they were valuable as human beings. The ability to do that with ourselves. To treat ourselves the way we would treat a really good, precious friend. Or a tiny child of ours that we absolutely loved more than life itself. And I think it's probably possible to achieve that. I think part of the job we're here is to learn how to do it. I know it sounds a little pious.*[1993]

In fact, it sounds exactly like the compassion he kindles in readers of *Infinite Jest:* moving beyond embarrassment of sentiment, irony, and harshness on the fragile but negotiable human soul; putting truth, trust, emotion, empathy at the center of life. It also sounds like something one would have liked to remind Wallace, whose life, as Lipsky remarks, "was a map that ends at the wrong destination" despite all the wisdom *Infinite Jest* offers.[1994]

3.3. JONATHAN FRANZEN'S *THE CORRECTIONS* AND *FREEDOM*: "MORALLY PASSIONATE, PASSIONATELY MORAL FICTION"

Jonathan Franzen's third and fourth novels have secured him a place in American letters as a masterful novelist. His 2001 *The Corrections* brought him the National Book Award for fiction and the novel was a finalist for many awards including the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and PEN/Faulkner Award of 2002. His 2010 novel *Freedom*, likewise, was an immense success that brought Franzen many literary awards and made him a finalist for the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. In addition, upon the publication of *Freedom*, *Time* magazine dubbed Franzen the "Great American Novelist" and featured Franzen on its cover, a rare appearance so far reserved to James Joyce, John Cheever, and most recently, Stephen King among literary figures. *Freedom* also made amends between Franzen and Oprah Winfrey, who, as we noted earlier in this chapter, has selected and then

[1992] Wallace, Jest, p.205.
[1993] Wallace quoted in Lipsky, p.292.
[1994] Lipsky, p.xv.

unselected *The Corrections* in 2001 for her Book Club, and *Freedom* was selected without strife for Oprah's Book Club in 2010.

In "Peace and War" (2010), Sam Tanenhaus calls both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* "masterpiece[s] of American fiction" and states that "the family as microcosm or microhistory has become Franzen's particular subject, as it is no one else's today."[1995] In this sense, what makes Franzen's *The Corrections* and *Freedom* great novels is his virtuosity in depicting the dramas of family life within the larger social, cultural, and political dynamics of modern American life. The following discussion aims at demonstrating that Franzen's most important contribution to the American novel could be his investigation of the possibilities of becoming an individual in the America of the 1990s and 2000s through an ingenuous treatment of identity as a site of continuous re-construction with regard to the unceasing conflict between the self's ethical being and its efforts at self-fulfillment. In both novels, doing the right thing and becoming a good, proper, authentic self generate irrational passions of fulfillment, thereby creating a continuous interplay between the rational and the irrational, the ethical and the unethical, as the defining dynamic of the construction/destruction of the self. By presenting the future of American public life through the inner torments of individual family members, Franzen not only offers a symbolic interpretation of the prospects awaiting America in the future but also reminds us the centrality of the human element to fiction with his exquisitely drawn characters whose dilemmas, failures, vulnerabilities, follies, vanities, corrections, and freedoms prove the worth of serious and responsible fiction.

Although the titles of both novels make generous explanations on the topics of the novels, they are also rich in the implications of the moral lessons we get from the novels. To begin with *The Corrections,* it is possible to say that the novel presents the act of correction as the only means of establishing an identity, requiring, in the meantime, multiple instances of revisions, or new corrections. It is granted that we human beings cannot attain perfection no matter how arduous our self-investigations and how sustained the arcs of our self-improvements are because life continuously presents new challenges and requires us to continue our self-

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[1995] Sam Tanenhaus, "Peace and War", **New York Times**, 09.08.2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/books/review/Tanenhouse-t_r=1&nl=books, (02.09.2010), n.pag.

investigations and self-improvements. We can never stop changing, correcting, learning, or improving. This is the core of our ethical being. However, in *The Corrections*, the timeless value of self-investigation and the ensuing (desired) self-improvement is embodied in the dangerous impulse to correct oneself that is in fact not so much correcting oneself as correcting, punishing, or avenging, someone else, in this case, a parent, a spouse, or a child.

The Corrections examines this impulsive need to correct through the corrections of the members of the Lambert family. Corrections matter to this novel insofar as they comprise life-long efforts of children not to turn into the parents they criticize and dislike to the point of intolerable aversion, if not outright hatred, and the efforts of parents to correct their children whose lives the parents want to see as the better, almost faultless versions of their own lives. In other words, almost every character makes corrections to his or her identity and life in order to attain perfection, to hide hideous flaws, meanwhile also correcting someone else's life and identity. Implying that a true correction is no easy task, the narrator of the novel remarks, "[w]hat made correction possible also doomed it."[1996] The danger of correction is that if it is not grounded in honest self-investigation, it cannot be worthy, ethical, and rational. A true correction is an honest confrontation with some bitter truth about oneself, with a hurting reality. Hence, a true correction is painful. In this novel, corrections are driven by hatred, (often unacknowledged) feelings of righteousness, guilt, regret, irrationality, and inferiority; corrections become paragons of trouble for selves seeking identity and peace. In other words, the corrections of this novel are failed attempts of confused individuals.

There is also a symbolic interpretation of the novel's title and it identifies a genealogy for the novel. In "What the Dickens" (2001), James Wood asserts that Franzen, "the slightly damaged child of Don DeLillo's peculiar relationship with American culture" corrects "DeLillo's *Underworld* [which] has been the most important American novel of the last 15 years" by writing "a book of DeLillo-like breadth and intellectual critique," albeit with a correction: whereas *Underworld* had

[1996] Jonathan Franzen, **The Corrections**, Picador, New York, 2001, p.295.

"no human beings," *The Corrections* is "centered on human beings."[1997] For Wood, "Franzen's emphasis on the human is welcome, and doubtless explains the novel's enormous popularity in America."[1998] Franzen himself expresses something along this line in an interview with Donald Antrim: "I was looking for a counterpoint to the relative abstraction of the cultural and political or linguistic preoccupations that drove the previous generations of big novels, […] a form of correction, a correction toward more traditional and human motives for a novel."[1999] It is to those "traditional and human motives" the discussion now turns to analyze *The Corrections'* masterful and perceptive analyses of the human condition, the constantly made and remade American selves.

The Corrections is the story of the Lambert family of St. Jude, Minnesota. Alfred and Enid Lambert, an old couple whose children have fled Midwest one by one to go to East, are at home. The novel opens on a gloomy note as it briefly describes the Lambert house in the suburbs of St. Jude:

> *The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen. The sun low in the sky, a minor light, a cooling star. Gust after gust of disorder. Trees restless, temperatures falling, the whole northern religion of things coming to an end. No children in the yards here. Shadows lengthened on yellowing zoysia. Red oaks and pin oaks and swamp white oak rained acorns on houses with no mortgage. Storm windows shuttered in the empty bedrooms. And the drone and hiccup of a clothes dryer, the nasal contention of a leaf blower, the ripening of local apples in a paper bag, the smell of gasoline with which Alfred Lambert had cleaned the paintbrush from his morning painting of the wicker love seat.*[2000]

The season and the weather match the mood of the empty house. Alfred Lambert, "the governing force" of the Lambert family, is a fallen patriarch struggling with the debilitations of Parkinson's disease.[2001] His protests and fits of rage now resemble "the cries of a government that could no longer govern."[2002] As the narrator explains, Alfred's disease

> *offended his sense of ownership. These shaking hands belonged to nobody but him, and yet refused to obey him. They were like bad children. Unreasoning two-year-olds in tantrum of selfish misery. The more sternly he gave orders, the*

[1997] James Wood, "What the Dickens", **The Guardian**, 09.10.2001, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/nov/09/fiction.reviews, (26.02.2012), (Dickens), n.pag.
[1998] Wood, Dickens, n.pag.
[1999] Jonathan Franzen, "Interview with Donald Antrim", **Bomb Magazine,** Volume:77, 2001, p.77.
[2000] Franzen, The Corrections, p.3.
[2001] Franzen, The Corrections, p.5.
[2002] Franzen, The Corrections, p.7.

less they listened and the more miserable and out of control they got. He'd always been vulnerable to a child's recalcitrance and refusal to behave like an adult. Irresponsibility and undiscipline were the bane of his existence.[2003]

Enid Lambert is the passive aggressive wife/mother who impersonates a cheerful homemaker. In essence, she is a simpleton who is almost completely composed of class envy and familial ambition. She does not want her husband to paint the wicker love seat; she wants him to have hobbies like the husbands of her friends, such hobbies as glass painting or building birdhouses. However, Alfred did have a hobby in the past; he had built a metallurgy lab at the basement where his amateur experiments yielded significant inventions, none of which received their due because Alfred's belief in serving society was antithetical to making profit, so he shared the patent rights with his company rather than promoting them individually.

Both Alfred and Enid have suffered during the Great Depression, so they are frugal; Alfred values every dollar and Enid compulsively collects discount coupons. Decades-old cans of food remain in the cupboards. Mail is preferred over the sixty-five-cents-a-minute telephone call. As the years go by, Enid, wishing to be equals with her friends, observes how her friends' husbands buy stocks and get rich quickly and tries to convince Alfred to invest and buy stocks, too. Alfred regards such profit a mortal sin and a terrible risk. He is one of the last living exemplars of the American work ethic in the America of the 1990s. Alfred has worked all his life extremely diligently as an engineer and manager for the Midland Pacific Railroad until it was bought and dismantled by an unprincipled, profit-oriented company that did not care about trains or serving people. After he retired, Alfred rapidly deteriorated physically and mentally due to Parkinson's disease, and at this point, that is, as the novel opens, he is an almost totally incapacitated, depressed, and occasionally hallucinating wreck. Alfred has moved from his industrious, self-disciplined, tyrannical, rationalized life to the desperate fear, anger, and shame of almost complete loss of self-control. What he is turning into is the utter opposite of the codes that governed his life.

Enid, on the other hand, has entered a new stage in her unhappy life with Alfred due to his illness that not only requires her caretaking but also leads her to

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[2003] Franzen, The Corrections, p.70.

shoulder every responsibility on her own. Meanwhile, she continues to want (and demand with all her might) her children to succeed better in terms of money, jobs, and marriage in order to compete better with her suburban neighbors and with the consumers she sees in advertisements and on television. If Alfred demands that family life and professional life be governed according to the mechanical systems of his engineer's mind, Enid has taken all middle-class pretentions as the truths of the human heart. What is more, Enid applies these pretentions as corrections to her life as well as to the life of her family. Although her family history has arguably been fairly troubled with severe fights in get-togethers, she is not joking when she comes up with the astonishing idea of gathering the whole family "one last Christmas in St. Jude."[2004] The pretense is Alfred's illness but she is preparing to compete with her neighbors who effortlessly spend vacations with crowds of kin. In fact, she is always in awe of what her suburban neighbors do in terms of money, spending, familial clichés, in short, the American flamboyance: Dean Driblet—one of her son's classmates—has four children, he has built a house with eight bedrooms, his birthday present for his mother was an eight-day trip to Paris, at the housewarming party for his million-dollar house, guests were served "*pyramids* of shrimp."[2005] It takes her months and many retellings to get over her excitement about the "catered […] solid shrimps, in pyramids."[2006] Tones of resentment for not having a lot of grandchildren, receiving expensive trips for birthdays from her children, and hints of accusation toward her children for not being rich and 'social' enough like Dean Driblet reverberate in each recounting, which is usually accompanied with her eyes "shut raconteurial pleasure."[2007]

Since Enid is the most authentic type of the middle-class American in the novel, we could look at how she really thinks and feels. Enid, "a bright girl with good business skills," likes Christmas, family get-togethers, wedding ceremonies, parties, and luxury cruises.[2008] Thinking of their upcoming luxury cruise trip, Enid thinks, "there were a thousand things she wanted from life, and since few were available at home with Alfred in St. Jude, she had forcibly channeled all her wanting

[2004] Franzen, The Corrections, p.79.
[2005] Franzen, The Corrections, p.21.
[2006] Franzen, The Corrections, p.21.
[2007] Franzen, The Corrections, p.131.
[2008] Franzen, The Corrections, p.255.

into the numbered days […] that the luxury cruise would last."[2009] Enid also likes gossip: "hearing of other people's disappointing children—their squalid divorces, their substance abuse, their foolish investments—made her feel better."[2010] It would not be wrong to see Enid as an ill-wisher, an envier of others' success, and a celebrator of others' failures. But why does she have a problem with her children? Enid thinks "her children didn't match. They didn't want the things that she and all her friends and all her friends' children" wanted.[2011] Her children wanted radically, shamefully other things."[2012] As a mother, she has failed to correct her children.

Enid is unable to comprehend anything outside of her narrow life, and her highest value is a party based on a marriage: "In the pageantry of weddings, Enid […] experienced the […] love of place—of the Midwest in general and suburban St. Jude in particular—that for her was the only true patriotism and the only viable spirituality."[2013] Her country and her religion make meaning for Enid only when a wedding takes place in St. Jude. When she feels inadequate during the luxury cruise, she affirms her worth, her sacred core:

> *The Astors and the Vanderbilts, their pleasure domes and money: she was sick of it. Sick of envying, sick of herself. She didn't understand antiques or architecture, she couldn't draw like [her upper middle class friend] Sylvia, she didn't read like [Sylvia's husband] Ted, she had few interests and no expertise. A capacity for love was the only true thing she'd ever had.*[2014]

Enid's capacity for love, however, is deeply problematic in terms of her relationship with her children whom she unhesitatingly includes in her marital conflicts and manipulations that serve as attempted corrections in Alfred's behavior.

As we learn from one of the novel's flashbacks, Alfred, who is a "shouter and punisher" of any foolish behavior and disobedience demonstrated by both children and wife, makes his young children sit at the dinner table until they finish their meals.[2015] Alfred has no difficulty in exercising his strict rules at home because he treats his children not kindly, lovingly, reassuringly like a father but in the formal manner of a business manager. Once, when he returns from a long trip, the children

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[2009] Franzen, The Corrections, p.307.
[2010] Franzen, The Corrections, p.316.
[2011] Franzen, The Corrections, p.128.
[2012] Franzen, The Corrections, p.128.
[2013] Franzen, The Corrections, p.124.
[2014] Franzen, The Corrections, p.332.
[2015] Franzen, The Corrections, p.22.

are happy to see their father: "As fast as they could without running (forbidden indoors), the boys proceeded to the basement […] and found their father in his laboratory. It was in their nature to throw their arms around him, but this nature was corrected out of them. They stood and waited, like company subordinates, for the boss to speak."[2016] Alfred exercises a similar boundary with his wife and one day the resentful Enid repays Alfred's cold-hearted treatment by punishing the whole family by cooking what she calls "Dinner of Revenge," liver and vegetables, which Alfred hates.[2017] The youngest child, Chip, a boy of seven, literally nauseated by liver, cannot finish up his dinner, and is punished by his father to remain at the table until he eats all the food on the plate. The poor child stays at the table and spends hours trying to dissect the liver from its fried crust in order to be able to swallow it, and falls asleep at the table far past his bedtime. Enid, aware of the situation, avoids looking at the dining room.

> *She reasoned that if the problem in the dining room was her responsibility then she was horrendously derelict in not resolving it, and a loving mother could never be so derelict, and she was a loving mother, so the responsibility must not have been hers. Eventually Alfred would surface [from his laboratory] and see what a beast he'd been and be very, very sorry. If he had the nerve to blame her for the problem, she could say: "You're the one who said he had to sit there till he ate it."*[2018]

After Alfred finds the child asleep at the dinner table around midnight and takes him to bed, he accuses Enid of "using [Chip] against him," and although Enid "simmered in her wrongness," this is not the only instance she is unjust to her son.[2019] Chip has a finicky taste and Enid finds a solution to Chip's food problem:

> *Lately she had taken to feeding him grilled cheese sandwiches all day long, holding back for dinner the yellow and leafy green vegetables required for a balanced diet and letting Alfred fight her battles. There was something almost tasty and almost sexy in letting the annoying boy be punished by her husband. In standing blamelessly aside while the boy suffered for having hurt her. What you discovered about yourself in raising children wasn't always agreeable or attractive.*[2020]

[2016] Franzen, The Corrections, p.264.
[2017] Franzen, The Corrections, p.264.
[2018] Franzen, The Corrections, p.284.
[2019] Franzen, The Corrections, p.291.
[2020] Franzen, The Corrections, p.276.

At the core of Enid's cruelty to Chip is that she sees Alfred in the boy and in making Alfred correct the boy's misbehavior, she believes she's actually correcting Alfred, or punishing Alfred for not letting her correct him.

Chip is the middle Lambert child who continues to be the problem child of the family even as he approaches middle-age. Before he falls asleep on the dinner table, the young Chip's inability to eat her mother's Dinner of Revenge plants the seeds of "[d]eeper sources of refusal."[2021] Simultaneously, his inability to eat the liver makes his punishment pointless: he is not doing it out of spite because Chip has a serious biological reaction to some kinds of food. "Even at the age of seven, Chipper intuited that this feeling of futility would be a fixture of his life. A dull waiting and then a broken promise, a panicked realization of how late it was."[2022]

Chip grows up as a successful student, and he is especially gifted at science, or so it would seem. He mines libraries for obscure reference books and plagiarizes his homework and award-winning science projects. He writes detailed lies about the progress of his experiments. Against his parents' extreme disappointment, Chip studies literature at college. As a person, the adult Chip likes to transgress social boundaries, does not hesitate to play dangerous games, and boldly takes risks. Morally, he is happily subversive and is frequently lying, cheating, pretending, using drugs, and getting drunk. Meanwhile, hateful criticism of literally everything drives his life and occupation; Chip is a postmodern scholar of art and literature. It would not be wrong to see him as a hysterical narcissist, and a pervert of sorts.

When we meet Chip early in the novel, Alfred and Enid are on their way to their luxury cruise voyage, and in transit, they are paying a visit to Chip in New York. Chip dutifully avoids visiting his parents in St. Jude, and in fact, it has been three years since he had last seen them, and his sister, Denise, who lives in Philadelphia, has insisted their parents visit during transit for a brief get-together lunch at Chip's apartment. Chip prepares his apartment for the visit:

> *He'd bought a stain-removal kit and lifted the big semen stain off the red chaise longue, dismantled the wall of wine-bottle corks with which he'd been bricking in the niche above his fireplace at a rate half a dozen Merlots and Pinot Grigios a week, taken down from his bathroom wall the close-up photographs of male and female genitalia that were the flower of his art collection, and replaced*

[2021] Franzen, The Corrections, p.277.
[2022] Franzen, The Corrections, p.279.

them with the three diplomas that Enid had long ago insisted on having framed for him.[2023]

After correcting his apartment's representation of him, "feeling as if he'd surrendered too much of himself, he'd readjusted his presentation by wearing leather to the airport."[2024] Yet "he was a little too old for the leather he was wearing."[2025] This seems less a subversion when compared to the expensive salmon fillet he steals from the supermarket to serve at lunch. Chip is broke, and a thief if necessary.

Although Chip was a brilliant scholar and a wonderful teacher on tenure-track, he was fired from his college in Connecticut because he was stalking a student with whom he had had a brief affair. After losing his job, Chip has moved to New York, lives hand-to-mouth, and works as a legal proofreader while he writes a screenplay called *The Academy Purple*, which is a pretentiously intellectual and pornographic story based on his obsessive relationship with his former student, Melissa. Chip's fed up girlfriend, Julia, who has already told Chip that he seemed to use sex as a drug to soothe himself, breaks up with him after she reads *The Academy Purple* and feels disgusted by its/Chip's adolescent pornographic mentality and sexism. Chip does not want to break up with her, and in an attempt to regain Julia, he promises her to correct his screenplay, hence himself. Chip wants to appear, at least to Julia, more attractive and agreeable, and his correction works as an attempt to cover up the obvious flaws in his personality, or his pathologies. Chip's other corrections can be seen as ridiculous manipulations of his self-presentation(s); from the cleaned apartment to the leather jacket, Chip withholds and at the same imposes his pathologies. Moreover, Chip "was thirty-nine years old, and he blamed his parents for the person he had become."[2026]

The extreme restrictions and conservatism of his father and the entirely illusory (mis)representations of his wannabe mother lead Chip into becoming an illusionist himself. Chip's illusion is that he believes he can demystify all the illusions of society. However, his demystifications do not serve the purpose, or have the purpose of, discovering solid truths. Rather, Chip establishes even more jaded

[2023] Franzen, The Corrections, p.24.
[2024] Franzen, The Corrections, p.24.
[2025] Franzen, The Corrections, p.15.
[2026] Franzen, The Corrections, p.18.

illusions to sustain his life. He is on the edge of nihilism and needs to be confident that reality exists, that he himself is real, and his critique of social falsehood is justified. Yet according to the narrator (and perhaps according to Franzen himself), Chip undergoes a crisis of confidence in the negative critical activity of debunking and whether he is based on anything solid at all.

In the last semester at college before he is fired, Chip offers a course called "Consuming Narratives" and teaches his students "how to criticize mass culture."[2027] In the last class of the semester, Melissa, who has been a bright and active student of Chip's class—a bold corrector herself, the minute she hears Vebern, would fire away a mocking "The name is Veblen?"—suddenly "attack[s] Chip like an angry equal, not a student": "you're here to teach us to hate the same things you hate. […] What's wrong with making a living? […] Why is it *inherently* evil to make money?"[2028] While the speechless Chip "waited for the bell to ring and the semester to end," Melissa continued her attack[2029]:

> *This whole class is [...] bullshit every week. It's one critic after another wringing their hands about the state of criticism. Nobody can ever quite say what's wrong exactly. But they all know it's evil. They all know "corporate" is a dirty word. And if somebody's having fun or getting rich—disgusting! Evil! And it's always the death of this and the death of that. And people who think they're free aren't "really" free. And people who think they're happy aren't "really" happy. And it's impossible to radically critique society anymore, although what's so radically wrong with society that we need such a radical critique, nobody can say exactly.* It is so typical and perfect that you hate those ads! *[...] Here things are getting better and better for women and people of color, and gay men and lesbians, more and more integrated and open, and all you can think about is some stupid, lame problem with signifiers and signifieds. Like, the only way you can make something bad out of an ad that's great for women—which you have to do, because there has to be something wrong with everything—is to say it's evil to be rich and evil to work for a corporation, and yes, I know the bell rang.*[2030]

Chip, standing speechlessly in front of the class, immediately sees a correction he has to make:

> *Melissa's accusations had cut him to the quick. He'd never quite realized how seriously he'd taken his father's injunction to do work that was "useful" to society. Criticizing a sick culture, even if the criticism accomplished nothing, had always felt like useful work. But if the supposed sickness wasn't a sickness*

[2027] Franzen, The Corrections, pp.37, 42.
[2028] Franzen, The Corrections, pp.44, 45.
[2029] Franzen, The Corrections, p.45.
[2030] Franzen, The Corrections, p.46.

> *at all—if the great Materialist Order of technology and consumer appetite and medical science really* was *improving the lives of the formerly oppressed; if it was only straight white males like Chip who had a problem with this order—then there was no longer even the most abstract utility to his criticism. It was all, in Melissa's word, bullshit.*[2031]

Melissa's correction shakes Chip's take on the world. Melissa argues not only for herself but also for a whole cultural and economic class ideology and proves to Chip how unfounded, unjustified his radical critique is. For her, there is nothing essentially wrong with society, and all the problems are being gradually solved, so Chip must be personally unhappy, must be constitutionally pessimistic, in order to be so negative about "everything." We realize that Chip's critique must be either a reflection of his personal failures, or it must be class hatred of some sort: Chip lacks happiness and money, and he would like all of us to suffer with him for that, and to blame society for it. Yet "these were years in America when it was nearly impossible to make money, […] and Chip had missed the boat."[2032] Like his father, "Chip had believed that it was possible to be successful in America without making lots of money […] so he had chosen to pursue a life of the mind."[2033]

Chip escapes the forceful and bitter correction of Melissa by going to Scotland for the summer and touches earth as it were. Before he returns, he realizes that his efforts at "regaining a sense of self and purpose" have quickly given way to drinking in the streets like a homeless man and "hitting on Yankee college girls."[2034] When he returns home, he is more determined than ever to complete his correction, as if it were a matter of self-discipline: he stops drinking, gets enough sleep, does regular exercise, reads his books and "the damned Heidegger."[2035] Chip is content. He believes that "pieces of the self-improvement puzzle fell into place."[2036] Meanwhile, Melissa reappears, this time as a seductress. Chip immediately forgets the unfortunate ending of the last semester and gives in to Melissa's advances. In other words, he trashes all his corrections. He gets re-addicted to sex and drugs, and

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[2031] Franzen, The Corrections, pp.46-47.
[2032] Franzen, The Corrections, p.109.
[2033] Franzen, The Corrections, p.33.
[2034] Franzen, The Corrections, p.48.
[2035] Franzen, The Corrections, p.48.
[2036] Franzen, The Corrections, p.48.

tries to convince Melissa into an anti-family, anti-society anarchism which he claims to represent himself. Chip's corrections are not trashed; they have been naught.

Melissa rejects such anarchism violently because she is antithetical to Chip in almost every respect. In fact, Melissa reworks her critical theory the moment Chip tries to correct her. She calls her divorced parents her "best friends," she respects their divorce on the basis that they are individuals with their own problems.[2037] Chip protests: "Children are not supposed to get along with their parents. Your parents are not supposed to be your best friends. There's supposed to be some element of rebellion. That's how you define yourself as a person."[2038] However, Melissa is actually happy with what she is and what she has as an upper middle class, privileged girl. Melissa is not consciously, deliberately doing something to spite her family or society. She does not feel guilty or happy at once; unlike Chip, she is not 'correcting' anything. She is comfortable with her behavior and whatever she does. She tells Chip, "I love myself. What's wrong with that?" while Chip remains silent, once more:

> *He was unable to say what was wrong with it. He was unable to say what was wrong with anything about Melissa—her self-adoring parents, her theatricality and confidence, her infatuation with capitalism. […] The feeling he's had on the last day of Consuming Narratives, the feeling that he was mistaken about everything, that here was nothing wrong with the world and nothing wrong with being happy in it, that the problem was his and his alone, returned with such force that he had to sit down on the bed.*[2039]

Chip is personally so insecure and vulnerable that even the slightest resistance to his theoretical social analysis is capable of wounding and destabilizing him. Nevertheless, Chip still wonders whether Melissa "was immensely well-adjusted or seriously messed up."[2040] Being well-adjusted is a crime for Chip, and he especially wants to destroy his parents' false adjustments to the world. This is seen most evidently in his college and post-college girlfriend Tori.[2041] She is Jewish, a feminist theorist, and an affront to his father's sexism. Chip takes Tori to St. Jude to meet his parents although, or because, he knew that the parents would violently disagree with and disapprove of a radical Jewish intellectual as a girlfriend for one of

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[2037] Franzen, The Corrections, p.62.
[2038] Franzen, The Corrections, p.62.
[2039] Franzen, The Corrections, p.63.
[2040] Franzen, The Corrections, p.64.
[2041] Franzen, The Corrections, p.34.

their children. Chip considered this prank of his a correction—a correction of his parents' conservatism and middle-class values. Tori's anger with the patriarchal structure of society also serves as a correction for Chip himself:

> *Chip had grown up listening to his father pontificate on the topics of Men's Work and Women's Work and the importance of maintaining the distinction; in a spirit of correction, he stuck with Tori for nearly a decade. He did all the laundry and most of the cleaning and cooking and cat care [… until he could] fully exhaust his supply of male guilt.*[2042]

In itself, this correction is not terribly wrong as it discerns a grave problem and tries to amend it, albeit futilely because Chip does it out of simple, adolescent antagonism. Nevertheless, two of Chip's social critiques are important for the novel's overall critique of America, and Franzen seems to use Chip as a spokesperson for some of his harshest cultural analyses of the America of the 1990s. Julia, as we have mentioned above, breaks up with Chip after reading his sexist screenplay. Two important interconnected background factors underlie this breakup. First, not aware that Chip is broke, Julia complains about Chip's tendency for staying at home engaged in intimacy and eating reheated pasta for days on end. Chip understands that "the minimum price of further conversation with her would be an overpriced lunch."[2043] Second, Julia has started taking mood-enhancing medications and feels much more healthy compared to Chip, who, she implies, is depressed and needs medication himself. Julia asserts that she has found herself while Chip believes that she is being refashioned, or corrected, by the therapy and medication. While self-serving, Chip's criticism of the situation is powerful. As Chip complains to his sister,

> *the structure of the entire culture is flawed[; …] the bureaucracy has arrogated the right to define certain states of mind of as "diseased." A lack of desire to spend money becomes a symptom of disease that requires expensive medication. Which medication then destroys the libido, in other words destroys the appetite for the one pleasure in life that's free, which means the person has to spend even* more *money on compensatory pleasures. The very definition of mental "health" is the ability to participate in the consumer economy. When you buy into therapy, you're buying into buying. […] I personally am losing the battle with a commercialized, medicalized, totalitarian modernity right this instant.*[2044]

Therefore, Julia has become a non-discerning creature of the new economy of consumption, pleasure, medication, and self-refashioning, and Chip's theoretical

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[2042] Franzen, The Corrections, p.34.
[2043] Franzen, The Corrections, p.30.
[2044] Franzen, The Corrections, p.32.

work is entirely based on a detailed critique of this socio-psychological and economic system.

In fact, *The Corrections* extends this critique toward a satire on the American consumer and psychopharmaceutical culture. As we mentioned above, Alfred Lambert had been a modest and quiet experimenter and an inventor in his healthy days. He holds patents for two of his inventions and one of them has been used, without his consent, in the development of a treatment system called "Correcktall"[2045, 2046] It is launched with an extravagant public relations event that celebrates the advent of "a revolutionary neurobiological therapy."[2047] Originally designed to treat "degenerative neurological diseases" such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, Correcktall is the miracle drug materialized by Alfred's discipline.[2048] Unfortunately, Alfred's Parkinson's is too advanced for him to receive this treatment. Yet there is more about this treatment :

> *Correcktall has proved so powerful and versatile that its promise extends not only to therapy but to an out-and-out cure, and to a cure not only of these terrible degenerative afflictions but also of a host of ailments typically considered psychiatric or even psychological. Simply put, Correcktall offers for the first time the possibility of renewing and* improving *the hard wiring of an adult human brain.*[2049]

While Correcktall is promoted aggressively although it is still in the experimentation process, it has already been made (illegally) available under the name Aslan on cruises off the U.S. coast. With a strange coincidence, Enid takes Aslan when she and Alfred are on their luxury cruise trip, which is aptly titled as the Nordic Pleasurelines. She visits the cruise physician, Dr. Hibbard, and asks for a pill to make her sleep at night. Dr. Hibbard, a demonic personality, convinces Enid that she is clinically depressed—what else could anxiety and sleep disturbance that he forces her to admit, mean?—and that she has to use Aslan. Enid, the dramatic queen of propriety, reacts to the idea of using an antidepressant, but Dr. Hibbard comforts her simply, and cunningly, by telling her that he will give her the drugs "free of

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[2045] Like *Infinite Jest*, *The Corrections*, too, figures a novelistic element that doubles the title.
[2046] Franzen, The Corrections, p.197.
[2047] Franzen, The Corrections, p.198.
[2048] Franzen, The Corrections, p.198.
[2049] Franzen, The Corrections, p.198.

charge."[2050] Furthermore, he presents the drug as one of the extraordinary services of the luxury cruise: Aslan is "the state-of-global-art psychopharmacology that Pleasurelines is proud to make available to its discerning clientele."[2051] To reassure Enid that Aslan is not an antidepressant, Dr. Hubbard also says that it is rather a "personality optimizer. […] You'll feel emotionally more resilient. More flexible, more confident, happier with yourself. Your anxiety and oversensitivity will disappear, as will any morbid concern about the opinion of others."[2052] The miracle of the drug is that it "exerts a remarkable blocking effect on […] shame."[2053] Enid, who organizes her life in accordance with "social expectations and moral imperatives," is excited, almost overjoyed, and enquires the ways to refill her prescription after her complimentary drugs are finished.[2054] What Dr. Hibbard describes but Enid naively misses is illegal drug routes. Of course, another trip on the Nordic Pleasurelines is the easiest option. Although Enid loves the drug and orders more from Europe, it is perhaps to her credit that she eventually kicks the habit.

By portraying the cruise trip as a den of illegal antidepressants for the upper middle class, Franzen offers a glimpse into the near-future paradise that the U.S. will become for those who have money: vulgar luxury, pretentious sophistication (with dining rooms named after obscure international philosophers) and psychopharmacology. Or a lifestyle of permanent pleasures. One of the smarter people on the cruise, Ted, gives a Chip-like analysis of the situation: "our culture attaches too much importance to feelings, [… and] it's not computers that are making everything virtual, it's mental health. Everyone's trying to correct their thoughts and improve their feelings and work on their relationships and parenting skills."[2055] Therefore, Ted diagnoses how the medical correction technology or the mental health industry has created a national malaise of improved thoughts and feelings. We are not ourselves, we are better without anxiety about others. The prospect of such freedom envelops Enid so completely that she does not even mind Dr. Hibbard's calling her Enith, Edith, Edna, Eden, Edie. It does not really matter who she is. The

[2050] Franzen, The Corrections, p.336.
[2051] Franzen, The Corrections, p.337.
[2052] Franzen, The Corrections, pp.339-340.
[2053] Franzen, The Corrections, p.335.
[2054] Franzen, The Corrections, p.331.
[2055] Franzen, The Corrections, p.326.

luxury cruise and the drug Aslan are merely the epitome of what people like Enid have always wanted: "pyramids of shrimp."

The most successful Lambert child, Gary, is another important character whose corrections continuously arrange and rearrange his identity, his life. He is the oldest and the only Lambert offspring with a family of his own. He is a successful banker, handsome, impeccably dressed, a family man, living in a big expensive house his mother would approve of. Yet he hates his life and he is struggling with alcoholism, paranoia, and chronic depression all at once. He is the sum total of the most significant characteristics of his parents; he is hardworking and successful like his father, and mean-spirited and conniving like his mother. Gary is clueless about his resemblance to his mother, but he is obsessed about his similarities to his father. Like his father, he works long hours to "escape" his seemingly wonderful married life, yet we are told that "his entire life was set up as a correction of his father's life."[2056] As Franzen tells Donald Antrim, "Gary's contorted attempts to avoid turning into his father, and his paranoid suspicion that he's failing [are futile because his] attempts to improve on his father's life make him all the more like his father."[2057]

Gary would like to be a loving and worldly version of his father. After all, he is also into hard work, is intelligent, disciplined, has enough inner strength. Nevertheless, he overestimates his fragile sense of superiority that he builds with the selfishness and class-consciousness he inherits from his mother, a superior self that is driven by an underlying anxiety of inferiority. With his immaculate, stylish clothes, Gary tries to differentiate himself from "striver[s]."[2058] He wants to be perceived, depending solely on his clothes, "as if he didn't have to work at all: as if he were a gentleman who just happened to enjoy coming to the office and helping other people. As if noblesse oblige."[2059] Nevertheless, America is changing and destroying his self-representation: "now, in the late maturing years of the long, long boom, even young suburban galoots from New Jersey were buying hand-tailored Italian suits and high-end eyewear. So much money had flooded the system that twenty-six-year-olds […]

[2056] Franzen, The Corrections, pp.203-189.
[2057] Franzen, Interview with Donald Antrim, p.74.
[2058] Franzen, The Corrections, p.205.
[2059] Franzen, The Corrections, pp.205-206.

were able to dress like Hollywood aristocracy."[2060] Because it is a time of lots of easy money, opportunities to make it, and with a newly developed culture of moneyless lifestyle devoid of taste, Gary's success seems not as grand as he had imagined it as a boy. Everyone is terribly unique and creative, stylish and interesting—they all want to pass as winners. As the narrator explains,

> *Gary wanted to enjoy being a man of wealth and leisure, but the country was making it none too easy. All around him, millions of newly minted American millionaires were engaged in the identical pursuit of feeling extraordinary—of buying the perfect Victorian, of skiing the virgin slope, of knowing the chef personally, of locating the beach that had no footprints. There were further tens of millions of young Americans who didn't have the money but were nonetheless chasing the Perfect Cool. And meanwhile the sad truth was that not everyone could be extraordinary, not everyone could be extremely cool; because whom would this leave to be ordinary? Who would perform the thankless work of being comparatively* un*cool?*[2061]

Gary is particularly obsessed about Midwesterners migrating to East. "He was part of this exodus himself, of course, but he'd made his escape early, and, frankly, priority had its privileges."[2062] He also observes with horror how St. Jude is correcting itself: "suddenly cleaning ladies knew from sun-dried tomatoes, suddenly hog-farmers knew from crème brulée."[2063] There are certain distinctions that determine Gary's sense of false superiority and he abhors their eradications. "Gary wished that all further migration to the coasts could be banned and all clothes and playing board games, in order that a strategic national reserve of cluelessness might be maintained," so that "a wilderness of taste which would enable people of privilege, like himself, to feel extremely civilized in perpetuity."[2064]

We realize that Gary is so vulnerable that he needs his cunning wife Caroline's rather poisonous advice in order to survive in the material and emotional jungle of the 1990's America. Gary compiles a list of Caroline's oft-repeated remarks that seem more like a collection of manipulative slogans that nevertheless provide "strength and sustenance" to Gary.[2065] Gary calls the following list his "personal Decalogue, an All-Time Caroline Ten":

[2060] Franzen, The Corrections, p.206.
[2061] Franzen, The Corrections, p.206.
[2062] Franzen, The Corrections, p.207.
[2063] Franzen, The Corrections, p.207.
[2064] Franzen, The Corrections, p.207.
[2065] Franzen, The Corrections, p.193.

1. *You're nothing like your father.*
2. *You don't have to apologize for buying the BMW.*
3. *Your dad emotionally abuses your mom.*
4. *I love the taste of your come.*
5. *Work was the drug that ruined your father's life.*
6. *Let's buy both!*
7. *Your family has a diseased relationship with food.*
8. *You're an incredibly good-looking man.*
9. *[Your sister] is jealous of what you have.*
10. *There's absolutely nothing useful about suffering.*[2066]

The fact that such meaningless, questionable, confrontational prop-ups would support an adult as guidelines for life reveals that Gary is an empty shell who has replaced his mother with Caroline to give him support for his social and psychological insecurities. The list also gives us a clue how aware Caroline is with regard to her husband's unhealthy relationship with his parents, whom she can barely stand. Naturally, Gary cannot convince Caroline to go to St. Jude with their three sons for the one last Christmas that Enid wants to celebrate together. The effects of the fight they have over the trip last as long as Gary can stand Caroline's withdrawal of her manipulative support.

The youngest Lambert child, Denise, is not any less troubled than her brothers are. Although she is a beautiful and smart young woman, a famous chef at high-end restaurants, responsible, methodical in everything she does, and capable of loving, she is terribly confused about her identity, leads a promiscuous life, and gets into complicated relationships. She is addicted to obedience, especially to men who will teach her things, tell her what to do, will use her body or culinary skills. Instead of conceiving herself as a passive object for men/masters, she actually would like to become a master herself, though. Yet she does not know how to have a self, and she erases herself completely. It is possible to see her as a hybrid "correction"; she is a nerdy yet cool chef and an aloof socialite who cooks (like her mother) but cooks as an obsessed virtuoso (like her father).

As the novel closes, Alfred is placed in a long-term care facility and Enid makes sure she visits him almost every day for two years in order to tell him, over and over at every single visit, how mistaken he was about everything in life:

[2066] Franzen, The Corrections, p.193.

> *She had to tell him, while she still had the time, how wrong he'd been and how right she'd been. How wrong not to love her more, how wrong not to cherish her and have sex at every opportunity, how wrong not to trust her financial instincts, how wrong to have spent so much time at work and so little with the children, how wrong to have been so negative, how wrong to have been so gloomy, how wrong to have run away from life, how wrong to have said no, again and again, instead of yes: she had to tell him all of this, every single day. Even if he wouldn't listen, she had to tell him.*[2067]

A rather touching correction, with echoes of Melissa's criticism of Chip's negativity, of Caroline's words of false wisdom to Gary, of Gary's greed for money, and of Chip's and Gary's vindictiveness and resentment. Alfred is reported to have said no to everything all the way to the end. When he is dead, Enid feels that nothing remains now that can "kill her hope": "She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life."[2068] At last, the bright girl with business sense will begin to live happily. Her happiness will depend, of course, on the extent she will change her self-perception.

Franzen's fourth novel, *Freedom*, is even more harshly critical than *The Corrections*. On the basis of its title, the novel may promise to examine the possibilities of and limitations on human freedom. Yet Franzen demonstrates what a misunderstood word freedom is, how abused it is, how unethically it is employed to defend our vilest, most selfish acts, and what a valid excuse it becomes for all kinds of immorality and self-destruction. It is almost as if Franzen exposes how people misconceive their freedom in order to show how our notion of freedom, when misconceived, may punish us. Not that he inflicts terrible disasters on his characters; the characters themselves inflict every kind of pain and trouble on themselves, freely and liberally, due to their flawed understandings of freedom. "Use well thy freedom," as one character reads engraved on a building's stone facade, is the ultimate challenge Franzen's characters face in their lives.[2069]

At its simplest, *Freedom* elaborates on the form of freedom that always takes the form of freedom-from but never freedom-to, a point directly addressed in *Infinite Jest*. The intergenerational pressures within the family, the correcting of one's parents and children that we saw in *The Corrections* are also at work in *Freedom*.

[2067] Franzen, The Corrections, p.600.
[2068] Franzen, The Corrections, p.601.
[2069] Jonathan Franzen, **Freedom**, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 2010, p.184.

The novel centers on the Berglunds, Walter and Patty, their children Jessica and Joey, and Walter's friend Richard Katz. The Berglunds are the generation that comes after the Lamberts, and the most of the novel takes place in 2004, during the reign of the Republicans, the Bush presidency, and the war in Iraq, and ends in 2010 under Obama. Covering the immediate years after September 11 and carrying a thorough and very harsh political criticism, *Freedom* does not hesitate to make explicit the corruptions of an ethically wayward country, on both personal and national bases.

The novel is structured in three chapters, each subdivided into three or more parts. An autobiography written by Patty in the third person concludes the first and second chapters. The first chapter takes us backward in time, to the first decades of Walter and Patty's marriage and their life in St. Paul, and then, as we read the first part of Patty's autobiography, we travel further back as well as forward in time. In St. Paul, Patty is known as a kind neighbor, "a sunny carrier of sociocultural pollen, an affable bee."[2070] Walter, "greener than Greenpeace," who works as a lawyer and goes to work by his bicycle, seems to be a perfect family man.[2071] Their portrait of the perfect family is disrupted by teenage angst; Joey, at fifteen, leaves home and moves in with the next-door neighbors because of Walter's disciplined parenting. Patty, who adores her son, turns into an alcoholic wreck while Walter holds up his principles of hard work and busies himself with work. Soon, Patty and Walter, now an alienated couple, move to Washington where Walter finds a new job, and Joey goes to the University of Virginia.

Then, we read the first part of Patty's autobiography, titled, in the confessional mode, "Mistakes Were Made."[2072] Patty lays out for us not only the decisive effects of family backgrounds on the future lives of Patty, Walter, and Richard but also the sad and tormenting stories how they try to be good and honest people, loyal to each other amid many instances of self-deception, denial, and betrayal.

Walter and Patty meet at college. Patty is initially attracted to Walter's roommate, Richard, a rebellious, selfish, "addiction-prone," and reckless rock

[2070] Franzen, Freedom, p.5.
[2071] Franzen, Freedom, p.5.
[2072] Franzen, Freedom, p.27.

musician who shares a room with the dependable and nerdy Walter.[2073] Walter falls in love with the tall, beautiful, athletic Patty at first sight and Patty takes shelter from Richard's rudeness and indifference in Walter's tender and understanding approach to her. Although Walter and Richard are opposites, one extremely cool, lazy, irresponsible, and the other the epitome of "uncool," hardworking, "heartbreakingly responsible," at times a "moralistic irritant," but mostly a nice and good person that makes everybody around nice and good, too, they are best friends.[2074] In fact, there is an underlying sameness to Richard and Walter: "both were struggling, albeit in very different ways, to be good people."[2075] Walter, in his honesty and loyalty to his friend, risks pushing Patty to Richard but reassures her on Richard's niceness and tells her that Richard's "mom ran away when he was little, and became a religious nut. His dad was a postal worker and a drinker who got lung cancer when Richard was in high school. Richard took care of him until he died."[2076] When Patty learns from Walter's friends that Walter has had similar troubles—which perhaps connect Richard and Walter like nothing else can, she "began to learn how miraculously worthy Walter was" behind a goodness that mostly annoyed her:

> *According to his friends, Walter had grown up living in cramped quarters behind the office of a motel called the Whispering Pines [in Hibbing, Minnesota], with an alcoholic father, an older brother who regularly beat him up, a younger brother who studiously copied the older brother's ridicule of him, and a mother whose physical handicaps and low morale so impaired her performance as the motel's housekeeper and night manager that during high season, in the summer, Walter often cleaned rooms all afternoon and then checked in late arrivals while his father was drinking with his buddies and his mother slept. This was in addition to his regular family job of helping his dad maintain the physical plant, doing everything from sealing the parking lot to snaking drains to repairing the boiler. His dad depended on his help, and Walter provided it in perennial hope of winning his dad's approval, which his friends said was impossible, however, because Walter was too sensitive and intellectual and not enough into hunting and trucks and beer (which the brothers were). Despite working what amounted to a full-time year-round unpaid job, Walter had also managed to star in school plays and musicals, inspire lifelong devotion in numerous childhood friends, learn cooking and basic sewing from his mother, pursue his interest in nature (tropical fish; ant farms; emergency care for orphaned nestlings; flower pressing), and graduate valedictorian. He got an Ivy League scholarship offer but instead went to Macalester, close enough to Hibbing to take a bus up on weekends and help his*

[2073] Franzen, Freedom, p.66.
[2074] Franzen, Freedom, pp.66, 349.
[2075] Franzen, Freedom, p.67.
[2076] Franzen, Freedom, p.73.

> *mom combat the motel's encroaching decay (the dad apparently now had emphysema and was useless). Walter had dreamed of being a film director or even an actor but instead was studying law at the U. because, as he reportedly had put it, "Somebody in the family needs to have an actual income."*[2077]

Compared to what Richard and Walter went through with regard to their families, Patty's troubles seem frivolous, as we shall note below.

Patty, from early on, projects a faulty self-image to Walter who thinks that she is a nice and good person. "Patty knew, in her heart, that he was wrong in his impression of her. And the mistake she went on to make, the really big life mistake, was to go along with Walter's version of her in spite of knowing that it wasn't right. He seemed so certain of her goodness that eventually he wore her down."[2078] She knows that she suffers from "morbid competitiveness and low self-esteem" and her eventual marriage to Walter, based on deception, is a result of her character flaws.[2079] She selfishly seeks Walter's love, in fact takes advantage of his love, simply because she is lonely, confused, and rootless while she never stops fancying Richard, even after twenty years of marriage. Richard is very protective of Walter and he knows what Patty is up to. He warns Patty early on that she is "apparently unaware that his dad's dying of liver disease and […] Walter's averaging about four hours of sleep while you're being friends and hanging out, just so you can come over here and flirt with me."[2080] Richard's protective loyalty prevents him from telling her that he too has feelings for Patty, and the trio continue with their lives in a maze of love, loyalty, and betrayal.

At surface, Patty seems to have achieved every dream she determinedly sought. After college, Patty severs all her ties with her politically engaged New York family of old money, quits her "standout" basketball career, marries Walter, and devotes her life to being the perfect homemaker.[2081] Patty's obsession with being a good mother is a reaction to her own mother who used her political ambition as "a noble and stirring excuse" to get away from her family. Her father is a "mean" ridiculer and he frequently torments Patty with his tasteless jokes about everything

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[2077] Franzen, Freedom, p.77.
[2078] Franzen, Freedom, pp.74-75.
[2079] Franzen, Freedom, p.29.
[2080] Franzen, Freedom, p.106.
[2081] Franzen, Freedom, p.4.

she cares about, from her sports coaches to her dog. Patty's plans for her future are a correction of her past. She wants a wonderful family of her own

> *[s]ort of by default, because her mother was so relentless in promoting impressive careers for her daughters, and also because her mother had been, in Patty's opinion, a substandard parent, Patty was inclined to want to be a homemaker and an outstanding mother. "I want to live in a beautiful old house and have two children," she told Walter." I want to be a really, really great mom."*
> *"Do you want a career, too?"*
> *"Raising children would be my career."*[2082]

This plan has fatal flaws, for both Patty and Walter. She makes Walter a plaything, a figurant in her dream life, lets him give up his dreams out of his love, whereas Patty is driven by ugly spitefulness, blunt competitiveness:

> *A great thing about the young Walter was how much he wanted Patty to win. […] Walter gave her full-bore infusions of hostility toward anybody (her parents, her siblings) who made her feel bad. And since he was so intellectually honest in other areas of life, he had excellent credibility when he criticized her family and signed on with her questionable programs of competing with it. He may not have been exactly what she wanted in a man, but he was unsurpassable in providing the rabid fandom which, at the time, she needed even more than romance. It's easy now to see that Patty would have been well advised to take some years to develop a career and a more solid post-athletic identity, get some experience with other kinds of men, and generally acquire more maturity before embarking on being a mother. But even though she was finished as an intercollegiate player, there was still a shot clock in her head, she was still in the buzzer's thrall, she needed more than ever to keep winning. And the way to win—her obvious best shot at defeating her sisters and her mother—was to marry the nicest guy in Minnesota, live in a bigger and better and more interesting house than anybody else in her family, pop out the babies, and do everything as a parent that [her mother] hadn't. And Walter, despite being an avowed feminist and an annually renewing Student-level member of Zero Population Growth, embraced her entire domestic program without reservation, because she really was exactly what he wanted in a woman. They got married three weeks after graduation.*[2083]

After deliberately choosing and putting perfectly to practice what she wants from life, Patty is objectionably unhappy. As she muses, "she had all day every day to figure out some decent and satisfying way to live, and yet all she ever seemed to get for all her choices and her freedom was more miserable. [She] is forced to the conclusion that she pitied herself for being so free."[2084] Yet she seeks further freedom: at forty-one, she finally cheats Walter with Richard, destroying both her

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[2082] Franzen, Freedom, p.95.
[2083] Franzen, Freedom, pp.118-119.
[2084] Franzen, Freedom, p.181.

and Richard's fragile relationships with Walter, a fragility created by moral anxiety not to hurt Walter who loves them both, and who instills in them whatever moral goodness they long to have.

Walter, in stark contrast to every other character in the novel, represents the true meaning of freedom. However, he also demonstrates the impossibility of it. As we noted above, his family is a terrible burden on him. If we can see Walter's father as the opposite of Alfred Lambert of *The Corrections*, we can understand how Walter turns into a responsible man as a reaction to his father. At root, Walter reacts to his father's insistence on his freedom from responsibility that brings nothing but misery. In a paradoxical way, and in the mode of a correction, Walter learns from his father how to lead a proper, ethical life by constantly trying to do the right thing, by being a good person. In other words, Walter knows that freedom means escape, that it brings disorder, mayhem, destruction for many people, and Walter is aware that true freedom means responsibility.

One of the most significant things about Walter is how he invents himself and how his low class background leads him to develop a reactionary theory without turning so much into an overt class anxiety as a realistic outlook on life that is shaped in a subtle manner by his reaction to his past. Walter's ethics inevitably grows into an environmental consciousness that focuses both on preserving nature and actively seeking precautions. Population control is one early manifestation. During college, Walter joins a group called Club of Rome which

> *was devoted to exploring the limits of growth. Mainstream economic theory, both Marxist and free-market, Walter said, took for granted that economic growth was always a positive thing. A GDP growth rate of one or two percent was considered modest, and a population growth rate of one percent was considered desirable, and yet, he said, if you compounded these rates over a hundred years, the numbers were terrible: a world population of eighteen billion and world energy consumption ten times greater than today's. And if you went* another *hundred years, with steady growth, well, the numbers were simply impossible. So the Club of Rome was seeking more rational and humane ways of putting the brakes on growth than simply destroying the planet and letting everybody starve to death or kill each other.*[2085]

After working as a lawyer, Walter eventually turns to projects that would enable him to take active role on these matters. In Washington, he works for Nature

[2085] Franzen, Freedom, pp.121-122.

Conservancy, and eventually makes a pact with the devil, so to speak, for his project of "[s]aving the planet."[2086] His plan is simple: business is destroying environment but if he can possibly work with an environmentally sensitive businessman, environment could be saved without fighting against business. Therefore, environment would not be abandoned to the business conscious people and American natural resources could be protected. He starts working with a rich businessman called Vin Haven who is close friends with President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.

Vin Haven is "a big oil-and-gas guy" and a "passionate bird-lover."[2087] Walter and his new assistant Lalitha—who is as passionate about nature as Walter is—collaborate with Haven for "the preservation of a single bird species, the cerulean warbler," which is "the fastest-declining songbird in North America."[2088] The plan requires collaboration with coal companies who are more than eager to collaborate before an endangered species would have "deleterious effects on their freedom to cut down forests and blow up mountains."[2089] Haven founds the "Cerulean Mountain Trust" and Walter becomes its executive director.[2090]

> *To help save the cerulean warbler, Walter said, the Trust was aiming to create a hundred-square-mile roadless tract—Haven's Hundred was its working nickname—in Wyoming County, West Virginia, surrounded by a larger "buffer zone" open to hunting and motorized recreation. To be able to afford both the surface and mineral rights to such a large single parcel, the Trust would first have to permit coal extraction on nearly a third of it, via mountaintop removal. […] Mountaintop removal as currently practiced was ecologically deplorable—ridgetop rock blasted away to expose the underlying seams of coal, surrounding valleys filled with rubble, biologically rich streams obliterated. Walter, however, believed that properly managed reclamation efforts could mitigate far more of the damage than people realized; and the great advantage of fully mined-out land was that nobody would rip it open again.*[2091]

So far, Walter's plan seems to be only about birds and their habitats. Yet mountaintop removal involves serious risks because it involves displacing people living there. In Walter's passionate argument,

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[2086] Franzen, Freedom, p.207.
[2087] Franzen, Freedom, pp.209, 210.
[2088] Franzen, Freedom, p.210.
[2089] Franzen, Freedom, p.210.
[2090] Franzen, Freedom, p.209.
[2091] Franzen, Freedom, p.211.

> *The* New York Times *gives Bush-Cheney a total free pass on Iraq but keeps running these editorials about the evils of [mountaintop removal. ...] Nobody state, federal, or private wants to touch a project that involves sacrificing mountain ridges and displacing poor families from their ancestral homes. They don't want to hear about forest reclamation, they don't want to hear about sustainable green jobs. Wyoming County is very, very empty—the total number of families directly impacted by our plan is less than two hundred. But the whole thing gets turned into evil corporations versus the helpless common man.*[2092]

For Walter the equation is simple: "Every species has an inalienable right to keep existing," government ignores environmental problems, and people keep breeding and breeding, and occupying more land that belongs to animals.[2093] Walter, who sounds like an "*angry* crank," seems to deplore humanity as a species that ruthlessly invades the planet at the cost of other species: "the sprawl, the sprawl, the sprawl. Low-density development is the worst. And SUVs everywhere, snowmobiles everywhere, Jet Skis everywhere, ATVs everywhere, two-acre lawns everywhere. The god-damned green monospecific chemical-drenched lawns."[2094] Within this scheme, it would seem, biodiversity requires limits on the human diversity, meaning, population, the "too many damn people on the planet."[2095] In Walter's projection, the growing human population will destroy the whole ecosystem (plant and animal) for food and resources, and "then mass starvation and/or disease and/or killings" will ensue.[2096]

The sad thing is that Walter experiences a late boom that comes with such ferocious passion that he wants to make up for the time he has lost. After setting aside all his plans for giving Patty her dream, Patty's unhappiness and depression leaves him alone and bitter. He still loves Patty, but she has shut herself down completely, and Walter is opening himself wide to the world, to finally correct it.

Walter and his assistant Lalitha ask Walter's popular musician friend Richard's help with their case against overpopulation. They are planning to benefit from Richard's popularity to spread their message. Trying to convince Richard that his return to his primary interest in college years is not a mid-life crisis but the

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[2092] Franzen, Freedom, p.213.
[2093] Franzen, Freedom, p.219.
[2094] Franzen, Freedom, p.217.
[2095] Franzen, Freedom, p.219.
[2096] Franzen, Freedom, p.222.

maturity of his outlook, Walter offers him an outline of America's approach to overpopulation:

> *I guess I was part of a larger cultural shift that was happening in the eighties and nineties. Overpopulation was definitely part of the public conversation in the seventies, with Paul Ehrlich, and the Club of Rome. […] And then suddenly it was gone. Became just unmentionable. Part of it was the Green Revolution—you know, still plenty of famines, but not apocalyptic ones. And then population control got a terrible name politically. Totalitarian China with its one-child policy, Indira Gandhi doing forced sterilizations. […] The liberals got all scared and silent. Even the Sierra Club got scared. And the conservatives, of course, never gave a shit in the first place, because their entire ideology is selfish short-term interest and God's plan and so forth. And so the problem became this cancer that you know is growing inside you but you decide you're just not going to think about. The conservatives won. They turned the Democrats into a center-right party. They got the entire country singing "God Bless America," stress on* God*, at every single major-league baseball game. They won on every fucking front, but they especially won culturally, and* especially *regarding babies. In 1970 it was cool to care about the planet's future and not have kids. Now the one thing everyone agrees on, right and left, is that it's beautiful to have a lot of babies. The more the better. Kate Winslet is pregnant, hooray hooray. Some dimwit in Iowa just had octuplets, hooray hooray. The conversation about the idiocy of SUVs stops dead the minute people say they're buying them to protect their precious babies. […] We just want to make having babies more of an embarrassment. Like smoking's an embarrassment. Like being obese is an embarrassment. Like driving an Escalade would be an embarrassment if it weren't for the kiddie argument. Like living in a four-thousand-square-foot house on a two-acre lot should be an embarrassment.*[2097]

Walter's argument on overpopulation is dangerously connected to the low class and he knows the risks involved:

> *The problem is that nobody dares make overpopulation part of the national cconversation. And why not? Because the subject is a downer. Because it seems like old news. Because, like with global warming, we haven't quite reached the point where the consequences become undeniable. And because we sound like elitists if we try to tell poor people and uneducated people not to have so many babies. Having large families tracks inversely with economic status, and so does the age at which girls start having babies, which is just as damaging from a numbers perspective. You can cut the growth rate in half just by doubling the average age of first time mothers from eighteen to thirty-five. […] It's the elitism thing again, […] we call attention to their high birth rates and their low age of first reproduction. […] It's all circling around the same problem of personal liberties. People came to this country for either money or freedom. If you don't have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you can't afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life whatever way you want to. […] The reason the system can't be overthrown in*

[2097] Franzen, Freedom, pp.220-221.

> *this country […] is all about freedom. […] And the conversation about rights in this country isn't rational. It's taking place on the level of emotion, and class resentments, which is why the right is so good at exploiting it.*[2098]

Perhaps, then, Walter, too, is trapped in emotion and class resentment. As the executive director of Cerulean Warbler Trust, Walter has to clear the mountaintop off its residents, "two hundred or so families, most of them very poor, who owned houses or trailers on small or smallish parcels of land within the Warbler Park's proposed boundaries."[2099] Most of these residents do not have jobs and "pas[s] their time with guns and internal-combustion engines, supplementing their families' diets with game shot deeper in the hills and carried out on ATVs."[2100] The difficulty is, one resident called Coyle Mathis is resisting even the mention of leaving his home. His resistance is especially difficult for Walter who sees in Mathis his father:

> *Coyle Mathis embodied the pure negative spirit of backcountry West Virginia. He was consistent in disliking absolutely everybody. Being the enemy of Mathis's enemy only made you another of his enemies. Big Coal, the United Mine Workers, environmentalists, all forms of government, black people, meddling white Yankees: he hated all equally. His philosophy of life was* Back the fuck off or live to regret it. *Six generations of surly Mathises had been buried on the steep creek-side hill that would be among the first sites blasted when the coal companies came in. (Nobody had warned Walter about the cemetery problem in West Virginia when he took the job with the Trust, but he'd sure found out about it in a hurry.) Knowing a thing or two about omnidirectional anger himself, Walter might still have managed to bring Mathis around if the man hadn't reminded him so much of his own father. His stubborn, self-destructive spite. Walter had prepared a fine package of attractive offers by the time he and Lalitha, after receiving no response to their numerous friendly letters, had driven the dusty road up the Nine Mile valley, uninvited, on a hot bright morning in July. He was willing to give the Mathises and their neighbors as much as $1,200 an acre, plus free land in a reasonably nice hollow on the southern margin of the preserve, plus relocation costs, plus state-of-the-art exhumation and reburial of all Mathis bones. But Coyle Mathis didn't even wait to hear the details. He said, "No, N-O," and added that he intended to be buried in the family cemetery and no man was going to stop him. And suddenly Walter was sixteen again and dizzy with anger. Anger not only with Mathis, for his lack of manners and good sense, but also, paradoxically, with Vin Haven, for pitting him against a man whose economic irrationality he at some level recognized and admired.*[2101]

This is the beginning of a downward journey for Walter whose "entire personality had been formed in opposition to the backcountry he'd come from. Mathis, with his

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[2098] Franzen, Freedom, pp.360-361.
[2099] Franzen, Freedom, p.294.
[2100] Franzen, Freedom, p.294.
[2101] Franzen, Freedom, p.295.

poor-white unreason and resentments, had offended Walter's very being: had blinded him with rage."[2102]

In an effort to lure Mathis out, Walter makes another great compromise of his values and joins forces with the Republican defense contractors close to President Bush. American military forces, as the war escalates in Iraq, need body-armor, and Coyle Mathis and other resisters take the offer of jobs in armor factories, new luxurious houses, health insurance, and retirement plans. Their jobs would be secure, they are reassured, as "various members of the Bush administration [declared] that America would be defending itself in the Middle East for generations to come. There was no foreseeable end to the war on terror and, ergo, no end to the demand for body armor."[2103] Walter completely disagrees with the war in Iraq and looks down on "the moral hygiene of defense contractors" but he eventually conducts business with them.[2104]

Meanwhile, Walter's anger increases as he cannot take it out of his mind that Americans "feel uniquely entitled" to the biggest, best, most extravagant of literally everything while no one gives "*five seconds' thought*" to the idea of "the planet's ruination."[2105] Walter begins to feel pessimistic:

> *He didn't know what to do, he didn't know how to live. Each new thing he encountered in life impelled him in a direction that fully convinced him of its rightness, but then the next new thing loomed up and impelled him in the opposite direction, which also felt right. There was no controlling narrative: he seemed to himself a purely reactive pinball in a game whose only object was to stay alive for staying alive's sake.*[2106]

His relationship with his son Joey is a further complication in his life. Joey's purpose in life until he goes to college (the University of Virginia) has been to evade and hurt his family in every possible way. He wanted to escape from his mother's oppressive love and his father's ethical mandates for doing the right thing. From early adolescence on, Joey willfully defies his father and his authority on everything from fixed bedtime hours to his allowance. Patty thinks that because Walter expects obedience from his children because he is the provider, Joey's "quest to liberate

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[2102] Franzen, Freedom, p.298.
[2103] Franzen, Freedom, p.301.
[2104] Franzen, Freedom, p.301.
[2105] Franzen, Freedom, p.314.
[2106] Franzen, Freedom, p.318.

himself from Walter" turns him into an adolescent entrepreneur: out of his own savings account (with the money saved by shoveling snow and raking leaves in the neighborhood), Joey buys cheap plastic watches and a "thermo-embedding press," personalizes the bands of the watches by embedding texts on request and sells the custom-made watches to boarding school girls with the help of a "courier."[2107] Walter is outraged at this so-called investment and tells Joey that "making money is not a *right*. You're selling junk those girls don't really need and some of them probably can't even afford."[2108] Joey's ventures in life follow along these lines: in college, Joey converts to Republicanism, works for "a corrupt little start-up that had won the no-bid contract to privatize the bread-baking industry in newly liberated Iraq" and challenges his father's "old-fashioned principles."[2109]

When he goes to college, Joey meets upper-class Republican businessmen and wants to be as powerful and influential like them. Walter immediately recognizes this conversion: Joey "dress[es] like a College Republican, in a blue blazer and shiny loafers."[2110] Joey's magnetic pull toward Republicans is that unlike his father, these people believe that it is not wrong to want to make money. Therefore, his decision to become a big-player is an attempt to reassure himself that there is nothing wrong with him, to prove to his father that Walter's ethics is not perfect, nor even suitable for modern American life. Joey wants to be rich, move up in the social ladder, and hang out with beautiful rich girls whose ideal boyfriends work at "Goldman Sachs" and are "worth a hundred million at age thirty."[2111]

Around the mid-2000s, America is ablaze with war industry, and in his determination to succeed in his new Republican personality, Joey conducts morally dubious business, much like everybody else. He is a good student, working successfully in lucrative summer jobs, and he attracts the attention of Kenny Bartles, "a well-connected Floridan in his early twenties," who proposes Joey to do research for the project called "Restore Iraqi Secular Enterprise Now," in short, "RISEN."[2112] RISEN "had won a no-bid contract to privatize the formerly state controlled bread-

[2107] Franzen, Freedom, p.12.
[2108] Franzen, Freedom, p.13.
[2109] Franzen, Freedom, p.326.
[2110] Franzen, Freedom, p.475.
[2111] Franzen, Freedom, p.260.
[2112] Franzen, Freedom, p.388.

baking industry in newly liberated Iraq" and what Joey does for the enterprise is to research the possibilities of

> *commercially exploit[ing] an American invasion and takeover of Iraq, and then writing up these commercial possibilities as arguments for invading. To reward Joey for doing the primary research on Iraqi bread production, Kenny Bartles had offered him a full-time job with RISEN, over in Baghdad, in the Green Zone. For numerous reasons, […] Joey had declined the offer and agreed instead to spend the summer setting up RISEN's Stateside office and interfacing with the government.*[2113]

While Franzen unpacks the American determination to free Iraqi people from a dictator and destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, Joey cherishes the fact that his business choices would drive Walter crazy and encourage Joey to do more of the same: "He wanted to get rich enough and tough enough fast enough that he would never again have to take shit from his dad."[2114] Nevertheless, if not his Democratic upbringing, his basic sense of ethics leads to self-doubt:

> *Joey wondered if he'd somehow missed the joke in his dealings with his think-tank bosses and Kenny Bartles: had failed to notice them winking or ironically inflecting their voices when they spoke of reasons beyond their own personal or corporate enrichment for invading Iraq. In Joey's view, the think tank did indeed have a hush-hush motive for supporting the invasion: the protection of Israel, which, unlike the United States, was within striking distance of even the crappy sort of missile that Saddam's scientists were capable of building. But he'd believed that the neocons at least were serious in fearing for Israel's safety. Now, already, as March turned to April, they were waving their hands and acting as if it didn't even matter if any [weapons of mass destruction] came to light; as if the freedom of the Iraqi people were the main issue. And Joey, whose own interest in the war was primarily financial, but who'd taken moral refuge in the thought that wiser minds than his had better motives, began to feel that he'd been suckered. It didn't make him any less eager to cash in, but it did make him feel dirtier about it.*[2115]

The premonition of his moral corruption is shadowed by his freedom to be rich, for Joey still needs the ridiculously big amount of money he makes at RISEN, a major amount of which is spent in high-end restaurants with girls he wants to impress.

In the following months, Joey visits his parents and tells Walter about his job at RISEN "hoping to impress him with the size of his salary and the scope of his responsibilities."[2116] In response,

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[2113] Franzen, Freedom, p.388.
[2114] Franzen, Freedom, p.389.
[2115] Franzen, Freedom, p.400.
[2116] Franzen, Freedom, p.403.

his father all but disowned him on the spot. Until now, all his life, their relationship had essentially been a standoff, a stalemate of wills. But now his dad was no longer content to send him on his way with a lecture about his coldness and his arrogance. Now he was shouting that Joey made him sick*, that it* physically disgusted him *to have raised a son so selfish and unthinking that he was willing to connive with monsters trashing the country for their personal enrichment. […] There was nothing he could do but cross his arms tightly and make his face a mask and shake his head and tell his dad, over and over, not to criticize things he didn't understand.*
"What's not to understand?" his father said. "This is a war for politics and profit. Period!"
"Just because you don't like people's politics," Joey said, "it doesn't mean that everything they do is wrong. You're pretending that everything they do is bad, you're hoping they're going to fail at everything, because you hate their politics. You don't even want to hear about the good things that are happening."
"There are no good things happening."
"Oh, right. It's a black-and-white world. We're all bad and you're all good."
"You think the way the world works is that Middle Eastern kids the same age as you are getting their heads and their legs blown off so you can make a ton of money? That's the perfect world you live in?"
"Obviously not, Dad. Would you stop being stupid for a second? People are getting killed over there because their economy is fucked up. We're trying to fix their economy, OK?"
*"You shouldn't be making eight thousand dollars a month," his dad said. "I know you think you're very smart, but there is something wrong with a world where an unskilled nineteen-year-old c*an do that. Your situation stinks of *corruption. You smell really bad to me."*[2117]

Joey's response is to leave home and immerse himself immediately in even more serious corruption. Kenny Bartles finds "bigger and better fish to fry" and Joey leaves the RISEN bread business with Kenny for buying discarded trucks and replacing their parts with useless, rusty spareparts bought from Paraguay and shipping the trucks to the warzone in Iraq, only to break down and cause American soldiers to die in their military vehicles. He is motivated by the excellent prospect of "being worth half a million dollars when he turned twenty-one."[2118] As usual, however, Joey's dreams are momentarily clouded by a flicker of moral self-doubt: he is "selling total crap to the government."[2119] During one of his hunts for spare parts, he has to buy literal refuse, spareparts that are corroded and impossible to use, but Kenny—who knows people—assures him that they can nevertheless be sold to the military. Forced to buy the parts and ship them off to Iraq so that he will not be "sued for nonfulfilment of [his] contract" with Kenny, Joey earns 800,000 Dollars and he

[2117] Franzen, Freedom, p.403.
[2118] Franzen, Freedom, p.411.
[2119] Franzen, Freedom, p.37.

hates himself.[2120] Seeking redemption, he plans to expose the corruption of this and many other similar contracts that betray the country during wartime, but a friend advises that the minute the story appears on newspapers, the contractors will not only know that it was Joey but that they will also "smear" him and make him a "scapegoat" and walk away with clean hands.[2121]

> *And then one night, on CNN, he saw the news of an ambush outside Fallujah in which several American trucks had broken down, leaving their contract drivers to be butchered by insurgents. […Joey] knew he had to call his father in the morning. He'd never felt so afraid of anything as of making this call. But he could see now that nobody else could advise him what to do, whether to blow the whistle and suffer the consequences or stay mum and keep the money, and that nobody else could absolve him. […] It was to his strict, principled father that a full accounting needed to be made. He'd been battling him all his life, and now the time had come to admit that he was beaten.*[2122]

Although he had disowned his son, Walter responds to his emergency call and advises him to donate the money to charity.[2123] The irony is that, around the same time, Walter ends up doing business with the Republicans, and he is himself "implicated" in similar war industries: the body-armor factories, run by Republicans, have hired the displaced residents of the Warbler Park.[2124] Worst of all, Walter has to give a speech at the body-armor factory and thank the displaced residents, has "to make grateful on behalf of the Trust."[2125] Yet by now, he has discovered Patty's infidelity with Richard, sent her away from home, embarked on an affair with his assistant, and feels a loss of his "moral bearing."[2126] Walter is not like his old self. In fact, like Joey, Walter too feels like a betrayer. "I'm tired of being Mr. Good," Walter explains, his ineffectual goodness a result of being "the endangered species of the world, the nonadaptive."[2127]

Joey is much more business-oriented in comparison to his father, but his dilemma is that while he confuses money-making with rebelling at his father, he also seeks to separate money-making from conducting illegal and immoral business. The question the novel poses is that whether the America of the twenty-first century will

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[2120] Franzen, Freedom, p.441.
[2121] Franzen, Freedom, p.441.
[2122] Franzen, Freedom, p.442.
[2123] Franzen, Freedom, p.471.
[2124] Franzen, Freedom, p.475.
[2125] Franzen, Freedom, p.475.
[2126] Franzen, Freedom, p.474.
[2127] Franzen, Freedom, p.480.

find a way to conduct business with the ethical principles of Walter but without his bitter approach. Joey's redemption may seem positive, but Walter's moral crisis is not. Indeed, Walter confronts his dark soul and accepts that his love of nature, his frenzied attempt to save nature "was to safeguard" nature from people he associates with his family.[2128] When Walter gives the speech, the supposedly "grateful" speech addressed to the displaced residents of Warbler Park, everything comes to a belated halt, the prolonged simmering finally comes to a boil:

> *"So, yes, welcome," he said. "Welcome to the middle class! That's what I want to say. Although, quickly, before I go any further, I also want to say to Mr. Mathis here in the front row: I know you don't like me. And I don't like you. But, you know, back when you were refusing to have anything to do with us, I respected that. I didn't like it, but I had respect for your position. For your independence. You see, because I actually came from a place a little bit like Forster Hollow myself, before I joined the middle class. And now you're middle-class, too, and I want to welcome you all, because it's a wonderful thing, our American middle class. It's the mainstay of economies all around the globe!" […] "And now that you've got these jobs at this body-armor plant," he continued, "you're going to be able to participate in those economies. You, too, can help denude every last scrap of native habitat in Asia, Africa, and South America! You, too, can buy six-foot-wide plasma TV screens that consume unbelievable amounts of energy, even when they're not turned on! But that's OK, because that's why we threw you out of your homes in the first place, so we could strip-mine your ancestral hills and feed the coal-fired generators that are the number-one cause of global warming and other excellent things like acid rain. It's a perfect world, isn't it? It's a perfect system, because as long as you've got your six-foot-wide plasma TV, and the electricity to run it, you don't have to think about any of the ugly consequences. You can watch* Survivor: Indonesia *till there's no more Indonesia!"*[2129]

However passionate and at times right, Walter is doomed to failure. First, because he knows what freedom really means, how much responsibility it requires, he ends up being a corrector in the grandest sense in his ecological concerns. People enjoy their SUVs and prefer to ignore the environmental cost of their personal comfort. The fact that he knows, and others know that he knows, what is right and what is wrong makes Walter a killjoy. His unpretentious, comfortably uncool persona also makes him unattractive for others. Second, he is well aware that in public life, business thwarts the efforts of doing the right thing. Oil and coal are needed for the economy, and he breaks the gentleman's agreement to keep mum about the actual costs of these needs. Still, Walter is realistic and knows that in order

[2128] Franzen, Freedom, p.457.
[2129] Franzen, Freedom, p.483.

to guarantee that the right thing is done, a certain collaboration with power is necessary. While trying to reconcile the ethical with the commercially viable, Walter cannot compromise his realistic side with his ethically vindictive side. He becomes an absolutist, as it were, in his pursuit of the absolute right. In other words, although he strives to establish reconciliation and follow a realistic path, the ultra-ethical Walter in him warns that he is selling out. The problem with his absolutism, or his ultra ethical stance, is that it makes him, in a sense, authoritarian, or a fascist, if you will. Furthermore, his ethics becomes tainted by irrationality because in essence it is based on a visceral hate of his father and all the white low class (white trash) lazy bums.

On a closing note, we could take a moment to observe how Walter's changing relationship to nature marks the onset of his true claim of freedom. After his angry speech at the body-armor factory, Walter is fired. Soon, his affair with his assistant that has turned serious ends miserably when she dies in a car accident. Willfully isolated from a world he hates, Walter withdraws from everything and shuts himself to a family cottage by a lake. He busies himself with bird-watching and channels all his anger and sadness to the fate of the birds with which he obviously identifies:

> *It was the season of migration. […] Cerulean warblers winged their way up along the coasts of Mexico and Texas and fanned into the hardwoods of Appalachia and the Ozarks. Ruby-throated hummingbirds fattened themselves on the flowers of Veracruz and flew eight hundred miles across the Gulf, burning up half their body weight, and landed in Galveston to catch their breath. Terns came up from one subarctic to the other, swifts took airborne naps and never landed, song-filled thrushes waited for a southern wind and then flew nonstop for twelve hours, traversing whole states in a night. High-rises and power lines and wind turbines and cellphone towers and road traffic mowed down millions of migrants, but millions more made it through, many of them returning to the very same tree they'd nested in the year before, the same ridgeline or wetland they'd been fledged on, and there, if they were male, began to sing. Each year, they arrived to find more of their former homes paved over for parking lots or highways, or logged over for pallet wood, or developed into subdivisions, or stripped bare for oil drilling or coal mining, or fragmented for shopping centers, or plowed under for ethanol production, or miscellaneously denatured for ski runs and bike trails and golf courses. Migrants exhausted by their five-thousand-mile journey competed with earlier arrivals for the remaining scraps of territory; they searched in vain for a mate, they gave up on nesting and subsisted without breeding, they were killed for sport by free roaming cats.*[2130]

[2130] Franzen, Freedom, p.485.

Walter declares war on cats that are responsible for the gradual extinction of birds. In fact, there is recent scientific research that proves statistically the point of Walter, and it is now an established fact that feral cats as well house cats allowed to roam freely are killing birds in staggering numbers.[2131] Walter visits his neighbors around the lake house and begs them to keep their cats at home and not allow them outside. One particular neighbor, Linda—whose cat, Bobby, enters Walter's garden every day and leaves his decapitated preys behind him for Walter to find—mocks Walter for being an "animal nut."[2132] Walter tries to reason with Linda who thinks it is normal that cats kill birds:

> *"So Bobby kills birds," she said to Walter. "So what?"*
> *"Well, the thing is," Walter said, "small cats aren't native to North America, and so our songbirds never evolved any defenses against them. It's not really a fair fight."*
> *"Cats kill birds," Linda said. "It's what they do, it's just part of nature."*
> *"Yes, but cats are an Old World species," Walter said. "They're not part of our nature. They wouldn't be here if we hadn't introduced them. That's the whole problem."*
> *"To be honest with you," Linda said, "all I care about is letting my children learn to take care of a pet and have responsibility for it. Are you trying to tell me they can't do that?"*
> *"No, of course not," Walter said. "But you already keep Bobby indoors in the winter. I'm just asking that you do that in the summer, too, for the sake of the local ecosystem. We're living in an important breeding area for a number of bird species that are declining in North America. And those birds have children, too. When Bobby kills a bird in June or July, he's also leaving behind a nest full of babies that aren't going to live."*
> *"The birds need to find someplace else to nest, then. Bobby loves running free outdoors. It's not fair to keep him indoors when the weather's nice."*
> *"Sure. Yes. I know you love your cat. And if he would just stay in your yard, that would be fine. But this land actually belonged to the birds before it belonged to us. And it's not like there's any way that we can tell the birds that this is a bad place to try to nest. So they keep coming here, and they keep getting killed. And the bigger problem is that they're running out of space altogether, because there's more and more development. So it's important that we try to be responsible stewards to this wonderful land that we've taken over."*
> *"Well, I'm sorry," Linda said, "but my children matter more to me than the children of some bird. I don't think that's an extreme position, compared to yours. God gave this world to human beings, and that's the end of the story as far as I'm concerned."*[2133]

[2131] See Natalie Angier (2013), Scott R. Loss et al. (2012).
[2132] Franzen, Freedom, p.544.
[2133] Franzen, Freedom, pp.542-543.

In his losing fight, Walter decides to eradicate the problem of Bobby, the best representative of "the sociopaths of the pet world."[2134] He catches and then takes Bobby to an animal shelter in Minneapolis. Two things, however, turn Walter's act into a tragedy, rather than a triumph for him. The end of Walter's antagonism to Bobby feels like "loss and waste and sorrow: the feeling that he and Bobby had in some way been married to each other, and that even a horrible marriage was less lonely than no marriage at all."[2135] In other words, Walter faces his isolation, his deep sense of loneliness. Then, being the one to end the freedom of a creature overwhelms Walter as "he pictured the sour cage in which Bobby would now be dwelling, […] there was something pitiable about his trappedness nonetheless."[2136] what way is Bobby different from Walter, one wonders, in being banished from his freedom by others who claim that freedom is morally wrong? Walter may have lost his freedom to corporate greed, national frenzy of skewered understanding of freedom, but in what way does his punishment of Bobby's freedom differ from what others want to do to him by preventing him from saving birds? "He didn't regret having removed a menace from the ecosystem, and thereby saved many bird lives, but the small-animal vulnerability in Bobby's face made him aware of a fatal defect in his own makeup, the defect of pitying even the beings he most hated."[2137] That is, his father, his brothers, and every low class, lazy, drunk people he tried to protect himself from by pretending to protect nature from them. His hatred traps him, imprisons him, Walter realizes. He cannot be free until he confronts his soul's darkest side and makes peace with it, this "fatal defect," that should not be a defect at all, but his path to redemption, or freedom. He should not see nature as a fragile extension of himself, under constant attack by the likes of his father, evil predators like Bobby, and must not feel sorry for birds who return to find their nests destroyed: just offer what is within his power. Eventually, Walter cannot identify with the birds anymore; they might fly freely, but only to return to a fixed spot, while he does not even have such spot. His freedom without an anchor is not freedom, and he forgives and reunites with Patty after six years of isolation. (Not that he does this out of

[2134] Franzen, Freedom, p.548.
[2135] Franzen, Freedom, p.550.
[2136] Franzen, Freedom, p.550.
[2137] Franzen, Freedom, p.551.

loneliness. Patty repents, and has been trying to reunite but Walter was the angry bird hovering over an empty lot that once housed its trees.) As for the lake house, he turns it into a bird sanctuary, the walls of the house is destroyed carefully to create "a haven for owls and swallows" and the property is surrounded by "cat-resistant fence," that small necessary protection to keep the evil outside.[2138]

In conclusion, both the Lamberts of *The Corrections* and the Berglunds of *Freedom* try to find their selves, construct and re-construct their identities as their lives unfold against the materialism of the 1990s and the morally dubious fight for freedom in the 2000s. Franzen's investigation of the possibilities of becoming an individual dramatizes the unceasing conflict between the self's ethical stance and its constant efforts at self-fulfillment. As Franzen demonstrates at the end of both novels, there may be forgiveness and hope if we are ready to realize our personal mistakes and make amends. However, such optimism is not an option for the U.S., which, Franzen declares in an interview for *The Guardian*, has become "almost a rogue state" in all its freedom.[2139] In *Freedom*, Franzen warns that "the personality susceptible to the dream of limitless freedom is a personality also prone, should the dream ever sour, to misanthropy and rage."[2140] Similar to individuals misconceiving freedom as a ticket to destroy their lives, American troops in Iraq, greedy corporations dislocating poor families for their land, and Republican entrepreneurs shipping off damaged trucks to Iraq all attest to the novel's portrayal of that rage in the U.S. In *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, we see that the rage may be national, but it will be solved on the level of the personal, on the level of true moral correction.

3.4. RETURN TO THE EVERYDAY AND REALITY

Of the major writers this study is concerned with, William T. Vollmann and Nicholson Baker are the least studied academically. Although there is by now an established Wallace scholarship with major critics writing diligently on many aspects of Wallace's oeuvre—a tendency that increased in momentum after Wallace's

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[2138] Franzen, Freedom, p.562.
[2139] Jonathan Franzen, "Interview with Sarfraz Manzoor", **The Guardian**, 25.09.2010, http://www.theguardian.com/books/video/2010/oct/25/jonathan-franzen-freedom, 13.10.2011, n.pag.
[2140] Franzen, Freedom, p.445.

suicide in 2008—and Franzen proudly carries the title of *the* American novelist of the millennium, a label that is firmly established after the international success of *Freedom*, Vollmann and Baker have garnered much less scholarly attention despite great success, awards,[2141] and impressive productivity. Of course, Vollmann is the only writer to be anthologized among the writers under study, and this fact may alleviate the curious lack of interest in his works. In *Volume E* of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature,* Seventh Edition (2009) that covers post-World War II literature, a story from Vollmann's 1989 *Rainbow Stories* is anthologized, securing his rightful place in the American Canon. The headnote introducing Vollmann in the anthology is praiseful:

> *Like Thomas Pynchon, an obvious influence, Vollmann is a meganovelist, a writer of excess, a producer of massive narratives that seek to encompass everything the fragmented and multiform world has to offer. Such is his method in* Rainbow Stories *(1989), where* Red Hand *(reprinted here) appears as one of many encyclopedic specifics that together form a complex prism of existence. His first novel,* You Bright and Risen People[2142] *(1987), follows the Irish novelist James Joyce's inspiration in its portrait of the artist as a young man—but here the portrait is wildly hallucinogenic, resembling the caricaturing excess of a cartoon, as the hero leads a failed revolution based on the idea of power as the only requisite for access to knowledge and experience. Given Vollmann's epic propensities, it is not surprising that at the age of twenty-nine he embarked on a major novelistic project,* Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes*—its individual volumes are being written and published non-sequentially—in which history from colonial days to the present is gathered in great diversity of data yet held coherently within the author's ken (the measure of success for all such meganovelists).*[2143]

The importance of this headnote is that it is probably written by literary critic Jerome Klinkowitz who co-edits this volume of the anthology. It would not be wrong assume that the note belongs to him because his co-editor edits the poetry part of the

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[2141] Among others, Vollmann is the recipient of a Whiting Writers Award in 1988, the Strauss Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2007, and his *Atlas* wins the PEN Center USA West Award for Fiction in 1996, *Europe Central* is awarded the National Book Award in 2005, and *Rising Up and Rising Down* is a finalist for the 2003 National Book Critics Award. He is a self-acknowledged candidate for a Nobel Prize in the future (*Eden* 321). Baker's *Double Fold* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction in 2001. His novel *A Box of Matches* (2003) was a nominee for *TIME* magazine Best Fiction Books in 2003; his 2009 novel *The Anthologist* was Fiction Finalist for ALA Notable Books, and his 2011 novel *House of Holes* was included in *New York Times* 100 Notable Books of 2011.

[2142] Though a minor mistake, as the novel's title is *You Bright and Risen Angels*, it is telling in the sense that Vollmann is ever preoccupied with the "human."

[2143] Jerome Klinkowitz, **The Norton Anthology of American Literature**, Eds. Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B. Wallace, Volume E, Seventh Edition, Norton, New York, 2007, p.3232.

anthology and Klinkowitz edits the prose fiction part. Klinkowitz has been one of the most influential critics of the contemporary since the 1980s and he has written renowned books of criticism such as *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction* (1980), *The American 1960s* (1980), *The Self-Apparent World: Fiction as Language/Language as Fiction* (1984), and *The New American Novel of Manners* (1986). His interest in Vollmann makes it possible to draw a genealogy for the reception of Vollmann. Since Vollmann's first book came out, another literary critic, Larry McCaffery, has ardently promoted Vollmann and they have been close friends since then (recall McCaffery introducing Vollmann to Imperial Valley and going on trips with him to the deserts and rivers of the area as mentioned in Chapter Two). McCaffery, too, is a prolific and influential critic of the contemporary and has written books such as *The Metafictional Muse* (1982), *Avant-Pop: Fiction for Daydream Nation* (1993), and *Some Other Frequency: Interview with Innovative American Authors* (1996). McCaffery has also edited a special issue of "Review of Contemporary Fiction" that is devoted solely to Vollmann, Wallace, and Susan Daitch in 1993. The attention these two critics pay to Vollmann is important in the sense that as respected experts, if not authorities, of the contemporary for at least three decades now, their endorsement of a contemporary writer would be utterly important for establishing the worth of that writer.

In an attempt to garner further interest in Vollmann and Baker, Chapter Two of this study attempts at analyzing four creative nonfiction works by these writers. In *Human Smoke* and *Rising Up and Rising Down*, approaching the objective presentation of history responsibly and treating researched historical fact morally and meticulously, Vollmann and Baker re-write history objectively and try to understand the past in its ethical bearings on the present. In *Imperial* and *Double Fold,* their meticulous analyses and comprehensive discussions on varying subjects yield works of intellectual and ethical significance. Vollmann and Baker, for all their differences in methodology and subject matter, not only think and discuss their topics thoroughly from myriad viewpoints but they also demonstrate the importance of such endeavors that try to face reality in all its forms. In their fiction, they discover what they do not know about: Vollmann people, the other, and Baker the quotidian existence, the mind's relationship to it, and the self. In the meantime, they offer new perspectives

for leading meaningful lives. For Vollmann, being human and having a meaningful life is closely related to the self's capacity to know the other, whether he or she be a Mexican from whom his rightful water is stolen by an imperial force, or a delusional Vietnam veteran so lonely that he searches for a ghost, or a prostitute with flesh so scarred that her endurance gives a glimpse of the human heart's strength. For Baker, being human requires that the human mind slow down and pay attention to the mundane's, the everyday's importance and understand the self in relation to the seemingly unimportant details of the everyday; understand the self by way of the self's relationship to the everyday, the self as the other, as it were.

While *Rising Up and Rising Down*, *Human Smoke*, *Imperial* and *Double Fold* re-define contemporary creative nonfiction through their ethical and intellectual depth and thrust, the novels of Vollmann and Baker are equally important in defining the vectors and new directions in American letters in that they test the limits of the human self's capacity for openness to the world, to the other, to everyday existence, and broaden our means of facing reality. At the center are again the ethical thrust of narrative and the realistic treatment of the human both as the sacred source and the conveyor of meaning. The present part, therefore, shall provide an outlook on their very prolific careers by focusing on examples from Vollmann and Baker's fictional output that continues to grow as this study is completed.

The following discussion gathers the fiction of Vollmann and Baker under the organizing premise that they pay distinctive and unprecedented attention to parts of life that go unrecognized or ignored, a sense of attention that remains unsurpassed in their innovative definition of the quotidian and the lengths of the self's relationship to the other, in the form of social outcasts and the details of the everyday life that remains invisible to us. This organization, while depending on the thematic and theoretical similarities of Vollmann and Baker, will equally draw on their differences. While Vollmann understands the self's true relationship to the other, hence the human, in a controversial manner and turns to forms of lowlife as painfully real parts of human existence, Baker highlights the centrality of the trivial, the mundane to a meaningful human life by configuring the self's openness to the world equally as an openness of the self to itself. Gathering accounts of individual lives from the peripheries of society and consciousness and examining the meaning of the

otherwise depreciated and meaningless, Vollmann and Baker re-situate human warmth and love in unusual places. Similar to the simultaneously converging and diverging methodologies and themes of Vollmann and Baker in their creative nonfiction, their fiction too converges and diverges. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, they form a solid part of the direction the four writers point at collectively.

3.4.1. William T. Vollmann and the Comfort of the Unfamiliar

One way to approach Vollmann's numerous works of fiction would be to separate them into works that focus especially on American subcultures and lowlife such as *Whores for Gloria* (1991), *Butterfly Stories* (1993), and *The Royal Family* (2001) [2144]; works that focus on international politics and human plight amid political strife such as *An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or, How I Saved the World*[2145] (1993) and *The Atlas* (1996); and those that re-write history through fictionalized yet historically true accounts of real events, such as *Europe Central* (2005) and *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes* (1990-2001). None of these works can be ascribed to a single genre: as in his nonfiction, Vollmann utilizes heavily from memoir, travel writing, historical research, social reportage in his fictional endeavors. To illustrate, in *Europe Central*, which brings Vollmann the National Book Award in 2005, Vollmann writes stories of Russian and German soldiers, writers, musicians, and many artists as well as ordinary people during World War II. It might stand as the fictional counterpart of *Imperial*: facts are heavily researched (with sixty pages of scholarly list of sources), some real-life figures, however fictionalized their stories, bear witness to history with their lives distorted with war.

Vollmann's *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes* series is unequalled in its passion and range. In Vollmann's words, it concerns "the last

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[2144] Hemmingson posits that these works "are interconnected in theme, style, and autobiography and form a de facto trilogy. The protagonists—all anti-heroes—are on a quest for human connection, a search for what they consider is love in the guise of a prostitute" (Hemmingson, p.40).

[2145] Vollmann did hope to help change the course of the war in Afghanistan once he understood and wrote about it. In this sense, Larry McCaffery considers Vollmann "an old-fashioned humanist who sincerely believes that reading and writing profoundly matter not merely because they supply us with insights and information about the world, but because they can change it" (McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxx)

Americans we know about—ourselves—and the first—the Indians."[2146] The project comprises seven novels, and so far four have been published, namely, *The Ice-Shirt: First Dream* in 1990, *Father and Crows: The Second Dream* in 1992, *The Rifles: Sixth Dream* in 1993, *Argall: Third Dream* in 2001, and *The Dying Grass: Fifth Dream* is listed for publication in late 2013. His exquisite approach to history is evident in this series which attempts to "form a symbolic history of North America from its discovery a thousand years ago by Norse Greenlanders until the present."[2147] The second dream, *Father and Crows,* for instance, re-writes "the spiritually charged (and often extremely bloody) wars of conquest and belief between the French Jesuits and Native Americans during the seventeenth century."[2148] In the third novel, *Argall*, which is subtitled *The True Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith* and written in Elizabethan English, re-writes the founding of Jamestown as well as "the myth and legend surrounding Pocahontas."[2149]

This study holds Vollmann's that fictional interest in subcultures is valuable as an ethical practice. By subcultures, what is meant is the prostitutes, addicts and such lowlife that populate his novels. "He has written many words about prostitutes and the world they inhabit," Hemmingson writes, "perhaps too many."[2150] In an explanatory note in *Expelled From Eden*, Hemmingson adds, "the theme and subject of prostitution is, by now, a signatory aspect of Vollmann's works—even to the extent that critics have become negative in their assessment: 'Enough already!'"[2151] Is this mere obsession, or perversion, one wonders. In "The Shame of it All: Some Thoughts on Prostitution in America" (1999), Vollmann writes, in an echo of his arguments to know people before writing about them in *Imperial*:

> *They're coldly proud—no, tender, passionate, vacant, malignant. Can I truly claim to "understand" them? When he neared his eightieth birthday, the great Japanese printmaker Hokusai wistfully complained that he was only just now beginning to learn to draw. And I, myself not as accomplished or experienced as I would like to be, gaze at a waterfall of dark hair upon a soft while pillow; I see a naked shoulder pulse in sleep; I see an earring on the sheet, and confess*

[2146] William T. Vollmann, "Biographical Statement", **Wordcraft**, 1989, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., (Biographical), p.5.
[2147] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxiii.
[2148] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxv.
[2149] Hemmingson, p.37.
[2150] Hemmingson, p.39.
[2151] Hemmingson, Explanatory Note to Vollmann's "The Shame of It All: Some Thoughts on Prostitution in America", 1999, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.167.

> *that my desire to know the soul within this woman's flesh is several orders of infinity greater than my actual knowledge. Yet we feel at ease together, she and I. She's a prostitute; she's a woman; she's a human being. Isn't that enough?—Not for ideologues, who long to categorize her as exploited, free or corrupt, nor for body-renters, who yearn to define her according to one of motifs in yellow pages:* blondes, exotic Orientals, bored housewives, secretaries or nursing students, dominatrices, cowgirls, big girls, old women. ... *What is she? What is she? "But what is a woman* emotionally and spiritually*?"—Who's wise enough to answer that?*[2152]

These concerns are and the "symbolic implications" of Vollmann's interest in subcultures are illuminated in his epigraph to his first work of fiction, *The Rainbow Stories* (1989).[2153] From Poe's "Berenice," Vollmann borrows, "[m]isery is manifold: the wretchedness of the earth is uniform. Overreaching the wide horizon as the rainbow, its hues are various as the hues of that arch; as distinct too, yet as intimately blended."[2154] Despite our differences and our varying technologies of self, universals of emotion and matters of the heart unite us. Vollmann is definitely justified because however controversial his subjects may be, he shows them as human beings that search for love and meaning, companionship and solidarity; in their flights and plights, dilemmas and confusions, their struggles against systems of oppression and exploitation, or basic mundane life, the members of the subcultures of *Whores for Gloria*, do not differ in their universal wretchedness from, for instance, Sethe in *Beloved* or Swede Levov in *American Pastoral*. Guilt, victimhood, ethical dilemmas haunt them all.

In this sense, understanding Vollmann's preoccupation with subcultures, especially prostitution, is helpful in understanding his definition of literature which is in essence an ethical endeavor that extends in its scope toward politics and situates the human in it. In his 1990 essay "American Writing Today: Diagnosis of a Disease," Vollmann argues that there are "saintly books" that bring "word-light" but they are scarce in the contemporary literary scene which is populated by "careless and even putrid" writers.[2155] This bleak scenario is directly related to national

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[2152] William T. Vollmann, "The Shame of It All: Some Thoughts on Prostitution in America", 1999, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., pp.168-169.
[2153] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxiii.
[2154] Edgar Allan Poe quoted in McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxiii.
[2155] William T. Vollmann, "American Writing Today: Diagnosis of a Disease", **Conjunctions**, Volume:15, 1990, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., (Writing), p.329.

politics. As Vollmann shows in *Imperial*, human plight is at root caused by politics, so the ethical is always inherently political. Vollmann argues,

> *[i]t is a commonplace that our United States are in decline. On the part of our government we have at best a shortsighted reactive strategy to specific events, lacking in any vision which might influence basic causes. As for the governed, our apathy and misinformation grow hourly. The terrifying increase in random violence and racism of all colors bespeaks a nation polarized halfway to impotence. From homelessness to schools where nothing is taught, from impending environmental disaster to continued environmental assault, our failures illuminate us as Selves incapable of comprehending others.*[2156]

Lacking in empathy, humanity is failing in Vollmann's account, and he discusses the essential connectedness of human empathy and politics convincingly. In his opinion, literature is "writing with a sense of purpose," and this is the only way to fight against "the woes of the world."[2157] In a list of "Rules," Vollmann explains the goals of literature:

> *1. We should never write without feeling.*
> *2. Unless we are much more interesting than we imagine we are, we should strive to feel not only about Self, but also about Other.* Not *the vacuum so often between Self and Other.* Not *the unworthiness of the Other.* Not *the Other as a negation or eclipse of Self. Not even about the Other as exclusive of Self, because that is but a trickster-egoist's way of worshipping Self secretly. We must treat Self and Other as equal partners.*
> *3. We should portray important human problems.*
> *4. We should seek solutions to those problems. Whether or not we find them, the seeking will deepen the portrait.*
> *5. We should know our subject, treating it with the respect with which Self must treat Other. We should know it in all senses, until our eyes are bleary from seeing it, our ears ring from listening to it.*
> *6. We should believe that truth exists.*
> *7.* We should aim to benefit others in addition to ourselves.[2158]

Of course, one could object to Vollmann's preoccupation with subcultures: have we even understood mainstream culture sufficiently? However, as the insights of the above Rules testify, and as we have seen in *Imperial* and *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann's engagement with the other is all-inclusive: the other is the world itself for him, the other is everything he does not know about, and he has to cover as many faces of that unknown reality to be able to face it truly, honestly, and ethically. As Jerome Klinkowitz notes, Vollmann "look[s] where others are not prone to look,

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[2156] Vollmann, Writing, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., pp.329-330.
[2157] Vollmann, Writing, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., pp.329,331.
[2158] Vollmann, Writing, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.332.

or look with hostile preconceptions: at the lives of prostitutes, petty criminals, drug dealers, terrorists, and even serial killers. [… H]is gaze encompasses sufficient evidence for readers to judge on their own."[2159] In this sense, Vollmann explores a hidden dimension of human reality not available for immediate knowledge. For McCaffery, "Vollmann's literary descent" into subcultures is worthy because "his descriptions of these dark crevasses are stunning in their power to attract and repel at once—so they're not only illuminated, but their terrible and beautiful integrity is allowed to shine forth."[2160] It is possible to say that Vollmann's preoccupation with forms of subculture is inherently an ethical project, a compassionate investigation of the universal miseries of the human heart, and an effort to face the hidden realities of life.

Vollmann himself gives us clues on his interest in subcultures. As he explains in his 1989 "Biographical Statement," his interest in "underdogs and doomed causes" turns into an all-encompassing interest in many forms of subcultures, sustained by his realization that "[l]ove is what they all want. But they do not know how to get it, and so they become twisted. Must life be like this for so many people? Does it come about from the way people are or the way people live? Was it always this way?"[2161] Hoping to find answers to these questions, he spends extensive amounts of time with them, tries to understand what he does not know about them, and fills books writing about the things he learns about them.

As we noted above, Vollmann has been fervently promoted by the literary critic of contemporary American literature, Larry McCaffery on the literary quality and ambition of his work since his first novel, *You Bright and Risen Angels*, came out in 1987. McCaffery introduced another contemporary writer, Michael Hemmingson, to Vollmann, and together they prepared a Vollmann reader, *Expelled from Eden*, in order to introduce Vollmann to a greater audience. In the Introduction to the reader, McCaffery assures us: "after many good years of wandering in the desert of late twentieth-century American culture, I have drunk deeply from the raging torrent that is Vollmann and found it good."[2162] Considering Vollmann's place

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[2159] Klinkowitz, p.3232.
[2160] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxxiii.
[2161] Vollmann, Biographical, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.5.
[2162] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xxxvi.

among his contemporaries, McCaffrey situates Vollmann within the canonical American writers, especially Steinbeck, whom Vollmann himself expresses deep admiration for and calls the "most American of us all" in *Imperial*.[2163] McCaffery writes,

> *[i]n many ways, Steinbeck remains the closest of all to Vollmann as a literary figure, in terms of his willingness to be nonjudgmental, his empathy for the dispossessed, and his use of writing to open doors or windows onto the lives of people who remained invisible for most ordinary Americans. Steinbeck offered a model of commitment that combined fierce literary independence, idealism, the desire to use literature to make a difference, and a willingness to risk sincerity (a "risk," because to be sincere about anything is to make oneself vulnerable of others.) How much safer artists are who are able to cloak themselves in the irony, jadedness, and condescension associated with postmodernism.*[2164]

As McCaffery explains, another literary influence on Vollmann is Hemingway.[2165] Especially, Hemingway's journalistic investigations in Spain that culminated in his *For Whom the Bell Tolls* exemplify for Vollmann the power and aid of journalistic investigation in the truthful portrayal of subject matter in novels. Vollmann develops the firm belief that a writer has to experience his topic first-hand in order to be able to write truthfully about it. This belief applies to both fiction and nonfiction. Indeed, after studying Comparative Literature at Cornell University and moving on to graduate study on literature at University of California, Berkeley, Vollmann soon drops out; he wants to read, but he also wants to write, so he begins travelling extensively. Travelling, researching, and understanding his topic is the prerequisite of writing for him. First, he goes to Afghanistan to "join the Muhajideen rebel resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan" in 1982.[2166] Falling ill with dysentery, Vollmann returns to the U.S.A. and writes *An Afghanistan Picture Show: or, How I Saved the World*, which cannot find a publisher until 1992. For Michael Hemmingson, the book, part novel, part memoir, follows in the "footsteps" of Hemingway and can be seen as Vollmann's "quest to understand the Other."[2167] His firsthand experience of war and the realization that politics is unbearably tainted with

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[2163] Vollmann, Imperial, p.178.
[2164] McCaffery, Explanatory Note to Vollmann's **Imperial**, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.379.
[2165] McCaffery, "A William T. Vollmann Chronology", McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., (Chronology), p.410.
[2166] McCaffery, Chronology, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.424.
[2167] Hemmingson, p.62.

evil intentions, Vollmann "goes from naïve to jaded in the months he is there, yet remains hopeful that one man can indeed change the world. He goes back home thirty pounds lighter and with a slightly broken heart."[2168]

We should also acknowledge the impact of great American Naturalists, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris, on Vollmann. For McCaffery, the Naturalists' "meticulously accurate, non-judgmental treatment" of real-life material in fiction inspires Vollmann to approach fiction "as a diagnostic science, a probing of life and under-life, psychological and social."[2169] Beyond these influences, McCaffery sees Vollmann on par with Faulkner and early Pynchon with respect to his drive and talent. He also reserves a distinct place because no one

> *else [has] been willing to take on the range of social, philosophical, psychological, moral, and political issues as Vollmann, whose work, like that of early Pynchon's, seems able to weave the fabric of modern history, then put it together again new garment showing off the features of history in ways we've never seen before.*[2170]

McCaffery's suggestion of Vollmann's sincerity is also worth noting. If there is anything that renders his appalling subject matter worthy of examination, it is his sincere intention to understand to various miseries of life, so diverse yet so common that the predicaments and the joys of human kind remain distinct from the things that otherwise separate us. In an essay from 1993, "Honesty," Vollmann gives us an unusual portrait of the artist as an honest man. He tells us that an important part of his early life was spent with the belief that honesty was essentially an embarrassing quality. By honesty, he means being honest about being who we really are, beginning with the physical. Through much of his adolescence, Vollmann spends hiding his body under layers of fabric: his skin is full of acne and protrusions that he feels constantly embarrassed about his body and isolates himself. A sense of not being cared about for his "inner self," as a real person, for who he is inside, continues until his mid-twenties. When loneliness overwhelms him, in his honest account of it, he decides to see a prostitute. His experience with her brings his embarrassment about his body to an end in a magical way, and his self-consciousness about having a repellent body and his idea that his physical imperfections keep him from making

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[2168] Hemmingson, p.63.
[2169] McCaffery, Chronology, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.405.
[2170] McCaffery, Introduction, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.xx.

genuine human contact fades. Vollmann writes, "[t]his woman did not care about me as a person. [… M]y self was irrelevant to her."[2171] The separation of body and soul turns out not to be so cruel in its separation.

Around the 1980s, Vollmann "began to study the world of the San Francisco streetwalkers."[2172] He was "saddened and appalled: the dirt, the disease, the hard carapace over the fearful soul, the hatred, the danger, the addiction, the premature death."[2173] The body of one of these women, in its testimony to pain, moves Vollmann deeply:

> *Her body is so burned and scarred and slashed and shriveled and starved and drugged and bloated and bled, and yet she is not ashamed; she stands honest; she says: "This is me." And when I saw that I said: "I'm going to try to be me, too." […] When I see a woman's body covered with abscesses, needle tracks, motorcycle scars, bruises and bullet wounds, I experience awe at the endurance of this person in the teeth of the forces of which her flesh bears witness. When I see a younger girl just beginning the trade, reeking so richly of sex, I glimpse her as an icon of what makes and renews us, a literal fertility goddess, the perpetuation of life. But the person stands beyond and above the body, as I know now in my own case. […] From them I continue to learn how to be free.*[2174]

It is worth noting that it would be wrong to limit Vollmann's interest in heroic human suffering to prostitutes in San Francisco. In his travels to Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance, Vollmann spends considerable time talking to women who suffer the worst effects of war. Many educated women with careers and financial security are forced to beg and sell their bodies in other to survive during war; meanwhile, the threat of rape is always imminent.[2175] Every human soul that suffers is valuable for Vollmann; through them, he understands life. As McCaffery writes,

> *Vollmann wants to provide us with the opportunity to witness the horrors and beauty and banality of the real, stripped of condescension, sentimentality, political correctness, moral piety, or any other authorial stances that allow him or his readers to feel superior to, and hence comfortable about, the truth of the world. There is a desperate, throbbing honesty that runs throughout all of Vollmann's writing, and old-fashioned determination to seek out regions of geography and the human heart that most other artists consider inaccessible—*

[2171] Vollmann, "Honesty", 1993, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.64.
[2172] Vollmann, Honesty, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.64.
[2173] Vollmann, Honesty, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.64.
[2174] Vollmann, Honesty, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., pp.65-66.
[2175] Vollmann, "Across the Divide", **New Yorker**, 15.05.2000, McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.108.

> *and then, once there, to "tell it like it is" with as much honesty and empathy as he can. This isn't to say that Vollmann's version of "telling it like it is" is mere unadorned, objective reportage: as in all of his best work, moments of humor emerge where you least expect it, as do memorable sentences that gather momentum until they smash through the walls of our habituation and allow us entry into places no one else dares take us.*[2176]

A brief analysis of Vollmann's novel *Whores for Gloria* will illuminate how Vollmann achieves these tasks.

Whores for Gloria is a sad love story that takes place in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. The novel does have a plot to follow, but the daily struggles of the characters give it enough force to carry on. The novel opens with a chapter that works as a metafictional disclaimer. A stereotypical "story" of an unfortunate drug incident that "[w]e all know" is told.[2177] It is followed by a "less well known" "tale" of "a man who decided to kill himself by swallowing his athlete's foot medicine. Loving Gloria, he died in inconceivable agony."[2178] In contrast to the generic, the common, we are presented with the specific, the individual. We are informed, "[m]ore obscure still, because fictitious, is the following. All of the whore's-tales herein, however, are real."[2179] This sentence doubles back on the previous two claims in the sense that the text plays on the words "fictitious," "story," and "tale" and counters them with the "real." In the next chapter, these words acquire further significance as a drunk man that apparently lives his life through made-up stories is having an imaginary conversation with a woman named Gloria on a broken pay phone. Perhaps this is the man who loves Gloria and kills himself, and his fictitious story has begun. Alternatively, he is not that man, because, as it was claimed above, the "tale" that concerns his story and the present chapter are separate accounts, one real and the other fictitious.

The man's monologue on the pay phone is noticed and told from the point of view of a policewoman working undercover on the streets. As a law enforcer, she notices the cracks in order, such as the phone's malfunction, and she senses some fragility in the man's madness: "she stood with bored patience watching the man

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[2176] McCaffery, Explanatory Note to Vollmann's "The Best Way to Smoke Crack", **The Atlas,** McCaffery and Hemmingson, Eds., p.225.
[2177] William T. Vollmann, **Whores for Gloria**, Penguin, London, 1994, (Gloria), p.1.
[2178] Vollmann, Gloria, p.1
[2179] Vollmann, Gloria, p.1

leaning forward inside the phone booth as if that would somehow diminish the distance between him and the person he was talking to."[2180] Affected by this demonstration of affection, she dreamily revises her summer vacation plans with her husband. Meanwhile, the man on the phone cries and continues to speak with "gentle," "patient and tender" voice[2181]:

> *What else did the doctor say? The man asked gently—Gloria? Gloria, what did the doctor say? Are you crying, Gloria? If I can buy you a plane ticket tonight will you come tonight? Yes, Gloria, you can take a taxi cab to the airport, cant you? Gloria? Gloria? I got some money. I can give you some money—So is my little baby kicking inside you? Is it a girl or a boy? I didn't forget about you. I never forgot about you, Gloria. I never stopped thinking about you. Are you going to have my baby? I got lots of money now. I can take care of you, Gloria. When are you going to get the abortion? Are you smoking a lot of cigarettes? Gloria? Gloria, are you still there? How's it going' Gloria? Gloria, I'll be waitin' for you.*[2182]

After hanging up "very carefully and gently," the man makes another call and books a plane ticket for Gloria "because she can't take care of herself she needs help in everything she does."[2183] Desperate to be needed by some other soul, desperate to love, this man is not much different than the policewoman: the sane and the insane both crave companionship, make optimistic plans for the future, and surrender often to the dream world of contentment with the loved one.

The next chapter introduces a man named Jimmy who drinks merrily in a bar and afterward goes out and asks people Gloria's whereabouts. We learn that he is a Vietnam veteran, but we do not have so much information on the war's effect on his other than a reference in passing about Jimmy's erasure of war memories after he becomes an alcoholic. Jimmy cannot locate Gloria and he decides to "remember" her.[2184] In other words, decides to live his relationship with her in the imaginary realm. Lacking the material (memories) to remember Gloria, he begins to pay for 'company' in the literal sense and 'buys' happy childhood stories from prostitutes. "Tell me some happy stories about when you were a girl" Jim requests from a girl named Melissa who complies but her happy childhood memories are ordinary accounts of the first train ride, the first movie theatre visit, the arrival of the first

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[2180] Vollmann, Gloria, p.5.
[2181] Vollmann, Gloria, pp.5-6.
[2182] Vollmann, Gloria, p.7.
[2183] Vollmann, Gloria, p.7.
[2184] Vollmann, Gloria, p.21.

puppy.[2185] Jimmy reveres in these banalities and, before he sleeps that night, recounts every memory Melissa has told, and imagines experiencing them with Gloria when they were both children. He moves beyond the romantic and erotic in extending his relationship with Gloria to his childhood. As Hemmingson suggests, he seems to be lacking in some deeper sense of "human connection" (Hemmingson, p. 40).

His insistence on happy childhood stories is worth noting as he usually realizes how unhappy prostitutes look and feel. Perhaps, if he can manage to prove himself that they are not as unhappy as they seem, if only they can tell Jimmy their happy memories and prove that they had been happy, innocent, and content once, he can be happy, too, in the present as well as in the future. Jimmy may think that both the prostitutes and Jimmy have had difficulties with life, but now they are over and one can be happy again. Or perhaps this is Jimmy challenging life, proof of some form of relentless optimism that there might still be good to attain. He believes he might learn "secret good things about the whores that make memories worthy of Gloria."[2186] His ability to hold on to Gloria requires his ability to hold on to the possibility of hope and happiness. As the narrator remarks, "we must all build our worlds around us, bravely or dreamily, as long as we can shelter ourselves from the rain, walling ourselves in gorgeously."[2187] Jimmy's world is built out of dreams since he has nothing else. Jimmy prays: "God help me to give up food so I can spend more of my SSI checks on whores and find what I need to find and God let Gloria grow right with me because I sure don't want to die alone."[2188]

After a while, Jimmy becomes tired and decides to reserve the happy memories to himself. He thinks, "if he heard enough happy stories and put them in his *own* memory-bank then maybe he wouldn't need Gloria anymore."[2189] However, solitary memories are worthless, even if they are happy ones. "The problem he said to himself is how can I put one foot ahead of the other day after day for the rest of my life?"[2190] The last time we see him he asks a prostitute to tell him "sad stories. I

[2185] Vollmann, Gloria, p.25.
[2186] Vollmann, Gloria, p.104.
[2187] Vollmann, Gloria, p.45.
[2188] Vollmann, Gloria, p.19.
[2189] Vollmann, Gloria, p.103.
[2190] Vollmann, Gloria, p.107.

need ‘em sad so I can make ‘em happy.”[2191] The novel closes with an excited conversation among drunk men about Gloria murdering Jimmy in front of everybody.

If, as the metafictional disclaimer at the beginning states, “all of the whore’s-tales herein, however, are real,” Jimmy’s quest in learning about them becomes significant in another aspect: although his story is claimed to be fictional, what this fictional story gains its strength from, or seeks solace in, is real life. In this way, real life informs the fictional world in an unusual way by ensuring the survival of hope in fiction. This might seem an inversion of the general conception of fiction amending or illuminating real life, or exposing what we miss in it. Although of course the childhood memories of prostitutes may have been embellished to some degree, the fact that we read and realize their ordinariness and commonness gives the opportunity to see these prostitutes as human beings. This may seem like an ingenious treatment of the other. Without romanticizing prostitutes, Vollmann merely highlights their share in human sadness and happiness.

Whores for Gloria can be seen as an account of the human effort to transcend a lonely, loveless, and meaningless life. There is a heart-breaking beauty in Jimmy’s obsession: human connection, mutual care and love, belief in and devotion to a meaning in life are what he is after. All this happens in what we otherwise know as the most loveless, loneliest, degraded life there can be. At the end of the novel, Vollmann documents the real-life foundations of his novel. The interviews that profile real street prostitutes, their anecdotes, and the price ranges for their services have all been used accordingly in the novel structured as a collection of fragmentary monologues. Realizing the element of truthful reporting at the end of the novel, we are left with the impression that fact and fiction not only merge but mirror each other.

Jim dies because he cannot truly love; because his loved one is missing, nonexistent. Without a plot, the novel moves forward with the daily trenches of characters that become round in their unpredictability and compassion as well as hostility for each other, and their complete Otherness that may diminish in degree for

[2191] Vollmann, Gloria, p.132.

anyone interested. Jimmy, as Hemmingson points out, "is not a likable character."[2192] Yet through him, we witness the compassion prostitutes demonstrate toward an insane and delusionally obsessed person with nonjudgmental and gentle avoidance, and in that they seem far more sympathetic than Jimmy. Furthermore, their sufferings are portrayed as equally brutal and soul-crushing as a war veteran's. Then again, need we sympathize, or identify with, to feel empathy for a fictional character, or for that matter, as Vollmann's claim for veracity implies, for flesh-and-blood people? The other that we meet in fiction and in real life demands that we know how s/he lives, loves, and thinks. Through his research-based fiction, Vollmann challenges us to revise our categorical distinctions. Once we acquire insight to the other's heart and mind, we may sympathize or not, but we do acknowledge them as human beings as Vollmann does. *Whores for Gloria,* like Vollmann's other books on subcultures, invites the reader to investigate the motivations and troubles of these people. In the meantime, he reminds the reader of some of the ways in which the other can be encountered; either face-to-face, as he does before writing his books, or turning literature into a site of such ethical encounter with otherness.

3.4.2. Nicholson Baker's "Meticulous Mnemonic Logic"[2193]

It is possible to say that if Vollmann explores some controversial aspects of life as we (don't) know it, Baker explores the otherwise trivial, the habitual aspects of life. In other words, whereas in Vollmann the self gains a better understanding of life and the world through an attempt to know the other by establishing an ethical relationship with it, Baker's sense of openness to life resides in the possibility of the self's enriched relationship to the world of quotidian existence that he explores in minutest detail. In the meantime, the outward gaze of the self turns to itself; for understanding the world is also understanding oneself. In his account, the everyday and our relationship to what we deem unimportant, habitual, or automatic turn out to be central in understanding the human capacity to perceive beauty and meaning in life, himself or herself at its very center.

[2192] Hemmingson, p.41.
[2193] The phrase is Patrick O'Donnell's (O'Donnell, 2010, p.69).

In this sense, Baker's attention to detail that we observe in *Human Smoke* and *Double Fold* as well as essays has a fictional counterpart. As in his creative nonfiction, Baker's fiction too tends toward meditating on the significance of the dismissed details: every single utterance, object, idea, or action has an essentially revelatory function, and we are invited to consider every separate detail on its own as we form a larger understanding. As *Human Smoke*, Baker's novels *The Mezzanine* (1988), *Room Temperature* (1990), and *A Box of Matches* (2004) comprise of juxtapositions of bits of memories and anecdotes, and thoughts enlarge toward infinity in a maze of associations. As we observe Baker's narrators dwell on the techniques of wearing socks, of lighting a fireplace in the dark, of preparing morning coffee, the writer keeps his reader in constant awe at the joyful richness of beauties of the mundane most of which we do not realize have existed before his uplifting attention to them. Nothing remains buried and meaningless in some engulfing familiarity in Baker's universe: if we pay attention with care and love, every moment seems full of wonders to be recognized. Therefore, understanding our place in the universe becomes a quest of understanding our actions and thoughts about the everyday where dramas of a different kind inform our existence.

The Mezzanine, Nicholson Baker's first novel, is an attempt to demonstrate where the true essence of life lies: within the individual and his perception of the world around him or her. After his lunch break's trip to the drugstore to buy new shoelaces, the narrator, Howie who is in his early twenties, is on his usual escalator ride up to his office in the mezzanine of a posh New York corporate building he has been working for the last two years. His ride and what he thinks (in the meditative sense of the term) with regard to this thoughts about the ride, comprises the plot of the novel, stretching back to his childhood, returning to the time of the escalator trip, and to a much later time, "several years after the escalator ride that is the vehicle of this memoir."[2194] We learn that the novel comprises of "partially forgotten, inarticulable experiences, finally now reaching a point that I paid attention to [them] for the first time."[2195] The remembrance of the event of that particular lunch break extends and turns into a maze of thoughts where one association triggers another.

[2194] Nicholson Baker, **The Mezzanine**, Random, New York, 1998, p.37.
[2195] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.9.

Meanwhile, our knowledge of Howie remains limited to his ideas and memories. Apart from his first name, an unspecified occupation at the mezzanine he works, his girlfriend referred to as L., we do not know much about Howie's identity. However, these details stand as rather trivial regarding the attempts to know a person: it is how his mind works that introduces Howie to us. In fact, as we learn at the very end of the novel, Howie is an anxious adult who tries to understand and improve himself, and what better way could there be for that task than thinking and analyzing?

In a sense, there is not much of a plot other than a trip to buy shoelaces during the lunch break, but the expansion of Howie's thoughts is itself the unfolding event in this novel. While Howie narrates the incidents of that particular day, his narrative digresses on multiple occasions. Every thought associates itself with another thought, and Howie's narrative turns into a stream of consciousness that takes place on two levels, one textual, and the other paratextual, through footnotes. On the escalator, the paper bag he is holding leads to simultaneous digressions, one about paper bags in the body text and the other about straws in a footnote. The paper bag holds the items he buys during the lunch break: a cookie, a bottle of milk, and shoelaces. The cashier offers a straw for the milk and Howie does not take the straw but soon begins to think about the history of straws. In the 1970s, he remembers—which places the novel in the late eighties—plastic straws replace paper straws, to great distaste of Howie. It may strike one rather odd that a person should care about straws and think about them at length, but Howie is a man of habits and he prefers to eat a pizza with one hand, read a book with the other, and likes to sip his drink by craning his neck toward the straw awaiting obediently in the drink. Plastic straws, however, flow here and there in odd angles in the drink, taking every joy away from the experience.

Unlike the comfortable the domestic space in *Room Temperature* and *A Box of Matches*, the world of *The Mezzanine* glitters with the office building's "towering volumes of marble and glass," and polished escalators with "brushed-steel side-panels."[2196] Howie observes his surroundings and notes something particular in each detail. For instance, while he is riding on the escalator, Howie remarks, "I love the constancy of shine on the edges of moving objects. Even propellers or desk fans will glint steadily in certain places in the grayness of their rotation; the curve of each fan

[2196] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.1

blade picks up the light for an instant on its circuit and then hands it off to its successor."[2197]

If there is an antagonist in this novel, it is Howie's shoelace that suddenly breaks right before lunch. While he is working, the left shoelace comes loose, his foot slips from the shoe, and Howie suddenly realizes his foot—or his sock—is resting comfortably on the plush wall-to-wall carpet of his office. He has some theories about socks and carpets:

> *when you slide a socked foot over a carpeted surface, the fibers of sock and carpet mesh and lock, so that though you think you are enjoying the texture of the carpeting, you are really enjoying the slippage of the inner surface of the sock against the underside of your foot, something you normally experience only in the morning when you first pull the sock on.*[2198]

This argument carries on in a footnote because Howie also has theories about wearing socks in the morning:

> *When I pull a sock on, I longer* pre-bunch*, that is I don't gather the sock up into telescoped folds over my thumbs and then position the resultant donut over my toes, even though I believed for some years that this was a clever trick, taught by admirable, fresh-faced kindergarten teachers, and that I revealed my laziness and my inability to plan ahead by instead holding the sock by the ankle rim and jamming my foot to its destination, working the ankle a few times to properly seat the heel. Why? The more elegant pre-bunching can leave in place any pieces of grit that have embedded themselves in your sole from the imperfectly swept floor you walked on to get from the shower to your room; while the cruder, more direct method, though it risks tearing an older sock, does detach this grit during the foot's downward passage, so that you seldom later feel irritating particles rolling around under your arch as you depart for the subway.*[2199]

One way of distinguishing these arguments from an obsessive's self-indulgent bouts of narcissism over his expertise over seemingly trivial details could be to consider them as celebrations of every waking moment and the hidden splendor of caring about some minor detail that gives pleasure when we are aware of it. In a way, these are simple but important joys that give meaning to the activity itself and designate life as a culmination of a series of unusual pleasures that are readily available to the seeking mind. In a way, Howie simplifies and makes more accessible the happiness and gratification life would offer. He does not need spectacular events

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[2197] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.3.
[2198] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.12.
[2199] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.12.

to take him out of boredom, or life-changing events of dramatic sequence to make his life interesting. Nor does he revel in the quality of a sock, or pay attention to a sock as simply garment. It is his experience with socks on a daily basis that make them important. Moreover, it is possible to expect some sense of heightened sensibility from a person who does not treat an object as an object per se but sees in it some aesthetic quality, some experience-enhancing aspect.

When Howie is remembering that particular lunch break and getting lost in Proustian associative trains of thought, he realizes that he is somewhat nostalgic. Like, for instance, when he returns to his office after the escalator ride, his hand rests on "the concave metal doorknob" and he grieves the loss of the "knuckly, orthopedic quality" of "brass, porcelain, or glass knobs" of his childhood that "static modernism" banished from contemporary life.[2200] Soon, he resolves to banish from his reminiscences the phrase "when I was little" because it limits "the capacity for wonderment" of adult life, which is, and should be, as abundant in "enthusiasms" as childhood.[2201] He is a person who is interested in noticing things to be amazed at, and he wants to be entertained by small discoveries of perception.

He devises a method for this purpose, some technique he has developed in his childhood, which is called the "clean-background trick."[2202] As a child, he places objects to be examined, "as a group of fossil brachiopods," on white cardboard or some other white surface.[2203] This detail shows us that Howie has been, since his childhood, a student of serious investigation. "[A]nytime you set some detail of the world off that way, it was able to take on its true stature as an object of attention."[2204] From the vantage point of the narrative's present, Howie decides "to set the escalator to the mezzanine against a clean mental background as something fine and worth my adult time to think about."[2205] By analogy, the process of writing his memories puts his memories and the associations they trigger against the white clean slate of the paper and doubles the effect.

[2200] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.27.
[2201] Baker, The Mezzanine, pp.38, 40, 39.
[2202] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.38.
[2203] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.38.
[2204] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.38.
[2205] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.39.

However, Howie struggles to keep from feeling sentimental about his memories and cannot treat them matter-of-factly: after all, the past is full of changes, losses of certain practices and objects, and these changes, when thought of against "clean mental background," magnify the passage of time:

> *In case of the escalator, I can probably keep the warpage down, because escalators have been around, unchanging for my whole life—nothing has been lost. But other things , like gas pumps, ice cube trays, transit buses, or milk containers, have undergone disorienting changes, and the only way that we can understand the proportion and range and effect of those changes, which constitute the often undocumented daily texture of our lives is to sample early images of the objects in whatever form they take in kid-memory—and once you invoke those kid-memories, you have to live with their constant tendency to screw up your fragmentary historiography with violas of lost emotion.*[2206]

The transition from the home-delivered daily milk bottles to the cartons of milk sold in the supermarket marks the end of a certain phase of childhood. This paragraph also testifies further to Baker's passion about old books and newspapers, and his resistance to the digitalization process comes to mind. Baker cannot accept the gruesome fact that our print heritage too shall suffer technological advancement, in the mode of any and every (daily) object's transformation into a product more efficiently consumed.

This is not to say that Howie takes an antagonistic stance against changes: he finds a certain logic to, and pleasure in, contemporary life with automated gadgets. For instance, Howie very much likes the paper towel dispenser of his corporate bathroom because it provides "a new and identical towel-flap" with each pull.[2207] This is an example of what Howie calls the "renewing of newness," a phenomenon he observes with great pleasure when, for instance, "one sticky disk of sliced banana [is] displaced from its spot on the knife over the cereal bowl by its successor."[2208] We see that he reveres in the details of every mundane act, and this is nourishing in its possibility of discovering things to savor in otherwise banal, meaningless acts. It is also worth mentioning that Howie is frustrated with the table-napkin dispensers at fast-food restaurants because they are usually not filled correctly—either out of the carelessness of the staff who do not know that the flaps of napkins should face the mouth of the dispenser in order to ensure easy pulling, or simply by overstuffing the

[2206] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.41.
[2207] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.93.
[2208] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.93.

dispenser, again out of some hazardous negligence or willful recklessness, and hence making it difficult to pull one napkin at a time. Both his pleasure and frustration have, as the most important element of the equation, the unvarying constituent of human care and attention as the basic component of discovering joy and meaning in life. For Howie, beauty and meaning are in the meticulous, careful eye of the beholder.

As mentioned earlier, we learn at the end of the novel that Howie's purpose in this retrospective analysis is an effort to understand and improve himself. The last chapter of the novel focuses on the last fifteen minutes of the lunch break that Howie spares for reading a "Penguin paperback" in the garden across his office building.[2209] The book is mentioned at the beginning but neither its title nor genre is clarified until the end. As the novel closes, we learn that it is one of the classics, Howie's primary area of interest, and Howie continues reading from his copy of "Aurelius's *Meditations.*"[2210]: "Observe, in short, how transient and trivial is all mortal life; yesterday a drop of semen, tomorrow a handful of spice and ashes."[2211] Howie disagrees with Aurelius. "Wrong, wrong, wrong! I thought. Destructive and unhelpful and misguided and completely untrue.'"[2212] Howie's protest is understandable because this argument contradicts the book's first sentence that has led Howie to buy the book in great enthusiasm as he sensed in it a sense of reassurance: "Manifestly, no condition of life could be so well adapted for the practice of philosophy as this in which chance finds you today!"[2213] In this first sentence Howie not only notes "slight awkwardness and archaism of sentences, full of phrases that never come to people's lips now" but also thinks "that the statement was extraordinarily true and that if I bought that book and learned how to act upon that single sentence I would be led into elaborate realms of understanding, even as I continued to do, outwardly, exactly as I had done, going to work, going to lunch, going home."[2214]

[2209] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.1.
[2210] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.122.
[2211] Aurelius, **Meditations** quoted in Baker, The Mezzanine, p.120.
[2212] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.122.
[2213] Aurelius, **Meditations** quoted in Baker, The Mezzanine, p.124.
[2214] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.124.

However, reading the previous sentence he protests against, Howie feels "tired of Aurelius's unrelenting and morbid self-denial."[2215] Life is mortal, Howie grants. "Feeling Aurelius pressing me to practice philosophy on the scant raw materials of my life," Howie notes how chance finds us in our most trivial circumstances:

> *Chance found me that day having worked for a living all morning, broken a shoelace, chatted with [a co-worker], urinated successfully in a corporate setting, washed my face, eaten half a bag of popcorn, bought a new set of shoelaces, eaten a hot dog and a cookie with some milk; and chance found me now sitting in the sun on a green bench, with a paperback on my lap. What, philosophically, was I supposed to do with that? I looked down at the book. […] Who bought this kind of book? I wondered. People like me, sporadic self-improvers, on lunch hours? Or only students?*[2216]

In a moment of clarity, Howie contends himself with the idea that our thoughts need not be grimly philosophical. Mortality and the trivial pursuits of life need not be impediments to a fulfilled life. For him, thought of every kind gives us insight about life because our thoughts define our states of mind, and these states of mind in turn inform, illuminate our lives. This argument, coming at the end of the novel, neatly summarizes what Howie has been doing throughout his narrative of reminiscences, associations, and meditations: life is what we think about it, or it is the richness and inclusiveness of the way we think about it. It is therefore a matter of openness to our life in its every tiny, trivial, fleeting detail, to which openness makes it possible to locate the self, meaning, and pleasure in every single action we perform.

At this point, we could note critical reception, however limited, *The Mezzanine* has received. Phillip E. Simmon's 1992 article "Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination: Mass Culture in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*" posits that the novel writes a personal history of the postmodernist consumer culture.[2217] For Simmons, the products of the consumer culture Howie talks about reveal the postmodernist sense of loss of meaning beyond surface. However, Howie does not so much describe products as talk about their particular use-function, and he associates them with his sense of self to the extent

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[2215] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.124.
[2216] Baker, The Mezzanine, p.125.
[2217] Philip E. Simmons, "Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination: Mass Culture in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*", **Contemporary Literature**, Volume:33, No:4, 1992.

they connect to thoughts about his life. As Arthur Saltzman notes, "while Howie is a quintessential consumer, he is not an unreflective automaton."[2218] In line with Saltzman's disagreement with Simmons, Graham Thompson argues that the novel does not deal with a postmodernist self but merely "*a* self."[2219] By focusing on the novel's setting, the corporate office space, Thompson situates *The Mezzanine* in the tradition of American novels that deal with the office as a place where male sexuality is established and maintained. For Thompson, the office space of *The Mezzanine*, unlike those of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922), William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), or Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), does not threaten the masculinity of the white-collar office worker. Among Baker's contemporaneous writers, Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis also concern the office worker but in their novels, respectively, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) and *American Psycho* (1991), the corporate office "generates a sense of loss, trauma, and dehumanization."[2220] In contrast, Baker's white-collar protagonist, Howie, although he cannot be called a Yuppie, does not dramatize the ill effects of capitalism and does not deal with the office as a marker of male sexuality.[2221] Indeed, the office, to the extent that it harbors objects that Howie meditates on, such as staplers and wall-to wall carpets, figures as a gateway for Howie's associated ideas.

To this date, the only study devoted to Baker's career is Arthur Saltzman's 2003 monograph published as part of the University of South Carolina's *Understanding Contemporary American Literature* series. Saltzman praises Baker's "quiet satisfaction of the quotidian epiphany."[2222] Saltzman observes that in his ongoing career,

> *Baker has already crafted a signature style, which unites a jeweler's intensity of focus, a forensic scientist's ferocity for detail, a monk's humble delight in private discipline, and a satirist's sensitivity to oddities and errors. Best of all, despite the width and depth of his learning, Baker is not the starched, dry lecturer who sacrifices interest for information. […] While the assault of the culture's ephemeral spectacles goes on, conditioning viewers with brief blurs of fame, news flashes, and instant gratifications, Nicholson Baker slows sensation*

[2218] Arthur Saltzman, **Understanding Nicholson Baker**, University of South Carolina Press, South Carolina, 2003, p.27.
[2219] Graham Thompson, **Male Sexuality under Surveillance: The Office in American Fiction**, University of Iowa Press, Iowa, 2003, p.149.
[2220] Thompson, p.134.
[2221] Thompson, p.135.
[2222] Saltzman, p.xii.

down. Wherever his attentions descend, they return unexpected, and unexpectedly precious, dividends.[2223]

In this sense, his work bears no affinity to much of his contemporaneous writers, whether experimentalists and postmodernists or realists. Baker's particularly innovative and extremely precise use of language is unique in the sense that he uses descriptive, detailed language to construct and convey everyday reality. The world he describes is highly subjective; his novels abound with first-person viewpoints whose consciousnesses linger on throughout. He does not describe the world objectively and in fact, his fiction refrains from offering that; everyday reality is not objective—it resides in subjective accounts of mundane event and reflections on them. Against the postmodernist belief in the impossibility of describing anything at all, we may put Baker's work as an antidote: everything—from a shoelace to an escalator ride—can be described and can have meaning.

These facts may render Baker a modernist of sorts: he shares "the modernist concern with the mind as itself the basis of an aesthetic, ordered at a profound level and revealed to consciousness at isolated 'epiphanic' moments."[2224] Virginia Woolf's comments come to mind. In "The Common Reader," Woolf calls realist writers "materialists" on the basis that "they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring."[2225] However seemingly antithetical, this might be another way of discussing Nicholson Baker's work which gives immense value to the seemingly unimportant details and describes them with the precision of the realist while at the same treating them with the modernist's aesthetics of consciousness. That is to say, Baker's strain of descriptive realism gains momentum by the almost-Woolfian stream of consciousness—interior monologues record thoughts and feelings on everything in Baker.

Baker's particular use of narrative time may be related to this effect. In any Nicholson Baker novel, the temporal structure may dazzle us with its easy, smooth expansion of minutes and hours almost toward infinity along with the interior monologue of the character experiencing the time of a single moment full of the

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[2223] Saltzman, pp.13-14.
[2224] Waugh, p.23.
[2225] Virginia Woolf, "The Common Reader", Hogart Press, London, 1951, p.187.

force of the habitual. In *A Box of Matches*, for example, a family man wakes up at four o'clock every morning and diligently observes the passing of minutes: each minute has its own habits and comforting familiarity that nonetheless feels refreshing with every repetition: a box of matches found in the darkness to light a fireplace, the favorite coffee mug located by memory in the cupboard in the early morning darkness of a kitchen. In this and many other senses, Baker uses time—its constituents, its passing, or not passing, its recounting, or the immediate experience of time—an integral part of his narrative technique, his particular way of telling a story. The characters of Baker's novels experience time on a minute by minute basis, taking into account of the weight of every second.

Nicholson Baker shows us that there are many things to care deeply about in our lives. As the previous discussions of his creative nonfiction tried to show, these may be outrightly serious matters, such as the preservation of the human heritage through protecting print-books from destruction after being digitalized. As *The Mezzanine* shows, the techniques for putting on socks is important, too. However, Baker's signature comes in the form of the importance he bestows on the habitual, the reflexive, and the mundane: they hide, or reveal, what is particularly human about our otherwise automatic, fast-lane lives that consume and perform. In concluding, we could refer to Dreyfus and Kelly, who, in *All Things Shining,* highlight the importance of the decisions we make—and hence the meanings we create—through even as trivial a choice as the cup to drink the morning coffee out of. For Dreyfus and Kelly, living a meaningful life in our contemporary nihilistic and secular world requires us to maintain "touch with skill and care, the reverence and awe" in our relations with the world around us.[2226] In this sense, what we care about, what amazes us provides keys to understanding how we make "meaningful distinctions" in our lives.[2227] Their example considers a widespread habit of the modern world: "the morning coffee drinking routine."[2228] Of course, any habit of this kind is prone to impulsive decisions or whims of human likes and dislikes on the basis of taste and other preferences such as the drink's particular blend, brand, and temperature as well timing and other circumstances of consumption. The promotion

[2226] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.215.
[2227] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.215.
[2228] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.216.

of drinking morning coffee through media and grand-scale merchandizing is another issue, yet in focusing on the constituents of this activity, the authors approach the act from a different angle: what our daily habits are might mean more than they seem to if we investigate them with care.

Dreyfus and Kelly try to highlight that the degree of our conscious choices for a morning coffee, such as the cup we use, may reflect the meaning we find, or create for that matter, in the experience itself, hence the meaning of a particular part of life. While a nondescript coffee cup will deem itself "a mere resource," a "completely exchangeable" object that is "generic and banal," a deliberate choice of a particular cup may grant a most mundane activity a sense of "intimacy, meaning, and worth" through the objects involved in the act.[2229] In other words, "the generic cup […] treats every coffee and every coffee-drinking situation as if it were indistinguishable from the last."[2230] This, for the authors, is also a way "to dehumanize" oneself:

> *The coffee-drinking routine that recognizes no distinctions of worth is a routine in which the coffee drinker becomes exchangeable: assimilable to all of the millions of others who are sleepwalking through the same generic routine. If the cup is exchangeable in the activity, then so are you. To treat the cup as a mere resource is to treat yourself as a mere resource too, to dehumanize yourself by failing to recognize the care you might have shown for that domain.*[2231]

The difference, then, lies in the difference between the "ritual"—"a meaningful celebration of oneself and one's environment"—and the "routine"—"a generic and meaningless performance of a function."[2232] Baker portrays excellently this difference between ritual, or ceremonial, and routine, or customary; he dramatizes the human potential to make everything meaningful, or how the attention we pay to most minute details grants meaning to otherwise unimportant-seeming details, thereby fulfilling our ethical responsibility to the self, enabling it to know itself.

[2229] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.216.
[2230] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.217.
[2231] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.217.
[2232] Dreyfus and Kelly, p.219.

CONCLUSION

While recent American literary scholarship theorizes contemporary literature on the one hand as struggling with the debilitated—and debilitating—effects of postmodernism and tending toward the reestablishment of realism, and on the other hand as renewing an interest in—and transforming—the rather old-fashioned ethical literary criticism, this study concludes that having produced a rich output of creative nonfiction and fiction, Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace present us with a tripartite structure that draws the contours of a new literary and aesthetic sensibility in contemporary American literature: literature as ethical endeavor, a new form of realism, and a redefinition of nonfiction. By no means exclusionary, the elements of this new configuration overlap in their ends and means, and inform each other in enriching ways. The varying styles and subject matters of these writers interconnect through some shared concerns and methodologies that signify a new stage in contemporary American literature. Therefore, these writers restore to contemporary American literature, by way of their rich output of creative nonfiction and fiction, the unchanging mission of literature to be redemptive in its ethical treatment of the human and compel us to face reality boldly and responsibly.

When this study opened with intimations of contemporary American literature's introverted response to the trauma of September 11 and the ensuing backlash against nihilistic irony and postmodern relativism, the purpose was to highlight a general skepticism about the power of literature to respond to social and political issues and realities at large. Although we countered such claims by surveying the common preoccupations of contemporary literary criticism in a two-step evaluation of major trends in literary scholarship and the ethical turn, both of which suggested literature's vitality, a more coherent counterargument for, or defense of, contemporary American literature's vitality emerges in the selected works' approach to literature as ethics, realism, and a reworking of nonfiction.

In the works of Baker, Vollmann, Franzen, and Wallace, literature turns into an ethical endeavor that draws its force from a myriad of definitions of ethics. It is possible to identify five ways in which the writers transform literature into ethical

venture. First, the writers resolutely base their literary programs around a timeless question: what does it mean to be a human being? Most of the definitions of the human in their works point at some moral terms such as sentimentality, honesty, integrity, confidence, arrogance, and brutality.[2233] Both in nonfiction and fiction, these terms guide the definition of the human. Furthermore, the writers successfully break the rigid opposition between cynicism, ironic detachment, frivolous and meaningless critical debunking, and naiveté, sentiment and emotion, heartfelt social and intersubjective engagement, goal-oriented and constructive social criticism. Indeed, they demonstrate that we are human to the extent that we can care deeply about a plethora of serious and urgent matters, and think hard about them. Baker, Vollmann, Franzen, and Wallace write with—and about—feeling, emotion, compassion, and genuine ethical interest in important realities of the human life in all its forms, and quite possibly, the trademark of their works is how they put spirituality, emotion, naiveté, and unhip sentiment at the center of their ethical literary endeavors.

The writers encourage readers to be ethical, too. All of the writers invite us, in fact compel us, to establish and maintain ethical reflection as our default mode of existence and means of understanding life. For instance, in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann investigates some past and current incidences of violence and discusses the ethical appropriateness of the justifications of human violence. The values we hold make up our moral lives, and the principles we defend comprise our moral integrity. Or so we believe, because when confronted with Vollmann's unparalleled meditation on humankind's values and principles whose defense brings about justified and unjustified violence, we are compelled to test our prior values and principles against Vollmann's Moral Calculus. Observing Vollmann's intellectual and ethical faculties make us better human beings because once we observe the true potential of the human in Vollmann, we may revitalize our belief in the moral progress of mankind. In this sense, nonfiction turns in Vollmann's hands into the best medium to connect the human to the human and to the world.

Likewise, *Infinite Jest* dramatizes the fact that being human means having emotions. Wallace warns us about the human proclivity to waste love and hope,

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[2233] Haines, p.25.

denounce universal truths of human sentiment and reciprocity, give primacy to the needs and desires of the self without any moral value system to guide it, and shows how corrosive it is for the human soul to deny human emotion and connectedness and give itself instead to ironic nihilism and yield to the imprisoning pleasures of escape from the self. Wallace's warning dramatizes the consequences of the lack of moral terms to live by: dishonesty means the denial of the self's relationship to the other and its narcissistic worship of the self; only sympathy and empathy connect individuals and communities; moral integrity is impossible where the self's war against itself does not cohere into a form of kenosis (Hassan) that requires self-emptying and connecting spiritually to some higher truth and trustingly giving oneself away to it. In this way, *Infinite Jest* dramatizes the importance of ethical reflection both for literature and for each of us.

Similarly, the essays of Franzen and Wallace continuously interrogate the changing discourses on and forms of empathy and sincerity in modern American life. Franzen lays bare that after September 11, a flawed notion of sincerity in the mode of a sentimentalized discourse of sharing and sympathy on a national scale appears and works merely to escalate a false sense of the importance of the personal feeling, entitlement, and expression of opinion. While Franzen further connects this to the effect of technoconsumerism that grants utmost importance to the needs and desires of the self, Wallace reads it as another manifestation of modern American life's exclusion of the ability to have and display heartfelt emotions and the privileging of narcissism and cynicism. The venues Wallace seeks such sincerity, whether that be the moral credibility of a presidential candidate or the spiritual and moral guidelines the novels of Dostoevsky offer, he always emphasizes the urgency of devoting one's self to something larger than the desires of the self, of placing empathy, communication, emotion to the center of life without fearing ridicule, mocking indifference, and ironic derision for honest display of human values. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace offers a brilliant example of going beyond hip irony, world-weary cynicism, through a portrayal of various universal human troubles that require as a cure none other than sincerity, openness, self-investigation, surrendering oneself to the greater meaning of life rather than the self-serving desires and escapades of the self. Like a modernist, Wallace traces the contrail of consciousness, the fissure it leaves behind

in the perception of reality; like a postmodernist, Wallace treats textual space like a physical space that envelops the reader's attention in demanding ways and questions the position of the individual within vast systems; like a realist, Wallace describes human psychology in incredible depth and richness. Wallace questions what we value in life, how we make up our selves and sustain them without value systems to guide, how we transcend our loneliness, understand our past, and how we love ourselves and others. In other words, Wallace is interested in how be become human, how we struggle to remain human. In a slow but ground-shifting process of spiritual salvation that echoes Ihab Hassan's postmodern realism of truth and trust, *Infinite Jest* offers salvation on the individual level. The organizing principle is not the self's needs and desires but its ability to hold on to something other than the self. There is almost a humanist ethicist in Wallace.

Like David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* and *Freedom* are also passionate in proving the novel's potential to define the ways in which we become actual human beings in our sufferings and our eventual salvations. In fact, *Infinite Jest, The Corrections,* and *Freedom* have many themes that overlap; these novels have full command of the pitfalls of U.S. culture and politics and are masterful in their social criticism; they are deeply moving in their serious and sincere treatment of the vulnerable and yearning human heart, and heartbreaking in their portrayal of individuals suffering from inner torment, loneliness, and struggling for redemption. They all draw on the endless and hazardous pursuit of happiness and the irresponsible exertion and dislocating effects of freedom. The addictions, pleasures, professional careers, and interests that are passionately and uninhibitedly pursued in these novels are fuelled by the individual's need to shape his or her life around a certain idea, a need to devote oneself to something, anything.

The Corrections and *Freedom* demonstrate a refreshing, re-energizing, sincere, and optimistic approach in Franzen's efforts to explore, understand, and coherently express the world, and the position of the human. As their titles reveal, these novels are preoccupied with how identity is formed, de-formed, and re-formed through correction, through freedom. Of course, all the contradictions and difficulties of life are played out in the making of the individual and Franzen analyzes this

process within the background of American culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As James Wood notes, *The Corrections*

> *is a kind of glass-bottomed boat through which one can glimpse most of the various currents of contemporary American fiction: there is domestic realism (a Midwestern family); there is social and cultural analysis (a nasty Philadelphia biotech company straight out of DeLillo); there is campus farce; there is broad Dickensianism which has decayed into crudeness in too much American fiction; there is "smart young man's irony" of the kind familiar to us in Rick Moody and David Foster Wallace (riffs on corporate gardens, on the politics of cuisine, on the Lithuanian black market).*[2234]

Although Wood's general tone about the novel wavers between the negative and the positive, he nonetheless acknowledges the novel's achievements such as its "considerable grace, power, comedy, and beauty" which appear most impressively "when Franzen is cleaving to the human, when he is laying bare the clogged dynamics of his fictional family, the Lamberts."[2235] Familial tensions, along with social issues, are what Franzen is most passionate about. For Wood, Franzen is more successful when focusing on the latter because it enables him to turn fully to the consciousnesses of his fictional characters. Wood explains that Franzen "is at his finest when being ambitious and even theoretical about the soul."[2236] *Freedom*, too, can be read along these lines. Family dynamics and intergenerational strife, intersubjectivity, the ethical bearing of our selves and choices, our commitments, and our betrayals make up the core investigations of this novel. The more we try to define our identities, the more deeply mired we become in the relentless and at times futile effort to transform ourselves. Taking place in the aftermath of September 11, the moral dilemmas of the characters in *Freedom* coincide with a dubious national moral standing; with a war going on Iraq in the name of freedom, with Republicans creating lucrative business opportunities of that ever-refreshing industry of war, while Democrats, too, compromise their values. Meanwhile, individuals struggle with the affronts to their selves from the society, culture, and politics.

The second manifestation of literature's ethical endeavor is how the writers compel us to think hard about how we should think and act in the world today. They question insistently what we take for granted, what values we hold, and how we form

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[2234] Wood, Social Novel, p.201.
[2235] Wood, Social Novel, p.201.
[2236] Wood, Social Novel, p.201.

and maintain our values in accordance with established social codes and new developments. Baker, Foer, and Franzen turn what seems mundane, ordinary into serious matters that require critical ethical reconsideration. In *Double Fold,* Baker criticizes the fact that we seem to take for granted that libraries are entrusted with a traditional and honorable duty to preserve our books, the print heritage of our civilization. Governed with a strict sense of duty with regard to the protection of the rare, valuable, out-of-print books, newspapers and many other kinds of print material, library is the beacon of human intellectual legacy. What is interesting is how easily we accept fundamental changes in the operation of the fundamental task, the essential raison d'être of the library: when microfilming is presented as an opportunity to save aged paper crumbling into dust—some scientifically pseudo-proven, forced conclusions on the extent of such crumbling—we take it for granted that technology improves our life by replacing our print heritage by a poorly digitalized version of it. Baker attracts attention to the unknown, horrid, destructive, corruption-smelling details of this ignored, readily accepted transformation and questions our moral sensibilities that fail to adhere to some basic standards in caring about libraries and books. Mesmerized by electronic media of all kinds, we seem to consent to the virtual at the extreme cost of the actual, the material, the real. In a way, this is a genuine twenty-first century drama where we are gradually losing war on preserving true human connection via universals, and Baker illuminates our plight in a very provocative assessment. Digital revolution, completely antithetical to the traditional understanding of revolution, goes astray in our haste for human progress, a flawed progress based on regression, which can only be countered through a rigorous ethical approach.

In *Eating Animals*, Foer offers an account of how the disturbing facts of meat production and our willful ignorance of the modern, excruciatingly brutal and unethical circumstances of this production bear on our ethical being. He offers us versions of reality by enriching our reality; he posits reality as a story we have to construct with utmost ethical responsibility, thereby redefining the ethics of creative nonfiction. Meat production, as the saying goes, is the breeding, growing, and slaughtering of animals in factory farms. Make no mistake, farm is a misnomer, and factory farming is an unpleasant oxymoron. Factory farms disconnect animals from

land and cramps them into tight compartments where they are not allowed to move; animals do not graze but eat modified unhealthy food; as the products of any factory, any production plant, they are *perfected* through genetic modification and illness-preventing drugs. Foer does not promote vegetarianism, but makes us realize how we justify our eating habits like all other habits of taste and mood we develop: essentially irrational, without ethical grounding. The antibiotic injected, genetically mutated meat of animals does not give protein or nourishment; it brings along the shame of creatures subjugated to cramped, artificially lighted spaces. How much of our ethical values we are ready to sacrifice, Foer asks, for our gustatory pleasures.

Franzen focuses on the modern individual's position as a consumer of the much-celebrated, constantly improving technology and criticizes the restless and reckless rush to follow up on every technological advance that degrades human communication and leads to a regression in the ways in which we interact with other human beings. As we adapt to the developments (or, in this case, the dubious progress) of technology, we lose our humanity and regress toward narcissism and selfishness. Cellular phones destroy true, one-to-one, face-to-face, heart-to-heart human communication. Franzen shows us that rather than drifting into oblivious difference when some remarkable change happens in social fabric, we should take note of it, and think over it. Once technology conquers our daily life, we develop an unrealistic, deceptive sense of gratification that creates the illusion of the self's needs and desires as the constitutive aspects of life. Franzen gives us an idea of the hazards of our super-savvy tech-gadgets that make us feel falsely special and that seemingly deliver us from our yearning to be gratified. In fact, Franzen seems like a visionary who warns us that we are becoming too self-centered, too narcissistic, too "private" in all our communal acts that we jeopardize the possibility of a sensible, sensitive, and ethical life in our dedication to the grand desirer, the self.

Third, the writers investigate the possibilities of dealing with the other, inquire the ways in which we deal with the other both in/inside us and outside us, and explore literature's prospects in representing the other. For Baker and Vollmann, the precondition of attaining the true meaning of past events and hence discovering their true version is history, which is nothing other than understanding both the past and the actors of history as the other that we need to encounter and understand

responsibly. What can we know about what really happened during World War II without understanding what Presidents Roosevelt and Churchill, civilians, politicians, artists, pacifists thought and did on an individual level, on what particular moral grounds they acted? For Baker, if we pay attention to every single utterance and deed of historical figures without preconceived ideas about them, and try to understand the actors of past events as the other that we know nothing about but wish to, then we can truly deal with the other. Similarly, Vollmann shows us that any understanding we may have about, history, the past, the present and the future is dependent on the individual human being's particular position within the world of events. Only through an open, Levinasian face-to-face encounter with every person as the other that is completely unknown to us may we be able to make sense of the larger circumstances and consequences of events. The singular sufferings, predicaments, moral dilemmas of the individuals present us with the true understanding of the world we live in. If these attempts establish our relationship to the world as one of encountering the unknown other, they also reveal the extent to which our selves remain relatively unknown to us: the other in us is the part of us that is constantly on the making, the self whose formation, de-formation, and re-formation is carried out on the level of opening itself to the other outside itself.

In this sense, creative nonfiction acquires a vital role in encountering the other both outside and within us in terms of its stylistic foregrounding of the process of encountering and representing the other. Through research, interviews, and reporting the actual and the factual in their unadorned entirety, or unmediated reality, as in *Human Smoke*, *Rising Up and Rising Down*, *Imperial*, *Double Fold*, and *Eating Animals*, the other becomes a concrete presence that demands ethical response. In this sense, and fourth, the writers dramatize the human potential for moral courage. A lot of the time, we know what is right but we do not act on it. Moral courage is to act on something that you consider is right. When we observe the factual in its real-life manifestation, it forces us to face it in its naked ugliness, exposed malice, stripped layers of justifications and make-believe stories; we can no more ignore the truth than pretend not to know it because than we will be ignoring human compassion, justice, care, and love.

Fifth and final, the writers ask what fiction is for and what nonfiction is for, and they question literature's forms of social engagement through the means of nonfiction and fiction. In *Human Smoke, Rising Up and Rising Down*, *Double Fold*, *Imperial*, *Eating Animals,* and the social and cultural essays of Franzen and Wallace, creative nonfiction is the privileged medium for new and stronger modes of straightforward and constructive criticism. Therefore, a redefined mode of nonfiction appears as the more fruitful, truer, perhaps practical form of social engagement.

Broadly speaking, the literary criticisms of Franzen and Wallace show that nonfiction is as important in shaping the meaning and function of literature. In their essays on literature, Franzen and Wallace re-enact literary criticism: they theorize, discuss, criticize, denounce, and embrace various endeavors of fiction. In his literary essays, Franzen is motivated by the simple premise that fiction is fundamental to life because it depends on telling stories and because the humankind constructs reality through telling stories. Whether he reviews a novel, evaluates the shortcomings of postmodernist literature, or defends the worth of representing the ordinary human life that is fraught with serious dilemmas and complications, Franzen always defends the centrality of fiction preoccupied with understanding both the dark chambers and redemptive potential of telling stories about the human soul. As a literary critic, he invites American readership to remember the morally enhancing, spiritually guiding quality of literature. He prizes the true and honest representation of the human and disdains formal complexity that forsakes the human in fiction. He wants to see, and tries to establish, the novel as the most fruitful communication in which a culture would indulge in to know itself. Likewise, Wallace then and again turns to formulations of literature's ways of engaging effectively with the culture, offering not mere debunking and ridicule but serious faith in the possibility of overcoming the detected problems.

The second visible element in the new literary and aesthetic sensibility we see in the works of Baker, Vollmann, Franzen, and Wallace is the emergence of a new form of realism that relies on two basic questions: what is reality, and how to represent reality. Each writer distinguishes in his own way between understanding reality and talking about reality. While for Wallace reality is always filtered through mass media culture, and popular culture and advertisements not only invade our daily

life but also alter our perceptions of reality, Franzen keeps a secure distance from technology's grand-scale invasion of our lives in order to protect a basic, classic mode of existence intact from the effects of technology. In this sense, for Wallace, reality consists of our involvement with mass media but this does not mean that we become less human; on the contrary, he seeks ways of representing meaningful life amid such engagement. For Franzen, modern American reality consists of individuals' transformation into technoconsumers, and he attempts at restoring a sense of reality based more on intersubjective dynamics and the clash between the personal and the social.

For Baker, reality consists of the phenomenological world; the mind's relationship to the material world is the basis of lived life and every single, otherwise ignored, dismissed, belittled detail of the material world acquires remarkable weight on our perception of reality. In *Human Smoke*, this sensibility is reflected in the episodic structure of the book that isolates a myriad of single utterances that remain somewhat insignificant on their own but achieve a superior sense of comprehensiveness in determining reality. If in *Human Smoke* Baker brakes down elements, incidents, utterances to their minutest parts only to re-collect them to propose a version of reality, *The Mezzanine* turns to the flow of thoughts and delineates each idea in order to reveal how the human mind relates to the world and constructs reality out of singularities. This is not to say that reality is fractured for Baker; the fractured structure of reality is what gives reality its substantial and comprehensive form. Baker understands life as composed of our mental and intellectual processes, hence posits human mind as the origin, producer, and center of meaning, of reality.

For Vollmann, reality can only be known by testifying to the first-hand experience of the human agent. To this end, he challenges accepted versions of reality: the county of Imperial may be the official international boundary between the U.S. and Mexico, but as the history of the north and south regions of the county reveals, Imperial remains intact in its undivided historic entity. In a way, therefore, the reality of the region is empowered by its imaginary perception. Vollmann eschews official history; reality consists of the meaning we grant to our experiences, to our relationship with the land we live on, to our struggles to earn a living. In

Vollmann's fiction, reality is hidden in the brutal, taboo aspects of life as we know it. Vollmann inspects how outcasts and the spiritually lost seek redemption through the universal search for community and companionship, love, and faith. Our openness to the world, to the other, our ability and willingness to understand in its manifold manifestations constitute the basic premise of Vollmann's fiction, as well as his understanding of reality.

On the matter of the representation of reality, two further differentiations become visible. First, the portrayal of the relationships and contradictions between the personal and the social, and second, the particular realistic representation of reality each writer prefers. This new mode of realism is based on the representation of raw experience that is not bound by cliché. For instance, in Franzen's unpacking of the family and unpacking of the individual, we see how literature negotiates the personal and the social in the dramatization of highly specific cases, the particular dilemmas of particular individuals who are not sacrificed for social realism's all-encompassing presentation of the larger picture. Chip Lambert in *The Corrections* and Walter Berglund in *Freedom*, for instance, constantly criticize society but end up applying the social codes to the personal. Every personal problem acquires a counterpart in social life that reveals how the personal has social reasons and consequences. While made and unmade with the societal prejudices and expectations, the personal inevitably repeats the social on the personal level no matter how rigorous the criticism of and resistance to society.

For Wallace, realism means the sum total of human emotional reality and contemporary novels' depiction of soulless, loveless, half-human lives amid an obviously materialistic culture should not hinder fiction's job to investigate how "we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price."[2237] It seems that the difficulty would have been easier to solve if the presentation of the human was the sole problem of fiction: having inherited from the first generation of postmodernists a freedom to experiment with form without constraints, fiction gained a sense of consciousness that proved immensely dangerous. It is almost like fiction lost its humanistic pedestal, yet these writers re-humanize literature by approaching literature as a goal-oriented

[2237] Wallace, Conversations, p.27.

endeavor—the most important goal being the representation of human, of reality, the writers succeed in their goals.

In his critique of postmodernism, especially William Gaddis, Franzen posits that fiction needs to treat human troubles not for the sake of mere portrayal of the individual amid crushing forces of society but also for opening up possibilities for solving the problems. Franzen's proposal of tragic realism that defines the novel's in-depth treatment of characters and their struggle with universal human tragedies attests to his literary program that is defined in nonfiction. In Franzen's opinion, literature's offering of solace to the troubles of the self should be thought in terms of its "formal aesthetic rendering of the human plight redemptive."[2238] In this sense, Franzen suggests that the novelist adopt a tragic worldview in which the novel serves to "rais[e] more questions than it answers."[2239] This is an ethical endeavor in its penchant for questioning. Franzen turns toward a realism that defines the development of character and the psychological representation of character as its central mission, and establishing the reader's connection to universal values and thereby defining the reader's existential and ethical questionings as the novel's central function.

The third visible strain in this new literary direction is a redefinition of nonfiction. There are some reasons that the writers jointly privilege nonfiction and use it frequently. First, they do not trust fiction and question fiction's status in representing the truth**.** For instance, in *Human Smoke* and *Rising Up and Rising Down,* Baker and Vollmann turn to nonfiction to understand and represent historical fact and, in this way, counter the de-naturalization of historical truth and its fictionalized representation through historiographic metafiction, the postmodern novel par excellence (Hutcheon). Both works attempt at constructing a morally valid, as much as historically accurate sense of history once the historical data and the textual traces of the past are presented (after rigorous research) in an unadorned, unmediated manner. Meanwhile, Baker leaves it to the reader to make sense of the historical fact—both retrospectively and for the present as well as the future—and Vollmann carries extended philosophical and ethical discussions on what particular

[2238] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.91.
[2239] Franzen, Why Bother?, p.91.

historical truths may mean among a plethora of possibilities, merely to leave the reader to pondering the ethical questions he raises. We understand that a grasp of history teaches us the human in all its greed, folly, weakness, compassion, self-sacrifice, and of course cruelty and propensity for violence—whether justified or not. The past sheds light on the present, on the future. The unadorned, unnarrated story of history comprises the story of the human race. Indeed, in privileging nonfiction over fiction to represent truth as accurately as possible, there is the suggestion that rather than fictionalizing and enriching history through imagination, history writing should be valued for its unembellished veracity so that we can better compare the past with both the present and the future.

In another sense, this new mode of nonfiction works toward debunking some notions, or metanarratives if you will, about literature's relationship to the representation of truth that we have come to take for granted. For instance, neither Baker nor Vollmann take the authorial position that grants meaning to historical truth. In other words, they unsettle the postmodernist metanarrative that history writing is a process of imposing meaning on instances of past events. We see that history writing need not be filtered through the meaning-granting authority—or intervention—of the writer. We can discover historical truth through its textual traces and understand them in their unadorned factuality. In other words, history can be presented accurately.

To that end, and second, they write in new nonfiction modes. Baker's *Double Fold*, Vollmann's *Imperial* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*—which was included due to Foer's significant contribution to nonfiction's ethical reflection—all undermine our preconceived notions with regard to diverse topics; Baker challenges our too-ready acceptance of the so-called advances of technology and reveals how print archives of human civilization are destroyed for the sake of opening up space at libraries; Vollmann exposes the sordid details regarding the U.S-Mexico border and how life is imperially governed under the shadow of a ruthless—and one-sided—fight for natural resources; Foer confronts our willful ignorance of how our food is produced and invites us to reconsider how we justify our irrational habits of choice and taste through imposing unethical stories on them. These writers are also united in their unorthodox research methods. Like muckrakers, and like the New New

Journalists, they carry out extensive and at times arduous research and then present their findings not so much reportorially but artistically in storytelling that draws its significance from the ethical presentation of collected information. They do not, however, turn to nonfiction as an inherently objective pursuit. More specifically, their turn to nonfiction is not a result of a determination to leave subjectivity behind. Indeed, the writers represent the often clashing positions of different subjectivities and subjective experiences.

Third, they propose renewed modes of nonfiction and fiction, possibly through a combination of nonfiction and fiction. A shared concern with the important function of storytelling is a case in point. For the writers, the representation of reality is complicated because reality itself is complicated. This brings up the fact that nonfiction also uses fictional modes of storytelling/storifying, drawing round characters, and offering a multiplicity of relations of cause-effect and reason-effect. Foer asks what stories we create for our eating habits. How do our stories constitute the core of our ethical being? "We are made of stories," Foer proposes, and our stories about the meanings of our choice of food turn the act of eating into a realm of values, because, as Foer wonders, "[w]hy should eating be different from any of the other ethical realms of our lives?"[2240] He turns fact-based, heavily researched material, indeed nonfiction, into an act of storytelling, and invites us to reconsider the stories we tell ourselves and how we construct a self, a world, a system of values through these stories. What is the element of your ethical being, he asks us, what is your reality? He also seems to ask us whether we could look at the face of an animal, experience the ethical face-to-face encounter Levinas proposes, without feeling shame like Kafka did, or the nakedness Derrida felt under the gaze of an animal. What is the sheep, the cow, the broiler chicken, the cat, and the dog but an other, the other in whom we meet our selves. For Foer, our dietary habits are essentially ethical problems in that they define us: "The question of eating animals is ultimately driven by intuitions about what it means to reach an ideal we have named, perhaps incorrectly, 'being human.'"[2241] Created in the image of god, the human is entitled to … what?

[2240] Foer, pp.14, 9.
[2241] Foer, p.264.

In limiting its discussion to an analysis of the works of Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace, this study tried to demonstrate how their otherwise disparate styles and subject matters convey a strong sense of a new phase in contemporary American literature due to the writers' shared concerns of literature's ethical reflection, intellectual and moral response to cultural and literary as well as political matters without forsaking the representation of the question of the human and of how to live. In light of current literary criticism's problematizations of beginnings and endings for the new American literary era after postmodernism, these writers, when considered in relation to each other, demonstrate that current discourses are not adequately responding to the rich range of contemporary literary production they offer. Major trends in contemporary literary criticism rely too heavily on the postmodernism debate. Ethical literary criticism remains limited to the analysis of fiction, more specifically, the novel, and does not address literary endeavors more comprehensively. Therefore, rather than naming the Next Thing, the purpose of this study has been to acknowledge the formation of a new literary and aesthetic sensibility. Although we cannot speak of formal tendencies uniting these writers—as regarded necessary by most criticism to suggest a sufficiently coherent sensibility, this study was interested in sets of thematic, moral, and narrative concerns that bind them together. By bringing together these previously unaligned writers, this study tried to move forward in chronology from the late 1980s toward the present to offer a comprehensive account of the contours of the new direction in contemporary American literature.

To conclude, there is a remarkable proliferation of efforts to reestablish the representation of universal values, the human agency, human emotion and suffering, the redemptive role of truth and trust, and of the ethical in literary sensibility. The fresh readings of Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace aim to encourage contemporary literary criticism to further explore the importance of creative nonfiction along with fiction as distinct and valuable exercises in understanding and ethically representing human life. In providing an understanding of contemporary American literature through a selection of works by writers that individually illuminate the various questions of the human and the ethical life, emphasize the responsible representation of truth and the

centrality of storytelling, this study tried to draw the contours of a new aesthetic sensibility. Each of the selected works of creative nonfiction and fiction contribute extensively to the imaginative and artistic representation of the confounding world we live in and demonstrate the power of literature to engage with it meaningfully. Nicholson Baker, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen, and David Foster Wallace are the unique new voices for contemporary American literature's imaginative responses to reality, to the question of the human, the self's relationship to the other, to history, to the ethical mandate of any and all literary endeavor. Reality, it seems, is magnified under the ethical gaze of the writer who turns to literature as philosophy for life and as intellectual inquiry.

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