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David Foster Wallace's fiction and prose express a strong ethical commitment that does not correspond to normative categories of behaviour or normate bodies. Rather than abandon the problem of ethics, however, Wallace adopts an ethics of affinity, which explores the complex interplay of his characters' private experiences.

David Foster Wallace and the Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism

WILSON KAISER

There is a quickly emerging critical consensus that David Foster Wallace's writing evinces a strong ethical commitment.[1] Frequently cited essays by Wallace such as "Consider the Lobster" and "This is Water" seem to confirm the claim that he is concerned with what appear to be traditional ethical problems: our relation to animals, the pain of others, and right action in a chaotic world. At the same time, while criticizing authors such as John Updike and Philip Roth for their "narcissistic" obsessions, Wallace uses his own writing to foreground an ethical challenge that does not sit easily within the parameters of postmodernism ("Certainly" 51). In both fiction and prose, this "morally passionate, passionately moral" writing has become the hallmark of Wallace's style, signaling his development beyond the limits of a postmodern irony that seems to reject earnest ethical concerns ("Joseph" 274).

It would thus seem straightforward to claim that Wallace emphasizes the ethical dimension of literature, and seeks to develop this aspect in his own writing. And yet Wallace's ethical claims are anything but straightforward. In "Consider the Lobster,"

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for example, he is most interested in the lobster's complex and diffuse neural network, which makes it both deeply sensitive to its environment and difficult to locate as a singular entity. The ethical concerns in this essay shift from the traditional problems of right action, such as whether or not one ought to eat another creature, to how we locate something as an entity and, as a result, how we register our responsibility toward experiential networks that are not necessarily anthropomorphic. A similar movement away from what we can call a standard humanist ethics is in evidence in much of Wallace's work. Dismissing anthropocentric registers for gauging behaviour, Wallace relocates his discussion of ethics in a broader, fluctuating field of neural and social networks.

The defamiliarizing force of Wallace's non-anthropocentric ethics stands in marked contrast to the standard range of ethical approaches that have characterized philosophies ranging from deontology (ethics conceived as duty or obligation, such as Kantian imperatives of right action) to what Zygmunt Bauman calls "postmodern ethics." As Bauman points out, today we live in a "post-deontic epoch" that refuses the universal categories essential to generalizations about right action (2). Wallace's writing certainly expresses a post-deontic perspective, but it is far from clear that he is therefore committed to a postmodern ethics. For Bauman, postmodernism "tears off the mask of illusions" that maintains our false sense of absolute right and wrong. In this narrative, postmodernism functions as a new form of enlightenment that allows us to gain a distanced critical perspective described by Bauman as a heightened condition of "personal autonomy" in which our "answerability to the Other" becomes central (11). As I will argue, Wallace's literary worlds, for all their commitment to an ethics, do not assume personal autonomy or an irresoluble answerability to an Other. To Bauman's claim that "moral responsibility is precisely the act of self-constitution" (14), Wallace's writing juxtaposes an "ethological" perspective, that is, a perspective in which self-constitution is not founded in an obligation toward an abstract, groundless Other, but instead is situated in a concrete engagement with a specific milieu that contains a multiplicity of human and non-human actors.

Wallace's ethics consists of affinities within a network of possibilities rather than sweeping claims about self and other. Neither self-constitution nor the presence of other actors requires human intention for an ethics to come into play. Instead, Wallace's worlds are closer to Spinoza's description of ethics: a field of intensities that is more about the exploration of dynamics within a milieu than it is about either right action or a dualistic obligation toward an Other.[2] This means that ethics is not strictly interpersonal, but environmental, or "enworlded," enmeshed in a series of micro-

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environments built on affinity rather than what Bauman, citing Levinas, calls the "humanity of man" (85). Significantly, the establishment of this "humanity" depends on a "face-to-face" encounter that Bauman considers the "primal scene of morality" (110). Such a standardized faciality, however, depends on an interpretive and cognitive normativity that manifests a continuation of the human-centred perspective. It is worth noting that a person with autism, for example, does not interpret affect according to the laws of faciality. This is important because so many of Wallace's characters are shaped by cognitive, emotional, and physical "disabilities" that highlight the specificity of experience in contrast to normative assumptions about the human face and its significance. The frequency of non-normative perceptual frameworks in Wallace's writing thus specifically challenges the legibility of the human-centred model central to Bauman's description of postmodern ethics. What Wallace's narratives demonstrate is that different, in some cases more fruitful questions can be raised through a description that inheres in the specificity of experience and a Spinozist ethics of affinity rather than the normativity of the anthropocentric model.[3]

Rather than a human-centred ethical perspective, therefore, Wallace's writings frequently provide a more embedded description of events and relations that depicts contextualized sense perception instead of a subject-oriented point of view. Like the description of the lobster's experience in "Consider the Lobster," Wallace's fictional characters express a striking enworldedness, an enmeshment in a complex web of experiences that extends beyond the horizon of subjectivity. From short stories like "The Soul is Not a Smithy" and "The Suffering Channel" to his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* and his unfinished novel *The Pale King*, Wallace's characters are fragmented and distributed in a circuitry of intensive experiences that do not correspond to traditional ethical frameworks. His characters' "disabilities" communicate experiences that frequently and unpredictably disperse and refocalize in intensities that follow rules beyond the ken of universalist imperatives implicit in normate models of embodiment and behaviour.

The peculiar specificity of Wallace's characters demands another kind of approach that has recently begun to coalesce around newly emerging theories of posthumanism. My argument for a Spinozist interpretation of Wallace's works will draw on some of these theories, ranging from Jacob von Uexküll's science of ethology to Eve Sedgwick's thinking on habit to Sara Ahmed's "queer phenomenology," in order to describe the shape and dynamics of Wallace's non-humanist, anomalous ethics. What these theories have in common with Wallace's prose and fiction is a concern for the micro-environments generated by the specificity of the enworlded body. If Wallace's worlds are not guided by a centred, autonomous subject, neither do they depend on

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standard literary methods for holding this chaotic world at arm's length with the ironic distance that characterized fiction preceding his ground-breaking novel *Infinite Jest*. Instead, Wallace's immersive, intimate style is very close to the atmospheres it describes, demanding an ethics of affinity, an awareness of the specific ambient environments that emerge from habit that shape a milieu and the experiential thresholds that characterize the body.

Throughout his writing, Wallace blends an exploration of animal sensory networks with descriptions of characters who register intensities beyond standard human parameters. In "Consider the Lobster," Wallace argues that the lobster is not a singular being, but something like an accumulation of effects that is startlingly different from our normalized sensory-motor schema. This has a number of consequences for Wallace, such as a greater degree of uncertainty about what it means to witness pain. A straightforward event like immersing the lobster in boiling water is no longer a direct avenue to empathy: "Since pain is a totally subjective mental experience, we do not have direct access to anyone or anything's pain but our own; and even just the principles by which we can infer that other human beings experience pain and have a legitimate interest in not feeling pain involve hard-core philosophy—metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, ethics" (246). Another's pain is specifically outside our particular network of experience and associations, and in effect Wallace assigns problems of empathy to "metaphysics," an area of thought that he consistently avoids in his own work. This does not absolve us from the task of considering the experience of others, however. Instead of "metaphysics," Wallace's philosophical training at Amherst was in the practical branch of modal logic, which deals with probability within a given set of possible circumstances. In his essays and fiction, Wallace evinces a general modal attitude that deals in inference rather than an intuition of experience or a metaphysical ground of being, and this will make all the difference in his own conception of what a behavioural ethics might look like.

In his 2005 address to Kenyon College graduates, "This is Water," Wallace begins with the now famous anecdote recounting a scene in which two fish are swimming along when a third fish asks "How's the water?" The two fish continue on their way, and "then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes 'What the hell is water?'" This brief episode could easily be taken as the standard call to greater awareness of our environment and each other, but Wallace's point is that we are embedded, like the fish, in a multivalent environment that is experiential and perspectival rather than an object for distanced contemplation. In this sense we are little different from the fish (or the lobster), except that for Wallace our embeddedness raises important questions that do not fall under the traditional rubric of ethics: "None of this stuff is really about moral-

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ity or religion or dogma or big fancy questions of life after death. The capital-T in Truth is about life before death" (7). As Wallace's writing amply demonstrates, he is most concerned with this embedded quality of life, the blooming, buzzing confusion that comprises water for us, and which changes the stakes of our ethical claims.

In the contemporary and future US, where Wallace situates his dispersed and fragmented fictional characters, this encompassing environment becomes a hybridized medley of techno-commerce, addiction, and alienation. Wallace thought a great deal about these emerging forces in American life. His important essay on television culture, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," depicts an ambience in which television is "both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process" so that we are "blinded by constant exposure" (27). Like the circumambience described in "This is Water," television requires an involved approach, a commitment to experiential embeddedness that a distanced moralizing position fails to address. The postmodern author's ironic response to this atmosphere, Wallace argues, is therefore a misguided assumption that "etiology and diagnosis [point] toward cure, that revelation of imprisonment [leads] to freedom," and accordingly he holds the position that there is no outside from which to develop such a critical stance (67). On the other hand, Wallace is similarly critical of Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodernism, his lament at the failure of cognitive mapping to chart a totalized, coherent image of this media-saturated chaosmos (65). Like the postmodern authors whom Wallace dismisses as "narcissistic," Jameson's concern to map the world seems hubristically anthropocentric and normate in an environment that multiplies its unsurveyed spaces through our media and neural networks. In either case, whether addressing postmodernism or its critics, Wallace is wary of the attempt to find some superior purchase from which to survey the cultural condition.

Wallace's *Infinite Jest* brings together these considerations of the permeating media environment and the non-normative, embedded perspective that informs his ethological approach. The novel pivots around James Incandenza's creation of the catatonia-inducing "Entertainment" for which the novel is named, a self-contained media experience that is so powerfully engaging that it strips its viewers of their humanity. Even more than television, the "Entertainment" expresses the totalized amniotic world that Wallace elsewhere called a "womb with a view."[4] It is this world that James's son Hal, the arguable protagonist of the novel, inhabits. By the end of the novel's storyline (situated in the opening pages), Hal has shifted from a superb human specimen, a remarkable athlete and mental prodigy, to something "like an animal" whose major experience, that of pain, travels through neural and physiological networks that are no

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longer human (10-11). Both the catatonic viewers of the "Entertainment" and Hal cross thresholds that shift the boundaries of intensity to experiential modes outside of the anthropocentric register, entering into intensively isolated experiences that are beyond the reach of straightforward human-centred descriptions. For Wallace, both our contemporary media and Hal's "disability" (his "becoming-animal") demonstrate the mutability underlying our supposedly stable environments and bodies. As with his arguments in "Consider the Lobster" and "This is Water," Wallace is showing the reader that these shifting micro-environments are shaped by non-cognitive, non-intentional forces like habit and pain that comprise the building blocks of an ethics of affinity.

In her influential essay on *Infinite Jest*, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity," Katherine Hayles maintains that, "if the problem [driving the novel] originates in the presumption of autonomy that is the founding principle for the liberal humanist self, then nothing less than a reconceptualization of subjectivity can offer a solution" (693). With this claim, Hayles is extending her broader arguments on posthumanism to Wallace's work. In *How We Became Posthuman*, she is most concerned with the "construction of subjectivity" that corresponds to the "deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject" (4). Significantly, this deconstruction permits the re-entrance of "the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects." In a description that could characterize much of Wallace's writing, Hayles envisions a "version of the posthuman [. . .] that understands human flesh as embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continual survival" (5). As she makes clear in "The Illusion of Autonomy," Hayles's emphasis on this quality of being embodied results in a recognition of "the profound interconnections that bind us all together, human actors and nonhuman life forms, intelligent machines and intelligent people" (697).

While Hayles presents a compelling reading from the standpoint of her work on cybernetics, her argument leaves unaddressed Wallace's important and challenging concern for an ethics of affinity. The enworlded perspective of his characters certainly binds together the human and non-human, but it does so through localized webs of relations that have an ethical specificity resistant to transmissible codes of action or empathy. From the opening scene of Hal's becoming-animal to the Enfield Tennis Academy and the disjointed chain of events that brings about the catatonia-inducing "Entertainment," the characters of *Infinite Jest* are profoundly separate, lost in their own hybridized environments with hardly a window out to the others around them. Far from a recursive network, Wallace's novel offers few avenues for feedback because each character's experience resists translation into straightforward codes of information.[5] As Hal shifts intensive registers into other kinds of becoming, he is specifically

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disabled from communicating this experience. Like the lobster of Wallace's essay, we can only surmise from the outside about this creatural world. Describing this feeling of being "deeply alone," one of the young tennis players at Enfield, Evan Ingersoll, uses the phrase "E Unibus Pluram" to characterize this isolation, connecting the hyper-networked, technology-saturated environment in which *Infinite Jest's* characters live with the singularity of their experiential perspectives (109).

Wallace's provocation in *Infinite Jest* lies in his insistence that the reader engage with the combined effects of a disorienting, media-saturated environment and the loss of prescriptive codes of bodily and psychic behaviour. The chemical and media addicts who populate the novel are more deeply shaped by habit and the experiential thresholds of self-obliterating pain and pleasure than the normative binaries that an anthropocentric ethics depends on: human/inhuman, volition/compulsion, coherence/incompleteness. In turn, *Infinite Jest* takes shape around the characters' struggle to function (both singly and together) within such a deterritorialized network. Hal's experience is not a prototype of the other characters' worlds (there is none), but it does express a paradigm for the intensive crossing of thresholds that most of *Infinite Jest's* characters, from Don Gately to Hugh Steeply, undergo. It is also paradigmatic that we cannot relate to Hal's becoming animal at the beginning of the novel because at that point we are not as yet enmeshed in the complex webs of his experiences and desires. In many ways, the rest of the long novel is an addendum to this opening sequence, provoking the reader to develop retroactive points of connection with the extraordinary mutations of Hal and the other characters of *Infinite Jest*. In this way, Wallace reconfigures empathy and connectedness as emergent properties of micro-relations within the novel's own charged moments as they operate at limits beyond the traditional subject.

The early ethologist Jacob von Uexküll might have characterized Hal Incandenza's experience in terms of *Umwelt*, the threshold of perception by which specific stimuli enter into a "plan" that characterizes their reception. This threshold provides a network that both defines and delimits perceptual reality: "As the spider spins its threads, every subject spins his relations to certain characters of the things around him, and weaves them into a firm web which carries his existence" (14). Like the perceptual worlds of Wallace's characters, the creature's specific sensory-motor schema generates its web of relations, its own *Umwelt*. What is perhaps uniquely "posthuman" (to use Hayles's term) about Wallace's writing is that he extends this ethological perspective to each of his characters, generating contiguous worlds that touch and interface without collapsing into one another. These characters are limited by their embedded engagement with their worlds, and this in turn creates the webs by which they trace

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their connections with each other. In *Infinite Jest*, recovering drug addicts such as Ken Erdedy and Kate Gompert draw lines of affinity with other addicts and forms of addiction. The children and young adults at the Enfield Tennis Academy orbit around the hopes, fears, and desires connected to the insular world of tennis. The Canadian terrorist organization Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (The Wheelchair Assassins) are joined by their anti-imperialist project and their self-inflicted physical impairment. *Infinite Jest* houses an almost unlimited number of contact points, physical places, like the Ennet Drug and Alcohol Recovery House or the Enfield Tennis Academy, that become relational spaces in which diverse experiential webs are woven and find uneven edges of contact. At the same time, the *Umwelten* of Wallace's characters transform their bodies in important ways: the drug addicts bear the physical and psychological effects of their addictions; the tennis players develop disproportionate bodies from overpractice; the Assassins are connected by their amputations. In fact, it is difficult to locate normative bodies in Wallace's fiction, because they are each transformed by the perceptual circuits they develop with the specific environments they inhabit.

The Spinozist concern for exploring what bodies are capable of leads Wallace to shape narrative worlds that are full of intensities beyond human and humanist norms. This commitment to ethological explorations of habit, pain, and affinity continues into his final project, his unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, which, like *Infinite Jest*, presents a host of characters involved in "the firm webs which carry their existence" (von Uexküll 14). While Wallace's last work moves away from a direct consideration of media, it continues to explore the intensities of milieu and how it works in concert with bodily thresholds to produce an enworlded perspective. As an incomplete novel, it has the added advantage of showing how Wallace constructed these experiential webs. For example, he changed characters' names with some frequency, suggesting that their embedded context was just as important as any inherent characterological qualities. Correspondingly, *The Pale King* also provides numerous examples of bodily reconfiguration in a detail that might well have been excised or incorporated into the completed novel's plot lines. In illustrating this enworlded perspective in rough form, Wallace's final novel highlights the shifting ethical stakes presented in his fiction and more broadly in the emergent posthumanist context that Wallace addressed in his oeuvre.

The framework of *The Pale King* is developed around an IRS bureau in Peoria, Illinois, but much of the incomplete novel is concerned with the prehistory of the characters who come together there. Wallace's ethological challenge to normative ethics can be located throughout this series of backstories as they focus on characters

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at key moments in their development and experience. Although the chapters have an intensive internal consistency, obsessively turning on the specific desires that make up a particular character's *Umwelt*, the chapters' relationship to one another is often indirect, as though each section expresses a textual web that borders on other microenvironments without overlapping or being integrated into those other narrative and perspectival spaces.

In an extensively developed section of the novel, an unnamed character, simply called "the boy," nurtures a desire to "press his lips to every square inch of his own body" (394). This section provides one of Wallace's best and most important explorations of an ethics of affinity because it demonstrates that posthumanist concerns with habit and pain extend beyond frameworks of self-Other relations into the networks of body-milieu through which intensities generate experience and action. As Wallace is at pains to demonstrate, this six-year-old's desire is not autoerotic; it is simply a desire that accumulates certain habits of action within a delimited field (in this case, the boy's skin). Developing a carefully annotated chart representing where he had pressed his lips, the boy's process of mapping is completely private, and unintelligible outside the specificity of his desire. Rather than interpersonal relationships that assume subjective autonomy, we witness the construction of a network: after injuring his T2 and T3 vertebrae, the boy draws a chiropractor, Doctor Kathy, into his world, making her an unwitting mentor for the baroque stretching exercises he develops in order to achieve his private goal.

As Wallace notes, it was never "established precisely why this boy devoted himself to the goal of being able to press his lips to every square inch of his own body. It is not clear even that he conceived of the goal as an 'achievement' in any conventional sense. [. . .] the boy had no conscious wish to 'transcend' anything," but instead seemed to want "in some childish way," to be "self-contained and -sufficient" (400).[6] The boy's desire is neither libidinal, nor is it guided by a larger concept, an underlying metaphysic. In fact, it is much closer to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes in her essay "Epidemics of the Will" as habit: "A version of repeated action that moves not toward metaphysical absolutes but toward interrelations of the action and the self acting with the bodily habitus, the appareling habit, the sheltering habitation, everything that marks the traces of that habit on a world that the metaphysical absolutes would have left a vacuum" (591). Like von Uexküll's description of the *Umwelt*, Sedgwick's notion of habit describes a reflex arc in which the range of sense-perception that enters into the bodily environment is not defined by any abstract categories, but rather by a lived pragmatics that drives many of Wallace's characters and guides the affinities that shape their actions.

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In *The Pale King*, the instantiation of habit reconfigures the sensory-motor schema of the characters, transforming their bodies in the process. As years pass, the boy's desire does not wane, while his steady practice of stretching progressively transforms him into an extraordinary contortionist. In conjunction with this description of the boy's progress, Wallace interjects numerous other stories of bodily manipulation, such as a reported case in Ceylon of suiphagia (involving putting parts of the body down the throat without ingestion), several examples of stigmata, inedia (a special form of meditative starvation), etc., as though to join the boy to a particular subterranean genealogy of qualities shared between these extraordinary habits. Much more than his schoolmates or his family, his affinities with these other non-normative bodies describes a complex range of connections with the potential for new forms of social and bodily configurations. More locally, the boy's contortionism, undertaken in the privacy of his own room, also begins to extend its web of relations into his daily life. In school he is an apparently typical student, but this world too is dominated by his contortionist fixation. Wallace uses the physiological term "medial apex" to designate his average position on the class bell curve, while his teachers describe him as "self-containing" in an echo of the self-sufficiency of his own "childish" desire. Similarly, his habit changes not only his internal physiology (such as the extension of his spine) but also the outward appearance by which others encounter him, as his lips become "markedly large and protrusive" from extensive stretching of the "orbicularis muscles" (401).

In a parallel fashion, Wallace explores the boy's self-induced pain as he develops his habit toward its outer limits of possibility. Significantly, however, Wallace's strong and otherwise permeating narrative voice carefully resists any empathetic account of the boy's "algesia" since "pain is a wholly subjective experience and thus 'inaccessible' as a diagnostic object." Echoing language from his "Consider the Lobster" essay, Wallace argues instead that pain is marked by an intensity which is not quantifiable outside that entity's experience. A locus of traditional ethical concerns, pain becomes for Wallace an expression of enworlded specificity. Even "the observed intensity of pain" is not "directly proportional to the extent or severity of damage," Wallace notes, because the experience is guided by the specificity of neurosis or a "stoic or resilient personality" (402). As with his discussion of the lobster, and his description of Hal at the opening of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace is arguing in this section of *The Pale King* that the intensity of experience is specific to the firm web of existence inhabited by the particular organism, but that this enworlded experience is not reducible to normative humanist categories of cognition. Like von Uexküll's ethological description of the moth whose hearing is set to attend only to the high-pitched cry of the bat, the boy's proboscis lips are specially formed for the intensities and affinities of his particular *Umwelt* (14).

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The embedded specificity of the characters in Wallace's novels resists categorical generalizations about experienced intensities such as pain. The boy's stretching is painful in a sense that can only be understood in complex interaction with his affinities rather than intersubjective norms. *The Pale King* is concerned with many forms of pain that fade off of the normative register of experience. While the boy's pain is self-inflicted, many of the novel's characters deal with a "psychic pain" that emanates from their milieu. In a novel that deals extensively with the philosophy, history, and culture of the US tax system, Wallace makes a point of exploring the strangely discomfiting pain that he variously associates with "boredom" and "dullness": "Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention" (85). Boredom introduces a thickness to experience that we normally attenuate with "distractions," but in *The Pale King*, Wallace's characters are continuously immersed in the "psychic pain" of self-presence. As with the Ennet House in *Infinite Jest*, where recovering addicts encounter the thickness of withdrawal in the "reek of passing time," *The Pale King's* characters are faced with an intensively felt network of experiences that pass forcefully into their arc of perception, making the characters profoundly aware of their lived time (*Infinite* 276). "Boredom" signals the painful stripping away of everything except for the "ambient" worlds generated by the characters' lived networks.

One of the novel's most fully developed characters, David Cusk, illustrates this kind of pain when he begins to have "attacks of shattering public sweats" in his teens (91). The psychic pain that attends his public humiliation is excruciating because of the quality of the experience, which begins slowly and increases incrementally with the heat of anxiety and mounting weight of his past embarrassments. As a trait exclusive to his body, Cusk's experience of sweating makes him extraordinarily aware of his specific enworldedness. "The sweating was just something particular about him," the narrator relates; but it also causes Cusk to be intensively aware of the interaction between his body and the spaces he inhabits: "Without trying to or wanting to, he started to imagine what his sweating might look like in class: his face gleaming with a mixture of sebum and sweat, his shirt sodden at the collar and pits, his hair separated into wet little creepy spikes from his head's running sweat" (92). Painfully anxious to escape notice, he soon develops a special awareness of the spaces he inhabits: "Knowing where all the exits were to any room he entered wasn't a trick, it became just something he now automatically did, like knowing just how far the nearest exit

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was and if it could be got to without drawing much attention" (97). Cusk reshapes his affective life around his peculiarly felt pain, reimagining the territories he inhabits according to their most salient qualities in relation to his specific needs. This is not a "cognitive mapping" in Jameson's sense; rather, it is a highly effective diagraming of space built from Cusk's experiential network of habit and pain. Coming back to Sedgwick's description, we can say that Cusk develops habits that are not merely repeated actions, but the "interrelations of the action and the self acting with the bodily habitus," or more simply, his affinities (591).

The Pale King develops a challenge to normative ethical categories by demonstrating that experience is not categorical. Between the boy's stretching and Cusk's sweating, there is a broad latitude of habit and tendency that can only be specified from within the characters' perceptual embeddedness. This would seem to throw the reader and the narrative world into a relativistic tail-spin, in which all experiences are equal because they are equally closed off, but this is not where Wallace takes the question of ethical action in an ethological universe. While there are no imperatives of right action in *The Pale King*, there are more and less felicitous points of interconnection and self-realization. The modalities of pain and habit provide an important index of these worlds, because they represent specific registers within the perceptual horizon of an individual character. For Wallace, the painful boredom of thickened time, of experience from within a network of sensations, offers the intensities that indicate the fluid and emergent boundaries of the body and its milieu, making us aware of how we turn toward something or move away from it (Ahmed 10). This motion to and from, what Wallace calls our "most basic orientation toward the world," is more than a simple bodily reaction; it also signals a world that fosters some things and denies others ("Water" 3). In Wallace's fiction, characters are challenged to recognize the effects of their affinities and antipathies from within their necessarily embedded experience.

The Pale King stages this movement toward a more embedded perspective and a commitment to local environments. Tracing a progression from the internalizing effects of drug abuse to an intensive awareness of his "orientation toward the world," an unnamed character later identified as Chris Fogle recounts his time as a college "wastoid" in the nineteen-seventies, when he took drugs recreationally and casually attended literature classes. More than cocaine or marijuana, he preferred an amphetamine-based diet pill called Obetrol. "My affinity for Obetrol," he recounts, "had to do with self-awareness, which I used to privately call '*doubling*'" (180). In contrast to other drugs, which made him "self-conscious, sometimes so much so that it made it difficult to be around people," the speaker reflects that Obetrol "didn't make me self-conscious. But

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it did make me much more self-aware. If I was in a room, and had taken an Obetrol or two with a glass of water and they'd taken effect, I was now not only in the room, but I was aware that I was in the room. In fact, I remember I would often think, or say to myself, quietly but very clearly, 'I am in this room.' It's difficult to explain this. At the time, I called it 'doubling'" (181). In contrast to the ironic distance of self-conscious "double-coding" in postmodern fiction, Wallace is describing the heightened awareness of "doubling," the coming into consciousness of the embedded quality of life.[7] Reflecting on his dorm room, the speaker notes, "normally I lived within these walls and was probably affected in all kinds of subtle ways by their institutional color but was usually unaware of how they made me feel, unaware usually of even their color and texture, because I never really looked at anything in a precise, attentive way" (182). Like the fish in "This is Water," Chris Fogle is typically unaware of the environment he inhabits. He fixates on the Obetrol because it brings him into the closed circuit of his embodied inhabitation, through which he becomes "aware of the awareness" (183). From the quality of light in the room to the texture of the sofa he is sitting in to his own heartbeat, the intensive quality of his experience has the same boring quality of the thickness of time that unites the disparate characters of *The Pale King*.

Drugs both signal this embedded thickness and create a "doubling" effect that Chris Fogle struggles to realize more fully. As he recounts, the Obetrol serves as a "signpost or directional sign, pointing to what might be possible if I could become more aware and alive in daily life" (186). These reflections on embodiment and alienation serve as the background for two key events in the speaker's life. The first is the trauma of his father's gruesome death on the subway, witnessed by the speaker shortly before he has a conversion experience that serves as the climax of his narrative. Distracted by his father's death and the collapse of the protective shell of his earlier life, he accidently wanders into the review session for "Advanced Tax." In the tradition of conversion literature, he unexpectedly hears words that show him what he was looking for all along, except that in this case his calling is to the banausic profession of tax accountancy, rather than an induction into a transcendent metaphysical reality. In the teacher's closing remarks to the class, impressed eidetically on the speaker's memory in an exact inversion of the hazy experience of his father's death, he learns that "the accounting profession to which you aspire is, in fact, heroic," that is, it involves the real heroism of "enduring tedium over real time in a confined space." The prophetic teacher concludes, "Gentlemen, welcome to the world of reality—there is no audience. No one to applaud, to admire. No one to see you. Do you understand? Here is the truth—actual heroism receives no ovation, entertains no one. No one queues up to see it. No one is interested" (229).

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As in his experience with Obetrol, the speaker is drawn to accountancy because it involves a sustained engagement with the thickness of time, but unlike analgesic drugs, accountancy is held forth as an experience that promises to immerse him in the pain of moment-to-moment life. This "tedium" involves the quality of presence that Chris Fogle craves and which serves as his only viable response to the loss of his father. Turning to a life that more fully realizes the embedded "doubling" he initially found in numbing drugs, the "wastoid" embraces accountancy as an ethically "heroic" position toward the thickness of time in the wake of his father's death.

Like so much of Wallace's fiction, in which the narrative fades out or circles back on itself, *The Pale King* is a novel about the refusal of dramatic resolution, opting instead for the ongoing drama of enworldedness. Nor does Wallace spare his reader from this experience of boredom. Chapter 25 consists entirely of an undramatized description of the auditors at the IRS Regional Center turning pages of tax forms. The dull repetition of this section begins to reproduce in the reader some of the psychic pain that is the theme of the novel: "Ken Wax turns a page. Chris Fogle turns a page. Rosellen Brown turns a page. Chris Acuistipace signs a Memo 20. Harriet Candelaira turns a page," and so it continues for pages as the reader also turns the page (313). The diverse narratives of the characters in this bureau are explored in the backstories describing how they come to be capable of inhabiting this thickly lived time. Although they all do the same work, they come to it through their own experiences. The interconnection between their specifically embodied habits and the pain of this duration is the common factor uniting these accountants in an excruciatingly dull but immensely important aspect of modern culture, "arguably the most important federal bureaucracy in American life," as Wallace points out in his direct address to the reader (70).

Throughout his writing, Wallace favours this engagement with boredom and the redundancy that characterizes habit over the privileging of narrative information and dramatic resolution. Rather than moving through different plot events, Wallace's texts generate a productively chaotic congeries of jargons, voices, perspectives, etc., which pile up in the superabundant *amplificatio* of a few reiterated experiences. This is why addiction is both a theme and a writerly methodology for Wallace, in which the physical and mental habits of characters emerge from the repetitious expansion of the narrative. The vast panorama of *Infinite Jest*, for example, funnels down to a few spaces (the tennis academy, the rehab centre, etc.) through which the characters move in endless cycles. In *The Pale King*, there is a similar reduction, coupled with an enhanced attention to the painful boredom (and the lack of new information or experience) of these delimited experiential networks. The contortionist's endless hours of stretching, the "wastoid"'s interminable reflections on Obetrol, and, most importantly, the rou-

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tinized activity of "turning a page" in the federal accountancy make up the focal points of the novel. These enclosed spaces form delimited environments that the characters mentally and physically occupy as territorial *Umwelts*, and this in turn opens the way to moments in which action can become meaningful outside of the categorical generalizations that Wallace's prose consistently refuses.

In his discussion of *Infinite Jest*, Michael North calls Wallace's writing "fissiparous" for its continuous bifurcation into alternate narrative perspectives (178). These perspectives are richly experiential, and resistant to the generalizations that have grounded traditional ethics. More than a style of writing, this fissiparous mode gives the reader a complex set of territorialities instead of a universally legible map, constructing spaces and relations by affinities. Far from what Paul Giles calls "sentimental" posthumanism, therefore, Wallace's worlds do not secretly harken back to normative humanist models, but develop complex intertwining points of interconnection that open onto new possibilities of action and interaction. Following these principles, Wallace sought "to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves" (qtd. in McCaffery 127). For Wallace these "other selves" cannot be held at a distance with postmodern irony, nor can we retreat into "narcissistic" fictions. They must be engaged, but through a "fissiparous" style that interweaves these incompossible experiences in an enworlded "womb with a view," the simultaneous isolation and interconnectivity comprising the paradox that he named "E Unibus Pluram." As Hal Incandenza, Don Gately, "the boy," Chris Fogle, and so many of Wallace's other characters demonstrate, these isolated worlds always have points of correspondence that open onto other networks of relations, other webs of embedded experience that continuously offer the possibility of an ethics of affinity.

NOTES

1/ See, among others, Daniel Turnbull's "*This is Water* and the Ethics of Attention: Wallace, Murdoch and Nussbaum" (*Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays.* Ed. David Hering. Los Angeles: Sideshow, 2010. 209-17. Print); Zadie Smith's "*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men:* The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace" (*Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays.* New York: Penguin, 2009. Print); Iannis Goerlandt's "'Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away': Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47.3 [2006]: 309-28. Print); Emily Russell's "Some Assembly Required: The Embodied Politics of *Infinite Jest*" (*Arizona Quarterly* 66.3 [2010]: 147-69. Print); Paul Giles's "Sentimental Posthumanism"; and James Ryerson's in memoriam, "Consider the Philosopher" (*New York Times* [12 Dec. 2008]: n. pag. Web. 10 Dec. 2012).

2/ For an elaboration of Spinoza's ethics of affinity, see Steven Nadler's *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006. 200. Print).

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3/ See also Dorothy Hale's "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century" (*PMLA* 124.3 [2009]: 896-915. Print)," which reintroduces the same set of problems as Bauman through Martha Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian approach.
4/ This phrase first appears in Wallace's important early story, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" (*Girl with Curious Hair.* New York: Norton, 1989. 317. Print).
5/ Even the sections of *Infinite Jest* dealing with Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous (which comprise some of the most "communal" episodes) emphasize the isolation and specificity of the recovering addict's experience. For example, the insistence on the moment-by-moment dimension of recovery matches closely the embodied particularity of pain and habit that Wallace explores in a more explicitly ethological register elsewhere in his writing.
6/ This part of *The Pale King* dealing with the boy's contortionism first appeared in *The New Yorker* (7 March 2011) as "Backbone." Several other sections of *The Pale King* appeared in various publications before they were gathered into the novel.
7/ "Double-coding" is Linda Hutcheon's term for the ironic distance specific to postmodern literature. See "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern" in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988. Print).

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