Writing About Writer's Block: Metafiction, the New Sincerity, and Neoliberalism in David Foster Wallace's "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" and Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?*

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WRITING ABOUT WRITER'S BLOCK: METAFICTION, THE NEW SINCERITY, AND NEOLIBERALISM IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S "WESTWARD THE COURSE OF EMPIRE TAKES ITS WAY" AND SHEILA HETI'S *HOW SHOULD A PERSON BE?*

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In "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993, revised 1997), David Foster Wallace admonished writers of 1980s metafiction for reverting, in the face of advertising and televisual culture, to self-aware flattery of readers and technically elaborate self-congratulation.[1] Because advertising had learned, perhaps *from* metafiction, to speak of itself coolly in the third person, Wallace argued that metafiction could no longer parody advertising or visual media with any subversive effect, as had the works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo. Instead, as Wallace claimed, metafiction had come to reflect the "poker-faced silence" of an apathetic generation (1998, 65, 49).[2] In response, Wallace urged writers to forgo the self-shielding that metafictional techniques offer and seek instead a "backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic" fiction that would approach "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (81). Prophesizing of a

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generation of literary "*anti*-rebels," whose resistance would lie in outmoded explorations of emotionality and the inner-life, Wallace thus cleared the way for the fiction central to the "New Sincerity" movement (81).

Since Wallace's divination, the New Sincerity has come to be known in critical circles as both a predecessor and core component of our present mode, a forbearer that arrived at the zenith of postmodernism in the mid-1980s and a current that continues to run through contemporary US literature, film, and music.[3] The fictions of the New Sincerity are those that, in predominately realist aesthetics, sought or still seek to elevate the act of creative expression above the technical virtuosity and cool dispassion that, according to touchstones such as "E Unibus Pluram," characterized so much of postmodern media. In doing so, writers associated with the New Sincerity (including Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Franzen, Dana Spiotta, and Rachel Kushner) take as their subject matter the major impediments to sincere communication—to achieving the "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" Lionel Trilling once described (1972, 2)—under late capitalism and in the Information Age.

Chief among these impediments is "irony," a detached or apolitical ethos which the fiction attributed to the New Sincerity is said to combat. Such theorizations typically take place in a genre of public commentary that, as Wallace did in "E Unibus Pluram," calls on readers to articulate and act on broad matters of emotional and human importance. In this "cottage industry" dedicated "to attacking the hipster" (Konstantinou 2016, 273), critics such as Christy Wampole contend that "apolitical irony [. . .] most clearly expressed in the rise of hipsterism [. . .] represent[s] a surrender to commercial and political forces that could lead to an emptiness of both the individual and collective psyche" (2016). Wampole's remedy for this condition can be found in the "honest self-inventory" appearing in her *New York Times* 2012 op-ed "How to Live Without Irony." With her anti-ironic prescription, Wampole challenged the hipster to consider, "is your style an anti-style?" "How would it feel," Wampole asked, "to change yourself quietly, offline, without public display, from within?" Yet in writing, like Wallace, against consumerist complicity, Wampole also demonstrated the vulnerability of anti-ironic projects—which encourage readers to retrain themselves in sincere self-expression—to the coopting powers of neoliberal capitalism. Amid all this individualized self-examination, "commercial and political forces" are nowhere to be found.

Wampole thus illustrates the pervasiveness, even in anti-neoliberal critique, of what Wendy Brown has called "responsibilization," an insistence on a "singular human capacity for responsibility" that leaves governing powers "nowhere in discursive sight" (2015, 113). As Adam Kotsko argues, neoliberalism posits the free market as the purest manifestation of freedom, thereby redefining liberty in terms of responsibility or blameworthiness. Refashioning subjectivity in the image of entrepreneurship, neoliberalism disseminates a sociopolitical logic in which citizens are "free enough to be to blame" for their economic misfortunes but never "free enough to have any power over [their] collective fate" (Kotsko 2017, 506). Such is the hipster of Wampole's critique, who is the sole party responsible for their expressive incapacity, and whose expressive reclamation depends entirely on soul-searching. While Wampole needs no special justification for drawing attention to the political and economic forces that benefit from "ironic" apoliticality, she neglects the ways in which those same forces orchestrate the very disengagement she critiques.

In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015), Rachel Greenwald Smith articulates a more robust version of this critique in regards to recent fiction. And while the New Sincerity is not a key subject for Smith, her critique effectively implicates New Sincerity fiction's aesthetic and thematic treatment of expressivity in neoliberal logic. By depicting the hazards inherent to divulging one's emotional inner-life to another, New Sincerity novels risk invoking what Smith terms "personal feelings." Smith has in mind feelings susceptible to privatization or commodification, feelings that are "personally controlled, even though they circulate outside the self," are "managed by the individual," and that "enrich the individual through their carefully calculated development, distribution, and expansion" (2015, 2). Smith understands this concept as characteristic of neoliberalism's efforts to reprocess traditionally noneconomic spheres through an all-encompassing economic rationale. She submits that fictions guided by personal feelings not only discount the extra-personal production and consequences of emotions, but also frame the reading of literature as a transaction in which readers' personal, moral, or emotional development is promised as a return on their investment of time and attention.

If Wampole is right (despite her neoliberal undertones) that there is an untapped political power in sincere expression, then how can fiction writers aid in the recovery of sincerity without reinforcing

the very logic they mean to disrupt? Smith's answer lies in "impersonal feelings," which deny easy relations between characters and readers and catalyze affective responses that cannot be coded in the language of neoliberalism (2015, 2).[4] While Smith's framework helps us to discern how recent literatures both absorb and, in exceptional cases, subvert neoliberal logic, the personal/impersonal feelings dichotomy it installs also prompts us to reject literatures that, although rife with personal feelings, nonetheless offer responses to neoliberalism worthy of critical evaluation. Predominant among those literatures is the fiction attributed to the New Sincerity; in representing (or even instigating) personal feelings—especially as they pertain to problematics of expression—such narratives may well implicate themselves in a transactional structure of affect.

However, within the New Sincerity's roughly three-decade timespan, there is a current of fiction that, in animating personal feelings, finds a powerful method for contesting the preeminence of neoliberalism. To illustrate the critical potency of this current, as well as its temporal persistence, I call attention to two New Sincerity texts separated by twenty-one years, Wallace's 1989 novella, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," and Sheila Heti's 2010 semi-autobiographical novel, *How Should a Person Be?* (hereafter *HSAPB*). Published in moments crucial to the development of neoliberalism—the conclusion of the Reagan presidency, which consecrated free-market logic in US policy, and the austerity-driven aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis—both fictions examine neoliberalism by way of its affective and subjective impact on creative writers within institutional and market contexts. Given that literary fiction is a commodity of little value to neoliberalism—one that "tends to circulate mainly within the confines of the 'reading class'" and "transgresses social borders only in the imaginary sense," as Günter Leypoldt argues (2011, 848)—it may seem counterintuitive to examine its resistive potential. In each text, however, Wallace and Heti demonstrate how the New Sincerity's characteristic attention to expressive dilemmas in fact grants writers access to a register of epistemic critique which neoliberalism otherwise renders unavailable. Deviating from Linda Hutcheon's account of a postmodern parody that critiques "through a double process of installing and ironizing," Wallace and Heti turn to the *Künstlerroman* subgenre of the bildungsroman that portrays young writers' developmental journeys (2002, 89). For both authors, thematizations of the struggle of artmaking—that is, *metafictional* representations of literary creation

and, not unironically, writer's block—become a vehicle for interrogating constraints on expression, refusing responsibilization, and dethroning neoliberalism as the only conceivable rationale. Through the very mode of writing seen in "E Unibus Pluram" and the criticism surrounding the New Sincerity as symptomatic of ironic quietism, "Westward" and *HSAPB* aim to reveal neoliberalism as ***but one*** ideology and logic, contingent as any other.

As is characteristic of the fictions associated with the New Sincerity, the major conflicts in both "Westward" and *HSAPB* stem from anticipatory states pertaining to potential failures of sincerity: moments when characters confront the astonishing difficulty, as Iain Williams describes, of "discover[ing] if it is possible for an individual to sincerely communicate and empathize with an other" (2015, 302). The expressive anxieties captured in New Sincerity fiction involve the fear that one's "sincerity" is really what Katherine Bergeron calls a "sincerity effect" (2009, 53), or, as Trilling puts it, that one is only "sincerely act[ing] the part of the sincere person" (1972, 11). At its most vicious, apprehension incites a feedback loop where anxiety over the reception of one's written or verbal expression warps the intended statement or, more dangerously, the self that would articulate it. For Adam Kelly, who was among the first to locate this pattern in the New Sincerity, Wallace's interest lies in "what happens when the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner-states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic" (2010, 136). So, as they depict the inner-lives of writers toxified by anticipation, Wallace's and Heti's works are ever-shadowed by the specter of personal feelings. Their predicament is whether a writer can ever stage the transcendence of transactionalism without simultaneously initiating an affective transaction.

And yet, by locating anticipatory anxieties within professionalized writing environments, Wallace and Heti reconfigure representations that may otherwise demonstrate complicity in neoliberal transactionalism into a method for describing and contesting the economic subjectivity neoliberalism propagates. By placing Mark Nechtr, his protagonist in "Westward," within the demands of the MFA in fiction—a setting Wallace sees infected by an individualistic obsession with disciplinary capital—Wallace advances a powerful vision of how neoliberal professionalization may nullify the empathetic potential of art.[5] Meanwhile, for Heti neoliberalism

emerges in the social formations, cultures, and production of high art. While "Sheila," Heti's semi-autobiographical counterpart, reveals few financial concerns, her efforts to distinguish her artistic identity stem from a fixation on brand and celebrity intensified by competitive self-comparison with both canonized artists and the members of her artistic coterie.[6] Locating Sheila in what Loren Glass would portray as an "authorial star system in which the marketable 'personalities' of authors [are] frequently as important as the quality of their literary production," Heti confronts the seemingly inescapable pressures of personal branding and entrepreneurialism in creative labor (2004, 2). The plotlines of both *HSAPB* and "Westward" trace the characters' experiences with writer's block, and it is a range of metafictional techniques branching from the *Künstlerroman* that ultimately gives Wallace and Heti a means for depicting the subjective demands of professionalized fiction-writing under late capitalism, whether in an MFA program or in the larger marketplace of art. And consequently, the authors garner opportunities to emphasize the typically occluded prospect of alternative ontological motivations, frameworks for expression, and rubrics for sociopolitical thought.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY AND RECOVERY OF EXPRESSION IN WALLACE'S METAFICTIONAL WRITER'S WORKSHOP

Neoliberalism manifests in "Westward" at the nexus of fiction, literary criticism, and the professional anxieties of creative writers either undertaking or instructing postgraduate study. In his examination of balance, value, and market concepts in Wallace's "axiological fictions," Jeffrey Severs theorizes "Westward" not as a fully anti-writing-program novella, but instead as a work that seeks to restore fiction writing to the status of a "trade" of the "artisanal" kind: "the exchange of an alternative form of economic value" (2017, 16, 81). Central to that attempt is Wallace's interrogation of the gap between what fiction *is* and what it *could be* during what Mark McGurl has deemed the "Program Era," the post-WWII period in which American creative writing was institutionalized through university sponsorship (also coinciding with the so-called "corporatization" of the university).[7] As Kasia Boddy describes, "Westward" is "a version as well as a repudiation" of John Barth's 1968 canonical metafiction "Lost in the Funhouse" (2013, 25), and Wallace adapts Barth's bildungsroman hero, Ambrose Mensch, as Professor

Ambrose, celebrated metafictionist and instructor of creative writing at the "East Chesapeake Tradeschool Writing Program" (1989, 233). As indicated by the institutional acronym, the Program Era comes into focus in Wallace's depiction of the pedagogy of Professor Ambrose and its impacts on his favorite pupil, Mark Nechtr. And in linking the writer's block Mark faces to the anxieties of professional training in fiction writing, Wallace transfigures MFA study into an instrument for contesting neoliberalism.

In Ambrose, Wallace offers one of his most striking illustrations of the recursive pathology central to the New Sincerity, a portrait of how a fixation on professional or institutional capital may undermine the empathetic aims, if not the wholesale production, of art. The narrator, a member of Mark's MFA cohort, recalls:

> He told us all right before Thanksgiving to imagine you're walking by the Criticism Store and you see a sign in the store window that says FIRE SALE! COMPLETE ILLUMINATION, PAYOFF, UNDERSTANDING AND FULFILLMENT SALE! EVERYTHING MUST GO! PRICES GUTTED! And in you scurry, with your Visa. And but it turns out it's only the sign in the window *itself* that's for sale. (Wallace 1989, 293)

Despite the confidence Ambrose exudes in ridiculing criticism as an empty and commercial affair, he cannot exorcise his own scholarly demons. "Criticism: it never left him alone," we learn of the professor (239). Yet more than criticism itself, it is Ambrose's uneasiness with his own response to the inevitability of reception that dogs him; he is "clearly obsessed the way you get obsessed with something your fear of which informs you" (293). And as visionary metafictionist—one who has made metafiction an "academic 'franchise,'"[8] as Boddy posits (2013, 30)—the only therapy Ambrose knows is to meet anticipation with literary treatment, with self-aware extrapolations that, while keeping criticism at bay, entrench scholarly attention (and the disciplinary capital it provides) all the more deeply in creative labor.[9]

The self-interpretive strategies Ambrose stages for his "academic heirs" (Wallace 1989, 310) originate in his experience in "the professor's publish-or-perish bargain," an impact-oriented setting that Chad Harbach has categorized, along with the New York publishing industry, as one of the two most transformative forces in postwar fiction (2014, 16). Ambrose recalls the association of MFA programs with John W. Aldridge's famously-termed "assembly line fiction," as well as the stereotype, articulated by Maria Adelmann,

of "'MFA-style writers,' robots churning out technically perfect but emotionally dead stories" (2014, 45).[10] It is significant, however, that Wallace varies the stereotype by characterizing Ambrose as a godhead of metafiction *a la* Barth rather than of minimalism in the mold of Raymond Carver, which is often cast as the dominant aesthetic of creative writing programs in the period. With his self-aware fixation on the readings of scholars, Ambrose gives Wallace access to the precarious balancing, as Severs has identified, of moral fiction and economic exchange, the entwinement of "language *and* economy as unifying systems of human bonding" (2017, 25). And as the mode of literature closest in proximity to scholarly interpretation, metafiction allows Wallace an unparalleled vantage on the relationship between art and its institutional lifeline.[11]

Reflective of Wallace's belief that MFA programs, rather than "train[ing] professional writers, in reality train *more teachers of Creative Writing*," Ambrose's emphasis on criticism does best to credential his students according to the interests of the academy (2013, 60). More specifically, his critically-obsessive fictions evince complicity in "academic capitalism," a term coined by Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter to describe how "private sector logic has increasingly come to shape human agency in and the political economy of the academy" (2006, 117). While pertaining most directly to scientific inquiry, Rhoades and Slaughter's contention that the postwar university has sought to "commercialize the values informing academic research" also captures Wallace's views on the MFA in creative writing, in which programmatic standing is fortified by producing writers who attain faculty positions, garner critical renown, or achieve what sales are to be had in high-literary fiction (118). As Wallace himself put it, "the professional writer/teacher has got to develop, consciously or not, an aesthetic doctrine, a static set of principles about how a 'good' story works" that is likely tethered to the values of critics and hiring committees (2013, 59). For Wallace's Ambrose, this set of principles demands a writing that anticipates and cultivates the interest of scholars, one paranoid enough to incorporate interpretive vantages into narrative itself: metafiction. But for Mark, the main recipient of Ambrose's attention, it means harsh self-consciousness and "solipsistic delusion," a program-induced "standards problem" that leaves him creatively "blocked" (Wallace 1989, 305, 326).

A crucial plotline of "Westward" follows Mark's inability to compose his ideal fiction, a work capable of seduction, love, and betrayal, or, as Mark describes, that "treat[s] the reader like it wants

to . . . well, fuck him" (Wallace 1989, 331). One can read Mark's literary ambitions in light of the young Wallace's own, expressed in an oft-cited interview with Larry McCaffery published four years after "Westward." As Wallace sees it, fiction might liberate the reader "marooned in her own skull" from the solipsism of postmodern culture by highlighting the common humanity between reader and writer (McCaffery 1993, 127). That commonality is, ironically enough, a shared susceptibility to solipsism: or, as Wallace puts it in a later story, a "This thing I feel, I can't name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?" sort of feeling (1999, 131). The empathetic charge at the heart of Wallace's oeuvre is therefore one of faith in the perception of behavior; fiction, as Wallace understands, can signal the humanity of others but never offer verification.[12]

The pressures of the creative writing program amplify Mark's "professionally diagnosed emotional problems" so as to alienate Mark from his own inner-life and emotions (Wallace 1989, 303)—that is, his source material according to the Program Era's "write what you know" dictum.[13] Yet, more than in portraying Mark's psychological tribulations, it is in teasing the possibility of Mark's unwritten story that Wallace tiptoes the boundaries of personal feelings. Throughout "Westward," expressions of gratitude for the reader's attention—for example, "I'll say that I'm sorry, and that I am acutely aware of the fact that our time together is valuable"—allude to the possibility of affective payout; the narrator continually breaks the fourth wall to emphasize "the need to get economically to business" (235). In this context, Mark's literary quest amplifies the remunerative prospect in a manner that is, while aware of its own transactional dimensions, no less hazardous in terms of personal feelings. It carries the implication that if Mark does eventually pen the story he envisions—and, more importantly, achieve its affective ends—then so too will "Westward" at the moment it manifests Mark's fiction. The writer's block that Mark experiences thus facilitates, along with the promise of his ideal story, Wallace's implicit (or even explicit) pledge to pay dividends on the reader's capital.[14]

In order to deploy Mark's story and complete his *Künstlerroman*, Wallace turns in "Westward" to a hallmark technique of postmodern metafiction: the nested narrative. According to the major critical accounts, by making explicit the incorporation of one narrative within another, writers of postmodern metafiction sought to underscore the ordinariness and arbitrariness of the creative process.[15] With the procedures of artistry placed center stage, themes of

authority, subservience, and resistance tend to lurk in the subtext or emerge at the forefront of such texts (e.g., the character rebellions in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* [1939], Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* [1979], and Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* [2005]). For Wallace, however, the nested narrative instantiates what Clare Hayes-Brady describes as a careerlong "political narrative disruption of the radical individualism of neoliberal America," offering a pathway for thinking, and writing, beyond neoliberal professionalization (2016, 136).

For all the attention Wallace offers the critical sphere in "Westward," it is telling that the term "criticism" makes no appearance in his 1993 reflection on his intentions for the novella, in which he described "Westward" as aiming to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" (McCaffery 1993, 142). It can be suggested, then, that the early Wallace saw two mutually exclusive possibilities available to metafiction: estrangement, as in the case of Ambrose's critically-fixated fictions, and empathetic relationality, as in the case of Mark's ideal story. While Wallace is quick to describe how metafiction can amplify a writer's worst approval-seeking tendencies, he also believes that by virtue of its intrinsic heteroglossia—its ability to speak for/as/to character, narrator, writer, and reader—metafiction also holds an unexploited potential for what Stanley Cavell terms the "acknowledgment" of others.[16] So even in his attempt "to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction tried to expose the illusions of the pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that came before it," Wallace tempers the criticality of his novella with humanism, refashioning metafiction as an affective method for epistemic recovery (142).

Wallace's answer to apprehension in "Westward" is not less metafiction, but more. Like Wallace (or, in Marshall Boswell's reading, as "*Wallace*'s own Ambrose" [2003, 106]), Mark sees in metafiction a correspondence between self-reference and self-centeredness: "solipsism affects [Mark] like Ambrosian metafiction affects him" (Wallace 1989, 303).[17] At the same time, however, a small inkling of Mark's sets him apart from the Wallace of "E Unibus Pluram." In response to the narrator's opening query in "Lost in the Funhouse"—"For whom is the funhouse fun?" (Barth 1963, 72), which resurfaces throughout "Westward"—Mark suspects the only "way to make a story a Funhouse is to put the story itself in one. For a lover. Make the reader a lover, who wants to be inside" (Wallace 1989, 331). According to Mark's vision, a literature is possible

in which the construction of interior narratives, rather than highlighting artificiality, would instead facilitate emotional interchange between writer and reader.[18] Still, Mark has his doubts. A story of this sort "would NOT be metafiction," he makes clear, "because metafiction is untrue, as a lover. It cannot betray. It can only reveal. Itself is its only object" (332).

If metafiction, as Wallace insinuates, is indeed symptomatic of anticipatory approval-seeking, then it may seem counterintuitive that Wallace would turn to metafiction, even in the nested form. Mark's distinction suggests, however, that the most hazardous qualities of metafiction stem not from self-reference alone but rather from the marriage of self-reference and Ambrosian defensiveness. It is by virtue of this difference that Wallace embeds Mark's finally written short story—a sentimental tale about Dave, whose lover, L, kills herself during one of their frequent arguments—in the long conclusion of "Westward" and, counterintuitively, the MFA classroom. While in "Westward" the MFA workshop typically stages the propagation of individualistic professionalism—the very conditions for Mark's blockage—it also becomes, in the novella's finale, the framing device for Mark's draft. The narrator, present at the workshop, offhandedly summarizes the nascent narrative. On occasion, the narrator interrupts this synopsis to describe Ambrose's professorial judgments, and it is in these instances that Wallace contemplates and repositions the workshop and Mark's story in relation to institutional pressures.

The difference between these exchanges and Ambrose's earlier diatribes is stark. The concerns Mark encounters in the workshop are less "what will scholars think?" and more "does it work?" Take Ambrose's interjection regarding a speech on honor Dave makes to the warden of the prison to which he is eventually condemned:

> Ambrose invites us to listen closely to the kidnapped voice here. This Dave guy is characterized very carefully all the way through the thing as fundamentally *weak* [. . .] Is this the real him, bandaged, prostrate before ideas so old they're B.C.? That shit with [the warden]: that was just words. Could a weak person *act* so? (Wallace 1989, 370)

Note the choice of "listen closely" as opposed to "close read," the New-Critical terminology one might expect of Ambrose. While the feedback of a writer's contemporaries can be as vicious as any critic's, neither Mark's peers nor their criticisms threaten his creative

willingness.[19] Rather than emphasizing the deleterious aspects of institutional fiction writing—aesthetic standardization and professional insecurity—the workshop engenders an environment suddenly accommodating of creative expression, hospitable even to "Westward's" most unproductive writer. In this arena—reminiscent of Leypoldt's conceptualization of the MFA program as both "market sustained and market sheltered" (2014, 71)—the discourse in which Ambrose guides his students alters, eliciting the empathetic humanism at the core of Wallace's work. An Ambrose undisturbed by criticism asks his pupils an uncharacteristic question: whether Mark has rendered his characters human enough to inspire belief in them as thinking, feeling beings. And Mark, despite his anxieties, finds the workshop a site in which creative and empathetic risk-taking becomes sanctioned and plausible. Paradoxically, it is only within the heart of the academy that Mark can regard literature as a means for the very "pathetically unself-conscious *sentimentality*" that, four years later, would characterize Wallace's prophecy of a newly sincere fiction (Wallace 1989, 370).

But more significant than the draft's sentimentality is that it appears at all. In other words, if Mark's expressive reclamation can only take place behind closed doors, in an environment central to but quarantined from professional demands, then "Westward's" own aesthetic and formal daringness follows a similar inward trajectory. Gone, after the appearance of Mark's draft, are the insistent mediations on the efficacy and affective incapacity of metafiction, the transactionally inflected expressions of gratitude, the dwelling on institutional demands. The most telling features of Mark's summarized draft, especially when compared to the shell narrative, are its absences. What follows, aside from Ambrose's occasional interruptions, is character-driven, sentimental, gimmick-free, linear narrative: one that tells rather than shows, but that is also conspicuously unmarked by fourth-wall ruptures and defensive self-interpretation: a story, once placed inside another, that is expressible as just a story.[20]

In terms of personal feelings, the indirect manifestation of Mark's draft does constitute a final payoff. Yet, the corresponding shift in form signals a destabilization that complicates the transaction's terms. In the mold of Cavellian ordinary language philosophy, Wallace's response to a problematic paradigm is not to argue against its tenets, but to propose a different paradigm altogether. Thus, rather than rebuke institutionality, Wallace instigates a shift in parameters, summoning an environment which engenders a

reclamation of expressive capacity from both writer's block (Mark's) and self-consciousness (the narrator's). While an institutional rubric may demand intense defensiveness, the institution also becomes, in its metafictional treatment, an enabling condition for the very kind of writing Wallace understands it to deter. That is to say, though critical and even at times parodic, Wallace's most meaningful response to the creative-writing apparatus that he sees as contaminated by neoliberal prerogatives is to instrumentalize it as a tool for formal transformation—not to resist the workshop, but to reframe it as a literary vehicle for the very plotlines, styles, and structures of feelings it may deny.

OBJECT LESSONS IN HETI'S "NOVEL FROM LIFE"

Two decades after Wallace's "Westward," Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* demonstrates a persistent engagement of metafiction within the literature of the New Sincerity to probe the social, economic, and subjective conditions of neoliberalism through representations of artistic labor and frustration. At the heart of *HSAPB* is an instance of writer's block amplified, if not instigated, by the "creative economy," an environment Sarah Brouillette theorizes as a neoliberal "linking up of culture, economy, and governance" that imagines artists as "models of contentedly flexible and self-managed workers" (2014, 2). In depicting pressures of self-distinction in the creative economy, *HSAPB* also speaks to the capacity of New Sincerity fiction to examine neoliberalism beyond merely the institutionalization of fiction writing in MFA programs, and to interrogate neoliberalism as an ever-territorializing rubric for social, personal, and civic life. Reflecting on the composition of *HSAPB*, Heti describes her struggle with individual achievement: "One of the things I wanted to kill in myself when I wrote this book was this modernist artist [. . .] the one who tries to create one great monument" (Naimon 2012, 117). Likewise, Sheila's attempts to murder her own inner-modernist form the central crisis of what Heti subtitles her "novel from life," a work that, while informed by the twenty-first-century "personal-essay boom" (facilitated by platforms such as *Jezebel*, *xoJane*, and *the Awl*), can hardly be severed from the high-literary tradition of experimental autobiography.[21]

HSAPB depicts Sheila's failures to eschew monumentality, and the *Künstlerroman* gives shape to a narrative of literary paralysis linked to an obsession with individuality and accomplishment.

After receiving a commission from a feminist theater company, Sheila attributes the writer's block she faces to her fixation on an authorly pantheon. For Sheila, the question of how a person should be is often synonymous with the question of how to become one of those "people whose learning is so great, they seem to inhabit a different realm of species-hood entirely [. . .] filled up with history and legends and beautiful poetry and all the gestures of all the great people down through time" (Heti 2012, 187). This premise, coupled with her insistence on "writing a play that is going to save the world," instigates the creative blockage that stifles Sheila but fuels the plot of the novel (87). Adamant that her work must culminate in impact and distinction, Sheila reflects what Brown identifies as neoliberalism's distinctive "emphasis on entrepreneurship and productivity" (2015, 65). Sheila's approach to artistry is part venture capitalist, to whom the only worthwhile returns are of inconceivable proportions, part free-agent athlete, whose services are reserved for the highest bidder. Her unconscious habit of writing "*soul* as *sould*" is telling in this regard (Heti 2012, 186); throughout the novel, Sheila awaits the best opportunity in which she might invest her being. Yet unlike the venture capitalist—who has attained a large enough resource pool to make an array of bets—Sheila conserves her resources in the hope of allocating them at the right moment and to the right project only, a time and place that never come.

What differentiates Sheila's experience from the anxiety of influence is her willingness, in the face of writer's block, to amend her being for the sake of monumentality. The principal characters of the novel are drawn from Heti's years in the Toronto art scene—the visual artist Margaux Williamson, the writer Misha Glouberman, the multi-medium artist Sholem Krishtalka—and Heti models much of the novel's dialogue from taped conversations and its plot on personal experiences (Elkin 2011). This material makes fertile ground for Sheila's attempts to absorb the productivity of her more prolific friends, either by osmosis or by pilfering elements of their identities. The central example involves Sheila's belief that "talking with Margaux, and sharing a studio with Margaux" would eventually "make me a genius in the world" (Heti 2012, 94). Sheila's imitative tactic comes to a symbolic boiling point in an instance that underscores the centrality of consumer choice in Sheila's self-construction. Traveling with Margaux to an art festival in Miami, Sheila purchases the same dress that Marguax had first selected. Margaux later emails Sheila: "i really do need some of my own identity. and this is pretty

simple and good for the head" (116). Devastated, Sheila comes to the realization that she "had used *her* words, stolen what was *hers* [. . .] had plagiarized her being" (179). And so she goes back to the drawing board.

Sheila's second method of self-distinction comes in the form of "competitive abjection," a term coined by medievalist David Wallace and applied to social media by journalist Eric Andrew-Gee, who describes a "putting on display sordid or pathetic aspects of one's life with a kind of abashed defiance, to pre-empt feelings of embarrassment or the possibility of scorn" (2017).[22] Yet for Sheila, whose life is rarely digital in *HSAPB*, abjection means giving up her search for what Heti in an interview called "this idea of one Platonic person" (Linton 2012) and dedicating herself to life "without any clothes on" (Heti 2012, 60). Embracing creative incapacity as if it were her nature, Sheila martyrs herself as a different Platonic form: a pedagogical example of how *not* to be. "Most people," Sheila philosophizes,

> live their lives with their clothes on, and even if they wanted to, couldn't take them off. Then there are those who cannot put them on. They are the ones who live their lives not just as people but as examples of people. They are destined to expose every part of themselves, so the rest of us can know what it means to be human. (Heti 2012, 60)

Sheila thus devotes herself to a submissive sexual role with another patron of the Toronto art scene. And while her play remains unwritten, she finds ulterior productivity in their erotic dynamics, content, at times, to be "working on my blow jobs, really trying to make them something perfect" (155), though at others ashamed, none more so than when she flashes a child inadvertently while writing a "cock-sucking letter of flattery" at her partner's behest (226).

While on the one hand a means of procrastination, the competitive abjection Sheila undertakes offers a robust sense of individualism that not only differentiates Sheila from those within her artistic coterie, but also encodes Sheila's long expressive struggle into a commercial metalanguage. Seeking a monumental identity, either by mimicking the habits of friends or amplifying her own abjection, Sheila in both instances integrates herself into a late-capitalist logic whereby, as Fredric Jameson describes, individuals' "personality traits" are rewritten "in terms of potential raw materials" (1992, 270). Laboring in service of an identity distinct enough to merit creative

output—in taking charge of the raw materials of her identity and altering them according to perceived market demands—Sheila entertains an effort centered almost exclusively on personal branding. Thus, in Sheila's subsequent modifications to her relationships and motivations, Heti takes the composition of (or failure to compose) high-art as a study in how neoliberalism, to quote from Jedediah Purdy, both "render[s] the self a flexible commodity—a platform for a suite of apps—and strip[s] relationships to instrumental transactions" (2014).

So when Sheila realizes finally that her "life need be no less ugly than the rest," that monumentality is no criterion for art, she has already contaminated the affective structure of the text with a transactional rationale (Heti 2012, 274). We have good reason—especially in light of Julia Kristeva's thesis that abjection is "*a precondition of narcissism*" (1982, 13)—to question whether Sheila's epiphany is only the endpoint of a narrative in which the struggle for self-acceptance becomes a commodity repackaged to promote Sheila's expressive reclamation. What feelings Sheila expresses, in other words, cannot at any time be severed from the entrepreneurial and radically adaptable subjectivity that grounds the majority (if not the entirety) of *HSAPB*.

If Wallace's method in "Westward" is to traverse toward an interior level of fictionality, then Heti demonstrates something of the opposite: an emergence outward, away from the imagined and in the direction of the real. Unlike Mark, Sheila never completes her creative task. As with Heti's own experience in authoring *HSAPB* after a play of hers received an underwhelming reception, the grant from the theatre company culminates in a product of another genre (Dean 2015). At the climax of *HSAPB*, Sheila faces an exasperated Margaux's ultimatum that she shed her apprehensions and "answer your question—about how a person should be—so that you never have to think about it anymore" (Heti 2012, 262). Sheila submits, but only with the sly caveat, "Does it have to be a play?" (262). The suggestion behind this provocation—like in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), among many others—is that the book at hand represents the character's product, Sheila's substitute for the unfinished drama. While chronicling Sheila's struggles, the text serves doubly (and has served all along) as record of its own production, its mimetic elements born in self-reference.

While Heti's narrative reconceptualization may be clever and self-congratulatory, it is also the key technique with which Sheila

reconfigures her relationship to market demands. The effect of such "self-reflexivity in book form," as Johanna Drucker might call it, is for Heti to establish the genesis of *HSAPB* as an exploitation of the same anxieties that had plagued the novel's protagonist (1995, 161). Attributing Sheila's social and psychological impediments to her own description indicates an implicit but powerful amendment to the expressive conditions that had silenced the writer; in adopting a self-referential mode of fiction and trajectory toward the real, Sheila signals a transmutation of her apprehension into art. This goes far in explaining Heti's "a novel from life" subtitle, a description that marks fictionality as only a byproduct, to use Sheila's words, of the human tendency to "pick certain dots and connect them and not others" (Heti 2012, 279). By Heti's oft-cited account, her propensity for the real hinges on little more than personal preference: "Increasingly I'm less interested in writing about fictional people, because it seems so tiresome to make up a fake person and put them through the paces of a fake story. I just—I can't do it [. . .] I love being in the world, I love being among people, writing is the opposite of that" (2007). And yet, given the centrality of economy, acclaim, and impact in *HSAPB*, the substitution of fiction for reality brings a distinctly political salience, illuminating a fiction of a different kind: the compulsory nature of neoliberal subjectivity.

To reject fictionality for its proximity to what Glass identifies as the "model of the author as a solitary creative genius" (2004, 6) is also, by Heti's design, to engage in an alternative mode of writing capable of repurposing the seemingly inexhaustible demands of branding and canonicity. With this paradoxically metafictional "renunciation of metalanguage," as Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan describe it (2014, 82)—and without what James Wood calls the "false, lying, artificial" elements of fiction dramatized by Heti (2012)—the sincere transmission of intent again becomes possible, even in an artistic sphere that demands a self that is more malleable than principled. Sheila's narrative needs only to edge closer and closer to the real, toward a literature that, while not exactly autobiographical, can be characterized as a public display of subjective reclamation contrary to the demands of the creative economy from which it is described to emerge.

What Sheila evinces, then, in assuming the depiction of her long bout with writer's block is not so much the inexpression synonymous with hipster postmodernity as it is a variation of irony akin to Richard Rorty's: the willingness to amend one's innermost

assumptions. Sheila's reconsideration of the monumentality and branding required for artistry is also a surge in her "power of redescription" (Rorty 1989, 89): an openness to reshaping her epistemic foundations. As metafictional book-object and thus public display of self-transformation—distinct from Wampole's responsibilist call for self-amendment "without public display, from within"—*HSAPB* clears space for Sheila to stage the engagement and contestation of the entrepreneurial subjectivity endemic to the creative and, as depicted in *HSAPB*, neoliberal economy. Or, in Sheila's words, *HSAPB* facilitates the exemplification and eventual transcendence of abjection, of "all the molecules of shit that were such a part of my deepest being" (Heti 2012, 277).

More charitably, we might read the novel as a fictional enactment of the "struggle with the feeling or experience of something we might call insincerity" which Jill Bennett deems characteristic of sincerity's twenty-first-century articulation (2009, 199). In claiming the representation of this tension, Sheila demonstrates how irony does not prohibit intense periods of inexpression but rather mandates them. One can distinguish a generative irony of this kind, writes Jonathan Lear, by "a breakdown in *practical intelligibility*: I can no longer make sense of myself (to myself, and thus can no longer put myself forward to others) in terms of my practical identity" (2011, 18). On an affective register, he adds, irony is "species of uncanniness" that disrupts one's underlying expectations of world and self (19). Heti is careful to describe her protagonist in such a tumult, introduced in the throes of writer's block, breaking down in intelligibility. We thus encounter in Sheila's pseudo-physical production evidence not only of the coherence of irony with sincere expression, but also of the capacity for metafiction to challenge the preeminence of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Like the emergence of Mark's narrative within the MFA workshop, Sheila's paradigm-shattering composition offers a testament to expressive reclamation that is catalyzed by metafiction.

NEW SINCERITY METAFICTION AND THE "DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE"

In animating the intersection of neoliberalism, institutional patronage, and high-art markets, "Westward" and *HSAPB* follow opposite vectors: the former toward fictionality, the latter away. For both narratives, however, a critical perspective on the ascendency

of neoliberal values is made possible by self-referential reckonings with artistic anxieties and incapacities. As Mary K. Holland argues, this "post-postmodern" evolution of metafiction fulfills, unlike its postmodern predecessor, the "formerly 'realist' goal of making the author and text feel intimately present for a reader whose participation in that act of humanism the text depends" (2013, 166–67). But if there is a humanism implicit in New Sincerity metafiction—a genre enduring through at least two decades of neoliberal expansion—then it is also bound up in a political effort to highlight the otherwise occluded contingency of neoliberalism and the limitations it imposes on subjectivity, epistemology, and expression.[23]

From this perspective, the lack of alternative subjectivities or socialities in "Westward" and *HSAPB* comes into focus within a broader critical logic. The challenges thrown down by Wallace and Heti, while far from radical politics, are challenges at a foundational level, matters of subject rather than efficacy. They bear less on neoliberalism as such than they do on the permanency and primacy which neoliberalism ascribes to entrepreneurial subjectivity. This, despite the absence of a positive vision, constitutes its own kind of political intervention. To destabilize the exclusivity of neoliberal motivations, for Wallace and Heti, is to fracture its epistemic bedrock.

Recall Brown's contention that neoliberalism models a subject who "knows only market conduct" and "cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way" (2015, 39). This is to say that neoliberalism generates a specific "distribution of the sensible," a term coined by Jacques Rancière to describe "system[s] of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously disclos[e] the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (2004, 12). "Politics and art," Rancière argues, "like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done" (39). As an analytic, the distribution of the sensible describes how politics and art delimit the concepts, perspectives, and actions available to public imaginaries. A robust understanding of neoliberalism must therefore include an epistemic framework that secures its preeminence through a cycle in which neoliberal subjects—who understand institutions and self on only economic terms—build the very discourses and cultures that render inconceivable alternative subject positions, rationalities, and social configurations.

This means that to treat neoliberalism as malleable—even within the commercially insignificant contexts of MFA training and the creative economy—is a more radical act than it may appear. Though far from manifestos, the metafictions of Wallace and Heti suggest that if it is possible, in Lee Konstantinou's words, "to dismantle the power of those whose strength partly depends on our cynicism," then such an effort begins with an affective energization of epistemic capacity (2016, 288). As Rancière might argue, metafictions such as "Westward" and *HSAPB* reflect on creative conditions as a way to "loosen up this relationship between art, the market, and politics" and to "suggest different ways of making different realms today" (2016, 176). Depicting artists for whom self-referential transformations of form renew artistic production, Wallace and Heti posit that even within an environment ostensibly sealed from non-economic concepts, literary experimentation can provide a method for restoring the conceivability and thus expressibility of alternate paradigms. For both authors, metafictional techniques provide a vantage from which a seemingly inexhaustible neoliberalism can be understood as contingent, one context for subjectivity, sociality, thought, and labor among others.

It should be no surprise, then, that "Westward" and *HSAPB* come replete with personal feelings; however, the utility of those feelings emerges as a factor more contradictory than we might anticipate. While promising affective payouts, the narratives simultaneously invoke personal feelings to stage the subjective demands of neoliberalism and, importantly, to offer glimpses of ideological variability. In both texts, when the *Künstlerroman* coincides abruptly with the metafictional scaffolding of narrative levels, attention is drawn to an epistemic notion that neoliberalism seeks to undermine: the possibility of disparate conditions for thinking, being, and expression. So in coupling the thematics of personal feelings with self-referential forms, Wallace and Heti achieve a political salience crucial for a time in which neoliberalism is becoming visible, finally, as something besides an inevitability.

NOTES

[1] Referencing the scholarship of Stephen J. Burn, Lucas Thompson, and Tore Rye Andersen, Jeffrey Severs encourages interpreters to read Wallace's fiction against the moral and anti-ironic principles established in the perhaps overly cited "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction"

and 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery. While Severs is right to argue that advancements in Wallace scholarship necessitate "more reading[s] of the tales against the teller's precepts," there remain elements of Wallace's early fiction (and early vision for future fiction) that have yet to be articulated in sufficient detail (2017, 5). Among these elements, I contend in this essay, is the relationship between Wallace's 1989 novella and the epistemic and expressive restrictions enforced by neoliberal capitalism.

[2] Wallace is preceded in this contention by one of postmodern culture's most vociferous critics, Christopher Lasch, who argued that the late-twentieth-century metafictionist's aim is "to seduce others into giving him their attention, acclaim, or sympathy" (1978, 21).

[3] While the monograph that designates the New Sincerity the definitive mode of "post-postmodernism" has yet to be written, the movement is well-recognized as a precursor to and among the major candidates, including (but hardly limited to): "neosincerity," "neorealism," "metamodernism," "postirony," and "post-postmodernism" proper. See the following references to the New Sincerity in scholarship and cultural criticism: Stanley Fish (2013), Jonathan D. Fitzgerald (2012), Mary K. Holland (2012), A D Jameson (2012a, 2012b), Adam Kelly (2010, 2014), Lee Konstantinou (2016), R. Jay Magill (2012), Jedediah Purdy (2014), Joseph Witek, ed. (2007), Jesse Thorn (2006), and Leah Finnegan (2018). For an account of the Austin, Texas, indie and punk scenes in which the term "New Sincerity" was coined, see Shank (1994).

[4] In theorizing "impersonal feelings," Rachel Greenwald Smith acknowledges her debt to Sianne Ngai, and especially to Ngai's 2005 monograph, *Ugly Feelings*. However, Smith contrasts impersonal feelings' resistance to categorization with the affects captured in Ngai's more taxonomic approach (exemplified better in Ngai's subsequent monograph, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* [2012]). Smith attributes her comparably non-taxonomic approach to her "interest in the distinction between two different types of literary feeling, one that can be more easily felt, described, and therefore traded and valued, and another that is less immediately palpable and codifiable" (2015, 18).

[5] While Mark McGurl is right to identify in the later writings of Wallace a conservative "embrace of institutional authority," Wallace's early depiction of institutionalized creative writing suggests a more critical approach (2014, 50). One should note, however, that Wallace's take on compositional training hardly reflects a scholarly consensus on the relationship between MFA programs and capitalist economy. Günter Leypoldt, for instance, convincingly describes American MFA programs, secured by an expansive, post-GI Bill reading public, as "spaces of market sheltered contemplation" whose "relative detachment from financial and political domains makes them enabling sites of transcendence" (2011, 857, 849). As Leypoldt posits, the MFA program is "regulated by peer validation rather

than economic rationalities" (2014, 71). Similarly, in an account of Paul Engle's directorship of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, Loren Glass characterizes the MFA-inclusive university as providing "institutional support" for "bohemian community" so as to "insulate creative writers from any direct dependence on the literary marketplace" (2009, 264, 267). For the purposes of this essay, however, the veracity of Wallace's position is of less concern than its critical function.

[6] For book critic Christian Lorentzen, the blurring of writer/character and writer—and the implications of that act for contemporary "challenges of artistic creation"—classifies *HSAPB* not as metafiction but rather as "autofiction," a subgenre of authenticity-focused fiction marked by "an evident hostility to many of the tidy conventions of literary fiction." In this subgenre, he adds, "plots are submerged beneath the unruly flow of time. Characters other than the protagonist may be reduced to the status of spokes, of interest only in terms of their connection to the central figure. The set piece gives way to the essayistic digression or the journal shard" (2017). Lorentzen's distinction stems from an understanding of metafiction that is limited to intertextuality, parody, and self-conscious allusion. I, for one, prefer Patricia Waugh's comparatively broad vision: "*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (1993, 2). While I contest the centrality Waugh ascribes to the fiction/reality paradigm (as self-referentiality has troubled more than that one boundary), the upside of Waugh's understanding is that it allows us to draw lineages of metafiction that reach beyond relatively short-lived periods, such as postmodernism. For this reason, a definition such as Waugh's does better to encapsulate the intertextuality that Lorentzen privileges—a feature which is indeed key to a text like Heti's given the dialogue *HSAPB* establishes with literary modernism.

[7] On the subject of the corporate university, I recommend Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades (2009), Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson (1995), and Frank Donoghue (2008). I also call attention to two salient and seemingly oppositional approaches to imagining a university after neoliberalism. For an argument on how the neoliberal university might be amended, perhaps paradoxically, through an intensification of market-based evaluation, see Jeffrey T. Nealon (2012). For a set of democratic guidelines that might supplant those of the neoliberal university, see Michael Rustin (2016).

[8] Similarly, the major plotline of "Westward" follows the graduate-level creative writers delayed but *en route* to the filming of a McDonald's commercial that will feature alumni of past commercials (of which one writer-character, D.L., is included). In this way, Wallace depicts creative writers actively rerouted by corporate capitalism.

[9] On the subject of metafiction, McGurl contends that "flagrantly reflexive displays of power and fabulation were first and foremost an assertion of professional potency," meaning that newly installed professors of creative writing sought to demonstrate their disciplinary validity through metafictional integrations of literary criticism (2009, 236). Given Wallace's observation that the bulk of late-twentieth-century metafiction amounts only to a cry of "'Hey! Look at me! Have a look at what a good writer I am! *Like* me!'," it would be safe to imagine Wallace holding sentiments similar to McGurl's (McCaffery 1993, 130).

[10] See John W. Aldridge (1992).

[11] A further perspective on Ambrose and academe can be found in Wallace's experience with "trickle-down aesthetics," a framework Alexander Rocca uses to describe how well-endowed institutions (in Wallace's career, the university and the MacArthur Foundation) transfigure the priorities of art by virtue of their potential and actual patronage (2017).

[12] Note that for Wallace empathy does not mean epistemic access to the inner-lives of others. Wallace concedes that "true empathy's impossible" and in fiction empathy is better understood as "a sort of *generalization* of suffering" (McCaffery 1993, 127). That "generalization," however, is far less general in Wallace's fiction than his 1993 articulation suggests. As Joel Roberts and Edward Jackson rightly argue, the ethics and humanism tied to Wallace's conception of sincerity (in *Infinite Jest* [1996] especially) not only privilege a "white male liberal humanist subject," but also demand the ceding of other gender and racial identities (2017).

[13] See McGurl (2009, 77–181).

[14] In *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (2017), Severs describes Mark as one of Wallace's many characters who anthropomorphize the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' economic and monetary developments. Severs argues that "we should regard Mark himself as living currency: his name plays on the German mark (famous for 1920s hyperinflation), and his climactic realizations center on ideas about the 'self's coin' (*GCH* 369), seemingly the medium honored in the 'living transaction' of Wallace's fiction" (2017, 84).

[15] See Waugh (1993) and Linda Hutcheon (1988).

[16] For Cavell, ordinary responses such as "pain-behavior" offer philosophically valid justifications for treating others as human despite one's skeptical inclinations. To deny pain-behavior as indicative of another's life-status is to deny the practical knowledge one uses to participate in the world: "A question whether we know what pain-behavior means? What question? Whether we are ignorant of this fact? Or have forgotten it? It is only the knowledge that a body which exhibits its pain(-behavior) is that of a live creature, a living being. Not to know this would be the same as not knowing what a body is. And yet this seems to be the knowledge that Wittgenstein takes philosophy to deny" (2002, 340).

In this sense, one need not argue analytically against skepticism as the skeptical position is nullified in the face of suffering. That we recognize suffering as such does not rebut the skeptic's argument, but it does allow us to "know," in every practical sense of the word, the humanity of the sufferer: "your suffering makes a claim upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what '(your or his) being in pain' means" (263). Note also that during his stint as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard University, Wallace had hoped to claim Cavell as his mentor (Max 2013, 132–33).

[17] If metafiction is, in this sense, missing something vague but essential—a humanism or human resonance—then an additional significance of Mark's name comes into focus. As Boswell has recognized, the surname "Nechtr" is a play on how "Ambrose" is "two letters short" of "ambrosia" (2003, 105). Given Mark's status as Ambrose's favorite student and, by virtue of their nominal relation, inheritor, then he too will be defined by an experimentalism that also lacks: a clever "h" but conspicuously absent vowel.

[18] For Lee Konstantinou, such is a "credulous metafiction," which rebukes deconstructive epistemology by fostering the reader's capacity for belief as such (2016, 41, 183).

[19] On the competitive friendship between Wallace and Jonathan Franzen, see Max (2013, 89–176).

[20] Wallace arrived for his MFA training at the University of Arizona (which had offered him a more generous financial package than had the Iowa Writers' Workshop) under the impression that UA professors would be more receptive to experimental fiction than the typical program of the 1980s. This was true, but only to the extent that the faculty at Arizona had a relatively modest appreciation for postmodern forms and aesthetics. The secondhand summary of Mark's draft thus subverts the "Show, don't tell" adage that Wallace would challenge (and be rebuked for challenging) throughout his time in the program. See Max (2013, 50–88).

[21] See Jia Tolentino (2017).

[22] David Wallace's coinage of "competitive abjection" is referenced in Geraldine Heng (2015, 37).

[23] My interpretation of these texts diverges from the recent argument that much of contemporary US fiction, including New Sincerity fiction, is not a mode of response to neoliberalism, but instead a repackaging of neoliberal logic. According to that argument, though contemporary works might perform gestures of resistance, they ultimately fail (or refuse to attempt) to alter the institutions or ideologies they appear to engage. Perhaps most effectively articulated in Smith's essay "Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics" (2014), this argument sees the metafictional works of the New Sincerity as merely negotiating a "compromise" between

the radical politics typically associated with postmodern forms and the alleged quietism of the MFA-driven realism of the postwar period. By Smith's account, then, writers like Wallace and Heti, who hybridize New Sincerity prerogatives with metafictional frameworks, see form and aesthetics as nothing more than "neutral tactics waiting to be marshaled for the success of the individual work," an approach consistent with neoliberalism's individualist and entrepreneurial value systems (2014).

However, I would argue that while New Sincerity metafictions such as "Westward" and *HSAPB* may indeed walk a formal and aesthetic middle path, they also specifically highlight the contingency of neoliberal epistemology and subjectivity vis-à-vis their metafictional scaffoldings, a feature which ultimately differentiates them from other works that may epitomize the entrepreneurial apoliticality of "compromise aesthetics." So, while formally and aesthetically analogous to the literatures Smith critiques, I suggest that the hybridizations of metafiction and realism that both "Westward" and *HSAPB* stage ultimately belong to a different ideological category; rather than working in tandem with neoliberal logic, they confront that very logic on levels both thematic and formal, seeking to undermine its epistemic primacy.

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