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“WHAT IS PEORIA FOR?”: READING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE
IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S THE PALE KING

By

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Thesis

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“WHAT IS PEORIA FOR?”: READING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S *THE PALE KING*

Chairperson: Dr. Brady Harrison

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Since its publication in 2011, critics have written about David Foster Wallace’s final, unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, by looking for resonances with his career-long interests of irony, alienation, and the text’s relation to the reader, but few have written of his final fiction as exhibiting a new approach to these topics. To further such criticism, I argue that in *The Pale King* Wallace uses new means – religious, and specifically mystic, vocabularies of experience – to seek ethical practices for living in a period heavily influenced by Postmodern irony. In the process, Wallace’s characters end up advocating a mystical both/and style of living-through both irony *and* sincerity, boredom *and* attention, loneliness *and* relation. In investigating Wallace’s work, I draw on the fields of Mystics, narrative ethics, Postsecularism, and (Post)Postmodern literary studies to show the valences of cultural interest at play in Wallace’s fictional world.

Throughout my main chapter, I discuss how Wallace premises his characters’ routinized lives as IRS employees on the concept of boredom and its relationships with capitalism and mysticism. While many characters have become accustomed to boredom’s ubiquitous presence, some characters respond to pervasive alienation by seeking practices tinged with mystical overtones to center their living around, such as the practice of personal relationship, experiences of grace, or self-made ascetic rituals. Throughout my explication of these themes, I show how Wallace importantly mirrors his treatments of boredom with his formal choices as well. In my final section, I write toward a speculative explanation of these formal oddities: the reader’s metafictional involvement in both boredom-filled living and spiritual practices, an endeavor linked to the connection between life and literature that Wallace emphasized throughout his career.

In my conclusion, I write of my hesitation to identify as a postsecular critic: namely, Postsecularism’s lack of interest in collective spiritual practices, a perspective shared by Wallace. As a result, I point to some contemporary writers who share Wallace’s interests in finding the ethical link between life and literature through reimagining spiritual practices, whose work may develop Wallace’s focus on individual experiences toward a collective vision.

“What is Peoria for?”: Reading as Spiritual Practice
in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*

Introduction: “should we decide to inhale rather than die”:

Influences of Ethical Philosophy and Mystics on Contemporary Fiction

On December 19, 2012, *The New York Times* published an article by writer Paul Elie entitled “Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?”¹ In his piece, Elie decries the current state of religiously-influenced fiction, a type of writing Elie marks by its absence, saying that “if any patch of our culture can be said to be post-Christian, it is literature. Half a century after Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, Reynolds Price and John Updike presented themselves as novelists with what O’Connor called ‘Christian convictions,’ their would-be successors are thin on the ground” (Elie). Elie links this change in the American literary landscape to what he sees as an “obvious” trend in American living generally:

The obvious answer is that it has gone where belief itself has gone. In America today Christianity is highly visible in public life but marginal or of no consequence in a great many individual lives. For the first time in our history it is possible to speak of Christianity matter-of-factly as one religion among many; for the first time it is possible to leave it out of the conversation altogether.² This development places the believer on a frontier again, at the beginning of a new adventure; it means that the Christian who was born here is a stranger in a strange land no less than the Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Soviet Jews and Spanish-speaking Catholics who have arrived from

¹ Elie is himself a novelist and nonfiction writer interested in religious themes; he practices the same genres as those he critiques in this article.

² His point in this section of the article is rather similar, in a way, to Charles Taylor’s argument in *A Secular Age* which I will briefly discuss later in this introduction.

elsewhere. But few people see it that way. People of faith see decline and fall. Their detractors see a people threatening rear-guard political action, or a people left behind.

(Elie)

Some of Elie's claims, to my mind, are certainly overstated; in particular, the ability for Christianity's hegemonic influence to become a "stranger in a strange land" in America, his ability to speak for Christianity's role in individuals' lives, and his ability to know how such a varied people of faith see the changes in the American religious landscape are all such large proclamations that they remain untenable claims. Nevertheless, Elie's article points to a larger conversation that is in fact present and ongoing in American discourse: after Postmodernism, what is the role of faith today? How has its role changed, and how will it continue to change? How has its role already changed the ways we live, and how will it continue to change the ways we live? And how is this constantly evolving relationship represented in our culture, our literatures?

Elie points to authors who have written of faith, specifically a Christian faith,³ including Marilynne Robinson, Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo, and younger writers such as Jonathan Franzen, Colum McCann, and Jeffrey Eugenides. However, while faith exists in the work of these authors, Elie still expresses dissatisfaction with their treatments of faith: "Randall Jarrell ruefully remarked that when it comes to poetry, you can get a conversation started around just about anything: the lives of the poets, the state of poetry, the craft of poetry – anything but a

³ Elie's treatment of faith in his article has a rather vaguely limited scope, keeping his discussion to an unfortunately undefined strand of American Christian faith. As in the quote above, European Catholics immigrating to America do not fit his definition. In addition, the scope of his comparisons beg explanation in other ways. For instance, he writes of the American treatment of other faiths, including Judaism and Islam, as being done well, essentially excluding these faiths from the faith that has been lost in fiction: "It's a strange development. Strange because the current upheavals in American Christianity – involving sex, politics, money and diversity – cry out for dramatic treatment. Strange because upheavals in Christianity across the Atlantic gave rise to great fiction from 'The Brothers Karamazov' to 'Brideshead Revisited.' Strange because novelists are depicting the changing lives of American Jews and Muslims with great success" (Elie).

poem. In American fiction, belief is like that. Belief as upbringing, belief as social fact, belief as a species of American weirdness: our literary fiction has all of these things. All that is missing is the believer” (Elie).

The publication of Elie’s article sparked one of the most visible conversations on the blogosphere about the relationship between religion and literature, how strong the relationship still is or ever was, and where fiction in particular may be headed in the future in terms of its connections with the religious imagination. Perhaps the most notable response to Elie came from his friend Lorin Stein, editor of *The Paris Review*, published as a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* and whose complication of Elie’s argument I will reproduce in full:

To the Editor:

My friend Paul Elie argues eloquently that Christianity has become “something between a dead language and a hangover” in American literature. I would note a possible exception in the stories and novels of David Foster Wallace. A churchgoer⁴ trained in philosophy, Wallace deplored the “thematic poverty” of contemporary fiction, its inability to speak of faith and doubt; yet his own characters do a lot of praying: a young evangelical couple pray over whether to have an abortion, a rape victim prays for her attacker, two would-be adulterers pray to be delivered from temptation, etc. Even more often, Wallace shows us what it could mean, for a Christian, not to be able to pray. So many of his characters feel convinced of their own depravity, or else are trapped in solipsism that looks like the sin of pride. (Wallace once described the men in “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men” as souls in need of grace “who don’t even know it.”)

⁴ Wallace’s own church habits, in my opinion, are a bit more difficult to describe than what Stein says here. While Wallace’s personal beliefs remain ambiguous (see: Max 114, 166, 251, 316, 322), the persistence of the religious theme in Wallace’s work is clearly present, even if outside of church services, as Stein begins to show.

That there are very few church services (and a lot of church basements) in Wallace's work may help prove Elie's point.⁵ Instead of writing about religion as such, Wallace described more-or-less secular institutions – Alcoholics Anonymous, the I.R.S., a halfway house – when he wanted to show people in communion with something larger than themselves. But for this reader, at least, the religious impulse is hard to miss. (Stein)

Stein's short letter does quite a bit of groundwork for those of us interested in religion and literature at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Pointing to an important, influential writer clearly interested in religious themes and beliefs as they intersect with potential doubts or failures, Stein's quick treatment of the religious across Wallace's career points toward the kind of work critics in Wallace Studies have been doing since Wallace's death: large-scope treatments of themes and concerns in his fiction, a tracing of resonances across books. Stein notes Wallace as a potential exception to Elie's schema, but, in the small space of his letter to the editor, does not approach explaining the significance that Wallace as an exception to Elie's supposed rule could have. This thesis examines Wallace's final, unfinished novel as it shows him incorporating religious influences into the ways he thinks about his postmodern inheritances. In particular, my thesis responds to the question: how could *The Pale King* represent a different relationship to the religious or spiritual imagination than critics have so far discussed in Wallace's other work? *The Pale King* particularly suits an investigation of religious themes as Wallace pointedly uses mystical vocabularies of experience in the novel to newly treat the postmodern tropes present throughout his oeuvre and which he shares with other (Post)Postmodern authors.⁶ While we may retrospectively be able to see hints of this lens throughout his career's work, *The Pale King*

⁵ And yet, the same point would also align Wallace with writers under consideration by the most prominent postsecular critics, some of whom I will discuss later in this introduction.

⁶ I use this spelling of the term to indicate its provisionality and necessary relation to postmodern studies.

represents the religious stepping to the forefront of his attention to stand alongside his career-long interests in postmodern-influenced prose techniques, irony, and narratives of alienation.

In this thesis I argue that instead of postmodern-influenced alienation and loneliness remaining ubiquitously and unambiguously present in the structure of his fiction, *The Pale King* begins to show characters attempting practices of concern and attention in response to the ever-present postmodern condition in way that is new for Wallace: a mystic both/and. The new mystic influences on Wallace's fiction give resonance to the both/and state that many of the characters approach as they confront always both boredom *and* attention, alienation *and* relation, falsity *and* truth, and irony *and* sincerity in their searches for postmodern-influenced and ethical modes of living and knowing. While the import of these mystic influences to Wallace's larger project have been overlooked by critics so far, this additional religious coordinate points to a previously unseen response in Wallace's work, representing a way to live ethically without abandoning postmodern inheritances, an important task for Wallace's generation and the writers who have followed him.

A short description of Wallace's final novel may be helpful to those who are either unfamiliar with the text or who have not read the novel through this critical frame. *The Pale King*, first and foremost, is the unfinished novel that was in process at the time of Wallace's death. While nearly 250 pages of the manuscript were already arranged on his desk in order to be sent to his publisher for an advance, the version of the drafted pages published in 2011 by Little, Brown was the result of three years of work by Wallace's longtime editor, Michael Pietsch, who visited Wallace's home after his death and left with thousands of manuscript pages to edit into a coherent product. As Pietsch explains, "Nowhere in all these pages was there an outline or other indication of what order David intended for these chapters. There were a few broad notes about

the novel's trajectory, and draft chapters were often preceded or followed by David's directions to himself about where a character came from or where he or she might be headed. But there was no list of scenes, no designated closing point, nothing that could be called a set of directions or instructions for *The Pale King*" (x-xi). This explanation of Pietsch's starting point for the editorial process also represents the reader's interaction with the novel Pietsch has given us: an experience of engaging characters and clear themes without structure, narrative arc, or completion. Importantly, the entire manuscript and set of drafted pages are available for scholarly use at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and further investigations of those pages have been publically underway by various scholars and reporters since the publication of Pietsch's edited text.⁷

The Pale King represents a project Wallace had been working on consistently for more than ten years when he died;⁸ as Pietsch writes in his introduction, it was a project that Wallace "had written deep into" (xi). In my own scholarship, I use Pietsch's version, particularly the paperback version which includes an addendum of notes from Wallace's drafts, because of what I perceive to be Pietsch's earnest attempt at staying open to the potential resonances of Wallace's unfinished work, not closing off narratives Wallace may have developed further. I believe Pietsch to have been able to make this attempt because of his long history as Wallace's editor.⁹

⁷ The Wallace archives have already been subject to a few very public articles published by popular internet websites, including for a few examples, Jenn Shapland, "The Human Heart Is a Chump: Cataloging The Pale King" and Maria Bustillos, "Inside David Foster Wallace's Private Self-Help Library" (which prompted the self-help portion of his library to be taken out of circulation). In addition, various scholarly conferences have started to treat the archives such as the conference at UT-Austin discussed by AJ Aronstein in "Out of Reach: Notes from the David Foster Wallace Symposium" as well as the Antwerp conference on *The Pale King* organized by Marshall Boswell in 2011.

⁸ As D.T. Max writes in his biography of Wallace, "Wallace had been mulling the possibilities for a third novel since the mid-1990s, even as he began the stories that would form the heart of *Brief Interviews*. The setting had come early, possibly even before the publication of *Infinite Jest*" (255).

⁹ Pietsch had been Wallace's editor for all of his major books, beginning with *Infinite Jest*. Gerry Howard, his first book editor, worked with Wallace on his first two books, *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*, after which his publisher, Norton, lost Wallace's contract. As a result, by the time of Wallace's death, Pietsch had been

As a result, the stylistic and thematic consistency between Pietsch's version of *The Pale King* and Wallace's other novels shows Pietsch's concerted attention to Wallace's idiosyncratic approach to fiction. Like Wallace's other novels, *The Pale King* focuses on a narrative of alienation centered in specific locations; mainly, the novel's characters' lives intersect at the Regional Examination Center of the IRS where they all work. Many of the chapters of the novel depict these work experiences while other chapters experiment with direct representations of tax law, lectures from accounting courses, and flashbacks to the characters' childhoods of extreme personal difficulty. Throughout the narrative, in both form and content, the novel, through its main theme of boredom in routinized work, lack of intimacy, and lack of spiritual practices emphasizes the alienated subject position that Wallace saw as central to American living at the turn of the twenty-first century, and which he thought Americans must confront and combat.

While all of Wallace's fiction focuses on modes of reading and practical living, *The Pale King's* characters simultaneously interact among another set of thematic overtones: mystical experiences. Repeatedly, Wallace's characters converse with ghosts, seek intimacy and narratives to give meaning to their lives, and enter into repeated practices of attention, a trait that lends the Examination Center the resonance of a twenty-first century parodic attempt at monastic living. Yet, the horizons of concern,¹⁰ seen mainly as spiritual longing for relationship and/or life

his editor for fourteen years and throughout his most productive artistic period, a time during which Wallace published six books with Little, Brown not including his ongoing work on *The Pale King* (Wallace published a seventh book in this time period as well, his nonfiction history of the concept of infinity *Everything and More*, published through a series separate from his contract with Little, Brown and with a separate editor).

¹⁰ My use of the phrase "horizon of concern or care" is heavily influenced by the concluding chapter of Robert Baker's book, *In the Dark Again in Wonder: The Poetry of René Char and George Oppen*. In his conclusion, Baker writes of an ethical line of thought concerned with holding in relation a concern for the social with a concern for the metaphysical, a consistent theme, as he shows, throughout the history of existentialism and certain poetry and poetics. He takes his terminology from George Oppen; as Baker explains, "Oppen tends to think of this tension or intersection in terms of different *orientations of the spirit* or different *horizons of concern*. To put the matter in simple terms, when he speaks of the vertical concern, he speaks of a relationship to the depth of being or the miracle of place, and when he speaks of a horizontal concern, he speaks of a relationship to other persons, but the whole question is far from simple, not least because the horizontal can have to do with the social world as a whole,

meaning, at work in the novel and the characters' desires for progress in their own lives remain sincere in a way that brings into tension the ironic and parodic humor suffused throughout the novel's alienating texture. Throughout my investigation of *The Pale King* the relationship between sincerity and irony as linked to the mystical moments of Wallace's unfinished work stands as the guiding coordinate.

Wallace's literary importance stems from his control of literary and philosophical questions, prose styles, and technical innovations, but, perhaps most importantly for literary critics, also from his role as a liminal figure between high Postmodernism and what he termed the "post-everything" (*Consider* 118). Highly lauded as a literary forebear by the current generation of young writers, Wallace's position as role model and marker of a generational shift in literary concerns has begun to be treated as an important area of critical investigation.¹¹ Here, I am interested in the interplay between what Wallace saw as a contemporary alienation of the American adult worker-class (by the institutional narratives of religion, psychology, consumerism, entertainment culture, and capitalism, all interrelated for him) and the simultaneous potential for participants of narrative to temporarily subvert this alienation as they are able to engage in various practices. I argue that Wallace's final novel makes particularly

or with the world of friendship, love, and family, and in the latter case, as we have seen, it becomes profoundly embedded in the vertical concern with being, the life of the mind, and the questions of the whole and the meaning of one's mortal life in the whole. But if there are finally no simple terms in which to put the matter, there are nonetheless basic spiritual bearings and horizons of concern that do take on a certain clarity in Oppen's work" (128). My investigation of Wallace's novel finds similar spiritual bearings and longings in the face of such tension between the individual and the collective which I approach throughout my treatment of *The Pale King* but also directly in my critique of Wallace and postsecularism in my conclusion.

¹¹ As Linda Hutcheon writes in "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism," critics attempting to theorize the Postmodern (or, I would add, that which has been influenced by the Postmodern period) should aim to elucidate the "shared responses and common provocations" between culture and theory that create what Richard Rorty termed "poetic moments" while recognizing the critic's own active role in shaping and constructing the hegemonic characteristic of categorization (Hutcheon 254-5). This tension, between elucidating important connections and recognizing a somewhat falsely constructed narrative of understanding, stands as central to Wallace's own literary ambitions and should be central to any critic's attempt at delving into Wallace's wide-ranging, ambitious, largely successful, and complicated body of work, even as we look toward him through certain frames of categorization.

evident the tensions between these two functions of different but related narratives as they relate to discourses of Mystics, (pseudo)religious practice, and devotion or attention. The many moments of alienation represented in the novel require the disciplines of attention some of Wallace's characters cultivate, creating an interesting "poetic moment" in his fiction between current philosophical interest in Mystics and the dangers of bureaucracy, alienation, and ideology in the world today.

This emphasized tension, as I treat it in my first chapter, continues Wallace's larger project of fiction, helping characters find ways to live through the alienation inherent in contemporary American living. Throughout his career, he aimed to use postmodern narrative techniques to underscore the importance of this characteristic of the neoliberal American present.¹² In the process, by actively involving the reader in the narrative of his final fiction, Wallace attempts to engender self-reflection outside of his fictional world on ethics, civics, politics, and consumer culture, but my interest particularly centers on how he also includes in *The Pale King* spiritual practices in these conversations of ideology and story through the depictions of his characters' quotidian living. As a result, this study engages Wallace's work around a focus of spiritual longings and exercises by approaching him from the perspectives of Religion and Literature criticism, as well as (Post)Postmodern and Wallace Studies.

As Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell write at the end of their preface to *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*,

¹² My use of the term neoliberal stems from Lisa Duggan's book *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. As Duggan writes, "Neoliberalism developed over many decades as a mode of polemic aimed at dismantling the limited U.S. welfare state, in order to enhance corporate profit rates.... Thus, pro-business activism in the 1970s was built on, and further developed, a wide-ranging political and cultural project – the reconstruction of the everyday life of capitalism, in ways supportive of upward redistribution of a range of resources, and tolerant of widening inequalities of many kinds" (xi). While neoliberalism began in the early 1970s, the 2000s brought this cultural project into the fore as spurred by the Bush Administration's policies, leading both to movements like Occupy in 2011 and market responses such as the financial crisis of 2008. I approach the specific significance for Wallace of neoliberalism in the Bush presidency in my first chapter.

what Wallace *did* take from the literary theory revolution was his belief that “once I’m done with the thing... it becomes simply language, and language lives not in but *through* the reader” (CW 40). Yet even this Barthesian statement does not go far enough: Wallace went beyond simply affirming Roland Barthes’s diagnosis of the “birth of the reader” (130), and elevated it to an architectural principle. His fiction is designed to enact rather than simply reflect Barthes’s “multi-dimensional space” (128) by deliberately creating an arena in which a variety of sometimes conflicting theoretical lenses find a rich breeding ground. The chapters in this volume do not attempt the illusory project of exhaustively covering the many dimensions of Wallace’s work, but, in concert, they do try to reflect the kaleidoscopic nature of the Wallacian text. Our hope is that, taken together, these chapters not only enrich our understanding of Wallace’s work but also mark out the coordinate points for more exacting estimates of his achievements. (Boswell/Burn xii)

By approaching his themes of alienation, practices, and his attention to the reader,¹³ I also aim to contribute to this kind of kaleidoscopic criticism in Wallace Studies in my investigation of *The Pale King*. In doing so, I see my writing as bringing to light potential ways that the religious resonances of Wallace’s work affect the novel’s political and cultural valences as they relate to what Wallace saw as the purpose of fiction: the reading event’s role in overcoming the loneliness and alienation inherent in American life at the turn of the twenty-first century. Before I begin my investigation of *The Pale King* in this light, however, we need to spend some time with the particular overlapping of theoretical contexts that my approach to Wallace implicitly stands within: Mystics, Postsecularism, and narrative ethics.

¹³ As another critic stated Wallace’s concern for the reader: “What seems to be the case, then, is that Wallace’s novels show a particular awareness that the creation of an immersive narrative world is only effective if the reader, listener, or viewer actively co-creates it” (Staes 415).

Mystics, Postsecularism, and Narrative Ethics

After the “end of metaphysics” and “the end of history,”¹⁴ at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves with questions still unanswered about how to live in the world we inhabit, a world shaped by the mass-scale varied destructions of the twentieth century and the first decade of the current one. A trending move against disciplinarity and specialization in order to posit models for living today seems tied, for many important thinkers, to the intellectual corner of ethics as a result of this historical wake. A turn either toward ethics or stemming from it has premised some of the great work of philosophers in the second half of the twentieth century, most of whom began as specialists in different sub-categories of thought, including works by Butler, De Certeau, Foucault, Ricoeur, and Wyschogrod. Interestingly, at the same time that such a shift in concerns has occurred, a simultaneous renewed interest in a (largely Christian) theological tradition of mystics,¹⁵ and specifically the negative or apophatic theological line stemming from Dionysius the Aeropagite, has also occurred.¹⁶ Many

¹⁴ These thoughts stem from the Heideggerian and Post-Heideggerian turn against traditional metaphysics as well as various writers and texts of the late twentieth century, among which is Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, that also wrote of a turn in the cultural conception of history after the Cold War. As my treatment of Wallace implies, literature shows rather clearly that neither our previous conceptions of history nor metaphysics have completely passed away as alluded to by Samuel Cohen in his text *After the End of History: American Literature of the 1990s*. As he approaches various history-interested novels of the 1990s, Cohen writes, “The appearance of these novels challenges a variety of arguments that the 1990s saw the ‘end of history’ – not just Francis Fukuyama’s on the end of ideological struggle, but also Fredric Jameson’s on the impossibility of postmodern historical understanding, as well as Walter Benn Michaels’s on the replacement of historicism with identitarianism. In looking at the ways in which the national past has been and continues to be narrated, these novels reconnect the past to the present and... also connect the past to a future whose tenuousness places it at the center of the contemporary American historical imagination” (4).

¹⁵ A term used in the spirit of Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard’s collection, *Mystics: Presence and Aporia* in which they follow Michel De Certeau’s *The Mystic Fable* in defining Mystics as “not only persons... Mystics was also a science, a way of describing and explaining such confessed experiences. ‘Mystics’ names a topic and its interpretation; the interpretation is part of the topography. Just as history refers both to the past and the way we critically reflect on the past, we took ‘mystics’ to name a topic that includes not only mystical personages and their mystical experiences but also what is called mystical theology, negative theology, mystical union, mystery, and mysticism as well as any or all of the many ways of critically reflecting on any or all of the above” (vii).

¹⁶ A line of theological thought which continued from Dionysius through a long and extremely varied group of medieval Mystic-thinkers including Hugh of St. Victor, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, the anonymous

poststructural thinkers have found an affinity with these apophatic theologians and writers in their negation of (the methods of) knowledge in an effort to come into a living relationship with faith, Goodness, Being, and/or a way to live.¹⁷

This juxtaposition and/or interrelation between twentieth century (largely Continental or Continentally-influenced) thinkers and apophatic theology is a burgeoning and complex field of concern for contemporary writers like Bernard McGinn, John D. Caputo, Thomas A. Carlson, Kevin Hart, Amy Hollywood, Mark C. Taylor, and David Tracy. While I am very much interested in their philosophical and theological reflections on the issue of post-Heideggerian influences and effects as related to apophatic and negative theologies, my thesis hopes to point from their philosophical and theological fields to another area of importance that only a few of these writers have approached: (Post)Postmodern literature,¹⁸ and in particular, the example for contemporary writers given by David Foster Wallace. I hope that by illuminating some neglected underlying influences and concerns of Wallace, one of the largest influences on writers today, I bring a new perspective for both Wallace Studies and Religion and Literature criticism on contemporary literature: a focus on the role of spiritual exercises.

As part of my attention to practices in this Mystics frame, Postsecularism stands as perhaps the most obvious implicit area of critical concern underlying my project. At the same time that poststructural thinkers were engaging negative theologies, other philosophers such as

author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Meister Eckhart and John Tauler, Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila.

¹⁷ For more on the relationship between existential and apophatic thinkers, see Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*. For more on the relationship between poststructural and apophatic thinkers, see the introduction of Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God*, Eds. Kessler and Sheppard, *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, and Christopher J. Knight, *Omissions Are Not Accidents: Modern Apophaticism from Henry James to Jacques Derrida*.

¹⁸ Kevin Hart, Amy Hollywood, Christopher J. Knight, and Regina M. Schwarz among others have all written on the relationship between Mystics and literature, but none of them, as far as I know, have written on (Post)Postmodern literature, while Hart, Hollywood, and Knight have all approached various aspects of Postmodern thinking and writing.

Charles Taylor approached the contemporary attention to religion along more sociological lines in addition to philosophical ones. Bringing into the conversation the rise in some (mostly North Atlantic) countries of secularism as a trend and topic of study in its own right, Taylor defined secularism as a time period in which societies can see secularism as an equally valid choice alongside various religious choices; as Taylor says, “Belief is no longer axiomatic” (*A Secular Age* 3). Along with his contemporaries in the field of sociology, Taylor helped critique the previously held secularization thesis that along with “modernization” a country would also inevitably and simultaneously secularize, now thought by many academics to be no longer viable. With so many examples of “modernizing” regions -- including the United States, India and Pakistan, Israel and Palestine, and Southeast Asia -- that had not moved beyond but had actually experienced a rise of religious fundamentalism within their borders in the late twentieth century, thinkers such as Taylor and Jürgen Habermas have spent significant time in the last twenty years investigating what constitutes public and private spheres and the role of the religious within those respective spaces.¹⁹ This thinking has influenced (along with many others) two branches of thought I consider, and which I have already named: ethics as connected to practical living, and literature.

Attuned to this intersection of ideas, Postsecularism, the burgeoning field stemming from Taylor’s work, currently has a branch of its critics incorporating his and others’ philosophical observations on the secular into the field of literary criticism.²⁰ These critics incorporate the

¹⁹ For some of their work in this area, see, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on a Postsecular Society.” Importantly, I should note that Taylor and Habermas both address religious fundamentalism in their work while also moving beyond it to discuss the larger global world of religious and secular interaction generally speaking. The presence of religious fundamentalism in these countries is merely one of the most visible instances of the kind of religious interest they discuss being prevalent in contemporary discourse.

²⁰ Prominent critics invested in postsecular discourse, even as they may not identify as postsecularists, include Talal Asad, Tracy Fessenden, Amy Hungerford, Michael Kaufmann, Kathryn Ludwig, and John A. McClure among others.

theoretical focus on secularization into literary examples, largely from canonical Postmodern texts that portray the binary between secularism on the one hand and religious narratives and practices on the other as no longer critically tenable. While Taylor and Habermas are guiding lights in this field, postsecular critics also draw heavily on Jacques Derrida's late works on religion and Gianni Vattimo's theory of weak thought while hailing back to a renewed interest in the pluralism and individualism of William James. Of those interested in the ramifications of these thoughts for literature, John McClure emerged as a leader upon the release of *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. In *Partial Faiths*, he discusses the rise of a weak religion in literary fiction that incorporates aspects of popular thinking (including New Age practices, ecological awareness, consumerism, and globalization) into the religious beliefs and practices of the characters of novels in the Postmodern period.

Postsecularism, while useful, remains a controversial and complicated term that has been rightly interrogated at times for its false notions of a complete break with secularism and a potentially simple call for a re-enchantment with belief or the religious.²¹ However, as a literary discipline, Postsecularism engages the confluence of concerns with which I am interested: ethics and practical living, Postmodern influences, and religiously influenced narratives. By doing so, Postsecularism plays a role in what has been prevalent in Religion and Literature critical discourses throughout their history: an investigation of the particular ways that religion and its characteristics are included, adapted, furthered, or themselves help to author certain narrative patterns and concerns. Where Postsecularism seems particularly appropriate for approaching writers like Wallace -- who exist in the generations after those Postmodern authors generally covered by Postsecular critics -- is exactly in its post-ness, connecting it to both an admittedly

²¹ For more explanation of these and other caveats to the term postsecularism, see, Tracy Fessenden, "The Problem of the Postsecular."

complicated temporal relationship to secularism and to a constant investigation of its relationship to Postmodernism as a literary movement.²² Many of the first leaders of Postsecularism in literary criticism extolled a Jamesian attention to experiences of religion over and against dogmatic belief-systems of religion, a pattern they saw reflected in Postmodern texts; my own project also uses a Jamesian frame of individual experience in order to point toward an importantly discursive intersection of thought, looking for the ways that various kinds of religious expression and self-identification are interrelated with secular narratives of the same.²³ In attempting to pursue this endeavor, spiritual practices become important to my project in their necessitating actions, ethical choices, self-positioning, and relationship. As evidenced by the discussion in a special edition of *Religion & Literature* on the postsecular, the term “postsecular” itself is nearly impossible to define (Maczynska 73), and yet the religious discourse that includes postsecularism retains a certain level of cultural importance that few other critical methods currently have in an age of increasing interaction between various religious groups and individual subjectivities.

As a result, my project exists in dialogue with Michael Kaufman’s important call for work in postsecular criticism and in the larger conversation of religion and secularism engaged by many thinkers. As Kaufman writes, “The project of postsecular literary criticism thus conceived, then, would be to continue to identify thematic and structural traits that are distinctively postsecular, and to articulate the critical consequences of identifying these traits for

²² This is an important point as the field of Religion and Literature has not always readily included Postmodern literature.

²³ It is important to note here that while I have serious theoretical concerns with this approach, I still think that Postsecularism is a necessary critical lens with Wallace’s work. Interestingly, Wallace also read and upheld James as an important and meaningful thinker, writer, and philosopher. See, Marshall Boswell, “Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*”; David H. Evans, “‘The Chains of Not Choosing’: Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace”; and Laura Miller, “The Salon Interview”. I will approach the concerns I have about this Jamesian frame in my conclusion to the thesis.

our understanding of postsecularism and literature” (69-70). Through working in this line of scholarly attention, I see my thesis as an interdisciplinary conversation between studies of ritual and spiritual practices, religious studies, and literary criticism, a type of work I find is needed in Postsecular and Religion and Literature criticism and which I find important given the concern for just these types of interactions in the world today.

Unfortunately, the academy’s reluctance to treat themes of spiritual longing for meaning or purpose in (Post)Postmodern and Postmodern fiction has resulted in a limited attention to spiritual practices, a rising trend in contemporary religious living even while individuals are identifying with religious institutions less and less.²⁴ As a result of this lack of treatment, I focus on spiritual practices in art in order to elucidate some of their cultural and philosophical importance to the present moment in American history. As Robert Wuthnow states in his text *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*, “A focus on practice helps orient our thinking to the fact that spirituality also exists in the complex and fragmented areas of contemporary society” (170). By involving society in framing spiritual practices, defined in the social sciences as a “way in which personal identity is created... a way of understanding how beliefs and assumptions influence ordinary life” (170), we inevitably, and importantly, also bring ethical choices into the conversation of self-creation through and with narrative. Discussing ways of living and creating a self in community, spiritual practices included, necessitates an ongoing consideration of habituated ethics in relation to other people. As Wuthnow describes, “practices involve a shaping of the person as well – becoming habituated to the practice to the point that one can exercise wisdom when new situations necessitate making difficult judgments, learning how to get along with other practitioners, being willing to pay the costs that may be associated

²⁴ A point made by Robert Wuthnow in his book *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*, particularly chapter seven: “The Practice of Spirituality,” a source Taylor himself also uses.

with one's principles, and knowing how to relate the practice responsibly to one's other obligations and areas of life" (184). With Taylor's description of the growing inability for people to remain within traditional communities of religious observance without interacting with other faiths and nonfaiths, growing numbers of people are looking for practices to guide their living, both tied to and separate from traditional religious belief. This kind of attention to living practices and ethical living is heightened for many people today, a growing subset of individuals that includes contemporary fiction writers as well.

The Role of Fiction

Narratives necessitate considering the questions raised by juxtaposing individual practices with communal living in ways similar to the philosophical and sociological schools I have briefly treated here. In fact, certain strands of contemporary fiction are intentionally involved in the confluence of Continental thought, religious living, and ethical choices. The larger concerns of these schools of thought (including the potential deconstruction of ethics, aesthetics, and truth among them) is a central theme to much contemporary fiction as novels and stories make explicit ties back to Postmodernism. To many contemporary writers, David Foster Wallace can be seen as a particular influence and possible literary turning point in part because of his efforts at coming to terms with the seeming inability of the postmodern Age of Irony and ethics to engage in conversation.²⁵

Contemporary writers engage the search for ethical practices at just this supposed gap between irony and ethics because they are directly engaged with the different mode of

²⁵ Edith Wyschogrod states a similar claim in the prelude to her book *Saints and Postmodernism* when she asks, "A postmodern ethics? Is this not a contradiction in terms?" (xiii).

knowledge that narrative represents.²⁶ Through art, news, and conversation, we are repeatedly shown that narrative underlies human living and, simultaneously, that we need ethics (as surely our daily news and history attest). Wallace and writers like him attempt to use narrative as a way to surpass the often preconceived notion that the inheritances these authors and our culture more largely received from Postmodernism emptied out the possibility for ethics.²⁷ As Wallace makes clear, narrative makes it impossible to live contentedly with the gap between ethics and Postmodernism; narrative relentlessly returns our attention to the necessity for ethics by placing its characters in temporal settings to engage other characters and the readers' imaginations, in the process asking ethical questions as the reader imagines the interactions and decisions that characters make.²⁸ As he wrote in an early essay, our culture has continued to inundate us with story, narrative, and ways of understanding the world whether we at first understand the philosophical importance of this or not:

It's important to remember 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: every culture countenances itself as culture via a story, whether mythopoeic or politico-economic; every whole person understands his life-time as an organized, recountable series of events and changes with at least a beginning and middle. We need narrative like we need space-time; it's a built-in thing. ("Fictional Futures" 52)

²⁶ Wyschogrod, in *Saints and Postmodernism*, describes narrative as a new mode of philosophical thought separate from the disciplinary traditions that Postmodern writers and thinkers roundly critiqued. By moving to narrative as a mode of knowledge, she says, we potentially escape the abstraction that allowed ethics to be neglected at certain moments in history.

²⁷ Clearly, there were postmodern exceptions to this characterization, but my explanation is still the basic perception, potentially due to the reliance on irony as I will discuss in relation to Wallace in Chapter 1.

²⁸ Throughout the paper, I will use the term imaginative variations to describe this process, a term I borrow from Paul Ricoeur's work, specifically his *Oneself as Another*.

If narrative is seen as a potential necessity for living, Wallace, like some of the writers with and after him such as Jeffrey Eugenides and Zadie Smith, saw the writer's career as in part centered around the Postmodern-ethics tension: the necessity of pursuing the question of whether Postmodern inheritances allow narratives that are adequately equipped to model living for us today, to model human beings attempting to ethically go through space-time narrativizing themselves and those around them as they are already in the middle of various practices of living.

In an attempt to do this, the concerns of Continental philosophy, specifically those overlapping with religious discourses, practices, and mystics, have surfaced in the writing of contemporary fiction as a possible mode of thought allowing discussion, and modeling, of practical living. As Wallace wrote in the same early essay:

The fact that we Aspiring Voices as a generation show so little intellectual curiosity is the least defensible thing of all. But it could well be that the very thing that makes our anti-intellectualism so obscene renders it also extremely temporary. Thing in question: 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. The 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 – should we decide to inhale rather than die – 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 simply no longer afford to regard the work of

critics or theorists or philosophers – no matter how stratospheric – as divorced from his own concerns. (“Fictional Futures” 63)

More than twenty years after Wallace wrote this essay, writers of his generation and the generations following them have indeed breathed in the winds of Continental thinking as they approached the relation of ethics to language and aesthetics. Writers have shown the influence of this thinking, alongside Postmodernism, through their themes and techniques, which are also tied to the practical art of living that fiction writers inevitably approach in the narratives of their characters.

However, the practices of living do not stop here for Wallace. As with many Postmodern-influenced writers, Wallace metafictionally reflects the attempts at living practices for his characters with the simultaneous practice of his readers: reading itself. Because Wallace links the reading event with practices of daily living, the ways he appropriates, engages, and changes his own ideas on the reading event, especially in his novels,²⁹ become central to my critical project. My premise is that while *The Broom of the System*, among its other goals, ironically critiques religion,³⁰ and *Infinite Jest* moves away from more traditionally organized forms of religion to find ritual and connection in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and tennis practice, *The Pale King* begins a new mode of engaging Wallace’s main theme of alienation through Mystics. By means of a novel premised on boredom, he enacts a multi-layered narrative that draws the reader into the identity-creating process involved in the imaginative variations of reading. Importantly, the relationship between reader and text for Wallace never ends, becoming a practiced life habit of

²⁹ The movement of his thought is visible in his other books as well, but the nature of short fiction and nonfiction collections is that all the various parts stem from different periods of an artist’s working life and do not necessarily engage a sustained period of thought on an issue from beginning to end.

³⁰ *The Broom of the System* engages this critique in its episodes concerning the evangelism of the television preacher, the parrot’s learning scripture, and the creation of the Great Ohio Desert (the G.O.D.) for commercial interests (commodifying mystical traditions in the process).

identity actively being created while in ethical engagement with an imagined Other. *The Pale King* borrows and engages a mystical vocabulary for these thematic relationships in addition to Wallace's more often used poststructural and Continental influences.

Wallace, famous for writing long and difficult books, spent his writing career constructing a reader particularly attentive to moments of empathy and connection between characters of Wallace's fictions. This process is the center of his project of overcoming what he sees as contemporary societal alienation by engaging his readers' imaginative senses of empathy. *The Pale King*, even in its unfinished state, follows the postmodern techniques common to all of Wallace's oeuvre: irony, a looped circling of themes and plots, and the undercutting of conventional narrative tropes. Throughout the novel, plotlines and characters appear, circle back around, or disappear in ways that are sometimes unexpected by the reader.³¹ As he writes in his own notes on the novel-in-progress's central concern: "Central Deal: Realism, monotony. Plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens" (*The Pale King* 548). This narrative technique is tied, in my view, to his own description of the novel's form as tornadic, always circular and yet building (547).³²

However, while all of Wallace's work shows his relation with Postmodernism, *The Pale King* in particular shows a concerted effort to escape the odd bind between using postmodern, ironic narrative techniques and wanting the kinds of "single-entendre principles" he wrote of in "E Unibus Pluram" (81). To borrow Stein's phrasing from his letter to *The New York Times*, the "religious impulse" of *The Pale King* shows characters thoroughly alienated, and yet devoting

³¹ Wallace's own notes on the novel point to the use of this tactic as a helpful tool: "David Wallace disappears 100 pp in...David Wallace disappears – becomes creature of the system" (*The Pale King* 548).

³² Stephen J. Burn also notes that Peoria, Illinois, the physical landscape of Wallace's setting in *The Pale King*, is arranged in a concentric, tornadic fashion with circles of concerns and communities emanating from the IRS' Regional Examination Center. See, Stephen J. Burn, "'A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness': Closing Time in *The Pale King*."

themselves to disciplined practices of attention, often cast in a (pseudo)mystic light, for their own spiritual, mental, or physical survival.

Chapter One: “blind but groping”:

Moments of Grace and Spiritual Practices in *The Pale King*

David Foster Wallace’s final, unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, is premised on boredom and alienation. The novel is “tornadic” in its form, technique, and concerns, relying on postmodern tropes of irony, metafiction, and a complex structure that circles around many ideas without ever bringing them to a conclusion (*The Pale King* 547). Wallace’s use of postmodern tropes and the frame of monotonous IRS jobs and workspaces intentionally bores and alienates the novel’s readers to make them confront his important, often culturally neglected, thematic concerns. In *The Pale King*, boredom is a central part of the alienation that Wallace’s characters must find ways to pay attention to if they do not want to suffer an onslaught of ills, including separation from their labor, inability to have meaningful relationships, and an inability to find or compose an overarching narrative to give meaning to their lives. Wallace sees this alienation as characteristic of American society at the turn of the twenty-first century. This alienation, however, in the larger scope of the examples of some of his characters, importantly prefaces a search for ways to live well given their circumstances, a desire some characters engage by Mystics-influenced practices of attention, which potentially help combat the commonly alienated, hyper-mediated American discourse in which the characters and, Wallace argues, the readers live. The spiritual longing which results from this boredom-fueled alienation prompts the characters’ search for practices or exercises that possibly lead to a horizon of concern or care and the ability to live more fully. The desire for this kind of hope or optimism in the face of alienation - a potential “postironic belief” at least in the potential of belief itself – does not propose, in Wallace’s novel, to move past the frame of alienation entirely; instead, the characters attempt a narrative-based living-through of boredom. In doing so, some of Wallace’s characters

find ways to live in a Mystics-like both/and fashion, paying attention to boredom *and* attention, alienation *and* relation, falsity *and* truth, irony *and* sincerity, a postmodern-inflected and ethical mode of living and knowing that could potentially lead them to what Wallace's notes for the novel ambiguously call "bliss" (546).

After a brief discussion of the frame of the novel's important contract with its reader, I will pursue a discussion of the main theme of *The Pale King*: boredom and alienation. This will be followed by three key treatments of the themes within the novel that show the thematic concerns as repeatedly linked to spiritual longing and subsequent attempts at exercises or practices. I will then briefly discuss possibilities for a metafictional relationship between what these characters experience as spiritual longing and practice and the reader's simultaneous ironic and sincere experience of the novel that must remain unfortunately somewhat speculative due to the unfinished nature of Wallace's book.

Frameworks and Primary Concerns for *The Pale King*

For Wallace's characters, boredom exists everywhere, unrecognized for its danger in alienating them from their desires and values. As the fictionalized David Wallace states, "To me, at least in retrospect, the really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull... [there may] be more to it... as in vastly more, right here before us all, hidden by virtue of its size" (87). This open-ended question metafictionally reflects the attention to boredom the reader undertakes in reading the novel while also resonating with the characters' stories of boredom and mystical experiences. Both characters and readers are searching for the value that may lay hidden beneath the boredom. The narrator emphasizes the value of this passage through its resonance with a footnote from the page before

that reads: “I’m reasonably sure that I am the only living American who’s actually read all these [tax] archives all the way through. I’m not sure I can explain how I did it. Mr. Chris Acquistipace... proposed an analogy between the public records surrounding the Initiative³³ and the giant solid-gold Buddhas that flanked certain temples in ancient Khmer. These priceless statues, never guarded or secured, were safe from theft not despite but because of their value – they were too huge and heavy to move. Something about this sustained me” (86 fn.25). For the characters of Wallace’s novel, making practices out of the ways in which they interact with boredom, the ways they ‘read’ boredom, is like recognizing anew the importance of the Buddha statues in Khmer. In paying attention to what most characters normally pass by, the ability to imagine optimistic futures while in the midst of alienation remains viable through what Lee Konstantinou termed Wallace’s “postironic belief.”³⁴ My interest in Wallace rests in how he shows his characters, and metafictionally links his readers, to attempts at finding ways to “sustain” such disciplines of attention initially entered into in order to move past the usual blindness due to boredom and to a renewed belief in their own lives.

The confluence of themes at the center of my interest in Wallace’s work (alienation and practices to combat alienation) is crucial to his thinking throughout his career, a history deeply involved in Wallace’s relationship to Postmodernism. As Stephen J. Burn has written in *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, “Post-postmodernism explicitly looks back to, or dramatizes its roots within postmodernism” by incorporating aspects of Postmodernism while

³³ The Initiative is the changeover in tax law in the mid-1980s, during which “David Wallace” works at the Peoria REC (a fictional legal shift that at least partially reflects the real Tax Reform Act of 1986).

³⁴ Konstantinou termed this move in Wallace’s (Post)Postmodern fiction by explaining that “metafiction doesn’t undermine this or that belief, but belief as such... Metafiction removes the foundations for belief in realism. By contrast, postironists attempt to use metafictional form as a way of reconnecting form and content, as a way of strengthening belief. What is paradoxical about this attempt is the emptiness of the proposed ‘postironic belief.’ Postironists don’t advocate a stance of belief toward some aspect of the world but rather the ethos of belief in and of itself” (Konstantinou 90).

trying to push past merely reinscribing the original arch-Postmodernist goal of highlighting textuality (Burn 19). He continues, “Post-postmodern novels are informed by the postmodernist critique of the naïve realist belief that language can be a true mirror of reality, and yet they are suspicious of the logical climax to this critique: Derrida’s famous statement that ‘there is nothing outside the text’” (Burn 20). While Burn goes on to speak of the aesthetic and political ramifications of this relationship within Jonathan Franzen’s work, Wallace exhibits the same desire in an arguably more influential way for the writers who have come immediately after his and Franzen’s generation.

In accordance with this idea from Burn, Lee Konstantinou writes that Wallace’s characters

seek philosophical and literary solutions to the problem of personal survival, and more often than not fail to find what they’re looking for. The problem then is not that ‘reading’ a life as literature debases life, but rather that to assume that one ‘merely’ reads literature without having to take its conceptual commitments seriously – to assume that writing is merely a gesture – debases literature. Wallace, more than most contemporary novelists, insists on the necessary link between life and literature. (Konstantinou 105)

Wallace’s concern for the relationship between life and literature runs throughout his interviews and work as it does throughout his characters’ lives; perhaps Wallace’s most explicit example of this view comes from his interview with Larry McCaffrey when Wallace famously said, “fiction is about what it means to be a fucking human being” (McCaffrey 26). Wallace’s interest in the interrelated nature of life and literature as centered around what it is to be a human being is an

important consideration with any of his work, but especially, as in *The Pale King*'s mystic influences, when he confronts his readers with strange, unbelievable, and fantastic scenes.³⁵

Before entering into more specific readings of such scenes, however, I believe it would prove helpful to discuss the same attention to the link between life and literature as explicitly found within the context of *The Pale King*. As I have already alluded to, David Wallace also appears as a character in the narrative of the novel, a stand-in fictional author for the book arguing for its importance and explaining its structure while also sharing his own history with the IRS in Peoria. The first author-character section begins, "Author here" (66), and immediately gives the reader a sense of recognition, familiarity, and the feeling of being spoken to specifically even while the connection between reader and author is obviously done through fiction.³⁶ As a result of this chapter and others like it that follow, Wallace's sometimes humorous approach to boredom also always tips its hat to the fictional nature of the text in the reader's hand, something accomplished mainly through the author-character's discussion, and questioning, of the novel's genre and subsequent purpose.

Throughout the first Author's Foreword, the author-character David Wallace continuously attempts to show the differences between fiction and nonfiction in order to explain the significance of his narrative being nonfiction, at one point calling it a "vocational memoir" (72). As he writes:

The point I'm trying to drive home here is that it's still all substantially true – i.e., the book this Foreword is part of – regardless of the various ways some of the forthcoming §§s have had to be distorted, depersonalized, polyphonized, or otherwise jazzed up in order to

³⁵ As Brian McHale writes in his *Postmodernist Fictions*, "The fantastic, in other words, involves a face-to-face confrontation between the possible (the "real") and the impossible, the normal and the paranormal" (75).

³⁶ As the Frank Bidart poem, "Borges and I" (part of which is used for the epigraph to the novel), states in a section Wallace did not quote: "This "I" therefore allows us to enter an inaccessible magic space, a hitherto inarticulate space of intimacy and honesty earlier denied us, where voice, for the first time, has replaced silence" (Bidart).

conform to the specs of the legal disclaimer [that the book is fiction]. This is not to say that this jazzing up is all just gratuitous titty-pinching; given the aforementioned legal-slash-commercial constraints, it's ended up being integral to the book's whole project. The idea, as both sides' counsel worked it out, is that you will regard features like shifting p.o.v.s, structural fragmentation, willed incongruities, & c. as simply the modern literary analogs of 'Once upon a time...' or 'Far, far away, there once dwelt...' or any of the other traditional devices that signaled the reader that what was under way was fiction and should be processed accordingly. For as everyone knows, whether consciously or not, there's always a kind of unspoken contract between a book's author and its reader; and the terms of this contract always depend on certain codes and gestures that the author deploys in order to signal the reader what kind of book it is, i.e., whether it's made up vs. true. And these codes are important, because the subliminal contract for nonfiction is very different from the one for fiction.³⁷ (74-5)

These codes are important because they help the reader know what is "true" and what is not, what has real meaning in the lived world and what does not, what has been lived already and what has not. Wallace clearly thought that fiction, as Lee Konstantinou explained, had relation to the real world, even with the conceits necessary to Postmodern-influenced fiction. This long, round-about, detailed false confession of fooling a reader (ostensibly thought up by the

³⁷ At which point the author-character places a footnote pointing to the reader's ability to tell when they're being manipulated, exhibiting camaraderie between Wallace and his reader, which I will reproduce in full here in a footnote of my own: "The main way you can tell that the contracts are different is from our reactions to their breach. The feeling of betrayal or infidelity that the reader suffers if it turns out that a piece of ostensible nonfiction has made-up stuff in it (as has been revealed in some recent literary scandals, e.g. Kosinski's *Painted Bird* or that infamous Carcaterra book) is because the terms of the nonfiction contract have been violated. There are, of course, ways to quote-unquote cheat the reader in fiction, too, but these tend to be more technical, meaning internal to the story's own formal rules (see, e.g., the mystery novel's first-person narrator who doesn't reveal that he's actually the murderer until the last page, even though he obviously knew it all along and suppressed it just to jerk us around), and the reader tends to feel more aesthetically disappointed than personally dicked over." Wallace is participating in this second, fiction-based relation with the reader through technical moments without wanting the reader to have that feeling of being "dicked over" as a result (75 fn. 9)

character's legal counsel, another nod to capitalist alienation for the novel's frame) in order to simply fool the reader all over again (an author-character purporting that the book is nonfiction when it's clearly a novel and he's a character) ends up attempting to engage the reader in imaginative relationship with the fictional text. This relationship, Wallace hoped, would be more than the viewership he decried in his essay "E Unibus Pluram" and that he found prevalent in American culture, a view I discuss in more detail toward the end of this chapter.

As he wrote in a letter to a friend:

Maybe the root challenge here is to form and honor a fairly rigorous contract with the reader, one that involves honesty and unblinkingness (if the latter's a word). So that the reader gets the overall impression that here's a narrator who's primarily engaged in trying to Tell the Truth... and if that truth involves the putziness of other people or events, so be it, but if it involves the narrator's own schmuckiness, limitations, prejudices, foibles, screw-ups at the event, etc., then these get old too – because the truth-as-seen is the whole project here (as opposed to just mockery, or just self-ridicule, or just self-superiority, etc.). (as qtd. in Roiland 37-8)

In a literature influenced by postmodern literary techniques and concerns, an author has to find new ways out of the double bind of wanting to appeal to a reader's sense of reality and/or truth-as-seen without coming off as sarcastic, ironic, or too sincere to be believed by a reader-population over-trained in the important tools of sarcasm and irony. As a result, a literary text must then be both sincere and not-sincere, both true and fictional, both just-language and truth-as-seen, and never just one or the other.

In my treatment of *The Pale King*, we see how the influences of mystics on Wallace's characters' longing and resultant practices allow for a both/and mode of understanding of how to

live in contemporary society similar to what I've just discussed, the contract with his readers that he saw as central to the purpose of his fiction. In order to investigate this representation of the both/and narrative mode of knowledge in *The Pale King*, I now turn to a discussion of Wallace's main themes of the novel, boredom and alienation, and three primary examples of their treatment centered around a longing for intimacy, moments of grace, and spiritual practices, respectively.

Central Themes: Boredom and Alienation

Wallace's *The Pale King* inextricably links boredom and alienation in descriptions of setting, the characters' work lives, and the characters' inability to relate to each other. In each case, boredom and alienation connect to the conversations concerning capitalism and Mystics. By examining how Wallace approaches boredom and alienation in his text, I point to an understanding of a need for a way out of the contemporary American bind of wanting relationship and modes of living not entirely premised on alienation while being practiced in maintaining distance and disconnection. Seeing this bind in Wallace's novel makes evident the need for a different mode of knowledge for his characters.

The word *boredom* is etymologically explained within the novel in one of its magical realist scenes. A ghost of a former IRS employee explains the word to Lane Dean, Jr., a current employee debating the benefits of suicide at his desk. Lane Dean, new to the IRS lifestyle, is no longer able to follow the attention tips he was given at orientation: to flex his buttocks and imagine a beach location. As the scene continues, Lane tries to pray the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a poor sinner," but feelings of oppressive boredom continuously interrupt him (379). He feels empty while reflecting, seemingly against his will, that "*boring* also meant something that drilled in and made a hole," and his prayer disintegrates into the phrase

“Lord Jesus,” a phrase that acts as both part of the prayer and an expression of blasphemous contempt for his situation (380; 381).³⁸ As Lane Dean thinks before the ghost’s arrival, he is experiencing a kind of hell, given ever-multiplying tasks wholly concerned with numbers that do not connect to anything Lane Dean will ever see. The ghost appears, then, just as Lane Dean wakes from a dream to find his head in his hands, the image of either contemplation or despair.

Before naming the word *boredom*, the ghost emphasizes boredom’s silent presence in a way similar to the Khmer Buddha statues: “They don’t ever say it, though. Have you noticed? They talk around it. It’s too manifest. As if talking about the air you’re breathing, yes? It would be as if saying, I see so-and-so *with my eye*.³⁹ What would be the point?” (384). The concept of boredom is too large, like the Khmer Buddha statues, to gain much attention, and yet boredom is suffused throughout the daily life of each IRS employee. The ghost continues with the concept, making Lane Dean pay attention to boredom by teaching him the histories of the word, including links to the traditions of Mystics and industrialization.

Word appears suddenly in 1766. No known etymology. The Earl of March uses it in a letter describing a French peer of the realm.... For no reason, Lane Dean flexed his buttocks.... The French of course had *malaise, ennui*. See Pascal’s fourth *Pensée*.... But nothing in English prior to March, Earl of. This means a good five hundred years of no word for it you see, yes?.... No word for the Latin *accidia* made so much of by monks under Benedict.... Also the hermits of third-century Egypt, the so-called *daemon meridianus*, when their prayers were stultified by pointlessness and tedium and a longing for violent death. (385)

³⁸ Dean, if more self-aware at this moment of the story, may have read his words in this way as he is a devout Catholic who, at another point in the chapter, discusses the fact that no one in his congregation is allowed to watch *The Exorcist* because it is against dogma and obscene (383).

³⁹ A remarkably similar claim to a part of Wallace’s commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, a joke in which a fish asks, “What is water?” See, David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water*.

As the ghost repeats throughout his description, the word boredom relates to the religious tradition through its relation to Benedict, Greek roots, the Desert Fathers' prayer habits, Donne's religious poetry, and Kierkegaard's philosophical writings. Yet, while the ghost goes on to explain the English words used before 1766 in lieu of boredom, most of which are associated with melancholy, he also expresses the word's fitness for its own time period: "Philologists say it was a neologism – and just at the time of industry's rise, too, yes? of the mass man, the automated turbine and drill bit and bore, yes? Hollowed out?... [L.P. Smith] Posits certain neologisms as *arising from their own cultural necessity*" (386; emphasis in the original). In this added explanation, the ghost emphasizes the dual heritage of boredom to both Mystics and capitalist industry.⁴⁰ These two thematic lineages tie the characters' lives together throughout the novel; the text's various narrative strands share boredom through both etymological lines, Mystics and capitalism. Yet, the concept of boredom so pervades the lives of the IRS employees that they cannot truly see its presence in their lives.

As the ghost tells Lane Dean of the Desert Fathers, the concept of boredom comes from a Mystics tradition always seeking ways past it through ritual practices.⁴¹ Importantly, at the end of the ghost's monologue, after Dean has been made to pay attention to the concept of boredom, he comes to the realization that he might pray again. As the ghost walks away he says, "Note too that *interesting* first appears just two years after *bore*. 1768. Mark this, two years *after*" (387; emphasis in the original). With the emphasis given by his supernatural presence, the ghost, and Wallace through him, says that what is of value can only be found by going through the concept

⁴⁰ As well, the word boredom interestingly arises with the form of the novel in the late eighteenth century.

⁴¹ While this reading in some ways focuses on a Christian Mystics tradition, such as the etymology that the ghost lays out for Lane Dean, Wallace clearly intended some of these ideas to be taken as more applicable than just within this tradition. For instance, he was interested throughout the writing of his novel in Buddhist practices of meditation as well. As D.T. Max included in his biography, Wallace was especially interested in Engaged Buddhism, a politically active sect of Buddhist thinking that relies on meditation and was started by the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. See, Max, especially pages 181, 257, 291.

of boredom first. While the relationship to Mystics, including this moment of resumed prayer, may not become fully evident until later in this chapter, the capitalist traditions involved in the “cultural necessity” of the word are more immediately clear. The capitalist and bureaucratic frame of the IRS represents the cultural necessity of the concept of boredom for Wallace’s characters.

In addition to the general way in which Konstantinou, in the sections I quoted earlier, shows life and literature as tied in Wallace’s work, the concept of alienating boredom as found in neoliberal capitalism had a specific, contemporary importance for Wallace in George W. Bush’s presidency, the period during which Wallace drafted the majority of *The Pale King*. As part of this life-literature connection, *The Pale King* joins other novels of the early twenty-first century in making an effort to use the 1980s Reagan era of American life and politics as a foreshadowing critique of later George W. Bush era issues of concern, including civil rights and liberties as well as the corporatization of civil responsibilities and citizen identities.⁴² In an interview with *The Believer* in 2004, Wallace spoke of the dangers he saw as part of Bush’s continuing into a second term: dangers consisting of neoliberal socio-political shifts and rampant ethico-individualism, both related to alienation and presented as such at various points in discussions of tax code reform in *The Pale King*.⁴³ The novel reflects this critique of the Bush presidency throughout its focus on alienation as part of capitalism, a link so ubiquitous to the fictional characters’ lives that

⁴² *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen and *The Marriage Plot* by Jeffrey Eugenides are two other major examples of this trend, while Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* also reflects certain cultural subgroups, such as the punks, responding to Reagan era policies as a foreshadowing of later dilemmas.

⁴³ As he said in the interview in response to how he would attempt to play a role in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, he (somewhat ironically) planned to find ways to interact with other people through rote activities oriented to clichés of living better: “My own plan for the coming fourteen months is to knock on doors and stuff envelopes. Maybe even to wear a button. To try to accrete with others into a demographically significant mass. To try extra hard to exercise patience, politeness, and imagination on those with whom I disagree. Also to floss more” (76-7). As well, for the link between Wallace’s aesthetics of boredom and neoliberalism, see Ralph Clare, “The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*.”

few of them even mention it. Rather, the reader more often sees this link between capitalism and alienation through the descriptions of spaces and rote activities.

While some chapters of *The Pale King* take place in the characters' childhood memories or in transit between spaces, the majority of the novel takes place in the Peoria Regional Examination Center (REC) of the IRS. Within this space, Wallace repeatedly asserts the utterly boring homogeneity of conformity in the jobs that most of the characters share; the institution metaphorically shuts closed any attempt at progress beyond boredom by its sheer design. For example, when approaching the REC via the highway, characters have to wait in a long line of turning-left vehicles to enter the parking lot. Rather than just parking and walking, most employees search for spots closer to the building, because there is no sidewalk and they have to walk along the side of the road (something more inconvenient and dangerous from farther away). In addition, the road consists of a one-way driveway, meaning that if a character drives to the area closest to the building in order to find a spot and doesn't find one, he or she has to follow the drive back out to the highway and join the line once again. After a series of circlings, once a character does reach the REC, the façade is the same as all other RECs in the country: namely, a large, detailed reproduction of a 1040 tax form. As the narrator explains it, the 1040 form looms over an impasse of understanding: "Even without the crowding and chaos, the whole huge main-entrance area was complex and disorienting. There were flags, coded signs, directional arrows, and a kind of broad concrete plaza with what looked to have been a fountain but had no water spurting" (283). This impossibility of progress or change represented by the encompassing, vast

space of the REC represents the alienation inherent in the lives of the employees in this and other similar scenes throughout the novel.⁴⁴

In addition, the characters' work lives revolve around repetitive paper work and bureaucratic hold-ups. This kind of monotony expressed throughout the novel connects to chapter twenty-five, a chapter with a different format than any of the others, consisting of four pages of double-columned text. The beginning of the chapter reads: "'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. 'Groovy' Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page. Anand Singh turns two pages at once by mistake and turns one back which makes a slightly different sound. David Cusk turns a page" (312). Through the boring nature of these pages, the reader becomes aware of the oppressive characteristic of this rote repetition for the characters; upon rereading the novel, the reader realizes that this utterly boring scene is the only appearance in the novel for some of its characters. The use of space and work in *The Pale King* makes the reader painfully aware of what the IRS employees simply live: the alienating effects of their rote work. As a result of this daily living made rote by the IRS setting, the reader looks for characters attempting to subvert the alienation so present in the formal techniques and content of the novel. I will now investigate three scenes with characters attempting to accomplish this goal, in the process trying to become, in their own words, either full or good people through conversation, through being open to moments of grace, and through spiritual exercises.

⁴⁴ This example in particular shows how related Wallace's use of space may be to a Jamesonian understanding of Postmodern architecture, most explicitly laid out in Jameson's treatment of the Bonaventure Hotel (Jameson 38-44).

Intimacy

In the face of the kinds of alienation discussed above, both systemic and personal, *The Pale King*'s characters rarely attempt to share parts of their personal lives with each other even while they long for the sense of intimacy that they largely lack; due to the infrequency of this potential overcoming of alienation, when these conversations do occur they are extremely important. One such instance occurs between Shane Drinion and Meredith Rand at a bar some of the employees frequent after work. Throughout their conversation, Meredith Rand explains to Drinion how she met her husband through a series of conversations while she was a patient of a mental health ward and he had a job as the nightwatch for her hallway. Through practicing this kind of relationship, through conversations about her inner life with another, she came to realize some of her central alienating problems and began the process of living through her dilemmas by engaging in the relationship with her later husband and first real friend. In her conversation with Shane about meeting her husband, Meredith is described as beginning to "look far more like herself now" and she begins to feel a connection to Shane Drinion, an employee no one speaks to very often (506). Rand's two conversations, with her husband and with Drinion, are uncommon experiences of relation and connection for Rand over who she is as a person, not just as an alienated sex-object, which is how many of the men at work think of her (and how she often thinks of herself).

Shane, on the other hand, spends most of the dialogue in silence, listening. Many of Shane's coworkers at the REC have a hard time interacting with him because he exhibits an odd manner in which he focuses almost too intently on a given person or a page of a tax document; he is so good at the practice of paying attention in comparison to those around him that he alienates himself from others. In this state of extreme attention and focus, unbeknownst to most

of the employees of the IRS agency, Shane levitates without any knowledge of what his body is doing; if he did become self-aware, his attention would be broken and he would stop levitating. Moments of supernatural oddity along the lines of magical realism occur throughout the novel, but Shane's case is one of the most memorable. The supernatural effect throws large shadows over his and Meredith's attempts to show their true selves and pay attention to each other, and yet also places an emphasis on someone who has practiced attention before and is exercising his attention again.

Meredith calls the type of conversation that she had with her eventual husband in the mental health ward a "tête-à-tête."⁴⁵ Likewise, both Shane and Meredith refer to their own current conversation as a "tête-à-tête," seemingly allowing for an attempt at understanding each other (460). Throughout the conversation, Meredith continuously interrupts her story to ask Shane if she is boring him, trying to make sure she's practicing this kind of conversation well. It seems for most of the chapter that if they can get through whatever potentially "boring" aspects to her story may be present, Shane and Meredith could have a chance at seeing each other as full people.

In this way, their conversation at the bar gets closer to two people establishing relationship, a genuine understanding of each other "as a person," through a practice, conversation, than any other section of the book (481). However, the novel's characteristic alienation subverts even this interpersonal potential. At the end of the chapter, Meredith cuts the conversation short. After baring so much of her troubled past and her fears, she stops sharing with Shane, quickly answers some of his very confused questions, signals her friend that she's ready to leave, and ends the chapter by flatly stating, "Anyway, that's how I met him" (511). Her

⁴⁵ Potentially resonant with my later discussion of practices, she refers to this activity of conversation as something one can "practice" in relation to another person (476).

hurried exit, while unexplained, may have something to do with her own inexperience with practicing platonic relationships or conversations between people about important, personal topics; as Drinion explains of the men's inability to speak or act normally around Rand, perhaps she also feels how "Fear and excitement seem to be closely related" (454).⁴⁶

Yet, more important than why Rand leaves is the alienation upheld by her doing so. The abrupt ending of this chapter is indicative of the rest of the novel's form. No character gets out of their respective alienations;⁴⁷ some of the chapters, including the Drinion-Rand conversation, are so disconnected from each other they could be read as a series of well-crafted, sometimes beautiful, sometimes funny, and sometimes sad character studies. The disconnected narrative style of the Drinion-Rand conversation alienates the reader while reflecting the double-sided nature of many attempts at practicing attention in the novel: characters need to practice attention in order to move past their alienation, and yet they are already all too used to staying comfortably at a remove, a counter-practice represented by each characters' walking through the doors of the 1040 form that is the REC.

Moments of Grace

My second example of spiritual longing for a horizon of concern takes place between two teenage Christians, Lane Dean and his girlfriend, Sheri, as they sit silently together at a park contemplating whether she should have an abortion. In chapter six, the free indirect monologue

⁴⁶ What does remain at least partially clear, even with the abrupt ending Rand gives the conversation, is the import of the conversation to her; she later brings up the conversation with a friend at work, regardless of the social taboo of admitting to enjoy spending time with the strange Shane Drinion (462).

⁴⁷ This is true, except, perhaps, for the author-character David Foster Wallace, but even his overcoming his alienation happens long after his work at the REC and only with the help of time, reflection, and the construction of the nonfiction-memoir that *The Pale King* is supposed to represent – all involving potential practices for him to model his life around. Even so, he seems rather cagey about the reception of his work in the sections inarguably from his perspective.

narrates Lane Dean's inner thoughts as to whether Sheri should have an abortion or keep the child, and, if their decisions differ, whether to stay together or split up. Throughout this tension-filled inner thinking, Dean repeats the doubled-nature of his thoughts about leaving his girlfriend:

She believed he was good, serious in his values. Part of him seemed willing to more or less just about lie to someone with that kind of faith and trust and what did that make him? How could such a type of individual even pray? What it really felt like was a taste of the reality of what might be meant by hell. Lane Dean had never believed in hell as a lake of fire or a loving God consigning folks to a burning lake of fire – he knew in his heart this was not true. What he believed in was a living God of compassion and love and the possibility of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through whom this love was enacted in human time. But sitting here beside this girl as unknown to him now as outer space, waiting for whatever she might say to unfreeze him, now he felt like he could see the edge or outline of what a real vision of hell might be. It was of two great and terrible armies within himself, opposed and facing each other, silent. There would be battle but no victor. Or never a battle – the armies would stay like that, motionless, looking across at each other and seeing therein something so different and alien from themselves that they could not understand, they could not hear each other's speech as even words or read anything from what their faces looked like, frozen like that, opposed and uncomprehending, for all human time, two hearted, a hypocrite to yourself either way.

(42-43)

Lane Dean's interior monologue in this chapter consists of this type of inner alienation exacerbated by the necessity of personal ethical choices with risks for his relationships with

himself, his girlfriend, and his god. Yet, this kind of potentially sincere discussion, and other scenes like it, also borders on the ironic, absurd, or humorous for a reading public trained in the practice of ironic detachment and critique. The bind between irony and sincerity for Lane Dean stands, as the two armies oppose each other while unable to be understood, eternally hypocritical by being sincere or being ironic, always hypocritical either way.

Yet, in the midst of this bind for the reader, to which we will return later in the chapter, Dean does escape this dilemma in his thought and action, at least momentarily. Without fully losing the previous understanding of his present position, his thoughts begin to shift when he takes in his surroundings, the place and the people around him:

When he moved his head, the part of the lake farther out flashed with sun; the water up close wasn't black now and you could see into the shallows and see that all the water was moving but gently, this way and that, and in this same way he besought to return to himself as Sheri moved her leg and started to turn beside him. . . . In his moment or time at the lake now just to come, Lane Dean first felt he could take this all in whole; everything seemed distinctly lit, for the circle of the pin oak's shade had rotated off all the way and they sat now in sun with their shadow a two-headed thing in the grass to the left before them. He was looking or gazing again at where the downed tree's branches seemed to bend so sharply just under the shallows' surface when he was given then to know that through all this frozen silence he'd despised he had, in truth, been praying all the while, or some little part of his heart he could not know or hear had, for he was answered now with a type of vision, what he later would call within his own mind a vision or *moment of grace*. He was not a hypocrite, just broken and split off like all men. Later on, he believed that what happened was he had a moment of almost seeing them both as Jesus might see

them – as blind but groping, wanting to please God despite their inborn fallen nature. (43-44; emphasis in the original)

In this mystical moment of grace, Lane Dean's story still awakens the reader's sense of irony, sarcasm, or disbelief. Yet, in this moment, Dean also finds solace and resolves himself to an ethical choice: to keep the child and marry Sheri. While the two-hearted nature of the ethical shadow could be interpreted as Dean and Sheri uniting in this moment of grace, the reader must remember that, at least in Dean's thoughts, Dean's alienation remains a basic reality of his life, returning after this scene. As represented in his conversation with the ghost which I quoted earlier, his decision to support having the child, to marry, and to get a job at the REC do not lead to a life of happiness and unity. Alienation does return even after this grace-filled moment. However, this may actually be closer to an understanding of Mystics than an overwhelming experience of grace in and of itself can be. Mystic language of recognizing an inborn fallen nature while also groping for divine relation and love, something never reached but always reached for, is clearly evident in this passage, others like it in this chapter, and Mystics literatures generally. This both/and style of language reflects the larger existential and spiritual themes of the novel: "full" people exist attempting to live well under the obscuration of alienation and boredom even while alienation and boredom are not entirely overcome.

Spiritual Exercises

To approach this mystical both/and model more directly, I will turn now to chapter thirty-six, originally published in *The New Yorker* as a stand-alone story entitled "Backbone" in March 2011. As such, it was one of the first glimpses of *The Pale King* the reading public had before its

later publication,⁴⁸ and, true to its name, sets the tone as an example *par excellence* for the Mystics influences throughout the novel. The chapter begins with a nod toward ethics and the imagining of another person as a full human being: “Every whole person has ambitions, objectives, initiatives, goals. This one particular boy’s goal was to be able to press his lips to every square inch of his body” (396). Chapter thirty-six centers around the boy’s practices to achieve his goal, a desire even the boy himself doesn’t fully understand; after an initial injury brought about by his stretching to kiss a part of his body, he visits a holistic-oriented chiropractor, Doctor Kathy, and begins his quest toward knowing intimately his own “whole person.”

Throughout the chapter, the boy’s story is interrupted repeatedly by histories of mysticism: at first by a reference to contortionism’s relationship to Tamil mysticism, and later to the even less immediately relevant history of stigmata. In this second history, however, while already subtly represented by the boy’s (in)ability to imagine success in kissing his entire body, doubt and faith appear as central concepts. After a brief explanation of a few examples of stigmata appearing on the palms of saints and common believers alike, the narrator writes:

And yet (fact): Hands lack the anatomical mass required to support the weight of an adult human. Both Roman legal texts and modern examinations of first-century skeletons confirm that classical crucifixion required nails be driven through the subject’s wrists, not his hands. Hence the, quote, ‘necessarily simultaneous *truth* and *falsity* of the stigmata’

⁴⁸ Before its publication were three other short stories stemming from *The Pale King* drafts that appeared in *The New Yorker*: “Good People” (February 2007), chapter 6, discussed earlier: Lane Dean’s interior monologue on the bench; “Wiggle Room” (March 2009), chapter 33: Lane Dean seeing a ghost while working at the REC; and “All That” (December 2009), a section apparently discarded by Pietsch from the book concerning a childhood memory about a Christmas gift. Of these, only “Good People” was published during Wallace’s lifetime.

that existential theologian E.M. Cioran explicates in his 1937 *Lacrimi si sfinti*, the same monograph in which he refers to the human heart as ‘God’s open wound.’ (401)⁴⁹

This both/and of truth and falsity is allowed to stand, and in some ways must be allowed to remain in order for the history of stigmata to be taken at all seriously as a history in the contemporary period’s “secular age” of many options for belief (Taylor 3). At the same time, the stigmata story directly relates to the boy’s *bildungsroman* experience of self-creation, an action predicated on the boy’s moving between a kind of collective blindness with his family and his individual pursuit of identity as well as potential cosmic knowledge or transcendence. The boy’s rituals, with their connotations for his knowing his full self, allow for a simultaneous connection and distance common to mystic traditions.

The boy’s ritual centers around a mystic image symbolizing simultaneous connection and distance. In the Christian mystic tradition, the kiss, stemming from the Song of Solomon and carried forward in the thinking of theologians and mystic-thinkers like Bernard of Clairvaux and the Spanish Carmelites, is a central image of intimacy and temporary union with, while ultimately remaining separate from, the divine. As Bernard explains in his sermons on the Songs of Solomon, and exemplifies generally speaking for the Mystics traditions, he longs for union with the divine through the kiss that is Christ, the Word that unifies God and humankind for Bernard: “O happy kiss, and wonder of amazing self-humbling which is not a mere meeting of lips, but the union of God with man. The touch of lips signifies the bringing together of souls” (217). However, as Bernard emphasizes throughout the entirety of his sermons, he does not “presume to think that [he] shall be kissed by [God’s] mouth. That is the unique felicity and singular prerogative of the humanity he assumed. But, more humbly, [Bernard asks] to be kissed

⁴⁹ Relatedly, in §44 an ex-cartboy relates that after working at the REC he has learned that “the human heart is a chump,” a remarkably different take that still speaks to some kind of vulnerability (439).

by the kiss of his mouth, which is shared by many, those who can say, ‘Indeed from his fullness we have all received’ (Jn 1:16)” (216). While a further elucidation of Bernard’s theology of the kiss of the kiss quickly becomes complicated, his imagery makes immediately evident how the mystical image of the kiss is an opportunity, generally speaking, for simultaneous union and recognition of humility and distance.

Wallace’s kissing boy upholds this both/and of connection and distance as well. The boy learns his ritualized practice of kissing his body from his chiropractor Doctor Kathy. She shares with him her belief that awareness of a practice that orients a person to their own body exists as “the interpenetrating dance of spine, nervous system, spirit, and cosmos as totality” (405). The transcendent language she uses, while potentially humorous and New Age sounding, is repeated throughout the chapter in the narration of the boy’s progress and in his reflections on his practiced awareness to his own body. This type of diction used by Doctor Kathy, and the absurdity of the boy’s project being textured with mystical comparisons allows for a sense of parody to enter the kissing boy’s chapter. Potentially, a reader may interpret these scenes as a parody of a mystical experience, leading to further isolation rather than connection with some larger spiritual presence; central to this reading is the recognition that the boy is always only kissing himself in order to attempt an unaccomplishable goal from within a potentially solipsistic self-referentiality. Perhaps the boy needs a partner to help map the rest of his body, or perhaps he needs to attempt entering into community in other ways like the Rand-Drinion chapter also attempted. I do not think that this parody is ever fully undercut by Wallace.

However, while the boy’s story shows a mystic-like practice of attention that is potentially parodic, the (pseudo)spiritual exercises also exist in a larger context of familial alienation and isolation between the boy and his father that shifts the humorous depictions of the

boy's project from the beginning of the chapter toward an earnest spiritual longing; while the boy's practice does not subvert his alienation, the alienation's continued existence helps lend legitimacy to his attempt at creating a purpose and a narrative to his own entering adulthood within the circumstances he has been given. As the chapter describes, there are often times when the father, after a divorce and throughout his admitted sex addiction, is in despair and not connected to the boy's transcendent imaginative possibilities. The father, while arguably leading the more unstable lifestyle of the two, often worries over his son as he sits on the other side of the boy's bedroom's closed door listening to the silence that pervades the room as the boy stretches, a silence, distance, and closed door representative of the alienation in this chapter (400). Even while the boy comes to know himself more fully and becomes content with his own practice,⁵⁰ the alienating framework of his current life is never broken through completely, as exemplified with the ongoing comparison between the boy and his father. Rather, the boy's practices allow him a way to live while within this framework of alienation.

The boy's decision to follow these practices, even as their absurdity is foregrounded repeatedly, undeniably has, at least temporarily, more immediate, positive developments within this smaller scope. While the boy's father, due to his addiction, is left only with the "sort of dutiful tedium of energy and time and the will to forge on in the face of despair," the boy seems to find hope or optimism, some sort of sentiment of being sustained in his long journey toward his goal, by orienting his life around his practice of stretches and kissing (400). Doctor Kathy initiates him into this physical-therapy-as-spiritual-exercise with language reminiscent of religious practice:

⁵⁰ The boy becomes content at least for a while. Many childhood characters for the novel return as future IRS employees; while the boy does not return as an adult, the reader of Wallace's unfinished novel wonders who the boy may have been in his future, fully adult life. A pattern established by the other characters suggests he would continue to run into isolating environments and situations.

She instructed the boy to perform the stretching exercises every single day and not to let boredom or a reduction in symptomology keep him from performing the rehabilitative exercises in a disciplined way. She said the long-term goal was not relief of present discomfort but neurological hygiene and health and a wholeness of body and mind he would someday appreciate very, very much... Thus was Doctor Kathy the child's formal introduction both to incremental stretching and to the adult idea of quiet daily discipline and progress toward a long-term goal. (398)

The boy's daily practice and progress toward awareness of himself sets his actions apart from the quotidian activities of the boy's life; he takes stretching and kissing, actions that are otherwise rather ordinary while not often combined in this way, and organizes his sense of self around them in pursuing his spiritual longing.

The importance to the boy, and to his identity, of these ritualized practices becomes evident in the final paragraphs of the chapter as the boy confronts the impossibility of achieving the self-set task of kissing his whole body:

The boy's mid- and upper back were the first areas of radical, perhaps even impossible unavailability to his own lips, presenting challenges to flexibility and discipline that occupied a vast percentage of his inner life in Grades 4 and 5. And beyond, of course, like the falls at a long river's end, lay the unimaginable prospects of achieving the back of his neck, the eight centimeters just below the chin's point, the galeae of his scalp's back and crown, the forehead and zygomatic ridge, the ears, nose, eyes – as well as the paradoxical *ding an sich* of his lips themselves, accessing which appeared to be like asking a blade to cut itself. These sites occupied a near-mythic place in the overall project: the boy revered them in such a way as to place them almost beyond the range of

conscious intent. This boy was not by nature a ‘worrier’ (unlike himself, his father thought), but the inaccessibility of these last sites seemed so immense that it was as if their cast shadow fell across all the slow progress up toward his clavicle in the front and lumbar curvature in the rear that occupied his eleventh year, darkening the whole endeavor, a tenebrous shadow the boy chose to see as lending the enterprise a somber dignity rather than futility or pathos.

He did not yet know how, but he believed, as he approached pubescence, that his head would be his. He would find a way to access all of himself. He possessed nothing that anyone could ever call doubt, inside. (409)

This passage, while maintaining a parodic dimension, represents as well a moment in which the boy overcomes the loneliness and doubt that the boy’s father irreparably has as an adult, and which many of the other adult characters also share. Regardless of this short term accomplishment, however, the boy’s end goal remains importantly unimaginable to himself. He cannot imagine any way for his body to contort into the shapes his goal necessitates. Yet, in the face of physical impossibility, he continues to believe his goal remains possible. The boy’s simultaneous belief in his goal and inability to imagine its completion act together to form a Mystics-like mode of knowledge, as represented by his having “his head,” a way of living different than his father. In opposition to what the narrator calls his father’s despair, the boy remains optimistic even while his goal seems as illogical as “asking a blade to cut itself.” In the final sentence, the last word is offset by an important comma which creates a double meaning for the discernment of doubt. Does the boy not see doubt within himself, or is it the reader not seeing it in the boy while still potentially outside him? Or is it both?

Meanwhile, the narrative voice describes the boy while he practices his stretching exercises as looking “either prayerful or catatonic, or both,” which at first read seems to describe the observer-narrator-reader’s lack of ability in deciphering and not necessarily the boy himself as occupying a liminal action (399). However, in all of the resonances between practices and mystic traditions, it is just this kind of both/and for the boy that his physical practice symbolizes and that the narrator presents in this last moment of free indirect narration. The Mystics knowledge undergirding so many of Wallace’s narratives in *The Pale King* ties the boy’s faith in his goal and simultaneous inability to imagine the future he desires into a kind of both/and belief.

The both/and of Wallace’s mystical vision upholds the distance between the participant and the Other or goal they desire, and, simultaneously, connects that distanced participant with whatever Other/goal in a different way; as reflected in the passage above, the boy is aware he will never fulfill his goal of kissing his whole body, and yet he remains connected to his sense of self and cosmos through his practice. In fact, Wallace’s novel presents these effects as if they further each other. The mystical influence on *The Pale King* exists as one mode of thinking that offers the both/and necessitated by the simultaneous spiritual longing for a full life oriented within a horizon of care and the consistently alienating framework of these characters’ lives. Across examples from the various chapters, Wallace’s characters share this both/and quality of desiring belief and nonbelief, connection and distance, boredom and attention, alienation and relation.

Postmodern Irony and Ethical Attention:

A Speculative Reading

As I have now shown, the influence of mystical thinking and living of the both/and style formatively shaped *The Pale King* even in its unfinished form. Its unfortunately unfinished state, however, leaves out an integral component to Wallace's purpose for fiction: the effect his fiction has on the reader. Without a finished manuscript, I find myself unable to make the larger leap to the effect on the reader that so many critics have made with Wallace's other books. In some ways, the monastic-like tone of the characters' experiences in the IRS are clearly linked to the reader's necessary, and tested, persistence in reading the novel. Yet, without a sense of where the novel would have gone, the significance of such ties remains not entirely able to be described. As a result, this concluding section to my chapter must remain somewhat speculative even while I will focus on Wallace's words from other texts to substantiate, at least partially, my claims. It seems clear to me, above all, that the novel's form, and its postmodern-influenced humor, ties the reader to the kind of doubling found in the relationships between *The Pale King's* characters; the reader desires to overcome alienation through the practice of reading while simultaneously contributing to their own alienation from the text through practiced habits of contentment with boredom. To read this novel, the reader must work hard, but the purpose of this metafictional link remains difficult to interpret in the novel's unfinished form. Wallace focused on this kind of dilemma throughout his career through his treatment of irony's social utility and simultaneous inability to answer the problems it can point toward. By investigating a scene with irony in mind, we can elucidate a potential reading, which remains unfinished as the novel does, as to how readers experience a similar double-sided experience of alienation as the characters do.

The doubling for the reader of both irony and sincerity is most easily found in scenes which also exhibit the descriptions of the characters' own feeling of doubled-ness. For instance, one fruitful scene to examine may be chapter six, already discussed earlier in this chapter, during which Lane Dean contemplates his teenage relationship with Sheri as he has just found out she is pregnant. While the reader can easily read the scene with a sense of ironic detachment due to the obviously stilted maneuvering between Lane Dean's voice and a dogmatically practiced voice of phrases such as "when he was given then to know" (43), the ethical obligations prompting Dean's inner dilemma remain real, shared by many people, and especially harrowing within Dean's traditional, conservative, American Catholic worldview. While the reader is potentially stuck between irony and empathy while reading his story, Dean is caught as well with the two armies within him unable to speak to each other or even understand each other's words. This metafictional link makes this bind more visible without offering a potential mode of answering or breaking through the stillness between the two sides: two armies with different ways of dealing with the scene for both character and reader, namely, irony and sincerity.

While postmodern-influenced fiction, as Burn says, always dramatizes its relation with postmodernism, Wallace seems to have done this most often with a back and forth movement between irony and sincerity; this movement between irony and sincerity is evident in any interview where he shares his fairly traditional and consistent claims that art concerns how people are human, something he always acknowledges could sound stiltedly old-fashioned. In an extended interview with David Lipsky, for instance, Wallace responded to Lipsky's summary that fiction's importance stems from its relation to basic life questions: "Yeah... who do I live for? What do I believe in, what do I *want*? I mean, they're the sorts of questions so profound and

so deep they sound banal when you say them out loud” (“An Interview” 116; emphasis in the original).

The claim that Wallace’s and Lane Dean’s basic ethical questions are important while sounding banal calls to mind Wallace’s writing in the early 1990s from *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*. In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace writes of postmodernism’s advantages and disadvantages as an approach to American culture in the late twentieth century. He argues that at the center of Postmodernism is a rebellious irony that may do more work than it has generally been given credit for doing: “And the rebellious irony in the best postmodern fiction wasn’t just credible as art; it seemed downright socially useful in its capacity for what counterculture critics called ‘a *critical negation* that would make it self-evident to everyone that the world is not as it seems”” (66). Literary critics generally see Wallace as a critic of Postmodernism’s attempts at engaging American culture and ideas, which is partially true, but, as this passage shows, and as his repeated use of irony in his work reflects, he never stopped believing in the at least partially “socially useful” sense of irony’s critical faculties. What he did think postmodern irony lacked was an efficacy when used over the long term as the primary tool of cultural critique, mainly due to irony’s inability to provide a new answer to what should be done in society after so powerfully pointing out its social ills. As he writes, “This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It’s critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony’s singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (67). What Wallace proposes in the stead of, or rather in conjunction with, irony’s useful “ground-clearing” is to engage with others 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.... The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the ‘Oh how *banal*’” (81; emphasis in the original).

For Wallace, irony facilitates pointing out the means of the alienation of the consumer-individual by institutional narratives, including capitalism, psychology, and religion. Overcoming this sense of alienation and loneliness that Wallace saw as central to contemporary American life is at the heart of his literary project. As he says in the McCaffrey interview: “We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy’s impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character’s pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside” (McCaffrey 22). With this as his aim, the alienation between individuals and what they find valuable in their lives (jobs, thought, belief, relationships with other people) stands as a wall to be overcome; as he says to David Lipsky, “And the big thing, the big thing seems to be, sort of leapin’ over that wall of self, and portraying inner experience. And setting up, I think, a kind of intimate conversation between two consciences. And the trick is gonna be finding a way to do it at a time, and for a generation, whose relation to long sustained linear verbal communication is fundamentally different” (*Although of Course* 290). For Wallace and his writing, the question becomes how to engage an audience through fiction beyond this isolating alienation while they are trained to stand at a distance through irony.

Wallace claimed in “E Unibus Pluram” that the sheer prevalence of television media consumption changed the way his generation, and those after him, interacted with art, culture, and each other. And yet, he does not want to join “a lot of the criticism [of television], the really

rabid criticism less leveled than sprayed at networks, advertisers, and audiences alike, [that] has to do with the charge that television has turned us into a nation of sweaty, slack-jawed voyeurs” (“E Unibus Pluram” 23). Instead, Wallace writes, “this charge turns out to be untrue, but it’s untrue for interesting reasons” (23). The common criticism’s being untrue leads to his own description of the interaction between viewer and television against which fiction should, according to Wallace, set itself up in contradistinction: “Television does not afford true espial [which is at the heart of voyeurism for Wallace] because television is performance, spectacle, which by definition requires watchers. We’re not voyeurs here at all. We’re just viewers. We are the Audience, megametrically many, though most often we watch alone: E Unibus Pluram” (23). Instead of the populist rhetoric usually attributed to the American motto, Wallace sees an inherent loneliness: out of the many we think we are, instead, we are often alone. He implies that Americans watch television, or use the internet, or react to politics at the same time and yet all separately, in their own rooms and homes. Wallace wants to confront this loneliness in his writing by incorporating his reader, making them more than a viewer by engaging their imaginative empathy in the face of their practiced and distanced ironic watching.

In order to bring his reader to confront this loneliness along with him, Wallace attempts to retrain the ways his readers read, to make them self-aware readers, as so many postmodern writers had done in a self-aware fashion before him, in order for the reader to be able to experience the kinds of thematic concerns and conjunctions that Wallace wrote into his narratives. Throughout his life’s work, Wallace seems to follow what Umberto Eco said of the difficulty of the beginning of *The Name of the Rose* in his “Postscript”: “What does it mean, to imagine a reader able to overcome the penitential obstacle of the first hundred pages? It means, precisely, writing one hundred pages for the purpose of constructing a reader suitable for what

comes afterward” (Eco 522).⁵¹ What comes afterward, after the conflict between irony and sincerity, seems to be less important to Wallace than knowing how to help his readers and characters gain the imaginative ability to live with the two opposing sides in conversation.

As the reader of Wallace’s work makes her way through his book, she is trained, á la Eco, in a certain practice of reading set apart from her own life (concerning an imagined reality in a book instead of “reality”) and yet, at least according to Wallace, while definitely different, imagined practices maintain efficacy in the reader’s lived reality as well; for Wallace, both fiction and life concern how to be human. The boredom-filled turning of the pages in chapter twenty-five mimics, jokes about, and reflects the process of reading while also causing a moment of empathy between the reader and the IRS employees as a result of sharing the monotony of the four double-columned pages. Learning to live through the both/and nature of fiction and truth in *The Pale King*’s language takes on a mystically paradoxical nature, a doubled approach to living, that must be practiced like a spiritual exercise through the reading event.⁵² Throughout the novel, various characters valorize working for the IRS, in sometimes obviously humorous ways, in this more paradoxically mystical-monastic fashion: as a type of heroism, a vocational calling, and a duty made out of their daily living of small tasks.⁵³ Wallace’s unfinished novel could be read as beginning to connect the characters’ attempts at learning how to live via practices to the reading of and living through of boredom and alienation experienced by the reader in the novel,

⁵¹ An idea maybe not original with Eco, but which Wallace most importantly saw as present in postmodern fiction like Eco’s.

⁵² To follow the monastic overtones of the IRS scenes, perhaps the reading event would mirror an exercise like the *lectio divina*, a reading practice of the middle ages through which monks would make texts a part of themselves believing in the presence of Jesus in any truth of a text, a presence they would wish to incorporate into themselves through the medieval attention to memory’s impression on the soul. For more, see Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*.

⁵³ This is particularly evident in § 17, 19, and 22.

something Wallace saw as an experience indicative of his readers' lives in American society as well.

In *The Pale King*, alienation hides the most important things the characters could discover: one's family, childhood stories, moments of identity-creation with others or alone, moments of relation, generally speaking a horizon of care or concern for the individual. These valuable moments can only be seen through the novel's reader engaging the practice of paying attention through the boredom, attempting to keep one's eyes open through a kind of both/and of language relating something important while alienating through its form. In this speculative reading's theme, we return to chapter twenty-five repeatedly: the reader continues to turn the pages of *The Pale King* in tandem with the turning of tax documents the employees are also doing. The two attempts to read, by reader and IRS employees, double each other in their simultaneous search for a way to read, to pay attention, to learn to live today by living through their alienation to what Wallace termed potential "bliss," a bliss his characters hope for without fully understanding what it may be (546). Perhaps his readers, in their own alienated states, could optimistically hope for an unidentified same.

Conclusion

“The communities in Wallace’s fictions are not all good and nearly every one of them exists only in relation to the threat of vast, compounded catastrophe: addiction, collapsing ecologies, death, loneliness, unchecked mechanization, eliminating one’s own map. The Pale King and Infinite Jest are not themselves communities; they are gestures to community, and to its limits.”
– Andrew Warren

As my investigation of *The Pale King* has shown, the mystical influences on Wallace’s narrative help shape a different response to his own postmodern influences than he had previously used in his fiction, namely, a both/and approach to living through the alienating frame of contemporary society while engaging an optimistic and hopeful “postironic belief” in the idea of belief itself. While Wallace clearly saw a link between life and literature as integral to the purpose of his writing, however, as the Andrew Warren quote above states, none of Wallace’s novels are living communities in themselves; his major novels, especially the unfinished *The Pale King*, only point toward community and its limits. This gestural movement is important and deserving of attention as so many commentators on Wallace’s work have attested, and yet, in allowing for seeing the limits of these gestured-to communities, I would like to treat one final area of my own concern with studying Wallace as it relates to my own hesitancy toward the postsecular lens I have used in this thesis.

One of the main reasons that I hesitate to self-identify as a postsecular critic is the largely uncomplicated reliance many postsecular critics have on William James, an important figure in the tradition of the work I want to do and whose emphasis on individual spiritual experiences I see as particularly conducive to studying Wallace’s work, specifically *The Pale King*.

Unfortunately, many postsecular critics fail to acknowledge that James, while investigating individual experiences of religious feeling to great effect, neglects some other characteristics of religious living that also deserve critical attention: particularly, collective rituals and communal experience. As Taylor contends in *Varieties of Religion Today*, his lectures on *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James' lasting influence is mainly due to his taking such a narrow view of religion. By focusing on the religious experience of individuals rather than their potential collective and ritual-based characteristics, James locates his discussion of religion in the frame of personal choices and actions. As some North Atlantic societies have engaged secularism in the way that Taylor describes, James' emphasis on individualism and pragmatic approaches to experience allows his influence to remain strong, pertinent, and seemingly more aware of the issues at hand in the twenty-first century than many of his early twentieth-century contemporaries. As Taylor writes, along with secularization is also a changing spiritual world today: "Supposing we are living in a world in which more and more people are forced out of comfortable niches in which they can be believers or unbelievers with minimal challenge from their surroundings; supposing more and more people are pushed on to the cusp that James so well described; won't this world be one whose spiritual pattern more and more depends on personal decisions that move people one way or another at the point of choice?" (63). For Taylor, however, what distinguishes contemporary Expressivist self-orientation and decision from the Romantic thinking of the early nineteenth century that this "point of choice" reflects is that today's individualism has become, since at least the 1960s, a mass phenomenon, not something restricted to an educated, elite class. This perspective would point toward a simultaneous change in ideas of individualized spirituality and communal modes of social organization, giving attention to collective or ritual actions an added importance in understanding either. These two

attentions, the individual and the collective, must be held in concert, something Postsecular critics have not made central to their projects and which Wallace's work in particular also does not treat as a central concern.

While Wallace's work demands attention in its capacious thematic and stylistic scope, I think that a critical approach that entirely neglects society's current concerns with collective actions and practices is theoretically negligent. Wallace's characters are inherently individualistic, and he treats these individual stories in manners few other authors have managed at the turn of the twenty-first century through his command of seemingly infinite styles and concern of abstract, important ideals. Yet, Wallace is seemingly able to do so only at the cost of failing to represent the collective.

Luckily, there remain many different ways of approaching the question of the religious influences on contemporary fiction, and it is possible, while not within the scope of this thesis, to look to other writers younger than Wallace while potentially influenced by his concerns and approaches. Importantly, many of them look explicitly toward what collective notions gender, race, religion, or place could contribute to questions of (Post)Postmodern practices and ethics.

One of the most important writers in this regard, who I will take the time to touch on briefly in this space, is Zadie Smith. As she has repeated many times, Wallace remains one of the lasting influences on her work, perhaps even rivaling her interest in some of the great writers of the Modernist period: Forster, Woolf, and Joyce among others. As she's written in her essay from the collection *Changing My Mind: Essays*, "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace," Smith is also interested in the relation between text and reader as explored in Wallace's fiction. Rather than being focused on postmodern metafictional loops of interiority, his stories are "turned outward, toward us. It's *our* character that's being

investigated... Wallace places us *inside* the process of recursion, and this is why reading him is so often emotionally and intellectually exhausting” and yet rewarding (273-4). As she writes of his characters’ disjointed sense of self, a sense she also hopes to change in her own readers, “Most of Wallace’s people refuse, even for a moment, to give up the self. They have been taught ‘that a self is something you just have,’ like you have a car, or a house, or a bank account. But selves are not consumer items, and the journey to becoming ‘a fucking human being’ is one that lasts as long as our lives: ‘The horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle... Our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home’” (294).

As she quotes, in that last section, Wallace on Kafka,⁵⁴ she also iterates a long-held Christian pilgrimage (and Mystics-influenced) narrative: that the “journey toward home is in fact our home,” that we are always in the process of becoming our selves and will not ever just “have” selves. Smith explores these themes in the lives of her characters in all of her novels, but perhaps approaches the themes of religious ritual most directly in her novels *The Autograph Man*, in which a member of the millennial generation personalizes a recitation of the Kaddish in order to properly mourn his father while establishing his own non-believing position of faith, and *NW*, in which multiple religious moments occur, perhaps most strikingly a visionary or hallucinatory⁵⁵ heated conversation between a character and an obsidian, black Madonna in an old, forgotten Medieval church in London concerning who the protagonist is, who she thinks she is, and who she will become.

Many other examples exist concerning Wallace’s influence in this regard, but one other example who is not as clear in their stemming directly from Wallace may help to show the

⁵⁴ See, Wallace, “Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness From Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed.”

⁵⁵ A blurred distinction left importantly indistinct.

prevalence of an interest in religious tradition, (non)belief, narrative and identity-creation for writers today, as well as different directions for an interest in Religion and Literature in (Post)Postmodern literature to follow. In every one of his books, Jonathan Safran Foer investigates the relationship between textuality and faith in one's traditions, often including the Jewish tradition. The author of three fiction books, one nonfiction book on vegetarianism,⁵⁶ and the editor of a new translation of the traditional Passover narrative, *The New American Haggadah*, Foer is a prolific writer with a consistent vision of the interrelatedness of reading and other cultural practices and ethical choices. As a nonbelieving Jew, Foer deeply identifies with the Jewish tradition and fellow Jewish artists, and speaks and writes of it often as connected to ethics, identity-creation, and the beginning of seeing literature or the arts as the beginning of life.⁵⁷ While he is not directly related, as Smith or other writers are, to Wallace's abiding influence over his generation, Foer may perhaps be an even better example of the ubiquity of these questions of religious influences on contemporary literature as well as authors' multiple styles of approach to these themes. With this thesis, while I have approached large questions without strict answers, I hope to have shown a way toward a potential, new route of critical investigation into contemporary literature's relationship with religious influences, a way with many more variations and relationships to come, perhaps among these other fiction writers, and for critics, myself included, to continue to discover.

⁵⁶ This book, *Eating Animals*, includes in its first chapter an important connection between the Jewish traditions of Passover, traditions of family recipes that include meat, and the choice for Foer of whether to raise his son as a vegetarian, something he sees as an importantly ethical choice to be made for the raising of his son and as an example to his future impressionable child.

⁵⁷ As he said in a keynote address at *The Festival of Faith and Writing*, the Genesis narrative in Judaism leads to the idea that "expression is generative," an idea he approaches through his own making resonances with other work in the Jewish tradition. For instance, his most recent novel, *Tree of Codes*, is a die-cut story made from the pages and words of Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*. His idea of expression as generative is in a way shared in his mind with belief, as he also said during his speech, "experience with belief encourages belief," a type of belief he would understand broadly. See, Foer, "Reading Between the Lines" and *Tree of Codes*.

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