

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S HIDEOUS NEOLIBERAL SPERMATICS

By

EDWARD WILLIAM JACKSON

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School of English, Drama, and American & Canadian Studies

College of Arts and Law

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates male sexuality and neoliberalism in the work of David Foster Wallace. I argue that his texts conceive of male sexuality through neoliberal logics regarding responsibility, risk, contract, property, and austerity. Informing such conceptions are spermatic metaphors of investment, waste, blockage, and release. These dynamics allow Wallace's texts to ground masculinity in an apparently incontestable sexual hideousness, characterised in particular by negativity and violence. Specifically, by figuring male sexuality as a neutral economic issue, and one that lends itself to spermatic metaphors, his fiction and nonfiction present such hideousness as a fact to be accommodated for rather than changed. Drawing upon theories of queer negativity, recent work on violence in American fiction, and neo-Marxist accounts of neoliberalism, I theorise Wallace's hideous neoliberal spermatrics as a performative process that affirms an idea of masculinity characterised by sexual baseness. My analysis is thus broadly revisionist. Chiefly, I depart from readings that stress his texts' opposition to neoliberalism by showing how they are in fact embedded in, and complicit in reproducing, its key logics. At the same time, I nuance considerations of Wallace's gender politics by arguing that their sexual traditionalism is indicative of an attachment to male hideousness, not their author's intentions or failings. In these ways my thesis evaluates the complex pessimism animating Wallace's treatment of male sexuality. I trace the interaction between neoliberal logics and spermatic metaphors throughout his *oeuvre* to consider how and why Wallace presents male sexuality as being so irrefutably rotten.

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## Introduction

David Foster Wallace's short story 'Forever Overhead' follows a thirteen year old boy's decision to jump off a diving board at a public swimming pool, and ends with him about to leap. The story thus works as an extended metaphor for initiation into adulthood, of which the boy's new sexual feelings play a key part. Indeed, Wallace describes this sexual awakening in some of the most lyrical prose to be found in his *oeuvre*. His wet dream is 'a rush and a gush and a toe-curling scalp-snapping jolt' (4) that produces 'a dense white jam that lisps between legs, trickles and sticks, cools on you' (4). Wallace would express reservations about this lushness, describing the story in his contributor note to *The Best American Short Stories 1992* as 'heavy, meditative, image-laden, swinging for the fence on just about every pitch' (375). This lyricism, though, imbues the boy's sexual stirrings with emotional importance, to the extent that for Zadie Smith 'the unmediated sensory overload of puberty overlaps here with a dream of language: that words might become things' (262). One image in these paragraphs is not only evocative of such thingness, but of an economic realm that, for all intents and purposes, is alien to the experience at hand: the boy's 'sack is now full and vulnerable, a commodity to be protected' (4). As a commodity the boy's scrotum takes on the meanings of the market. Consequently his ejaculation – and also, perhaps, his semen itself – derives its value from the apparent fact of its scarcity.

The significance of this image goes beyond the story's synesthetic mixture of physical sensation and inanimate objects, as in lines like 'you taste metal from the smell of wet iron in shadow' (9). Wallace links sexuality and economics throughout *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), a collection in which 'Forever Overhead' appears as the third story. This is most notable in the stories 'Adult World (I)' and 'Adult World (II)', where a currency trader hides his addiction to pornography from his wife. Pornography is indeed a focal point for these links between sexuality and economics throughout Wallace's output. Richard

Godden and Michael Szalay were the first to explore this connection in regards to *The Pale King*'s (2011) genesis as a novel about pornography (1311-1314), and subsequent archival research has confirmed the importance of this relationship. For example, David Hering notes how 'one of the longest extant pieces of unpublished material' (*Fiction and Form* 134) from *The Pale King* pertains to a 'magazine called *Money and Skin* that combines soft-core pornography and investigative business journalism' (134). Elsewhere, Lucas Thompson refers to a draft note for the novel in which Wallace pinpoints the 'economics of sex' (219) in his characterisation of Neti-Neti; a woman who, as this note outlines, handles the trauma of having lived through Iran's Islamic Revolution by exchanging sexual favours with her fellow IRS workers. Given these details, it is fair to say that Wallace's texts explore sexuality and economics in tandem, and in order to suggest their mutual disreputability.

Neti-Neti aside, men take centre stage in these connections. This is partly indicative of the generally androcentric focus of Wallace's texts, which critics like David P. Rando, Clare Hayes-Brady, Mary K. Holland, and Vincent Haddad have begun to explore in detail. While the sexuality in question here is gendered masculine – and usually, but not exclusively, heterosexually oriented – the economics in question often relate to neoliberal capitalism. Theories and definitions of neoliberalism abound, and it is far beyond the scope of this thesis to cover them all. However, David Harvey's much cited definition in his *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) is a good place to start: for Harvey, neoliberalism can be seen as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (2). Prompted in part by *The Pale King*'s concern with an attempt to turn the IRS into 'a business – a going for-profit concern type of thing' (114), scholars such as Marshall Boswell, Ralph Clare, and Jeffrey Severs have considered how Wallace's texts document the emergence of

neoliberalism in the United States. Building on these strands of Wallace studies in relation to masculinity and neoliberalism, my thesis explores why his texts present male sexuality as a vector for disreputable, and indeed hideous, behaviours.

The tenderness of ‘Forever Overhead’ is an exception to this hideousness. The boy in this story stands in stark contrast to the male sadists, abusers, and misogynists who populate *Brief Interviews*. This contrast points to a broader tension in Wallace’s texts: between their investment in writing about heterosexual men in particular, and their pre-emption of the charge that this investment shores up patriarchal power relations. Hayes-Brady notes this tension when she writes that Wallace ‘stands in uncomfortably watchful relation’ (*The Unspeakable* 42) to his ‘own status as White American Male’ (42). In other words, Wallace’s own awareness of how his whiteness, Americanness, and maleness puts him at the apex of power structures based on identity led him to exhibit an uneasy relationship to the privileges that derive from such. Hayes-Brady’s point seems geared more towards the man rather than his texts, and of the tripartite identity markers that she specifies, it is the third that concerns me here. Developing her observation, though, one can suggest that the presence of this tension in his texts is indicative of their awareness of political objections to male sexuality – namely, to borrow a phrase from *Infinite Jest*, the ‘slimy phallocentric conduct’ (25) imputed to men by perceived forms of feminist critique in particular.

His texts try to resolve this tension, I argue, by articulating men’s sliminess through neoliberal logics. To take one example, I argue in Chapter 4 that Wallace’s attempt to privatise feminist critique in the ‘Brief Interviews’ stories casts male sexual hideousness as a neutral economic issue, outside the sphere of political transformation.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this, his texts preserve slimy phallocentricism as the property of male sexuality, while implying that the desire to change it is admirable but futile. The examples of sexuality in Wallace’s texts that I focus on also follow spermatocentric metaphors of investing and releasing sexual energies as



one would a form of capital. Thus, part of Chapter 1 considers how Wallace's depiction of masturbation displays the fear that semen that has lost its value in a culture saturated with pornography. By appealing to what are ostensibly natural bodily processes, these spermatic metaphors help to further the idea that male sexual hideousness is incontestable generally. As the example of the scrotum-as-commodity in 'Forever Overhead' suggests, this appeal to the sexualised male body can at times be quite literal. At other times, though, the spermatic metaphors that I detect in Wallace's texts are more implicit. Hence, in Chapter 3 I argue that an emphasis on male orgasm as the ejaculatory breaking of boundaries informs Wallace's suggestion that employment contracts are hindrances to be overcome.

To support these arguments, my thesis accentuates the many instances of negativity and violence that run throughout Wallace's texts. Boswell touches upon this current when, writing about the short story collection *Oblivion* (2004), he describes 'the dark but insistent tug of nihilism that is the dialectical obverse of his otherwise hopeful posthumanism' ('The Constant Monologue' 162). Similarly, Mark McGurl suggests that Wallace is attracted to 'the seductive object – or nonobject – of a death drive, a destination of pure authenticity' (45-46). Male sexuality, in my reading, displays the nihilistic and death-driven qualities that Boswell and McGurl observe. In fact, negativity and violence are central to how Wallace's texts present male sexual hideousness. The neoliberal logics through which they do so vary. Thus, each of my chapters tackles one in turn: these are responsibility, risk, contract, property, and austerity. Meanwhile, the spermatic metaphors informing this process gravitate around ideas of investment, waste, blockage, and release. Unpacking these dynamics, I argue that Wallace's hideous neoliberal spermatics resolve the tension created by his texts' wariness of how, by focussing on heterosexual men to the detriment of other subject positions, they affirm patriarchal power relations. They do so by suggesting that sexual hideousness is the

intransigent substrata of male identity. In what follows, I explain in detail the three key terms of my analysis – hideousness, neoliberalism, and spermatics.

### Hideous How?

The short story cycle ‘Brief Interviews’ follows a woman – Q – and her encounters with men who display reprehensible behaviours and attitudes. Wallace redacts Q’s dialogue in these stories so that, whether in the format of an interview, an overheard conversation, or a personal discussion, the reader has access to the men’s speech alone. These men exhibit forms of misogyny, sexual abuse, ‘perverse’ desires, and a more general sense of emotional numbness. ‘Hideous’ is therefore a capacious term, as it refers to a multiplicity of shocking and abject men. Wallace’s writing of such hideousness, though, precedes these stories. *The Broom of the System* (1987), for example, contains a prototype of the cycle in a scene depicting Andrew ‘Wang Dang’ Lang leaving his wife, Mindy. In contrast to Q, Mindy has some input in this dialogue-only chapter, but Lang dominates it with his cruel justifications for breaking up with her. These include lines such as ‘my analysis of the problem [...] is that you’ve just run out of holes in your pretty body, and I’ve run out of things to stick in them’ (176). Wallace’s association of male sexuality with hideousness is evident in his first novel, and it remains, I argue, a near constant throughout the rest of his writing career.

Critics have noted how Wallace’s presentation of male sexual hideousness exceeds the ‘Brief Interviews’ alone, and particularly in relation to his depictions of women. Mary K. Holland, for instance, reads Wallace’s review of David Markson’s 1988 novel *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* as displaying ‘anxieties about masculinity and its seemingly inherent tendency to co-opt, disempower, or manipulate the female other’ (“By Hirsute Author” 5), a reading she supplements with references to his fiction. Elsewhere David P. Rando, in his deconstruction of the irony/sentiment binary in Wallace’s fiction, notes how his texts are ‘peculiarly invested

in diagnosing male lovelessness as a form of hideousness' (579). Holland's emphasis on a self-aware anxiety of dominating women, and Rando's pinpointing of affective numbness, isolate important aspects of the male sexual hideousness present in Wallace's texts. I wish to expand on these readings by interpreting hideousness as a broader marker for negativity and violence. Both of these terms fit into Holland and Rando's analyses, but I understand them in reference to theoretical and literary contexts that neither critic considers. First, I approach negativity through Lee Edelman's theories of anti-futurity. Second, I follow Sally Bachner's analysis of violence as an unrepresentable reality that, paradoxically, post-war American writers persist in writing about. A combination of these perspectives can help to illuminate how Wallace's texts suggest that male sexuality is irrefutably hideous.

In his 2004 polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman argues that an ideology of 'reproductive futurism' (2) defines the limits of political discourse. This phrase refers in part to how 'the biological fact of heterosexual procreation bestows the imprimatur of meaning-production on heterogenital relations' (13), and in turn privileges the 'Child [...], as] the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics' (3). For Edelman, to the extent that political thinking (of whatever stripe) is always aimed towards achieving a better tomorrow, then such thoughts are expressed through heteronormative imaginaries (and regardless of sexual disposition – put crudely, gay parents are just as reproductively futurist as straight parents). Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Edelman argues that reproductive futurism only enjoys the hegemony that it does by virtue of abjecting the *jouissance* left over from our ascension into the Symbolic order. Associating this *jouissance* with the death drive, he argues that queers have a historically privileged access to its negativity. By embracing negativity, rather than harnessing it into 'some determinate stance or "position" whose determination would thus negate it' (4), queers can rend the Symbolic from within, affronting reproductive futurism with its own 'self-constituting negation' (5). My reading of male

sexual hideousness in Wallace's texts accords with this idea of queer negativity, especially given their focus on the anti-procreativity of masturbation and anal intercourse.

However, although this negativity is important to Wallace's writing of sexual hideousness, his texts tame it to confirm 'some determinate stance or "position"' (4). This stance, in fact, is geared towards the very futurity that Edelman wishes to undermine. In Chapter 1, I show how Wallace uses masturbation's anti-procreative pleasures to sexually responsabilise men, whilst Chapter 2 extends this analysis to argue that his texts securitise male homosexuality for a similar purpose. Though queer negativity aptly describes the non-procreative sexualities that Wallace's texts ventilate as hideous, then, this is with the crucial distinction that they utilise said negativity in order to reaffirm masculine gender identity. Interestingly, Edelman also describes reproductive futurism as 'a Ponzi scheme' (*No Future* 4), corroborating how 'capitalism is able to sustain itself only by finding new markets' ('The Antisocial' 822), and as matching 'the laissez-faire faith of neoliberalism' ('Ever After' 112) in its demand that all positions compete within established political frameworks. If there is thus an anti-neoliberal critique implicit in Edelman's work, it is one that Wallace's recourse to negativity does not follow. Indeed, the logics of responsabilisation and securitisation allow his texts to marshal anti-procreative sexual acts – such as masturbation and anal intercourse – towards presenting male sexual hideousness as incontestable.

In addition to taming queer negativity, this sexual hideousness works by intimating acts of violence. Maggie McKinley's *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75* (2015) offers a good place to begin examining such violence. Although she is concerned with a period that precedes Wallace's career by over a decade, McKinley's readings of texts by Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and other male American writers offers a helpful understanding of masculine violence as a form of liberation. Drawing on the existentialist philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, McKinley

argues that the novels she looks at investigate how ‘violence can be used as a tool to freely construct one’s gendered identity with the aim of transcending a stagnant or oppressive situation’ (12). This notion of violent liberation is close to my reading of the ‘Brief Interviews’ in Chapter 4, where I show how Wallace mobilises the threat of violence as a means to affront feminist discourses that, ostensibly, attack men for such characteristics. The paradox of McKinley’s title refers to how such violence ‘in the name of liberation often reifies many of the cultural myths and power structures that these authors, or the protagonists who speak on their behalf, seek to overturn’ (2). When the racialized men that she examines use violence to approximate or resist the power of a white heteronormative culture, they only reproduce the systems that have worked to marginalise them.

A broad concern with ameliorative cultural politics therefore motivates McKinley’s study. By examining masculine violence in her chosen texts, she seeks to accentuate their potential oppositionality to essentialist ideas of masculinity that further aggression. I share McKinley’s sentiments, but I do not read Wallace’s texts in the same way. The hideousness that I detect in them works through and against such a well-meaning perspective, and indeed to affirm ‘the cultural myths and power structures’ (2) that McKinley describes. Furthermore, the violence that I focus on in Wallace’s depictions of male sexual hideousness includes but exceeds McKinley’s existential framework. In fact, these depictions often reach beyond the diegetic level of Wallace’s represented worlds to figure as an extra-linguistic reality. In this regard I follow Sally Bachner’s *The Prestige of Violence: American Fiction, 1962-2007* (2011), in which she argues that for many American writers of this period violence is ‘the last redoubt of the real’ (3). Thus, though my thesis follows McKinley’s emphasis on literary masculinities, and also takes inspiration from her reading of violence as liberation, Bachner’s argument that violence is a privileged conduit to reality in postmodern U.S. fiction will provide the main influence upon how I approach the term.

Bachner looks at novels by Thomas Pynchon, Margaret Atwood, Don DeLillo, and others to argue that they ‘locate in violence the ultimate source and site of authentically unmediated reality, even as they claim that such a reality cannot be accessed directly by the novel’ (2-3). Working from the ‘loosely Lacanian’ (4) idea of the Real as an ‘extralinguistic ontological order’ (4), she posits that these writers accrue prestige from tackling this apparent unknowability; in other words, ‘to know that it [i.e. violence] is unspeakable and to rephrase its unverifiability is to gain a new kind of authority in relationship to it’ (11). As I will show in Chapters 3 and 4, Wallace’s depiction of male sexual hideousness follows this prestige of violence. Bachner also argues that ‘the foregrounding of a violence guaranteed by its material absence as the center of American life, enables a deeply therapeutic and illusory reckoning with that violence’ (5). U.S. writers, anxious about their complicity in violence that they do not have immediate access to (especially in the form of overseas wars), try to resolve this anxiety by crowning it as the authenticating aporia of their writing. Applying this dynamic to sexual hideousness, it can be said that Wallace resolves the anxiety of furthering patriarchal violence by inscribing it as the unrepresentable ‘real’ of masculine identity.<sup>2</sup>

Hideousness in my thesis therefore has a twofold meaning. First, I use it to refer to the (tamed) anti-futurist queer negativity of non-procreative sexuality. Second, it designates intimations of violence that, though linked to ideas of existential liberation, figures mainly as an unrepresentable ‘real’ to which male sexuality has privileged access. Overlaps and tensions between these meanings are inevitable, but I allow for such criss-crossing in order to better accommodate the different ways in which Wallace’s texts suggest that male sexuality cannot be changed. Bachner’s decision to exclude Bret Eason Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991) from her study – a novel that is notorious for its depictions of torture and murder – also offers an opportunity to further elucidate how Wallace engages with violence. For Bachner, this novel is ‘about, rather than an example of, the kind of displacements of violence’ (5) that are her

subject. In other words, *American Psycho* communicates the banality rather than the prestige of violence in a consumer society. Hence, Wallace's dismissal of Ellis's sex scenes – 'pick a page, any page' ('Fictional Futures' 47) – is suggestive of his own approach. If Ellis presents hideousness as mundanely abundant, Wallace re-enchants the prestige of displacing it.<sup>3</sup>

While Wallace's treatment of male sexual hideousness signals his position as a post-blank fiction writer, it also points to his texts' imbrication in a cultural history of white male American backlash. In his *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (2011), Michael Kimmel asserts that since the mid-1990s 'a growing vitriolic chorus of defensively unapologetic regression' (ix) has arisen in American men's attitudes towards gender issues. The processes that I outline in Wallace's texts reaffirm a male sexual hideousness that one can confidently call regressive, and as such, they would seem to confirm the phenomenon Kimmel identifies. Wallace scholars have variously acknowledged this. For instance, Thompson briefly suggests that Wallace looked to 'Dostoevsky in order to locate the authentic masculinity he felt had been stripped from his own American context' (94), while Hayes-Brady suggests that Wallace's depictions of women and romantic relationships 'is patchy at best and enormously problematic at worst' (*The Unspeakable* 167). Most forcefully, in the final chapter of her 2016 book *Making Literature Now*, Amy Hungerford takes the fact that Wallace abused women in his personal life as a reason to not read his texts at all. I do not try to dispute the sexually reactionary elements of Wallace's texts; in some respects, my readings will confirm them. However, the self-awareness of these elements evident throughout his fiction suggests that a more complex dynamic than backlash is at work, one in which, as I argue, Wallace affirms the problematic nature of male sexual hideousness.

Indeed, Wallace's texts accept the negativity and violence that make up such hideousness, and in turn present them as the dark yet incontestable underbelly of white American masculinity. Olivia Banner's essay on 'The Suffering Channel' comes close to this

reading. Examining the novella's many instances of men who have failed in life, Banner argues that it is caught in, but also aware of, discourses of white male wounding prevalent in millennial U.S. culture. For her 'The Suffering Channel' 'sets up a representational space from which to critique the cultural scripting of white masculinity as abject, only to show the failure of representation to provide any alternative to such a positioning' ("They're Literally Shit"). I concur with the mechanics of Banner's reading, but I do not read 'The Suffering Channel' (or Wallace's work generally) as attempts to critique such cultural scripts. What she describes as 'the failure of representation to provide any alternative to such a positioning' is, in my reading, the point. Wallace mobilises scripts of abject masculinity in order to imply that male sexual hideousness is a non-representational 'real' that frustrates all attempts to transform it. That Wallace genders this hideousness as masculine puts the lie to its non-representationality, and in turn points to how, by affirming such abject and anti-futurist scripts, his texts suggest that they lie outside the realm of political contestation.

The notion that Wallace manipulates discourses in ways that neuter their political charge is not without precedent. In his account of how Wallace appropriates various styles and techniques from other writers, Thompson makes this point in passing. He notes that Wallace displayed a 'thoroughly depoliticized and dehistoricized mode of reading' (69) in regards to world literature, appropriating 'from a diverse global canon' (14). In this sense Wallace purged world literature of its political and historical context to treat it – in Rachel Greenwald Smith's words – as a 'grab-bag of neutral tactics waiting to be marshaled for the success of the individual work' ('Six Propositions'). The dynamic that Thompson touches on – whereby Wallace actively depoliticises issues that are resoundingly political in order to manipulate them as neutral tools – goes to the heart of how his texts present male sexual hideousness. Significantly, Greenwald-Smith reads formal grab-bagging of this kind as being reflective of neoliberalism's 'end of history' ethos, wherein past conflicts over literary style



are deemed both finished and ripe for repurposing by contemporary writers. As a group of logics that replace political contestation with economic evaluation, neoliberalism is a key frame of reference for my analysis of hideousness in Wallace's texts.

### Neoliberal Wallace

Scholars who have explored Wallace's treatment of economics tend to argue that his texts resist neoliberalism. A major study in this respect is Jeffrey Severs' *Balancing Books: David Foster Wallace's Fictions of Value* (2017). For Severs, Wallace was 'at bottom a rebellious economic thinker' (2), and 'continually sought illustrations of his central philosophical and spiritual themes through economic thought' (6). Severs' readings (particularly of Wallace's engagement with numismatics) support these arguments, and in turn the broad 'antineoliberal vision' (184) that he perceives in Wallace's texts. Iterations of this idea are in fact detectable across Wallace studies. For instance, from a position similar to that of Godden and Szalay in its Marxist complexity, Steven Shapiro argues that *The Pale King* intervenes 'into the capitalist abstraction of human relations' (1252) during a period of neoliberal financialisation. Elsewhere, Hayes-Brady uses neoliberalism as a marker for the 'cultural condition' (*The Unspeakable* 22) and 'radical individualism' (136) that she argues Wallace writes against. As Thompson observes, 'Wallace's critique of late-capitalist US culture is so clearly visible throughout his work' (2). Given the obviousness of this critique, it is to be expected that the above scholars – as well as Boswell, Ralph Clare, Kiki Benzon, and Alexander Rocca – have argued that Wallace's anti-capitalism is representative of his anti-neoliberalism.

That Wallace critiques neoliberalism is to a large extent undeniable. As early as 1990's *Signifying Rappers*, which he co-wrote with Mark Costello (but whose chapters are clearly demarcated as belonging to one man or the other), Wallace refers with only slight tongue-in-cheek to 'Supply Side democracy' (115), the 'Pursuit of Yuppiness' (137), and

‘halcyon Demand Days’ (135). Thus, though Clare is on firm ground to argue that *The Pale King* ‘bring[s] together economic, political, cultural, and social explanations as to why the neoliberal revolution came to be’ (199), Wallace’s texts display such concerns long before this novel. I agree that Wallace articulates incisive critiques of neoliberalism, and I do not try to refute this fact. However, I wish to complement and complicate it by pointing to how – beyond the frame of what we can imply Wallace wanted – his texts channel male sexuality through a variety of neoliberal logics to suggest that its hideousness is irrefutable. I thus meet Severs’ call (which he develops from remarks made by Stephen J. Burn, and expresses in a paraphrase of D.H. Lawrence) for ‘reading[s] of the tales against the teller’s precepts’ (5). Precepts may be too strong a word to describe how Wallace critiques neoliberalism. Yet their oppositionality in this light risks being another instance of – in Hayes-Brady’s words – ‘a range of ideas that have become doctrinal’ (*The Unspeakable* iix) in Wallace studies.

That said, some critics are starting to consider how Wallace’s texts support rather than resist neoliberalism. The revelation in D.T. Max’s 2012 biography, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, that Wallace voted for Reagan and supported Ross Perot (the latter because, as Max relates, Wallace told a friend that ‘you need someone really insane to fix the economy’ [259]) muddies the idea that a socialist or Marxist politics motivate Wallace’s critique of capitalism; Severs, for one, rejects this possibility outright (*Balancing Books* 25). Elsewhere Greenwald Smith references Wallace’s texts and their critical reception as exemplifying forms of neoliberal aesthetics (*Affect and American Literature* 41; ‘Six Propositions’). In a response to Greenwald-Smith, meanwhile, Ryan M. Brooks has teased out how Wallace’s essay ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’ accepts ‘the premise that capitalism’s problems can be addressed at the level of personal values and relationships’, thus expressing a neoliberal disavowal of ‘impersonal economic and political conflicts’ (‘Conflict Before Compromise’). An essay that many have taken to be the cornerstone of Wallace’s signature

hostilities to postmodern culture is, in Brooks' estimation, steeped in the neoliberal attempt to substitute personal relationships for ideological antagonism.

Brooks' broadly Marxist reading therefore faults Wallace's poetics for displacing structural conflicts. My interest in how Wallace's texts suggest that male sexual hideousness is not subject to broad social change is generally in line with Brooks' contention, but with an important caveat. In my analysis it is not that Wallace presents structural antagonisms as interpersonal disagreements, but rather that his texts seek to bypass political contestation altogether. His neoliberal spermatics, in other words, construct male sexual hideousness as a non-political intransigency, confirming William Davies' pithy formulation of neoliberalism as '*the disenchantment of politics by economics*' (*The Limits of Neoliberalism* 6, italics in original) (albeit, for my purposes this would read better as the disenchantment of *sexual* politics by economics). Wendy Brown also reads neoliberalism as a depoliticising force, and her *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015) will at times be essential to my thesis. Yet her focus is on how neoliberal rationalities hollow out liberal democracy, and so her arguments, if less Marxist than Brooks', resemble his in their attention to political discourse. The dynamics that I explore in Wallace's texts are indicative of the neoliberal context Brooks and Brown outline, but my thesis is specifically geared to explaining how they seek to make political debate, when it comes to male sexuality, redundant.

The terminology that Brooks uses in his piece is also interesting for my purposes. He refers to 'the logic of neoliberalism' and 'neoliberal logic' to describe the refusal of structural politics that he sees at work in 'E Unibus Pluram', but leaves his understanding of 'logic' unspecified ('Conflict Before Compromise'). In this way he is in line with Davies' *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (2016), which despite offering what is perhaps the most theoretically vigorous account of what neoliberal competition means in practice, does not state what the phrase 'logic of' means. One can

assume that Brooks and Davies use ‘logic’ in the descriptive sense of ‘the science or art of reasoning as applied to some particular department of knowledge or investigation’ (‘Logic’). I follow them in this light by approaching my five chapters’ key areas – responsibility, risk, contract, property, and austerity – as forms of neoliberal logic. This sense has the benefit of framing the areas that I examine – for example, contract – not in regard to actual policy (such as the contours of a specific labour contract) nor as epistemological concerns (as in the question of how we come to know what a contract is). By considering contract in terms of neoliberal logic, my focus will be on how Wallace’s texts try to resist it for creating unequal power relations, thus displaying a desire to empower individuals.

This points to a more particular strand of what I take the term neoliberalism to mean in my thesis. As the example of contract implies, Wallace’s writing positions male sexuality as a form of capital, free to invest in the pursuit of profit, but in need of being released from stricture. The logics I pick out therefore inflect a common attempt to construct male sexuality as a form of individually possessed capital. The emphasis on construction here is crucial, for as Jeremy Gilbert observes, neoliberalism ‘encourage[s] particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour’ (‘What Kind of Thing’ 12) of the kind that ‘the liberal tradition has historically assumed to be the natural condition of civilised humanity’ (12). Although Wallace’s texts suggest that male sexual hideousness is an intransigent reality, they try to inculcate this notion – both diegetically and at the level of the reading experience – rather than take it as pre-given. True to Judith Butler’s theorisation of performativity as a series of acts that ‘appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent’ (*Bodies that Matter* 70), Wallace’s neoliberal spermatics produce the idea of male sexuality as a form of capital that they ostensibly only reflect. Indeed, as Butler notes in relation to the gendered body, such acts remove the ‘political regulations and disciplinary practices’ (*Gender Trouble* 186) that constitute such a performative construction from view.

My understanding of capital in this context is close to Gary Becker's theories of human capital, as articulated in works such as *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (1976). As Michel Foucault explains in his account of Becker's work, capital becomes 'the set of all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage' (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 224), a move that extends '*economic analysis to domains previously considered to be non-economic*' (ix, italics in original). Though sexuality is not an explicit part of Becker's theories, neoliberal thinkers inspired by him – such as Richard Posner in his book *Sex and Reason* (1994) – have applied human capital to sexual behaviour. I examine theories of human capital in more detail in Chapter 1, particularly Wendy Brown and Michel Feher's arguments that human capital, in the former's words, has developed 'from an ensemble of enterprises to a portfolio of investments' (70). However, I will also at times approach capital in more straightforward economic terms. For example, Chapter 2's examination of homosexuality draws on neo-Marxist readings of financial securitisation. This will require careful delineation of the frameworks I use to understand human capital, but maintaining a relative theoretical openness to this concept can better illuminate the ways in which Wallace presents male sexuality as a resource to liberate and invest.

Furthermore, by describing the areas of neoliberalism that I focus on as forms of logic, I also wish to evoke their being 'logical' in the sense of appropriate and sensible. For Wallace's neoliberal construction of male sexuality as capital is suggestive of how his work – in this aspect at least – implies that there is no outside to capitalism. In this regard his texts are indicative of the socio-economic context that they arise out of, a period that Davies calls '1989-2008: Normative Neoliberalism' ('Incredible Neoliberalism' 9). These dates roughly map on to the publication of Wallace's first and last major works, 1987's *The Broom of the System*, and 2011's posthumously published *The Pale King*. Davies argues that neoliberalism is normative during this period because the perceived absence of alternatives allows for a

‘constructivist [...] neoliberal telos [...] of rendering market-based metrics and instruments the measure of all human worth’ (9) to arise.<sup>4</sup> Dissatisfaction with this telos runs throughout Wallace’s texts, but their sexual representations are indicative of its dominance. As Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea, Mark Fisher, and Neal Curtis argue, neoliberal logic in this context becomes common sense, defining the interpretative horizons of subjects caught in it. Common sense, whereby (to use Wallace’s warning to African American students that they must use Standard Written English) ‘This is just How it Is [*sic*]’ (‘Authority’ 109), furthers the seeming incontestability of male sexual hideousness.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, I am not arguing that Wallace writes against neoliberalism only to reproduce its logics, in a process that Jedediah Purdy describes as trying and failing to cut through the ‘neoliberal knot’ (‘The Accidental Neoliberal’). Wallace is not a card-carrying neoliberal, but his texts actively pursue logics that construct male sexuality as human capital. Rather than a betrayal of best intentions, his texts’ use of neoliberal logics proceeds with a similar verve to his more manifest and critically well-canvassed interest in postmodernism, dialogic communication, civic responsibility, and so on. That this aspect of his output has generally gone unexplored is perhaps suggestive of its potential to force a reconsideration of Wallace’s politics. For to read his texts as endorsing the notion that male sexuality is a form of human capital dulls their oppositional edge in the various anti-neoliberal fights that critics regularly enlist them in – whether in favour of a ‘democratic liberalism’ (Kelly, ‘Dialectic of Sincerity’), against finance capitalism (Godden and Szalay), or in resisting President Trump (Severs, ‘Spectacles Vehement’). My thesis indeed runs contrary to these critical trends by emphasising how Wallace’s texts are embedded within, and complicit in reproducing, key neoliberal logics. Far from providing us with platforms from which to bolster democracy, resist finance, or stand against Trump, Wallace’s channelling of sexual hideousness through neoliberal logics works to sidestep political contestation altogether.

Considerations of how male sexuality intersects with neoliberalism in literary and cultural texts are relatively scarce. The essay collection *Masculinities under Neoliberalism* (2016) suggests that there is scope for such work, but this book's sociological approach, and its focus on gender at the expense of sexuality, means that it is of limited use to my thesis. There is an essay elsewhere, though, that speaks to my concerns – C. Wesley Buerkle's 'Masters of Their Domain: *Seinfeld* and the Discipline of Mediated Men's Sexual Economy'. Buerkle considers the *Seinfeld* episode 'The Contest', in which the protagonists bet on how long they can refrain from masturbating. This episode displays 'the tensions and ambiguity experienced amid the social transformation from industrial modernism to consumerist neoliberalism as they manifest in discourses of masculine sexuality' (11). Buerkle's reading, particularly of masturbation in relation to ideas of sexual economy, touches on topics that are central to my analysis of Wallace's texts. Yet the contrast that he draws between 'industrial modernism' and 'consumerist neoliberalism' leaves both of these terms inadequately theorised. Buerkle's readiness to equate neoliberalism with consumerism indeed means that the former becomes an empty synonym for the latter. By approaching neoliberalism as a set of specific logics – responsibility, risk, contract, property, and austerity – my thesis attempts to provide a more rigorous understanding of Wallace's hideous neoliberal spermatics. To do so, I now consider how the final term in this trio connects to the other two.

### Theorising the Spermatic

Reading economic discourses in relation to spermatics brings to mind a medium that regularly associates the monetary with the seminal – hardcore pornography, and in particular, the role of the 'money shot' within it. As Gail Dines explains, this phrase refers to when 'the man ejaculates on the face or body of the woman' (xxvi), though, arguably, it need not be a woman who receives the ejaculate to still be considered a money shot. Comparisons of semen

and money however are rare in Wallace's texts. Perhaps the only instance of such occurs in section 24 of *The Pale King*. At the end of this section, the author surrogate David Wallace relates how he received fellatio from Neti-Neti, until, having impacted his 'abdomen twelve times in rapid succession' (311) with her forehead, she withdraws 'to a receptive distance' (311) for his semen. Godden and Szalay make much of this hinted at ejaculation in terms of the novel's concern with finance. Describing it as a money shot, they suggest that 'Foster Wallace's semen figures the contradictory structure of personhood called forth by a system of derivatives' (1311). My thesis includes a focus on specific examples of semen, but it also moves beyond them to explore how Wallace's texts combine seminiferous and economic metaphors more generally. What Walt Whitman called the 'quivering jelly of love' (67) in 'I Sing the Body Electric' is therefore not my overriding concern, but rather how a discursive construction of semen in economic terms (like spending, waste, scarcity, and so on) informs the neoliberal logics that I argue are at work in Wallace's texts.<sup>6</sup>

Whitman's poetry indeed offers a useful precedent, at least as expounded by Henry Aspiz in his essay 'Walt Whitman: The Spermatic Imagination'. As the only other piece of scholarship to use 'spermatic' as a tool for literary analysis, this essay is a good orienting point for how I approach Wallace's texts. Aspiz identifies a 'spermatic trope' (395) in Whitman's poetry, whereby 'sexual arousal and visionary fervor lead him to an inspired vocalism which accompanies, or acts as a surrogate for, orgasms' (379). Aspiz uses spermatic to designate signifiers (love jelly) taken to be the natural expression of signifieds (semen) which have a one-to-one relationship with their referents (Whitman's semen). My thesis retains this idea of semen being more than just somatic excrescence, but also builds from the understanding that signifiers often miss the signifieds and referents that they refer to. This is despite Paul Giles' arguments that Wallace tries to revivify 'the idea of a romantic subject' (4) in posthuman environments, and also Haddad's comparison of the homoerotics in



Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' with Wallace's depictions of male-male bonds. While Aspiz uses spermatic to describe ejaculatory images and the metaphysical qualities they have in Whitman's poetry, I use it to refer to discourses of sexuality that, though carrying seminal meanings, at times lack grounding in (or direct reference to) actual love jelly.

However, though I approach Wallace's hideous neoliberal spermatics as a performative process, and therefore one that creates the reality it purportedly only reflects, this does not mean that his texts follow a Butlerian attempt to aggravate the gap between gender and sex. The dynamics that I focus on, rather, are interested in soldering the two back together, countering their apparent distinction. This is important to bear in mind given the various formulations of masculinity in relation to biological metaphors. Notable in this context is Arthur Flannigan Saint-Aubin's arguments concerning phallic and testicular masculinities. For Saint-Aubin phallic masculinity – defined by aggression, linearity, penetration, and so on – has traditionally foreclosed the possibility of testicular masculinity, which is passive, cyclic, and receptive (239). The first book length study of Wallace's work in relation to masculinity, Andrew Steven Delfino's *Becoming the New Man in Post-Postmodernist Fiction* (2008), builds on Saint-Aubin's ideas to suggest that *Infinite Jest* blends phallic and testicular masculinities. Saint-Aubin and Delfino's readings tend to reconfirm the idea that the male body is a pre-discursive given. My thesis, by contrast, stresses how these spermatic metaphors are in fact contingent on the discourses they inflect; in particular, those of male sexual hideousness, and neoliberal logics.

As regards the latter of these discourses, an important precedent lies in ideas of spermatic economy, a concept that G.J. Barker-Benfield's 1976 study *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life* first considered in detail. Focusing on the Massachusetts minister John Todd, and his 1835 book of self-instruction *The Student's Manual*, Barker-Benfield describes spermatic economy as a form of Freudian sublimation *avant la lettre*. Conserving one's

sperm, and particularly from the danger of wasteful expenditure, entailed the ‘need to divert energy away from the invariably tempting sexual expression [i.e. masturbation] and to concentrate it on higher goals’ (183). Barker-Benfield reads Todd’s masturbation phobia as being indicative of similar fears throughout 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, but which ‘in America took hold during the early nineteenth century, possibly in the early 1830s, and was extraordinarily intense through the first third of the twentieth century’ (167). Though other framings of male sexual hideousness will be significant to my thesis – such as AIDS inspired ideas of risk, and ideas of emotional blockage and release prevalent in men’s liberationist discourse – spermatic economy, and what Barker-Benfield describes as its ‘connection between sperm and money’ (186), is of particular importance. Though Wallace cannot be said to display a Whitmanian enthusiasm for ejaculatory vocalisation, his texts are invested in 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas of sexual frugality – of the kind, indeed, that *Leaves of Grass* repeatedly flouts.

Barker-Benfield’s focus on masturbation phobia in Western societies partly mirrors the approach taken by another study published the same year as *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life* – Michel Foucault’s *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*. For Foucault ‘the war against onanism’ (104) was a notable instance of the ‘*pedagogization of children’s sex*’ (104, italics in original). This formed one of the ‘four great strategic unities’ (103) by which 19<sup>th</sup> century sexology’s ‘incitement to discourse’ (105-6) rendered sexuality an object of power-knowledge. This book’s theorisation of biopower – ‘power organized around the management of life rather than the menace of death’ (147) – accords with Todd’s emphasis on controlling semen. Indeed, ideas of spermatic economy follow the two poles that Foucault suggests are at work in biopower. On the one hand, biopower entails ‘*an anatomo-politics of the human body*’ (139, italics in original), which disciplines the individual body to ensure its integration into forms of control. On the other hand, it entails a ‘*biopolitics of the population*’ (139, italics in original), which focuses on ‘the species body’

(139); in other words, the broader population's 'propagation, births and mortality, the level of health' (139), and so on. Concern with ideas of spermatic economy, particularly as expressed by Todd and other commentators, disciplines the individual body out of an interest in regulating the sexual expenditures of men as a group.

Biopower is thus an apt framework through which to consider Wallace's hideous neoliberal spermatics. My thesis indeed progresses from an individualising focus on responsibility in Chapter 1, to an emphasis on population with austerity in Chapter 5. Yet biopower is also limited when it comes to unpacking capitalist logics, even though Foucault suggests that it was 'an indispensable element in the development of capitalism' (140-141). His idea that biopower allowed for 'the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes' (140) still leaves the nature of such production and processes unspecified. Focussing on Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism in his 1978-1979 lectures at the Collège de France, Wendy Brown similarly points out that Foucault 'averted his glance from capital; in these lectures, when capital is mentioned, it is usually to heap scorn on the idea that it follows necessary logics or entails a system of domination' (75). For Brown this blind-spot means Foucault cannot account for neoliberalism's 'undoing of democracy and a democratic imaginary' (78). At the same time, this aversion from capital allows its logics concerning value, investment, or profit to escape scrutiny. To be clear, then, Foucault's work motivates my analysis (at times explicitly, as in Chapter 4's treatment of feminist discourses of male sexuality), and I will show how Wallace's neoliberal spermatics are enmeshed in power relations. However, my focus is on unpacking the heterogeneity of economic logics through which Wallace suggests that male sexual hideousness is incontestable. Hence, I give more attention to capitalist processes that, on their own, an emphasis on biopower cannot capture.

A similar desire to work around Foucault's ideas of sexuality and power, and by paying attention to economic logics that fall outside of his purview, animates Michael Tratner's *Deficits and Desires: Economics and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Literature* (2002). Tratner argues that economics and sexuality share a "mutual representability": the terms in one discourse turn out to be useful to represent elements in another' (5). From this basis he suggests that 1920 to 1960 saw a congruence between a 'Keynesian orthodoxy in economics that oversaving is harmful, and the prevalent view of sexual theorists from Wilhelm Reich through Alfred Kinsey to Bernie Zilbergeld that repression is harmful' (6). Discussing writers such as Virginia Woolf and Zora Neal Hurston, Tratner explores how a Victorian morality of saving gave way in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century to a readiness to go into debt, both economically and sexually. There are problems though with Tratner's reading; as Patrick Mullen observes, he 'readily adopts the broad contours of the repressive hypothesis that Foucault is at pains to complicate – the narrative that associates the nineteenth century with repression and the twentieth century with liberation' (781). I am indebted to Tratner's approach, but I do not wish to suggest that Wallace's texts and their neoliberal moment signal a new turn in a dialectic of sexual repression and liberation.

Furthermore, by presupposing a division between economics and sexuality – so that 'different realms of behaviour and discourse find that they "glow" in each other's reflected glory' (6) – Tratner's notion of mutual representability cannot capture how neoliberal logics collapse such distinctions. If neoliberalism in Simon Springer et al.'s words entails 'the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life' (2), then sexuality in this state of affairs is economic from the start. Thus, neoliberal logics are not separate to Wallace's sexual representations, but immanent to them. In this sense his texts are suggestive of a situation Jean Baudrillard describes whereby 'the possibility of metaphor is disappearing in every sphere' (8). As a result 'all disciplines [...] lose their specificity and partake of a process of

confusion and contagion' (9); sex, for one, 'is no longer located in sex itself, but elsewhere – everywhere else, in fact' (9). Baudrillard names this situation transsexuality, which as Rita Felski explains, means 'a general social process of implosion and de-differentiation which renders all terms commutable and indeterminate' (339-340). As an indication of how neoliberalism naturalises economic logics in the realm of sexuality, Baudrillard's arguments usefully stress how ideas of mutual representability rest on unstable distinctions.

Baudrillard's dislocation of sexuality from any stable frame of reference can be read as a typically postmodern manoeuvre. In his 1996 book *Postmodern Sexualities*, William Simon goes so far as to state that 'human sexuality is really nothing, at least nothing specific' (145); in fact it 'is always inherently something else' (154). There are dangers in this attempt to make sexuality a discontinuous lens through which to view things elsewhere, not least of which is the loss of its phenomenal and embodied aspects. In a 2015 review essay entitled 'No Sex Please, We're American', Tim Dean assesses recent publications in queer theory to find it lacking on this front in particular. More provocatively, he also argues that because 'regarded as insufficiently serious, sex [in these publications] must yield to weightier issues. To be properly queer in the academy today means [...] to stop thinking about sex in favor of what are perceived as more urgent problems' (616). For Dean, legitimating sex as an area of academic enquiry has meant betraying the 'messiness of the erotic' (616) to focus on identitarian and progressive political goals instead. Put simply, one does not talk about sex, but rather about sex as a means to other conceptual ends. By labelling Wallace's spermatics as neoliberal, and by focussing on a gendered idea of sexuality, my project confirms Dean's critique. Worse, my recourse to queer theorists like Edelman will only serve to elucidate how imbricated male sexual hideousness and neoliberal logics are in Wallace's texts.

However, if Dean's review helpfully points to lacunae in current theoretical writing on sex, his approach is unhelpful in its prescriptivism. As Lauren Berlant and Edelman note

in their reply to Dean (for he attacks their co-authored *Sex, or the Unbearable* [2013] in particular), he ‘underimagines’ (627) sex as “‘embodiment’ or what he calls “bodily desire,” without considering for a moment that desire may not spring from the body alone’ (626). My thesis follows Berlant and Edelman by focussing, in their words, ‘on what sex induces in material and conceptual relations and not on sex as something immediately recognizable when we see it’ (627). My analysis of sexuality in Wallace’s work facilitates an investigation of what one might consider to be the weightier issue of neoliberalism. This is not out of a disregard for the erotic messiness that falls outside of this approach, but out of an interest in the conceptual entanglement between male sexual hideousness and neoliberal logics in his texts. Wallace’s *oeuvre* is in fact lacking in the kind of sex that Dean suggests contemporary queer theorists ignore. But to conclude from this absence that Wallace’s texts are uninterested in sexuality would be narrow minded; even though, as my thesis will at times demonstrate, they often display the same disdain for progressive sexual politics Dean does.

That said, despite my sympathy for Berlant and Edelman’s arguments over Dean’s – and in spite of drawing on Edelman’s work concerning queer negativity – my approach does not generally follow their concern with affect, non-sovereignty, and forms of attachment in *Sex, or the Unbearable*. This is because my interest lies less in aesthetic, phenomenological understandings of political economy (as explored in Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* [2011]), and, when I make recourse to psychoanalytic ideas (as Edelman does in *No Future*), it is mainly in order to illustrate how Wallace’s texts manipulate them for their own uses. As my focus on specific neoliberal logics suggests, political economy motivates my investigation to a greater degree than it does either Berlant or Edelman. Thus neo-Marxist readings of neoliberal economics, alongside queer theories of negativity and recent work on violence in American fiction, provide my main methodological inroads. As such, my thesis can be seen as a small contribution to a recent line of studies that mesh queer theoretical insights with an emphasis

on political economy. These include Kevin Floyd's complex blending of Marxism and queer thought in *The Reification of Desire* (2009); James Penney's suggestion in *After Queer* (2013) that capitalism has made queer identity politics redundant; and recent studies on the relationship between queer theory and anti-capitalism by Holly Lewis (2016) and David Alderson (2016). My interest is first and foremost on Wallace, but in elucidating his texts' hideous neoliberal spermatics, I hope to modestly further these lines of enquiry.

### Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1, 'Responsibility: Investing against Pornification', argues that Wallace's texts responsabilise men into conceiving of sexuality as a form of financialised human capital. They do so out of the conviction that the spread of pornography has devalued sex as an arena for emotional connection, chiefly by encouraging men to waste their spermatic resources on the non-reproductive pursuits of casual sex and masturbation. By investing in the value of their sexuality as a form of capital, and in turn the value of the emotional experiences they derive from such, Wallace suggests that men can resist pornification's degrading influence. I begin with close readings of 'Back in New Fire' and 'Big Red Son'. These essays depict male sexuality through metaphors of labour and exchange, only to replace them with a focus on financial self-appreciation. Yet, despite their suggestions that sex can facilitate emotional intimacy, both essays ultimately endorse displaced forms of sexual abstinence, in which men accept their sexual hideousness and choose not to act on it. This chapter ends by examining how such displaced abstinence, which preserves male hideousness as something that cannot be changed, also rests on a sexist alignment of women with pornification. By looking at the stories 'Think', 'Adult World (I)', and 'Adult World (II)' in particular, I demonstrate how the same responsabilisation that Wallace presents as being desirable for men registers as being

damaging for women. Indeed, these stories critique what they imply is a feminist complicity with neoliberalism in order to bolster the need to responsibilise men.

Whereas Chapter 1 ends with a consideration of gender difference, Chapter 2, ‘Risk: Securitising Male Homosexuality’, focuses on differences of sexual orientation. Wallace presents male homosexuality as an abject risk to heterosexual men, who in coming into contact with it are revealed to harbour mysterious psychological interiorities. Yet, not only are Wallace’s texts aware of this homophobia, they manipulate it as one would a financial asset. Specifically, his texts securitise male homosexuality: they treat it as a risky asset that, once combined with the safer asset of heterosexuality through the security of the closet, allows for positive emotional returns. To support this argument I trace Wallace’s depictions of gay sexuality from *The Broom of the System* (1987) up until *Infinite Jest* (1996), which marks his last sustained engagement with homosexuality as I am investigating it. Though the purpose of this securitisation develops from text to text – from broad comedy, to meditations on paternal relationships, and to a need to shore up psychological models of selfhood against biomedical models – the underlying logic remains the same. Within these dynamics male homosexuality figures as a sexual hideousness more abject than that which ‘Back in New Fire’ and ‘Big Red Son’ suggest inheres in straight men. The risk of such non-reproductive abjection, though, makes it amenable to securitisation, and in turn, to how Wallace’s texts suggest that male sexuality – whether hetero or homo – is incontestably hideous.

Chapters 1 and 2 then are concerned with male hideousness as a form of sexual non-reproduction. Underlying this concern are metaphors of investment and waste (and risk) that evoke spermatic economy. My next two chapters shift emphasis: from non-reproductivity to violence, and from investment and waste to spermatic metaphors of blockage and release. In Chapter 3, ‘Contract: Gazing within Masochism’, I argue that Wallace mobilises the male gaze as a means by which to reform the implicit contract between reader and text. Drawing



on Walter Benn Michaels' work on this topic, I show how a neoliberal desire that contracts respect individual self-determination, rather than allow one party to dominate another, drives this need for reform. At fault here, for Wallace, are theories of masochism which suggest that being subservient within a contract is a form of agency. *Infinite Jest* tries to remind its projected readers of their capacity for sadistic male gazing, and in turn, of how they are not subject to the text but its equal – especially when it comes to instances of violence that are seemingly beyond representation. To grasp how the novel does this, I look first at 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' and 'David Lynch Keeps His Head', which are in part concerned with male gazing, contracts, and masochism. In doing so, I argue that Wallace works within but against masochistic contracts in his pursuit of a greater equality between reader and text. This equality only makes sense, though, if one downplays how the novel has more power than the reader in gesturing toward unrepresentable violence.

Chapter 4, 'Property: Privatising Feminist Critique', also examines how Wallace's texts try to protect individual self-determination. Here, though, I consider how they do this against the perceived threat of feminist politics. Focusing on the stories that make up the 'Brief Interviews', I make explicit an aspect of male sexual hideousness in Wallace's texts that I have heretofore only touched upon. Namely, this is the fact that such hideousness, for Wallace, is in part a discourse created by a feminism that his texts present and caricature as attacking men. Through reference to Foucault's theories of discourse and authorship, I argue that the 'Brief Interviews' stories reclaim this apparently feminist notion of hideousness as heterosexual men's private property. In doing so, they imply that the critique this discourse sets out to make can be made more efficient – in effect, they privatise it. Encouraging men to speak about sexual hideousness as a type of private property, these stories imply, is a more efficient way to critique male chauvinism than Q's questioning. In fact, Wallace suggests that Q's interviewees embody forms of sexual violence that lie outside of her – and the vaguely

defined ‘feminism’ she stands for – comprehension. Thus, engaging with these hideous men offers a potential release from the blockage that, ostensibly, Q’s overly rigid feminist position creates. In keeping with how privatisation’s emphasis on efficiency over ideology seeks to sidestep political debate, however, the ‘better’ feminist critique that these stories provide ultimately reaffirms the idea that male sexuality is incontestably hideous.

My final chapter, ‘Austerity: Sacrificing and Scapegoating Little Men’, draws on various elements from the preceding chapters’ parallel threads (namely, non-reproductivity, investment, and waste on the one hand, and violence, blockage, and release on the other) to account for how male sexuality in *Oblivion* (2004) and *The Pale King* (2011) accords with the logics of neoliberal austerity. These texts, I argue, envisage a shared spermatic budget that some men, through their sexual overspending, have run into a deficit. Though Wallace acknowledges how hideous men are responsible for such unbalancing, and indeed presents them as figures to critique, he follows the austerity logic of displacing responsibility for such onto pathetic schlemiels, or little men. After tracing the genealogy of this trope in Jewish culture, I argue that *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* respectively present little men as detestable figures to scapegoat, and as admirable avatars of sacrifice. With the latter, they exemplify a responsible self-denial that helps to balance an inflated spermatic budget. With the former, Wallace scapegoats little men for failing to take such responsibility, in the process implying that capitalism and male sexuality share an inevitable hideousness. The austerity processes at work here not only compound how it is futile to try and change male sexual hideousness, but in doing so indicate how Wallace’s texts – even when they are at their most anti-capitalist – mobilise neoliberal logics in their depictions of male sexual hideousness.

‘I do have a thesis’ (‘E Unibus’ 49)

This thesis argues that Wallace's texts conceive of male sexuality through neoliberal logics regarding responsibility, risk, contract, property, and austerity. Informing such conceptions are spermatic metaphors of investment, waste, blockage, and release. These dynamics allow Wallace's texts to ground masculinity in an apparently incontestable sexual hideousness, characterised in particular by negativity and violence. Specifically, by figuring male sexuality as a neutral economic issue, and as lending itself to spermatic metaphors, they present such hideousness as a fact to be accommodated for rather than changed. His texts carry out this process, I argue, in order to resolve an abiding tension in their representations of gender: namely, that of focussing near exclusively on male characters and perspectives in the knowledge that this focus shores up patriarchal power relations. In this way Wallace turns an area of potential political contestation (the idea that men are sexually hideous) into a disinterested economic issue (hideousness must be managed, not transformed). My thesis builds on analyses of masculinity and neoliberalism in Wallace's texts to suggest that the two are thematically and conceptually linked. I offer a revisionist reading of his fiction and non-fiction as being indebted to neoliberal logics, which allow Wallace to reaffirm masculinity on the basis of its apparently incontestable sexual hideousness.

This is in many respects a suspicious argument. I am pouring cold water on the anti-neoliberal credentials of Wallace's texts by stressing their sexual and gender conservatism<sup>7</sup> – a move that, from a certain point of view, means using their most objectionable aspects as the most effective tools with which to criticise them. That said, this suspicion can be productive, and on two fronts especially. By adumbrating Wallace's attachment to sexual hideousness as the welcomingly rotten root of masculinity, my thesis makes a case for the importance of the darkness Boswell identifies in *Oblivion*, but on a much larger scale. Though my interests lie in how negativity and violence inform his writing of male sexuality, readings could no doubt build upon these elements in relation to other topics. In addition to this, by focusing on such

darkness I draw upon a variety of critical and cultural contexts – such as debates about pornification, theories of cinema spectatorship, and the microbiology of HIV – that cannot be contained within a strictly literary framework. I tie these disparate contexts to an overriding concern with Wallace’s hideous neoliberal spermatics. In doing so my thesis furthers Burn’s suggestion, as regards to *Infinite Jest*, that it is ‘a node in a network – a site of communicative energy not only drawing from the complex cultural matrix around it, but also pointing beyond itself’ (*Reader’s Guide* 6). I wish to apply this insight to Wallace’s *oeuvre*. Namely, I explore how his depictions of male sexuality draw from and point to a variety of cultural contexts to inform my main thesis: neoliberal logics, in combination with spermatic metaphors, facilitate Wallace’s attempt to ground masculinity in hideousness.

## Chapter 1

### Responsibility: Investing against Pornification

In his 2007 essay ‘The Braindead Megaphone’, George Saunders argues that media sensationalism during the 1990s helped to debase the quality of public discourse. To illustrate this, he references President Bill Clinton’s affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Saunders mimics news reports concerning Lewinsky’s infamous blue dress, which according to some, bore the traces of Clinton’s semen: ‘more at five about The Stain! Have you ever caused a Stain? Which color do you think would most effectively hide a Stain? See what our experts predicted you would say!’ (6) The satire here takes aim at a culture that allows for sexual images and meanings to proliferate in public. As such, Saunders articulates a fear of what Gil Troy, writing on the Lewinsky scandal in his social history of the 1990s, describes as an ‘An Ever-More Explicit Culture’ (231). Indeed, Troy draws on the work of another male writer to make this point, Tom Wolfe’s 2000 essay ‘Hooking Up’. Here Wolfe asserts that ‘every magazine stand was a riot of bare flesh’ (5), instances of ‘Web-sex addiction were rising in number’ (5), and ‘sexual stimuli bombarded the young [...] At puberty the dams, if any were left, were burst’ (5-6). This ‘lurid carnival’ (5) that Wolfe outlines implies the greater cultural presence of pornography in particular – in fact, he suggests that pornography has become so normalised that the term itself is now redundant (5). In the essays ‘Back in New Fire’ and ‘Big Red Son’, and several of the stories in *Brief Interviews*, Wallace explores the impact of this proliferation of sexual media. He suggests that the rise of pornography in U.S. culture has disenchanted sex as an arena for emotional connection.

Anxieties over pornography’s presence in the cultural mainstream are not new to the 1990s. However, my interest does not lie in determining whether or not this decade differs from others in the amount of pornographic material available. Rather, I wish to explore how

the perception that this was the case informs Wallace's depictions of male sexuality. Wolfe's image of dried-up dams in fact resonates with the spermatic metaphors that, as I will argue, underpin Wallace's concern with pornography. Wallace presents men who, when faced with an abundance of pornographic media, waste their sexual resources by having casual sex or by masturbating. Consequently, his texts suggest that men need to invest these resources more responsibly, if they would like to emotionally connect with others. As Matthew Eagleton-Pierce observes, appeals to individual responsibility have 'become common in the context of neoliberalism' (156), especially as politicians promote logics of 'self-governance and self-care' (160) while they dismantle forms of state support. In Wendy Brown's more precise definition, responsibilisation tasks subjects with 'undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving; it is in this regard a manifestation of human capitalization' (133). Wallace's texts task men, whether that be male characters or male readers, in a similar way. Indicting pornography for inspiring non-reproductive sexual activities, his texts encourage men to manage their sexuality as a form of human capital, to be wisely invested in the pursuit of greater interpersonal intimacy.

Furthermore, responsibilisation in this context constructs what Brown describes as 'financialized human capital' (33) in particular. Past theories of human capital, such as those put forth by Gary S. Becker, focused on how investments in one's education or lifestyle can determine future income, whether monetary, psychic, or otherwise. However, recent decades for Brown have witnessed a shift towards 'a new model of economic conduct' (34), whereby the goal 'is to self-invest in ways that enhance its [i.e. human capital's] value' (33). Though an interest in securing returns on investments persists, it now jostles with an understanding of human capital where the objective is to increase one's value. The ways in which Wallace's texts sexually responsibilise men accords with this idea of value appreciation. Pornography is indeed such a marker for non-reproductivity in his texts because it devalues male sexuality as

a means by which men can emotionally connect with others. Severs has explored at length how Wallace is interested in ‘economic, monetary, mathematical, semantic, aesthetic, and moral meanings of value’ (*Balancing Books* 10). The texts that I examine in this chapter envisage male sexuality in relation to the first two terms in this list. They suggest that if men increase the value of their sexuality envisaged as a form of financialised human capital, they will be able to form meaningful connections with their sexual partners.

These dynamics are indicative of what various commentators have described as financialisation. Natascha van der Zwan offers a useful breakdown of this term. If finance, at its simplest, refers to the management of money, and financial capitalism denotes a system in which financial processes dominate, then financialisation designates ‘the web of interrelated processes – economic, political, social, technological, cultural etc. – through which finance has extended its influence beyond the marketplace and into other realms of social life’ (101n1). One such realm, as my analysis of Wallace’s texts will demonstrate, is male sexuality. Indeed, in her overview of scholarship that focuses on ‘the financialization of the everyday’ (111), van der Swan explains how, for political scientists like Rob Aitken, ‘financialization has created a new subjectivity: the “investing subject” [...] [an] autonomous individual who insures himself against the risks of the life cycle through financial literacy and self-discipline’ (113). Wallace’s suggestions that men need to invest their sexual resources more responsibly accords with this idea. True to Randy Martin’s assertion that ‘economic fundamentals [...] become flustered under the financial gaze’ (*Financialization of Daily Life* 11), his texts also inculcate this subjectivity at the expense of ideas of male sexuality that, as I outline them, centre on labour and exchange. This inculcation is necessary, Wallace suggests, if men are to counter the emotionally deadening effect that pornography has on sex.

Commentators have coined a variety of terms to describe the greater presence of pornography in contemporary societies. These include pornification (Susanna Paasonen et

al.), porning (Carmine Sarracino and Kevin Stott), pornified (Pamela Paul), and pornocopia (Laurence O'Toole). As Gerry Carlin and Mark Jones note, 'authors and publishers compete to effectively signify the pervasiveness of pornography by forming neologisms combin[ing] porn with various suffixes' (188). My preference in this chapter is to use Paasonen et al.'s term, which they employ in order to capture how 'texts citing pornographic styles, gestures and aesthetics – and to a degree pornography itself – have become staple features of popular media culture in Western societies as commodities purchased and consumed' (1). However, I will at times stretch this focus on 'styles, gestures and aesthetics' to include sex aids as well. Hence when Jeni Roberts purchases a vibrator in 'Adult World (II)', I read this as being part of the pornification that Wallace is exploring. That said, there are also limitations to reading pornification as 'commodities purchased and consumed' alone. As noted in my Introduction, Wallace's texts often examine pornography in conjunction with economics, and to suggest that they share a mutual disreputability. Though Wallace does figure pornification in terms of purchasing and consuming commodities, his presentation of male sexuality as financialised human capital also departs from this realm. Accordingly, ideas of investment and valorisation are more significant to my analysis than commodification.

Furthermore, although complaints about commodification are useful in explicating anxieties about pornification, they presuppose that sexuality should exist outside of economics. As such, these complaints are indicative of what Brown describes as one of the 'four deleterious effects' (28) of neoliberalism that its critics tend to identify – the '*unethical commercialization* of things and activities considered inappropriate for marketization' (29, *italics in original*). Jeremy Gilbert provides a good example of this worry about, in Brown's words, 'crass commodification' (30). In his Introduction to the essay collection *Neoliberal Culture* (2016), Gilbert notes in passing that the 'commodification of sex [at the hands of the pornography industry] [...] is one of the most striking characteristics of neoliberal culture



today' (19). To some extent, Wallace's depiction of sex confirms this line of argument. Kiki Benzon is thus right to say that his texts explore how, in 'a culture governed by neoliberal principles' (33), consumer 'pleasure itself may preclude a conscious, critical engagement with the world' (33). Yet similar to how, as I noted in my Introduction, C. Wesley Buerkle's equation of neoliberalism with consumerism does not account for the former's particularity, reading Wallace's engagement with pornification in terms of commodification elides how his texts envisage male sexuality as an economic resource from the get-go. Although essays such as 'Back in New Fire' do critique pornification as a form of commodification, they also urge men to increase the value of their sexuality as financialised human capital.

Additionally, reading Wallace's objection to pornification as an objection to how it fans individualism – so that sex, in Gilbert's words, becomes a 'consumptive rather than a relational act' (19) – is only helpful to some extent. Wallace's texts undoubtedly suggest that pornification undermines sex as an arena in which men can emotionally connect with others. In this light, their treatment of pornification is part of what some critics argue is Wallace's key concern – as Clare Hayes-Brady puts it, this is his 'insistence on striving for connection' in pursuit of a 'dream of complete intimacy' (*The Unspeakable* viii; 7). For Vincent Haddad this focus on intimacy is 'a physical, potentially erotic, transfer as well' (3). Nevertheless, it would be short-sighted to argue that Wallace's texts thus try to reenergise sex as a relational space, if for no other reason than what Jonathan Franzen describes as a 'near-perfect absence, in his fiction, of ordinary love' ('Farther Away' 39). Though a failure of relationality provides the animus for Wallace's objections to pornification, the solutions that his texts posit paradoxically reaffirm an individualistic ethos. By encouraging men to increase the value of their sexual resources by investing them in more responsible behaviours, Wallace highlights the importance of self- rather than other-directed action. Instead of creating emotional bonds

with others, these processes have the paradoxical effect of transforming non-reproductive pleasures into what Wallace suggests is a more worthwhile sexual abstinence.

This goes some way to explaining why the essays and short stories that I examine in this chapter, despite their professed concern for how pornification undermines sex as a form of emotional connection, reaffirm the sexual non-reproductivity that they lament. Thus ‘Back in New Fire’ and ‘Big Red Son’ respectively instruct and imply that men should refrain from sex, rather than take part in the relational bonds that both essays suggest it can facilitate. The fact that these others with whom Wallace implies men need to connect are women, moreover, also explains why his texts bolster such non-reproductivity. For despite his attention to how men engage with and, in ‘Big Red Son’, perpetuate a pornified culture, Wallace often aligns the dangers of pornification with women. It is fair to read this as sexism, an example of the longstanding association of mass culture and femininity that Andreas Huyssen outlines in his book *After the Great Divide* (1986). In the texts I examine such sexism revolves around the suspicion that female sexual agency furthers consumerism – hence Jeni’s purchasing of a vibrator in ‘Adult World (II)’. Yet my concern lies less in accounting for the reasons for this suspicion, and more in exploring how it informs Wallace’s construction of male sexuality as financialised human capital. To some extent, it is central: for by aligning pornification with women, Wallace makes the need for men to resist the former – by valorising their own sexual resources – an important part of his call for men to resist the latter.

The readings that I pursue here will at times appear counter-intuitive. The ‘Adult World’ stories, for instance, critique the sexual self-investments that I focus on, albeit in relation to women. Nevertheless, by showing how these texts are still indebted to logics of responsibilisation, my readings are indicative of the revisionist approach that I adopt more generally. Hence, this chapter argues that Wallace urges men to invest their sexual resources in conducts that increase their value as a means to create emotional bonds with others. To the

extent that these conducts either proscribe or preclude orgasm, however, this process ends up implying that non-reproductivity is central to masculinity. This occurs by virtue of how Wallace's proposed conducts endorse displaced forms of abstinence, and also in how his texts' suspicion of female sexual agency means that they prioritise scenarios that foreclose intercourse with women. My argument unfolds in two stages. First, I show how Wallace's hostility to casual sex and masturbation supplants ideas of labour and exchange with an emphasis on financialised human capital. Second, I explore how his attempt to critique these processes when carried out by women ultimately works to stress their desirability for men. By preserving the negativity that Wallace suggests pornification inspires, his texts imply that men must control, rather than challenge, their sexual hideousness.

### The Labour of 'Back in New Fire'

'Back in New Fire' is Wallace's most direct engagement with sexual mores. It is also perhaps his most controversial text, arguing as it does that AIDS is 'a blessing, a gift' (171) that could 'be the salvation of sexuality in the 1990s' (168). Wallace makes this argument based on the threat of 'heterosexual AIDS' (168), and does not mention homosexuals beyond an oblique reference to 'brave people' (172) suffering from the illness. In his review of *Both Flesh and Not*, a 2012 collection of Wallace's non-fiction that includes 'Back in New Fire', Charles Nixon calls Wallace's logic here 'indefensibly graceless and uncaring, and, in fact, [it] has virtually nothing to recommend it' ('Variations on Wallace'). It is hard to disagree with this, though one can caveat Wallace's position by pointing to the essay's original place of publication – Dave Eggers' less literary precursor to *McSweeney's*, *Might* magazine. This magazine included issues with titles such as 'For the Love of Cheese' and 'Are Black People Cooler than White People?' To some extent, *Might's* satirical tone can help explain Wallace's provocative stance in 'Back in New Fire'. That said, *Might's* approach was tongue-in-cheek

rather than broadly parodic, and there is also a substantial difference between the racist cliché that blacks are cooler than whites and the deeply uncaring suggestion that AIDS is a blessing. Indeed, there is no doubting Wallace's earnestness in this essay when he proposes that AIDS can deliver Americans from pornification's 'erotic despair' (171), specifically by compelling them to consider sex as a means by which to connect with others.

For Wallace the '60s "Revolution" in sexuality' (170) led to the sexual hangover of the '70s, when sex reached a cultural 'saturation-point' (170), the legacy of which his 'bland generation' (171) inherit. Such excess includes 'swinging couples and meat-market bars, hot tubs and EST, *Hustler's* gynaecological spreads, *Charlie's Angels*, herpes, kiddie-porn, mood rings, teenage pregnancy, Plato's Retreat, disco' (170). This list contains only two expressly pornographic phenomena – '*Hustler's* gynaecological spreads' and 'kiddie-porn'. It therefore deploys what Rosalind Gill, in her criticism of arguments that document the 'sexualisation of culture' (139), calls 'a violent generalizing logic that renders differences invisible' (139). For Wallace the 'rampant casual fucking' this pornification inspires has indeed degraded 'human sexuality's power and meaning' (171). This idea resembles a similar complaint that Edelman perceives in P.D. James's dystopian novel *The Children of Men* (1992), which depicts a crisis of human fertility where sex has become 'meaninglessly acrobatic' (quoted in Edelman, 13). As Edelman notes, James's hostility towards such acrobatics points to how 'the specifically heterosexual alibi of reproductive necessity' (13) renders all pleasures outside of pronatalism 'inherently destructive of meaning' (13). Though 'Back in New Fire' is not concerned with what Edelman calls 'the Child as the image of the future' (3) per se, its suggestion that sex is only meaningful when it is generative – in this instance, of forms of emotional connection between partners – follows the logic of reproductive futurism.

Wallace assesses pornification's detrimental effects on sexuality from the viewpoint of heterosexual men in particular. Though he personalises his reflections (as in the comment

‘I realize that I came of sexual age...’ [170]), he also positions himself as talking directly to and for straight men. For example, he opens the essay with a Rapunzel-like scenario in which ‘a gallant knight’ (167) must ‘slay the dragon’ (167) to win a ‘fair maiden. “Fair maiden” means “good-looking virgin,” by the way’ (167). This demonstration of insider knowledge appeals to patriarchal notions of unspoiled womanhood. Wallace reiterates these notions when he attests that ‘any knight, from any era, can tell you what “win” means here’ (168). Any knight, or any heterosexual male, will thus feel ‘a slight anticlimactic droop to his lance’ (169) when he discovers that ‘here’s the fair maiden, wearing a Victoria’s Secret Teddy, and crooking her finger’ (168-69). Though there is a camp comedy to this image that suggests Wallace’s critical distance, it is still congruent with the essay’s overall argument. That is, a pornified culture – which, as the ‘Victoria’s Secret Teddy’ implies, Wallace associates with female sexual agency – supplants the impediments that heterosexual men apparently require to keep their lances stiff with an emasculating sexual abundance. More than this, such a culture obviates the need for men to labour towards their objects of desire.

For the ‘disappointment in Sir Knight’s face’ (169) when he finds his beloved too easy to access points to how, for Wallace, ‘sexual passion [...] [is] a vital psychic force in human life – not *despite* impediments but *because* of them’ (169, italics in original). In other words, men need to work for their ‘sexual passion’ if it is to have meaning. Severs describes the importance of work in Wallace’s texts as a ‘fundamental means of creating value and resisting consumerist forces of infantilization’ (*Balancing Books* 22). Mary K. Holland meanwhile reads this importance in relation to Wallace’s depiction of masculinity generally. Writing on his review of David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* (1988), and honing in on terms that resonate with the image of Sir Knight, Holland argues that in Wallace’s texts the male ‘subject’s experience of being comes only as pursuit (“Quest”) of the desired feminine Other who is herself constituted of lack (“Absent Object”) (“By Hirsute Author” 4). To

some extent ‘Back in New Fire’ follows this Lacanian framework, whereby, in Holland’s words, a ‘masculine-centered notion of desiring subjecthood’ (2) means men are constantly working towards an absent object. Yet, though this reading is compelling, it cannot account for how ‘Back in New Fire’ ultimately redirects this work – or to deploy a more explicitly economic term, labour – away from a feminine other, and towards the male subject.<sup>8</sup> As I will show shortly, Wallace supplants the other-directed labour that he attacks pornification for undermining with a focus on how men can appreciate the value of their sexuality.

To grasp how this occurs, it is useful to turn to the work of Michel Fehrer. Brown’s suggestion that ‘when everything is capital, labor disappears as a category’ (38) is indeed indebted to Fehrer’s 2009 essay ‘Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital’. Here Fehrer theorises ‘the decline of the type of free labourer and its gradual replacement by a new form of subjectivity: human capital’ (24), which he describes as ‘a defining feature of neoliberalism’ (24). However, Fehrer’s understanding of human capital differs from that put forth by Becker, who for Fehrer ‘largely remains a neoliberal theorist trapped in a utilitarian imagination’ (27n8). This is because, for Becker, ‘investments in human capital should essentially be analysed in terms of the returns they produce, that is, in terms of income’ (27). In the neoliberal context that Fehrer outlines, though, ‘our main purpose is not so much to profit from our accumulated potential as to constantly value or appreciate ourselves – or at least prevent our own depreciation’ (27). ‘Back in New Fire’ presents male sexuality in this context, whereby in Fehrer’s words the concern is with ‘appreciation rather than income, stock value rather than commercial profit’ (27). If the free labourer of liberalism rests upon a distinction between ‘a subjectivity that is inalienable and a labor power that is to be rented out’ (29), financialised human capital of the kind that Brown and Fehrer postulate collapses this divide. Significantly, it also turns a productive idea of labour – whether in the liberal

sense of producing saleable commodities, or in Becker's sense of self-investing to produce forms of future return – into a concern with increasing one's value.

The economic imagery that Wallace deploys in 'Back in New Fire' is suggestive of this concern. For instance, Wallace states that 'erotically charged human existence requires impediments to passion, prices for choices' (171); that it is 'impediments that give the choice of passion its price and value' (169); and that 'the higher the price of choice, the higher the erotic voltage surrounding what people chose' (170). One can of course read 'price', 'value', 'choice' and 'charged' outside of an economic register, especially the latter term, which with 'voltage' suggests the figurative electrification Wallace believes that sex has lost. However, that Wallace locates the roots of pornification in 'the erotic malaise of the '70s' (170) adds support to reading this term in relation to economics. As the IRS worker Chris Fogle observes in his monologue in *The Pale King*, U.S. culture during the 1970s was, for him, characterised by 'waste and drifting, which Jimmy Carter was ridiculed for calling "malaise"' (225). One can read this term as being suggestive of the economic crises that dogged Carter's time as president – notably, the rise in inflation. Melinda Cooper explains how 'by the late 1970s, commentators from across the political spectrum agreed that inflation represented a threat to the moral fabric of American society' (29). Indeed, 'by creating uncertainty about the future value of money [...] inflation had the effect of shortening time horizons and inducing a desire for speculative indulgence among the consumer public' (30). In 'Back in New Fire' Wallace aligns the emergence of pornification with these crises in the value of money. Inflation and pornification respectively devalue money and sexuality, chiefly by encouraging gratifications that waste what should be treated as a precious resource.

For Fehrer, one of the consequences of this emphasis on value appreciation is that it becomes 'possible to govern subjects seeking to increase the value of their human capital [...] by inciting them to adopt conducts deemed valorizing and to follow models of self-valuation

that modify their priorities and inflect their strategic choices' (28). This aptly describes how 'Back in New Fire' responsabilises men to invest in behaviours that will conserve rather than waste their sexual resources. For instance, Wallace hopes the threat of heterosexual AIDS will encourage men to enjoy sex 'through non-genital touching, or over the phone, or via the mail; in a conversational nuance; in an expression; in a body's posture, a certain pressure in a held hand' (172). Notably, except for 'non-genital touching', which steers sex away from an emphasis on orgasm, Wallace imagines types of 'sex' that either keep partners out of physical contact or touching in the most chaste way possible – holding hands. This signals a telling incongruence in 'Back in New Fire'. The essay posits that AIDS offers the required hazard to make sex valuable again. But, when it comes to imagining just what this valuable because dangerous sex will be, Wallace idealises scenarios that withdraw from danger, rather than, in accordance with the essay's own logic, arguing that men continue to have sex but in manners pleasurably circumscribed by an awareness of the risk it carries. The fire that will re-enchant sexuality in a pornified culture, then, is one in which no one gets burnt.

This contradiction suggests ambivalence about the body as a source of pleasure – indeed 'sexuality is, finally, about *imagination*' (172, italics in original). Most pertinently, though, the scenarios that Wallace proposes here mobilise fantasies of relationality that, ultimately, encourage men to increase the value of their sexuality by not expending it.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this non-expenditure takes on a distinctly individualist character by the essay's closing remarks. Wallace ends 'Back in New Fire' by stating that 'fire is lethal, but we need it. The key is how we come to fire. It's not just other people you have to respect' (172). The change from 'we' to 'you' in these lines not only signals an attempt to enlist the reader into respecting AIDS's fire, or the other people Wallace assumes (but struggles to imagine) men want to have sex with. What Wallace leaves unsaid, but which the reader can conceptually finish, is that men need to respect themselves. In this sense, 'Back in New Fire' exemplifies



what Iain Williams describes as a ‘prominent contradiction’ (311) in Wallace’s texts: their ‘appeal to vague, universal abstracts, coupled with a desire to protect the singularities of the individual’ (311). This contradiction does not create an impasse, though, but rather is key to the essay’s effect. ‘Back in New Fire’ appeals to the idea that sex can ‘erect bridges across the chasms that separate selves’ (172) in order to imbue the individual self-valuation that it ultimately condones with a sense of emotional importance.

Interestingly, this dynamic appropriates discourses that surrounded gay men during the AIDS crisis, and applies them to heterosexual men. Michelle Marzullo explains how ‘the terror over the emergence of AIDS encouraged a rhetoric of responsibility that incited gay and bisexual men to behave as good citizens through creation of a safe sex ethic’ (767). I will return to how Wallace’s texts appropriate elements of gay male experience and culture in the following chapter. For now, it is important to note that although ‘Back in New Fire’ gestures towards such a safe sex ethic in its mention of the ‘conscientious use of protection’ (172), it prioritises behaviours that, by avoiding intercourse, foreclose the need for such protection in the first place. Significantly, this puts the essay at odds with Fehrer’s call for subjects to defy ‘neoliberalism from within – that is, by embracing the very condition that its discourses and practices delineate’ (21), but in order ‘to express aspirations and demands that [...] neoliberal promoters had neither intended nor foreseen’ (25). If Wallace presented male sexuality in ‘Back in New Fire’ as financialised human capital as a way to reenergise sex as a relational activity, then this would indeed be the case. However, the essay does so to urge individual men to increase the value of such capital, and despite its pronounced interest in sex as a site of relationality. Consequently, this logic supplants an emphasis on other-directed labour with a focus on how men should appreciate the value of their sexual resources.

It is similarly important to stress how this emphasis on self-appreciation mobilises responsibility as a distinctly neoliberal concept. For as Susanna Trnka and Catherine Trundle

observe, ‘advanced liberal responsabilization projects [i.e. neoliberalism] have a particular political agenda attached to ideas of self-care and should not be misrecognized as subsuming the entire category of self-responsibility and self-cultivation’ (9). With this in mind, Trnka and Trundle propose the concept of ‘competing responsibilities’ (3) so as not to lose sight of how multiple ideas of responsibility are in circulation, ‘sometimes reinforcing neoliberal responsabilization, and at other times existing alongside or undercutting it’ (22). Of the three alternative ideas they posit – ‘other forms of personal responsibility; care for the Other; and social contract ideologies’ (3) – the second, care for the Other, would appear most applicable to ‘Back in New Fire’. For the essay conveys a desire for what Trnka and Trundel describe as ‘intimate, face-to-face relationships that predicate a fundamental, if often understated, mode of social obligation’ (3). Wallace’s depiction of male sexuality here as a kind of financialised human capital in need of valorisation, however, works against the possibility that the essay escapes a focus on individual self-care. Indeed, as capital to be appreciated male sexuality (as well as in my following analysis of ‘Big Red Son’ and the stories in *Brief Interviews*) is the target of an economising logic in which responsabilisation plays the key role.

That this self-appreciation endorses a displaced form of sexual abstinence, moreover, suggests how ‘Back in New Fire’ ultimately reaffirms the non-reproductivity that it sets out to criticise, albeit, in the guise of responsible self-denial, rather than hedonistic excess. The essay acknowledges the negativity Edelman posits in non-procreative sex – in his words, ‘sex as the site of drives not predetermined by any fixed goal or end’ (‘Ever After’ 111) – but does not ventilate its death-driven implications. Edelman’s critique of fellow queer theorist Judith Halberstam is applicable here – Wallace ‘strikes the *pose* of negativity while evacuating its force’ (‘The Antisocial Thesis’ 822, italics in original), with ‘pose’ referring to how ‘Back in New Fire’s recommended sexual behaviours amount to abstinence in all but name.<sup>10</sup> As such, the essay manipulates this negativity to affirm what Wallace suggests is a positive ‘fixed goal

or end' – men's capacity for hoarding, in order to valorise, their sexual resources. That said, this is not the hoarding of external objects or of labour-power, both of which place the subject in a possessive relationship to that which they hoard. As Fehrer suggests, 'neoliberal subjects do not exactly own their human capital; they invest in it' (34). Consequently, 'while they can considerably alter their human capital — by means of either diversifying or modifying their behaviors and social interactions — they can never sell it' (34). Human capital is indivisible from the individual, who by modifying his behaviours – in this context, replacing casual sex with behaviours that prevent orgasm – can increase its value.

This indivisibility has important implications for how the responsabilisation 'Back in New Fire' endorses ultimately implies that male sexual hideousness is incontestable. Though this essay takes issue with 'guys [who] now applaud their own casual sport-fucking' (168), the fact that it reaffirms such non-reproductivity in oblique forms of abstinence suggests a reluctance to question what Wallace variously calls 'erotic will' (168), 'sexual passion' (169), and 'human will' (169). Put differently, the essay implies that men can modify what they do with their hideous desire for non-reproductive sex (i.e. by supplanting orgasm with emotional connection), but not their tendency to desire such non-reproductivity to begin with. Further, the behaviours that Wallace promotes – holding hands, communicating by the mail, and so on – position this controlled yet unchanged negativity as a basis for masculine gender identity. For to the extent that 'the dragon can help us relearn what it means to be truly sexual' (172), then Sir Knight's quest is still necessary. Yet, rather than an external obstacle that 'knightly friends' (168) must slay for their sexual pleasure, the dragon necessitates that men direct such labour towards increasing the value of their sexual resources. The tamed negativity that the essay holds up as worthwhile may change Sir Knight's purpose from sexual conquest to self-appreciation, but this change reaffirms rather than undermines ideas of masculinity based in self-assertion and implicit aggression – indeed, as knightly.

Pornification in ‘Back in New Fire’, and the danger of AIDS for heterosexuals that Wallace aligns with such, provides the occasion to reaffirm male gender identity on the basis of a tamed negativity. This dynamic, whereby Wallace’s texts appropriate the same negativity that they lament in order to stress its intransigency, will recur throughout my analysis of their hideous neoliberal spermatics. In ‘Back in New Fire’, the neoliberal logic in question – that of responsabilising men into investing in their sexuality as a form of financial human capital – replaces labour with a focus on self-appreciation. In fact, the essay appeals to a liberal idea of inalienable subjectivity and rentable labour power, wherein incommensurable notions of ‘erotic will’ (168), though deriving their meaning from the labour that Sir Knight deploys in the face of cultural impediments, will always persist outside and in excess of such. It does so, though, to ultimately propose a neoliberal remedy to the problems that Wallace sees arising from pornification’s ‘casual carnal copia’ (168). As I will now argue, a similar process is at work in how he depicts masturbation as a failure to exchange. Indeed, the following section adds more substance to what I have hitherto described only as ‘sexual resources’. Wallace’s depictions of masturbation are illustrative of the spermatic metaphors that, as I unpack them in this and subsequent chapters, underpin his writing of male sexuality.

### Masturbation and Exchange

Commenting in his essay ‘The Nature of the Fun’ on the challenges of writing fiction, Wallace suggests that writers need to move beyond the stage where ‘you’re just writing to get yourself off [...] – since any kind of masturbation is lonely and hollow’ (197). The offhand tone here, ‘since’ working with the clause’s hyphenated isolation from the larger sentence to convey a common fact, compounds the essay’s casual assurance that masturbation is harmful. Indeed, these remarks are indicative of Wallace’s hostility towards masturbation throughout his *oeuvre*. However, the suggestion here that ‘any kind’ of masturbation is bad elides how

his texts overwhelmingly consider male masturbation. In fact, only two instances of female masturbation appear in his output: Jeni Roberts' auto-eroticism in 'Adult World (II)' and the suspicion in *Infinite Jest* that Enfield Tennis Academy student Carol Spodek has retained 'the same single large-grip Donnay stick for going on five straight years' (636) because she uses it to masturbate. Lucas Thompson notes how 'autoeroticism, in Wallace's work [...] functions as a recurring trope, consistently linked to such negative states as loneliness, ennui, artistic self-indulgence, self-serving metafiction, political avarice, and – perhaps most importantly – solipsism' (80). Though I agree with Thompson's observations, he does not account for the importance of gender in these dynamics. He also deflects attention away from masturbation's negativity qua masturbation – namely, as a type of failed sexuality that, as I will now show, Wallace consistently associates with men in particular.

The most obvious example of this pessimistic estimation of male masturbation is *Infinite Jest*'s Organization of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N. – the North American super-state made up of the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. This acronym points to the Genesis story of Onan, who as Thomas W. Laqueur relates 'spilled his seed upon the ground rather than into the wife of his dead brother' (15), and was thus struck down by God. Associations between this tale and masturbation arise in particular from the anonymous 1712 pamphlet *Onania*. In Laqueur's description, as 'masturbation's primal text' (25) *Onania* outlined the 'dangers of the "abominable practice" of "self-pollution"' (25). Indeed, he explains how this pamphlet helped to perpetuate the idea that 'just as in the world of trade and commerce one must discipline one's use of scarce resources, so in the spermatic economy men need to save and to husband their precious bodily fluid' (195). As Mia, the protagonist of Siri Hustvedt's novel *The Summer Without Men* (2011) describes it, Onan's crime and the lessons that anti-masturbatory tracts continue to draw from it amount to a 'waste-not-want-not-for-children argument' (123). Nevertheless, Wallace's texts take this need to control men's sexuality as a

precious resource seriously. In ways that confirm Thompson's suggestion that his texts 'most importantly' (80) use masturbation to convey solipsism, Wallace depicts wasting one's sexual resources as a sign of men's failure to emotionally connect with others.

Greg Tuck's research on representations of masturbation and the money shot offers a useful inroad to understanding how this works. In his analysis of various media texts from around the millennium, Tuck argues that male masturbation inspires revulsion because it is not 'socially or emotionally productive. It is not just "not partnered sex", it is "anti partnered sex"' ('The Mainstreaming of Masturbation' 91). Though it can be said to support consumer capitalism's focus on individual gratification, the fact that masturbation signals 'a failure to exchange' (86) means that it has also, for Tuck, 'profoundly threatened the workings of the market. This is the paradox at the heart of masturbation that continues today' (86). Such failure to exchange only makes sense in a reproductively futurist imaginary, where *successful* exchange occurs when a woman receives the semen. This may be within reproductive acts or, as Tuck's analysis of films like *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and *Happiness* (1998) suggests, in the abject form of the money shot ('Mainstreaming the Money Shot'). Within this imaginary, what a man 'buys' from his female partner when his ejaculate lands either in or on her is the meaning of a masculinity that fulfils its 'natural' progenitive function. The masturbator's deviation from this framework affronts the exchange upon which such meaning rests. Consequently, recalling Wallace's complaints in 'Back in New Fire', heteronormative culture tends to represent male masturbation as hideously meaningless.

Tuck refers to a number of thinkers to illustrate this conception of male masturbatory hideousness, including Kant, Freud, and Lacan, but his most useful example for my purposes is the 2000 horror film *The Cell*, starring Jennifer Lopez. Highly indebted to *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *The Cell* concerns a serial killer who masturbates to films he has made of his victims drowning. For Tuck, what makes this serial killer 'truly obscene [...] is that he

consumes his own production and therefore does violence to the concept of market exchange as well as to his victim' (88). Orin's addiction to casual sex in *Infinite Jest* corresponds with this description, albeit, unlike Tuck, Wallace seems to suggest that even partnered sex can harbour such masturbatory negativity. In one scene the narrator describes Orin's sex with a mysterious model, and notes that he 'need[s] to be assured that for a moment he *has* her [...] that there is now inside her a vividness vacuumed of all but his name: O., *O*. That he is the One' (566, italics in original). The pleasure Orin takes from sex entails negating his partner of any agency so that he can make love to himself as 'the One', confirming Catherine Nichols' description of his addiction as an 'unregenerative form of masturbation' (10). Orin resembles here the serial killer of *The Cell*, reducing the other in Tuck's words to a 'masturbatory prop' (88). Though Orin may ejaculate on or in his partners, the implication is that he may as well be masturbating, for the meaning of these encounters amounts to '*O*' (566).

In fact, reading this italicised '*O*' as – to borrow a description from Wallace's story 'B.I. #20', in part about a serial killer – 'the Ur-void, the zero' (268), and thus signifying the absence of value, highlights a limitation to Tuck's approach. Besides eliding the possibility that, as Orin's trysts suggest, partnered sex can also facilitate masturbatory negativity, Tuck's analysis rests on an understanding of exchange that neoliberalism supersedes. In particular, human capital in Foucault's famous formulation transforms *homo economicus* from being a 'partner of exchange' (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 225) into being an 'entrepreneur of himself' (226). As Brown notes, though, one of the many permutations of neoliberalism that Foucault could not foresee was 'the way that financialization has altered the figure of human capital' (70). Hence, Feher's reading of this dynamic again proves to be more useful for my purposes. His argument that neoliberalism now encourages subjects to valorise their human capital through responsible self-investments is illustrative of how, as I argue shortly, Wallace's texts

imply that men must increase their sexual value from that masturbatory *O*. Orin's satyriasis does fail to validate a progenitive idea of masculinity – chiefly because it purchases a reproduction of himself as 'the One' that denies his female partners the agency required to act as recipients in a (heteronormatively conceived) sexual exchange. Yet, as with labour in 'Back in New Fire', Wallace's depictions of masturbation appeal to an ideal of exchange even as they responsabilise men into conducts that prioritise self-appreciation.

Pornification provides an important backdrop for these dynamics. To some extent Wallace links Orin's masturbatory use of sexual partners with pornography when his father, James, gets wind of the fact that he plans to watch an 'old hard-core X-film' (955). The terms in which James warns Orin about porn's deleterious effects – such as that it will create 'an impoverished, lonely idea of sexuality' (956) – echo Wallace's description of masturbation in 'The Nature of the Fun'. James asks Orin to wait until he has 'experienced for himself what a profound and really quite moving thing sex could be' (956) before he watches pornography. Though one should avoid interpreting James as merely a surrogate for Wallace, the former's wish echoes Wallace's yearning for meaningful sex in 'Back in New Fire'. Notably, James' hope that Orin will avoid pornography so that he can experience such meaningful sex '*for himself*' (956, italics added) frames his intervention as a concern for the value of his son's individual feelings – not those of his potential partners. Thus James, like Wallace, evokes the danger of a 'lonely idea of sexuality' (956) to – paradoxically – lament how porn devalues an individual experience of sex. Masturbation here remains implicit, despite Orin's admission that 'I did myself raw for years on end on that hill' (136). In his essay 'Big Red Son', though, Wallace makes these connections direct, along with his suggestions for conducts men can undertake to appreciate the value of their spermatic resources.

Hal's description of his brother Orin's attempt to watch "'adult' films, which from what I've seen are too downright sad to be truly nasty, or even really entertainment, though



the adjective “adult” is kind of a misnomer’ (955), in fact echoes the title *Premier* magazine published ‘Big Red Son’ under: ‘Neither Adult Nor Entertainment’. In its account of Wallace’s attendance of the 1997 Las Vegas Adult Video News awards and adult consumer expo, ‘Big Red Son’ expounds upon the industry’s venality in particular. Wallace advances this complaint alongside his description of Las Vegas as ‘an enormous machine of exchange – of spectacle for money, of sensation for money, of money for more money, of pleasure for whatever be tomorrow’s abstract cost’ (9). If Las Vegas is a ‘machine of exchange’ it is one in which such exchange is of and for groundless ephemera (‘spectacle’ and ‘sensation’) that are hermetically recursive (‘money for more money’) and which exalt immediate pleasures, despite ‘tomorrow’s abstract cost’ and in the service of hedonistic individualism – ‘an empire of Self’ (10). The implication is that a porn awards show and expo have their natural home in a city brimming with corrupted exchange. Indeed, if ‘for centuries you basically had to marry a person to get to see’ (16) their faces in orgasm, then porn cancels this exchange (whereby one ‘buys’ sexual insight with marriage). To use Wallace’s phrase in ‘Back in New Fire’, porn has so reduced the ‘price of choice’ (170) for men that they no longer need to fear that, in choosing to have sex, they have to exchange something of value.

Like ‘Back in New Fire’, ‘Big Red Son’ prioritises pornification’s effects on men. Observing that ‘feminists of all different stripes’ (18) have advanced ‘well-known and in some respects persuasive’ (18) critiques of pornography, Wallace suggests that ‘antiporn arguments in the 1990s are now centered on adult entertainment’s alleged effects on the men who consume it’ (18). As an example Wallace gives an excerpt from David Mura’s *A Male Grief: Notes on Pornography and Addiction* (1987), which, despite being ‘a bit New Agey’ (19), he implicitly endorses. Mura argues that men who are in ‘thrall of pornography try to eliminate from their consciousness the world outside pornography’ (quoted in ‘Big Red Son’ 19), affirming the masturbatory failure to exchange evident in Orin’s sex addiction. Wallace’s

recourse to a text that bears the hallmarks of self-help literature, moreover, points to how he responds to such failed exchange by promoting self-appreciation. In the face of how difficult it is to measure the self-appreciation that Feher theorises (though Brown offers the intriguing example of ‘social media “followers”’ [34]), he suggests that ‘it is arguably the psychological discourse of “self-esteem” [..., that] is the most accurate correlate of practices and policies that aim at maximizing the (self-) appreciation of human capital’ (28-29). Wallace’s relationship to what Feher describes as this ‘major cultural phenomenon’ (29n10) which ‘peaked in the 1980s and 1990s’ (29n10) is complex.<sup>11</sup> For my purposes, it is enough to say that the brief glimpse we receive in ‘Big Red Son’ of a remedy to masturbation’s failure to exchange focuses on increasing the value of one’s emotional wellbeing.

Specifically, in a footnote to his suggestion that one used to have to marry a person in order to see them during orgasm, Wallace relates the story of a Los Angeles police detective – ‘60, happily married, a grandpa, shy, polite, clearly a decent guy’ (16n14) – who watches porn for ‘those rare moments in orgasm or accidental tenderness when the starlets dropped their stylized “fuck-me-I’m-a-nasty-girl” sneer and became, suddenly, real people’ (16n14). From this story Wallace considers the possibility that ‘occasionally, in a hard-core scene, the hidden self appears’ (17n14), thus affording the kind of emotional connection with others that he postulates in ‘Back in New Fire’. Indeed, ‘it turned out that the LAPD detective found adult films *moving*’ (16n14, italics in original). This episode stands in stark contrast to the grotesquery that Wallace documents elsewhere in ‘Big Red Son’, most notably in the figure of porn producer Max Hardcore. Unlike these men, the detective uses porn to access forms of emotional reality unavailable in other mediums, particularly Hollywood film, where even ‘gifted actors [...] go about feigning genuine humanity’ (16n14). Porn therefore enriches the detective’s emotional life. In place of a masturbatory response and its failure to exchange, he increases the value of his experience of sex. Furthermore, that he does not expel any semen –

Wallace makes no reference to the man masturbating to these films – suggests that this boost in personal wellbeing is akin to appreciating his spermatic resources.

One can suggest, then, that Wallace presents the detective as displaying a more responsible approach to porn than those who masturbate to it. Indeed, this activity's affront to progenitive exchange gives way to the kind of emotional enrichment Wallace suggests that sex can provide, and without expending the detective's semen to boot. The irony of course is that such responsabilisation merely sublimates a masturbatory compulsion into a less explicit form of self-attention. As Nixon observes, 'not only does the purported detective control the interpretation of this moment of "humanness", he is not required to communicate with it in any way [...] Wallace's argument is therefore self-cancelling' ('The Work of David Foster Wallace' 219). In other words, whatever 'human' communion this approach to porn may facilitate, it remains one-sided. Rather than conclude that this self-cancellation signals how Wallace is caught in a contradiction, however, it is more useful to ask what it achieves. For to the extent that the detective's (and his profession here is telling) search for 'erotic joy' (17n14) in porn forecloses orgasm, then it is comparable to Wallace's proposed sexual conducts at the end of 'Back in New Fire'. The dynamics here are reversed – the detective engages with porn, he does not withdraw from it – but the effect is the same. Specifically, Wallace responds to the problem of men wasting their spermatic resources by highlighting the desirability of a displaced form of sexual abstinence.

This displaced abstinence similarly transmutes a direct form of sexual negativity, namely masturbation, into the indirect non-productivity of swapping one's own orgasm for the sight of other people's. A more dramatic instance of such transmutation, and one that suggests how Wallace preserves such negativity to reaffirm male gender identity, is apparent in his choice of dedicatees for 'Big Red Son'. These are 'testosteronically afflicted males' (3) who are castrating themselves because 'their sexual urges had become a source of intolerable

conflict' (3) in a pornified culture that promises 'perfect, whenever-you-want-it release' (3). To these 'tormented souls' (3) Wallace proposes an alternative: undergoing the '1.4 years of nonstop continuous porn-viewing' (5) the AVN Awards judges have, at least purportedly, put in to assess the year's entries. As a result, they 'will never thereafter want to see, hear, engage in, or even think about human sexuality ever again' (5). Wallace's tone here is comic, but this suggested course of action nonetheless accords with the self-cancelling logic Nixon observes in the detective. For to fry one's 'glandular circuitboard' (5) through sustained porn viewing is not an alternative to castration but a means to achieve it through other means. Watching so much porn will not allow these men to escape their sexual negativity, but it will allow them to responsibly control it in ways that, as in 'Back in New Fire' (but lacking that essay's sense of optimism), affirms male sexuality's seemingly intransigent negativity.

The fact that 'Back in New Fire' and 'Big Red Son' supplant labour and exchange with an emphasis on value appreciation, but only to, in turn, reaffirm a negativity that should by definition lack value, is not a contradiction. In fact, the former can be said to run alongside the latter. For the negativity in question here provides an affirmation that Edelman's theories deny; in his words, negativity 'can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value' (*No Future* 6) (with 'positive' here understood as any cognizable or determinate end, rather than an ethical good). Both essays mobilise and indeed tame such negativity in order to affirm heterosexual masculinity as an identity defined by its propensity for non-reproductive desires. That such negativity is tamed, moreover, makes it amenable to the self-management that responsabilisation calls forth. In this regard, though 'Back in New Fire' and 'Big Red Son' display a manifest desire for men to responsibly invest in valorising their sexual resources, both essays also exhibit a latent desire for men to responsibly control their sexual negativity as, itself, what makes them men. Pornification is the motivating cause for these dynamics in both 'Back in New Fire' and 'Big Red Son', but these essays are not

the only places in Wallace's *oeuvre* where pornification, responsabilisation, and financialised human capital intermingle. The next section considers selected stories from *Brief Interviews* to show how the presence of these same elements there – though consistent with my above analysis – are also inflected by a suspicion of female sexual agency.

### The Difference Gender Makes

Wallace's predominate focus on men in 'Big Red Son' means that considerations of female sexuality in relation to pornography fall by the wayside. Indeed, Nixon argues that the various degradations that Wallace outlines here 'are perpetrated against women, and yet the essay's condemnation never appears to consider a woman's perspective at all. It devalues a female perspective almost as much as do the pornographers Wallace describes' ('The Work of David Foster Wallace' 219). This seeming disregard for women's experiences of pornography is more explicit in 'Back in New Fire'. In addition to the Victoria Secret clad temptress who frustrates Sir Knight's ability to labour towards his desire, Wallace ignores how the impediments that once made sex a 'deadly serious business' (170) – such as 'illegitimate birth; chaperonage; madonna/whore complexes [...] back-alley abortions' (169) – were disproportionately deadly to women. On a generous reading, this blindness to female experience confirms Wallace's generally androcentric focus; on a less generous reading, it confirms his texts' at times unreflective misogyny. The reasons for this phobic masculinism are arguably less interesting than the effects it produces.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, the rest of this chapter explores how Wallace's penalisation of female sexuality critiques the neoliberal logics I have examined above. His texts formulate this critique to imply that, if financial self-appreciation is objectionable when carried out by women, it is appropriate for men.

These dynamics are evident in the critically understudied story 'Think'. This story dramatizes 'Back in New Fire', to the extent of transposing that essay's Sir Knight and Fair

Maiden into a suburban setting. Just under two pages in length, 'Think' recounts the crisis-moment when a father and family man faces seduction by 'the younger sister of his wife's college roommate' (61) who has allowed her breasts to 'come free' (61). If the Fair Maiden of 'Back in New Fire' wears a Victoria's Secret Teddy, this woman's 'expression is from page 18 of the Victoria Secret's catalogue' (61). Indeed, her 'knowing, smoky smile, Page 18' (61) is 'media-taught' (61), and 'he realizes she's replaying a scene from some movie she loves' (61). This woman embodies the pornified culture that 'Back in New Fire' suggests has devalued male sexuality. Notably, the story's free indirect discourse implies that this man is already compromised by the pornification his seductress represents. The sentence 'even if she's never kept her heels on before she'd give him a knowing, smoky smile, Page 18' (61), in its suggestion of that man's own observation on events, signals his familiarity – down to the page number – with the same Victoria Secret's expression she has adopted. The challenge facing the male protagonist is not only to stop and 'think' about the dangers of an affair, and so to resist the woman's advances, but also to resist the pornified fantasies – such as asking her to keep her heels on – that are already at play in his mind.

Despite the suggestion that both characters are complicit in pornification, it is the woman who personifies its injunction to meaningless pleasures. Again blurring distinctions between third person narrator and the man's own perspective, the story relates that 'she could try, just for a moment, to imagine what is happening in his head [...] Even for an instance, to try putting herself in his place' (62). Wallace frames her failure to empathise with the man through images that highlight temporal foreclosure; not for a moment can she consider how she is endangering his loyalty to his wife and son. The recriminatory tone here emphasizes the man's contrasting acts of imaginative empathy. For instance, 'he knows what she might think'; 'he imagines'; 'she is, he thinks'; 'he realizes she's replaying a scene' (61). Whereas she acts impulsively, the man is actively empathizing with her to try and resist the temptation

to have an affair. That Wallace genders this scenario on so conventionally patriarchal terms – femininity as unthinking sensuality, masculinity as cognitive labour – speaks to the sexist traditionalism evident in this story. In addition to this, though, the man's attempt to empathise with this woman belies how his response to this situation – falling to his knees and beginning to pray – encourages a form of individual responsabilisation in which he is able to conserve, and therefore appreciate, the value of his spermatic resources.

The story's last sentence, 'and what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way' (62) resembles the end of 'Back in New Fire' in what Greg Carlisle describes as Wallace's 'undefined-climax technique' (17). This puts 'the work of completing or making decisions about the narrative on each individual reader' (17). One would be hard pressed to find a better description of responsabilisation or, coincidentally, a better metaphorical designation for a frustrated orgasm. The man's praying shields against the chance of non-reproductive sexual expenditure but, in accordance with my previous examples, it also works to sublimate this negativity into a situation where nobody comes, which Wallace's undefined climax asks the reader to condone. More pertinent to my present analysis, though, is how this situation positions the woman. As the dupe of pornified texts, she embodies how such texts urge people to treat sex (confirming Gilbert's complaint) as a consumptive instead of a relational activity. Furthermore, when 'Think' spotlights her breasts as having been '*freed*' (61, italics in original), entailed in the suggestion of her lust is a *free-market* ethos of gratification through consumption. Obliquely, her sexual agency follows patterns that neoliberal logics set out for her. When one considers 'Think' in relation to the 'Adult World' stories, Wallace's association of female sexual agency and neoliberal logic is even more apparent. In these stories he explicitly links female (and indeed feminist) sexual agency with human capitalisation, financialised and otherwise.

The diptych recounts the efforts of a woman, Jeni Roberts, to discover what is wrong ‘with her technique in making love’ (137) that leaves her husband so distant. By story II, she discovers that he is a ‘Secret Compulsive Masturbator’ (156), addicted to porn films he buys from the eponymous Adult World store. Wallace’s depiction of Jeni in stories I and II differs in terms of the human capital she exemplifies. In the former Jeni, unaware that her husband is addicted to masturbation, tries to improve ‘their sexlife [*sic*] together’ (138) by working on ‘her ability’ (138) as a lover. Accordingly, she gathers ‘her nerve together’ (139) to buy ‘a Dildo [...] to practice her oral sex technique on’ (139). Jeni engages in sexual consumption, then, to optimise her sexual skillset, with the aim of securing validation from her husband. Indeed, her insecurities arise from her failure to solicit such psychic ‘income’, to the extent that, in a nightmare, her husband lights her cigarette but ‘refused to give it to her, holding it away from her while it burned itself all the way down’ (145). Becker’s idea of human capital, where one self-invests to maximise future returns, applies here. It is worth reiterating that, for Becker, such returns do not necessarily involve money. For instance, he asserts that schooling is an investment in human capital not only because it may ‘raise earnings’ (15), but because it can ‘add to a person’s appreciation of literature over much of his or her lifetime’ (15-16). By approaching her sexuality as human capital, Jeni invests in her utility as a lover in order to maximise the psychic income she can receive from her husband.

Jeni fails in this endeavour, and by ‘Adult World (II)’ realises that he ‘has “interior deficits” that ...ha[ve] nothing to do with her as a wife[/woman]’ (159). As a result of this new awareness, she relinquishes Becker’s idea of human capital in favour of the financialised model that Feher theorises. In addition to quitting smoking, considering psychotherapy, and embracing ‘masturbation as a wellspring of personal pleasure’ (160), ‘Jeni Ann Orzoleck of Marketing 204’ (155) even ‘establishes [a] separate investment portfolio w/substantial and positions in gold futures & large-cap mining stock’ (159). These combined financial activities



and self-esteem boosting exercises demonstrate how Jeni embodies the financialised human capital that Wallace urges men to adopt in ‘Back in New Fire’ and ‘Big Red Son’, whereby self-appreciation becomes more important than securing future returns. However, unlike in those essays, ‘Adult World (II)’ presents these responsibilised behaviours – which lead Jeni to the conviction that ‘true wellsprings of love, security, gratification must originate within self’ (159) – as objectionable. The story prompts us to see Jeni’s ‘authentic responsibility for self’ (160) as working in lockstep with pornification. Central here, Wallace suggests, is how feminist ideas of sexual empowerment function as a smokescreen for perpetuating pornified consumerism, so that by the diptych’s end Jeni, in contrast to her past unease, has ‘revisited Adult World svrl [sic] times; becomes almost a rglr [sic]’ (160).

In addition to her worry in ‘Adult World (I)’ that her husband prefers ‘the familiar Missionary Position of male dominance’ (148), in ‘Adult World (II)’ we learn that, weeping for him, Jeni ‘notes this & speculates on significance of “weeping for” [= ‘on behalf of’?] men’ (158). Wallace thus aligns Jeni’s developing awareness of patriarchal expectations with her attempt to valorise her sexuality (and her life generally) as financialised human capital – the word ‘speculates’, in this light, is telling. That the story ends with Jeni ‘mastrbating [sic] almost daily’ (160), and with appliances that she has bought from Adult World, furthers this comingling of financialisation and feminist discourse. Tuck observes how, particularly in the wake of texts such as Nancy Friday’s *My Secret Garden: Women’s Sexual Fantasies* (1973) and Betty Dodson’s *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Selflove* (1974), second-wave feminist thought has often championed masturbation ‘as a political act, evidence of women’s sexual liberation’ (‘The Mainstreaming of Masturbation’ 84). Jeni’s final vibrator of choice – the ‘Scarlet Garden’ (160) – indeed contains an echo of the title of Friday’s book. The irony then that Jeni’s ‘new hi-tech mastrbtory [sic] appliances are [...] manufactured in Asia’ (160) is that a major part of her newfound sexual autonomy derives, circuitously, from the

influence of her husband – a man whose job involves checking ‘on the status of the yen’ (139), as well the ‘riyal, the dirham, the Burmese kyat’ (141), and so forth.

Wallace thus implicitly indicts sex-positive feminist ideas in these stories for pushing Jeni further into the grasp of financialised logics. One could read this indictment as serving its own feminist ends, by showing how an arguably superficial focus on self-empowerment via sexual pleasure reaffirms a consumerist ethos. In fact, Wallace hints at such a reading in how these stories play upon ‘Yen’ and ‘Jeni’ as near homonyms. That Jeni buys her husband a license plate which reads ‘YEN4U’ (149) signals this link, which becomes clearer when we learn that her full married name is ‘Jeni Roberts’ (151). Breaking this name down into Jen i Rob, one can suggest that, insofar as Wallace is equating ‘Yen’ with ‘Jen’, her name suggests ‘Yen I Rob’ (or even ‘Yen I Robbers’, or ‘Y/Jen I Rob Hers’). This signals how the husband figuratively ‘robs’ other currencies, in what Richard Godden and Micahel Szalay observe as the U.S.’s requisitioning ‘of monies from the world’s credit nations, in support of its deficit’ (1293) after President Richard Nixon’s 1971 decision to end the gold standard. Yet, it also points to how he robs Jeni’s own ‘I’: explicitly in ‘Adult World (I)’, where his ‘inner deficits’ (157) become her life’s concern, and implicitly in ‘Adult World (II)’, where his financial activities facilitate her use of vibrators manufactured in Asia. To some extent, therefore, Wallace’s penalisation of Jeni’s sexual empowerment implies that what appear to be feminist acts of self-actualisation actually imbricate her further into being controlled by men.

One could conclude that Wallace here joins commentators such as Johanna Oksala (2013), Nancy Fraser (2013), and Catherine Rottenberg (2017) in exploring the challenges that neoliberalism poses to feminist thought. Indeed, Jeni exemplifies what Rottenberg dubs neoliberal feminism, whereby women are urged to ‘build their own portfolios and to self-invest [...] as human capital’ (323). To stop there, however, would be to miss the double standard that is still in operation in these stories. While Jeni’s responsabilisation is something

to object to, Wallace implies that the husband would benefit from such ‘adult’ self-control. Jeni’s change from ‘utter child’ (144) to self-managing adult is ironic because her ‘authentic responsibility for herself’ (160) renders her complicit in a falsely empowering consumerism. By contrast, her husband’s failure to demonstrate the ‘adult’ resolve to break his addiction implies that responsabilisation for him is desirable. After all, it is his ‘trips to Adult World to purchase/view/masturbate self raw to XXX films’ (156) that create the problems Jeni tries to remedy in the first place. References to the husband’s infantilism, as in how he ‘looked [...] like a child on his side sleeping’ (143), compounds how his addiction to masturbation shows a lack of self-management. Indeed, Jeni suspects that he is masturbating ‘into the toilet’ (145) and ‘trash basket’ (146), thus quite literally wasting his spermatic resources.

Severs suggests that ‘in a traditional version of “Adult World,” the story might resolve itself by forcing the husband’s yens back from masturbation and market contingencies to more stable husbanding’ (*Balancing Books* 155). For Severs the fact that this diptych resists such resolution is indicative of Wallace’s desire to explore the ‘Asian Flu’ currency crisis of 1997. This reading is compelling, but a simpler answer as to why the husband does not responsabilise himself is that these stories are attached to the negativity his masturbation represents. Significantly, the Secret Compulsive Masturbator remains outside both the narrator’s and the reader’s purview; in this regard his addiction remains, at least notionally, a Secret. We only learn the facts of his autoeroticism through Jeni, whose perspective Wallace mediates through multiple layers of third person narration. Indeed, her sexual experiences move from demure euphemism (as in remarks such as ‘the head of his thingie’ [137]), to the bathetically pornified (as when she buys the ‘Scarlet Garden MX-1000® Vibrator with Clitoral Suction and Fully Electrified 12 Inch Cervical Stimulator’ [160]). The sexual consumerism Jeni comes to embody is another facet of a culture that, as Adam Kelly notes, Wallace depicts as ‘radically over-exposed, with many secrets appearing

in open view' ('The New Sincerity' 138). In contrast, the husband's inaccessibility – at least in how both stories refuse to broach his subjectivity – is an exception to such pornified overexposure, suggesting a negativity that cannot be represented.

However, consistent with how Wallace evokes such non-reproductive negativity only to tame it, 'Adult World (II)' ends with a gesture to reproductive futurism as a corrupted but worthwhile ideal. Wallace closes the story on the ironic note that Jeni and her husband 'were now truly married, cleaved,\*\* one flesh [...] [and] were ready thus to begin [...] to discuss having children [together]' (161, asterisks and brackets in the original). The sardonic humour of bracketing 'together' as an afterthought to having children here works on the notion that heteronormative marriage defines the natural parameters in which child-rearing takes place, a seemingly obvious supposition that Jeni and her husband's masturbation devalues. In David Coughlan's reading, the end of 'Adult World (II)' shows how for Wallace 'masturbation and pornography [...] have become the dangerous supplements to sexual intercourse, which both displaces and yet also enables what might be termed the natural meaning of sex: procreation' (168). The idea that sex's natural meaning is procreation says more about how the 'Adult World' stories elicit this traditionalist conclusion, than it does about Coughlan's narrow-mindedness in this regard. As he puts it, if in these stories 'no person is fully present to the other, in sex or in love' (168), then Wallace's parting joke at Jeni and her husband having a child presents this disconnection as being indicative of the failure of reproductively futurist ideals. Rather than mobilising the husband's – and Jeni's – masturbatory negativity as a means to question such ideals, Wallace uses it to backlight the couple's lack of communion.

Moreover, although both Jeni and her husband embody a masturbatory negativity by the story's end, they do not do so on equal terms. For instance, by the '7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> yr [*sic*]' (161) of their marriage the 'Hsbnd mastrbtes [*sic*] secretly, J.O.R. openly' (161). Jeni's openness aligns with a pornified culture's sexual overexposure – that her 'new dresser/vanity ensemble

contains no sachet drawer' (160), which was where she once hid her sex aids (140), indeed compounds her lack of shame. While Wallace uses Jeni's transformation from neurotic lover to brazen masturbator to signal how she has let go of her desire for the 'revelational pleasure of coming together as close as two married bodies could come' (138), the husband begins and ends these stories as a Secret Compulsive Masturbator. Hence, whereas Jeni's masturbatory negativity evokes deterioration in the kind of sexual-emotional connection Wallace's texts pine for, the husband's non-reproductivity figures as an unchanging constant. As in 'Back in New Fire' and 'Big Red Son', then, the implication is that though he is in need of investing his spermatic resources more responsibly, the husband propensity for such non-reproductivity is beyond reform. Furthermore, the monikers of the dildos and vibrators that Jeni uses before she settles on the Scarlet Garden – 'Penetrator!!' (160) and 'Pink Pistollero' (160) – evoke a militarism that in turn suggests her masturbatory empowerment involves masculinisation. Hence, if Jeni's actions speak to the hideous non-reproductivity that, as I have been arguing, Wallace links with male sexuality in particular, Jeni can only buy substitutes for such rather than, like her husband, exemplify it by virtue of her gender.

'Adult World (I)' and 'Adult World (II)', and to a lesser extent 'Think', convey how Wallace's suggestion that men need to invest in the value of their spermatic resources works at the expense of women who carry out similar processes. In the 'Adult World' stories in particular, Wallace implies that the husband should manage himself like a better 'adult' while implying that Jeni's self-management is something to critique. This is despite how, in the husband's job monitoring currency markets, Wallace aligns finance with non-reproductive sexuality, and as a central plank of what Severs notes as the story's interest in exploring how 'global capital [...] is the warping force flowing through these characters' (*Balancing Books* 154). More than any of the texts I have looked at so far, the 'Adult World' stories show how male sexuality is a conceptual snag in what is, at times, Wallace's evident desire to write

against neoliberalism. It is a snag because his texts' response to pornification subscribes to the neoliberal logic of responsabilisation, whether that be to encourage men to appreciate their sexuality as financialised human capital or, more obliquely, to cultivate their propensity for non-reproductive desires as central to masculinity. Jeni's sexuality – and as will become apparent, female sexuality throughout Wallace's texts – works as a foil for the hideous neoliberal spermatiks whose implementation I unpack.

### Conclusion

Wallace casts a critical eye on financialisation at various points throughout his texts. This criticism at times takes the form of incidental metaphors; for example, in *Infinite Jest* the sociopathic Randy Lenz, reflecting on his dislike for those who only pretend to listen to him talk, 'has a keen antenna for people like this and their stock is low on his personal exchange' (547). Elsewhere, Wallace refers to the anxiety among students at Enfield Tennis Academy of 'how the coaches are seeing you, gauging your progress – is your stock going up or down' (686). In both of these instances Wallace uses financial images to signify decidedly negative emotional states. His criticism of finance can also take more sustained narrative form, as in the 'Adult World' stories, but also in the uncollected story 'Crash of '69' (1989). This story focuses on a man who, as Severs explains, 'is "always wrong" in predicting successful stocks – and thus supremely valuable to financial firms, who do the exact opposite' (*Balancing Books* 66). Indeed, Severs goes on to suggest that "'Crash" initiates Wallace's contention that financial value and the irrational – if not the psychotic – are aligned' (66). Considering this in relation to *The Pale King*, which as Godden and Szalay have shown interrogates the influence of financialisation on U.S. society ('The Bodies in the Bubble'), it seems undeniable that Wallace's texts consistently envisage finance as a malign force.

My goal has not been to invalidate this reading. More can indeed be done to explore how, as Severs, Godden and Szalay argue, Wallace follows in the footsteps of his postmodern compatriots William Gaddis and Don DeLillo in critiquing finance. However, I have argued in this chapter that a financial logic of value appreciation not only drives Wallace's depiction of male sexuality in relation to pornification, but ties these depictions to a broader neoliberal focus on individual responsibility. Moreover, I have suggested that this is not an oversight on the part of Wallace's texts – i.e. these are not logics they either exhibit or recapitulate despite their otherwise best intentions – but a sign of how they enthusiastically endorse the neoliberal concern with responsibilised human capital. Starting with close readings of the essays 'Back in New Fire' and 'Big Red Son', I argued that Wallace responds to the perceived threat posed by pornification by supplanting ideas of male sexuality based on labour and exchange with an emphasis on financial self-appreciation. Spermatic metaphors of conservation and investment here were important, particularly with regards to masturbation as a form of waste. Ending with an extended reading of the short stories 'Think' and 'Adult World (I)' and 'Adult World (II)', I argued that these stories show the difference that gender makes to these dynamics. If women's responsibilised sexual self-appreciation is objectionable, in other words, the same process is either admirable or sorely needed when it comes to men.

Furthermore, if men follow Wallace's call to responsibly manage their sexual hideousness, and in doing so, increase the value of their spermatic resources as a form of financialised human capital, the hideousness in question remains unchallenged. In fact, it becomes the basis upon which Wallace's texts can evoke the seemingly inevitable fact that, when it comes to a desire for non-reproductive activities like casual sex, masturbation, and porn consumption, men will be men. Of course, this process implies that there is something objectionable about those three aforementioned activities, and as such, it points to the heteronormative assumption that sexual non-reproductivity is a problem. I have been less

interested in the content of this assumption – namely, Wallace’s sexual traditionalism – than in how it motivates what I am describing as his texts’ hideous neoliberal spermatics. This is the process whereby his texts turn a culturally contingent understanding of male sexuality (‘men are driven to engage in wasteful sexual behaviours’) into the expression and proof of natural gender characteristics (‘men are driven to engage in wasteful sexual behaviours *because they are men*’). Indeed, the call to responsabilisation I have analysed throughout this chapter works to retroactively construct the seemingly natural fact that men can only hope to channel their sexual negativity more productively, rather than try to change it.

Crucially, that fact that it is *their* sexual negativity in consideration here points to how, as I have stated throughout, Wallace’s texts invoke such negativity only to tame it. In other words, while for Edelman ‘the death drive dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves’ (*No Future* 17), the texts that I have examined invert this process, manipulating negativity to affirm male gender identity. This taming, as I will demonstrate in my next chapter, has an economic correlate in Wallace’s texts in the financial process of securitisation. As I explain in detail shortly, this process refers to making a risky asset saleable by combining it with a more secure one. Explicating securitisation in this manner, I argue that his texts not only envisage sexual negativity differently when it comes to gender (as I argued in relation to ‘Think’ and the ‘Adult World’ stories), but also in relation to sexual orientation. So far in my thesis I have presumed that the masculinities under analysis are heterosexually geared. It is time to complicate this presumption, if only because Wallace’s *oeuvre* shows a fascinating preoccupation with homosexuality. As usefully negative as male heterosexuality is, male homosexuality for Wallace – particularly as he articulates it in relation to anal intercourse – offers a more abject ore to mine.



## Chapter 2

### Risk: Securitising Male Homosexuality

Early on in his account of accompanying Wallace on the 1996 book tour for *Infinite Jest*, David Lipsky notes how ‘everywhere we’ve gone, restaurants, 7-Elevens, if someone asks, “You two together?” David has said, “Yes, but not on a date”’ (44). When Lipsky asks whether this response is indicative of the Midwest being ‘*more homophobic*’ (44, italics in original), Wallace answers that ‘it comes off as a joke, but it also communicates that, like – I don’t know, I’ve got a fair number of gay friends here. Who’ve had some terrible stuff happen to them, and have just...’ (45). Wallace manipulates a mild homophobia here to signal his distance from prejudice while, at the same time, facilitating his and Lipsky’s progress through public space as heterosexuals. This self-aware deployment of anti-gay sentiment, and to serve a bond between heterosexual men, speaks to how male homosexuality works in his fiction. Though homosexuality is an intermittent focus of attention throughout his output – figuring prominently in the short story ‘Lyndon’, but reduced to the briefest of mentions in *The Pale King* (446) – it is an important factor in Wallace’s abiding concern with emotional intimacy. Indeed, in what is still the only consideration of his texts from a queer perspective, Haddad reads male homoeroticism as the incipient and unintentional by-product of Wallace’s focus on author-reader connection (‘Conjuring David Foster Wallace’s Ghost’). This reading is compelling, but my analysis is less speculative. I argue that Wallace’s texts present male homosexuality as a type of risk that, once managed and invested in, can allow for desexualised, emotional intimacies between heterosexual men.

Despite this self-aware manipulation, when Wallace writes about male homosexuality he often does so in ways that play upon men’s ignorance of such, whether in relation to others or to themselves. In this respect his texts manipulate what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes

as ‘the relations of the closet – the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition’ (3). For Sedgwick male homosexuality since the end of the nineteenth century has had an ‘indicative relation [...] to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public’ (70). The historical context of Sedgwick’s theorisations of the closet and Wallace’s presentation of it are significant. In the 2007 preface to her 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she first explored many of her central ideas concerning knowledge, secrecy, and sexuality, Sedgwick relates how the 1980s was a decade when ‘something called “sodomy” was illegal in half the United States’ (xiii), and a time when the emergence of AIDS allowed for a ‘fusion of homophobic stigma with deadly medical mystery’ (xv). These conditions ‘imprinted a characteristic stamp on much of the theory and activism of that time’ (xv), her own included. Wallace’s texts also display this imprint in their depictions of homosexuality, anal sex, and HIV/AIDS. ‘Back in New Fire’, for one, is a provocative document of its time, showing the (oblique) homophobia in the face of the medical crisis that Sedgwick evokes in her preface.

However, although texts like *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair* appeared in a period when queer theory was flowering, it would be overstating things to suggest that Wallace was a queer writer. Haddad stops short in this regard, noting that despite Wallace’s ‘intimate relational mode, I do not intend to read Wallace as an affirmative “queer” figure, nor his fiction as constructing queer relational modes’ (25). Wallace’s texts lack the anti-identitarian edge one would normally associate with queer. For James Penney, ‘the most paradigmatic gesture of queer theory since its inception has been to insist that gender and/or sexuality subverts claims to identity’ (9). This gesture runs counter to Wallace’s suggestions that sexual hideousness is an irrefutable fact of masculinity. Further to this, his depictions of homosexuality also work to reaffirm ideas of psychological interiority, whether in the form of specific references to Freudian psychoanalysis, or in the broader notion that men harbour

unknown emotional depths. Indeed, Wallace's texts appropriate male homosexual risk in order to facilitate intimacies between straight men who, in the process of coming into contact with same-sex desire, are shown to contain mysterious interiorities. In effect, homosexuality allows for insights into 'what goes on inside' ('Good Old Neon' 151) heterosexuals.

For this process to function without compromising the heterosexuality of those involved, a notional distinction between such men and the same-sex desires they appropriate must remain in place. The closet's importance to Wallace's depictions of homosexuality, in this regard, lies in how it controls the risk of openly acknowledging same-sex desire while simultaneously teasing such. Indeed, it is the apparent danger of homosexuality that, though bracketed in the process of being appropriated, imbues the heterosexual male intimacies that Wallace's texts explore with their sense of urgency. Given this, Wallace's representations of male homosexuality can be seen as attempts to securitise a risky asset. As Matthew Eagleton-Pierce explains, 'securitization is a form of financial engineering whereby credit-risky assets are packaged with higher-quality assets in order to enable the sale of the former to a wider market' (73). Wallace's texts combine the perceived risk of same-sex desire with the higher-quality asset of heterosexuality to form a psychologised understanding of the closet. As a security, this closet enables homosexuality to enter the empathic exchanges that his texts evoke between men in ways that, though they may query heterosexuality, do not threaten to undermine it. If, as Max Haiven observes, 'securitization relies upon an underlying logic of risk management' (75), then intimations of homosexuality provide a valuable amount of risk for Wallace's depictions of male-male intimacy to manage.

Securitisation has entered public consciousness in recent years as a result of the 2007-09 subprime mortgage crisis. In the events leading up to this crisis, and the global recession that it helped spark, investment banks like Goldman Sachs and Lehman Brothers securitized disparate home mortgage loans – large proportions of which were high risk, but fraudulently

rated (closeted, even) as low risk – into Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDOs). When the underlying assets in these CDOs turned bad, a general loss of confidence in their value soon followed. Given that Wallace died on the eve of the crisis, his texts do not reflect its specific dynamics. However, as Randy Martin notes, these processes of financial securitisation have been at work in the U.S. since the 1980s, and are important to the rise of particular neoliberal logics during this period and since. Notably, securitisation has been instrumental to shifts in attitudes towards risk in U.S. culture. In Martin's words,

what began as the financial service industry's embrace of risk-management tools [...] has been refigured as a subjectivity of consumer finance that infuses domesticity with risk. The space of security is now that of securitization. Risk is not unilateral but operates a kind of moral binary, sorting out the good from the bad on the basis of capacities to contribute [...] Those who cannot manage themselves, those unable to live by risk, are considered "at risk." The epidemic that began with the 1980s, AIDS, is defined by moralizers as caused by "high-risk" behavior [...] (*An Empire* 37).<sup>13</sup>

For Martin securitisation has been central to the dissemination of risk-management activities in everyday life. His example of the AIDS epidemic is particularly relevant for my purposes. As I argued in Chapter 1, 'Back in New Fire' presents the threat of heterosexual AIDS as a much needed motivation for men to manage their sexual desires more responsibly. The essay thus positions AIDS as a risk that, when appropriately securitised, can serve the interests of heterosexual men. Whereas 'Back in New Fire' does not address male homosexuality, in this chapter I show how Wallace's explicit references to such follow a securitising logic.

The effect of this logic is to legitimise risk, so that, in Van der Swan's words, 'the possibility that something might happen is not to be feared, but to be embraced: financial

theory dictates that it is only through risk-taking that the individual can achieve the type of investment return necessary to sustain himself' (112). My present investigation indeed shares the last chapter's concern with financial processes. However, whereas my focus there was on value appreciation, here it is on forms of return. In other words, Wallace's texts securitise male homosexual risk so that heterosexual men can secure better emotional income. I thus share Brown's trepidation in following Feher's arguments to the letter. For, as she puts it, he 'appears to argue that the shift [from productive capital to finance capital] is thoroughgoing and complete. I am suggesting that both modalities are present today, that human capital on the entrepreneurial model is not dead and may cohabit in the same person with human capital on the investment model' (231n36). Furthermore, this emphasis on returns – and thus on futurity – reiterates how Wallace engages with sexual negativity in order to tame it towards the ends that Edelman tries to challenge. For him, homosexuality has a privileged association with the death drive, and is a 'future negating' (*No Future* 26) force whose 'risk informs the cultural fantasy that conjures homosexuality [...] in intimate relation to a fatal, and even murderous, *jouissance*' (39, italics in original). This is the case with Wallace's depictions of male homosexuality, but, in securitising such negativity for the purpose of creating emotional intimacies between men, his texts further a reproductively futurist ethos.

Moreover, one of the key spermatic metaphors in my last chapter – that of the waste that arises from casual sex and masturbation – here undergoes a slight modulation. For risk in the contexts that I am working in has seminal as well financial connotations. Lisa Jean Moore observes that, in a culture where 'warnings about HIV/AIDS and STDS are plastered on bus stops, broadcast through public service announcements on radio and television' (83), and so on, 'semen is directly associated with risk' (83). Though this association is largely implicit in the texts I examine, it is nevertheless pertinent. Indeed, if the self-appreciating dynamics I considered in Chapter 1 led to the paradoxical situation whereby responsible self-investment

preserved forms of wasteful negativity, a similar process is at work here, albeit in ways that are less apparently contradictory. In other words, by suggesting that securitising homosexual risk allows men to reap greater emotional returns, Wallace leaves unquestioned the equation of male homosexuality with abjection and danger. The success of the securitising processes I examine, in fact, reaffirms the apparent incontestability of this equation. In what follows I explore these dynamics in *The Broom of the System*, *Girl with Curious Hair*, and *Infinite Jest*. Although there are important differences in how each text securitises male homosexuality, in doing so all three position it as being useful to the extent that it is risky.

### Entering the Flange in *The Broom of the System*

*Broom*'s plot concerns Lenore Beadsman, a woman having an existential crisis over the possibility that she may not exist outside of discourse. She fears 'that there's nothing going on with me that isn't either told or tellable' (119). Not least of her problems are the novel's two central male characters, her boyfriend Rick Vigorous, and the man who eventually woos her, Andrew 'Wang Dang' Lang. Both attempt to control Lenore, leading Marshall Boswell to conclude that *Broom* displays a 'large-scale feminist critique of literary misogyny writ large' (*Understanding* 41). Though I agree that male chauvinism is the target for much of the novel's satire, *Broom* still affords Rick and Lang considerable moments of psychological depth. In addition to being a counterpoint to Lenore's sense of ontological instability, the depth Wallace gives these two men is also of a distinctly psychoanalytical kind. For instance, towards the novel's end, as Lang and Lenore lie next to each other semi-naked, the former confides that "'without a thing there, believe me, you're nothing," Lang said. His finger was in the hot part of her legs again' (410). Lang is referring to the 'good old boy' (410) persona he has now dropped for Lenore, a persona he developed in high school because there, 'you more or less got to have a thing' (410). The fact that he is pointing at Lenore's vagina implies

that ‘thing’ also means penis. Lang here unconsciously registers his subjection to the law of castration, suggesting that his chauvinistic ‘Wang-Dang’ persona is a means by which he can disavow castration anxiety. He thus points to how a Freudian schema of sexual development produces his gender identity. Furthermore, as the dramatic irony between his speech and his action indicates, it is a schema he does not understand, positioning him as the bearer of a psychic interiority the novel refuses to foreground but enigmatically hints at.

These factors are central to *Broom*’s depictions of homosexuality. Rick, for example, muses on how his son ‘is, I happen to know for a fact, a homosexual’ (78), and so confirms his sense of masculine inadequacy. Indeed, Rick suggests that his inability to display paternal discipline has led to Vance’s homosexuality: ‘I never once laid an angry hand to Vance Vigorous’s bottom. Maybe that is part of the trouble’ (300). The idea that not spanking Vance has contributed to his homosexuality bears a subtle irony, for Wallace implies that Rick’s wish to be spanked is indicative of repressed homosexual desire. In his essay ‘A Child is Being Beaten’, Freud suggests that fantasies in which men are beaten by women correspond to a repressed desire to be loved by their father. ‘The being beaten also stands for being loved (in a genital sense), though this has been debased to a lower level owing to regression [...] The boy evades his homosexuality by repressing and remodelling his unconscious phantasy’ (198), so that ‘his later conscious phantasy [...] has for its content a feminine attitude without a homosexual object-choice’ (198-199). Although Rick’s efforts to have Lenore spank him come to naught, the aptly named Mindy Metalman is more accommodating. One can thus read Rick’s desire to be beaten as the expression of an unconscious desire to be loved by a man. The irony of his idea that spanking Vance would instil a stronger straight masculinity is that Rick himself harbours closeted homosexual desires.

The significant point here is that Rick, like Lang, is subject to psychoanalytical frameworks of sexual development that, despite his neurotic self-awareness, he only has the

vaguest sense of. Furthermore, for Rick at least, this intimation of psychological interiority centres upon repressed homosexual desire. Part of the novel's comedy in fact stems from Rick's inability to conceptualise his attraction to Lang. When talking to Lenore, for example, Rick notes that 'I'm really not sure why. There are affinities [...] But something...I simply felt...I don't know how to describe it' (289). Boswell convincingly argues that Rick and Lang are Wallace's parodic take on the writings of John Updike and Vladimir Nabokov, and notes how 'these two narrative lines – the Nabokovian and the Updikean, respectively – join together, not coincidentally, in a gay bar in Amherst called the Flange' (*Understanding* 45). Wallace unites Rick and Lang in a gay bar as part of his parody of literary forebears who he suggests are emblematic of straight male lechery and narcissism. However, though this is a compelling insight at the level of artistic intention, and one that Boswell further supports with reference to Wallace's critiques of Updike elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> it can only partially account for how homosexuality functions in this scene. The precondition for comedy here lies in how the novel securitises male homosexuality as a dramatically ironic backdrop that facilitates Rick and Lang's encounter, and the intimacy they share with each other.

The bar's name is telling in this regard. A flange is a disk-shaped object with a hole in the middle, normally used to connect two different pipes. By naming this bar 'The Flange', Wallace not only evokes an object that resembles an anus, but one that serves to mediate and secure two interlocking things. Entering The Flange amounts to figuratively entering a man's anus, and in order to create a strong homosocial bond between two straight men. The text reaffirms this association when Rick and Lang enter one of the bar's toilet stalls to locate their initials, which they carved there as students when The Flange was a fraternity bar. As these events take place, the novel exploits the dissonance between Rick and Lang's growing intimacy (in chatting, they discover that they share several close, and predominantly female, acquaintances) and its potential libidinal implications for comedic effect. Indeed Rick, who is



narrating the scene, recalls that ‘it was something of a thrill, given the context. I tingle a bit even now, in the motel’ (230). Similarly, Lang’s sense that ‘I need to get out. Just...out, for a while’ (233) resonates with being ‘in’ the closet, while his tipsy catachresis ‘fine and Daddy – excuse me – fine and dandy’ (233) implies repressed father issues of the kind Rick has. For these disjunctions to work, the scene must rest on the risk of both men acknowledging desires in their own bond that may be congruent with sexual attraction.

Rick and Lang’s meeting is a scene of delicate risk management, whereby the novel secures a dangerous asset – homosexual desire – in the form of an intense but desexualized intimacy between straight men. The risk that this security will turn bad – that their intimacy will reveal itself to be more than just homosocial camaraderie – makes their incomprehension of such potential desire for each other comic. Such unknowingness provides the tenuous security that their intimacy will not trouble their heterosexuality. In this light, when Rick refers to Lang as ‘another inside outsider’ (227), the immediate sense may be of ‘another lonely alumnus’ (237), but the phrase takes on added resonances. In one way, it points to how Rick and Lang are both inside and outside the closet, at the threshold of intimacies that could trouble their understanding of themselves as heterosexual. In another way, it implies how their psychic ‘insides’, i.e. their repressed homosexual wishes, are now teasingly on the ‘outside’, whether through their behaviour towards one another or as represented through the gay bar. Psychological interiors, and the sexual metaphoric of being ‘in’ the closet, dovetail here as an asset pool the novel can securitise to make fun of their encounter. That said, if the comedy instils a distance toward this intimacy, it is an intimacy nonetheless, and one that has great import plot-wise; it leads, for instance, to Lang’s reintroduction to Lenore.

Given the absence of economic imagery in this scene, the objection can be made that reading a psychologized homosexual closet here as an asset-backed security is unwarranted. However, my interest in this chapter does not lie with Wallace’s intentional manipulation of

economic ideas. It lies rather with how such logics underpin his texts' depictions (both overt and covert) of male sexuality as a form of capital in need of responsible investment. These depictions are also suggestive of how, as Brown (drawing on Koray Caliskan and Michel Callon) notes, neoliberalism as a 'governing rationality' (30) entails the "economization" of heretofore noneconomic spheres, a process [..., that] may not always involve monetization' (31). Reading the male homosexual closet in Wallace's texts as a financial security allows one to see how they are imbricated in neoliberal logics in ways that do not necessarily relate to explicit images of money. This emphasis on economized but non-monetized logics will remain important as I consider similar images of securitized male homosexuality in Wallace's later texts. The processes that I have outlined in relation to Rick and Lang's encounter are actually quite marginal within the scope of *Broom*'s general concerns. In *Girl with Curious Hair*, however, securitised homosexual risk is at times central to how Wallace explores male-male intimacy, particularly between fathers and sons.

#### Securing the Future in 'Luckily' and 'Lyndon'

Several of the stories in *Girl* are concerned with queer sexualities. 'Little Expressionless Animals', for instance, follows a lesbian relationship between a producer and a contestant on the gameshow *Jeopardy!*, while 'Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR', 'Lyndon', and 'Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way' all in their different ways feature images of male homosexuality. Generally speaking, where same-sex desire appears in the collection, Wallace presents it as being more emotionally fruitful than heterosexual desire. However, at the same time as *Girl* prioritises queer sexuality, it also downplays its specificity as queer. As Hayes-Brady observes of the lesbian relationship in 'Little Expressionless Animals', to the extent that this relationship explores 'self/other dynamic[s], the gender of those involved does not much signify' (*The Unspeakable* 183).<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, focusing on

the intimacy between Lyndon Johnson and his homosexual aide in 'Lyndon', suggests that the two are kept together 'not with romantic love, but one fostered through a consistency of respect' (120). Although *Girl* evokes homosexual desire in its most significant relationships, it does so in the service of connections that deny any libidinal specificity.

The collection can thus be said to follow in the footsteps of *Broom*'s securitization of homosexuality as a way to create intimate yet non-sexual bonds between heterosexual men. However, in contrast to that novel's comedic treatment of Rick and Lang, *Girl* presents these bonds far more soberly. Importantly, it also exploits securitised homosexual desire as part of its concerns with relationships between fathers and sons. Self-consciously working within Harold Bloom's ideas of poetic influence, *Girl* uses these relationships to explore the paternal transmission of cultural value, as is perhaps most apparent in its closing novella, 'Westward'. Here Wallace meta-fictionally reworks John Barth's story 'Lost in the Funhouse' in a manner that resists Barth's influence while self-consciously re-inscribing its importance for its young male artist (and complex avatar for Wallace himself), Mark Nechtr. Kasia Boddy therefore puts it well when she describes the collection's 'interest in patricide (which is never less than sympathetic to the patriarch in question and with the condition of being a patriarch)' (26). Sympathy for male figures of authority is imbricated with *Girl*'s various attempts to – if not straightforwardly fulfil such authority – then at least stress the importance of patriarchal inheritances in the production of future cultural value.

This emphasis on futurity resonates with how securitisation works as a speculative process. Haiven explains how in combining assets that promise to have good returns with those that do not, 'securitisation effectively packages future probabilities as present-day commodities through the highly sophisticated manipulation of risk' (77). To the extent that risk, broadly defined, is an epistemological orientation towards the future (in other words, risk is the knowledge that something *may* happen), then securitisation manipulates future

probabilities so that, in the form of securities, they can be exchanged in present-day markets. As Martin also emphasises, securitisation ‘crash[es] the time machine by bringing the future into the present’ (*An Empire* 43). Relationships between fathers and sons in *Girl*, in this sense, securitise the risk of potential homosexual desire – again, through the motif of the closet – so that it can be utilised in the present. These relationships all the while exploit securitisation’s focus on *future* probabilities through their deference to the idea that fathers should transmit cultural values to sons, if only so said sons can resist their forebears. *Girl*’s preoccupation with paternal bonds as sites from which future value (envisaged as literature that facilitates emotional intimacy) can be created limns with how securitisation (here, of homosexual desire) is a way of speculating, in the present, on possible returns.

‘Luckily’ is a good example of these processes at work. This story relates how a young Account Representative, ‘almost literally a junior executive’ (46), tries to resuscitate his company’s Vice President, ‘old enough to be literally senior’ (47), after a heart attack. Woods Nash notes how as the Account Representative gives CPR, his interaction with the Vice President is ‘replete with sexual imagery’ (106n19). For instance, he is ‘straddling’ (50) the older man, ‘*having at*’ (51, italics in original) the ‘queer recession’ (51) at his chest. This suggestion of libidinal desire, however, works alongside the story’s confirmation of each man’s heterosexuality. The Vice President is ‘married for almost thirty years, grandfather of one’ (45), and the Account Representative has learned CPR from his ex-wife, ‘whom, he remembered, all the students had volunteered to be straddled [by]’ (51). Similar to Rick and Lang’s meeting in *Broom*, ‘Luckily’ securitises the risk of homosexuality so that, though both men are ignorant of such, it imbues their encounter with an otherwise inaccessible intimacy. For Boddy ‘the literary implications of [this scene] become clear’ (26) if one considers Wallace’s desire for fiction that ‘locates and applies CPR to those elements of what’s human’ (‘An Expanded Interview’ 26) in the wake of postmodern meta-fiction’s apparent neglect of

such.<sup>16</sup> To the extent that ‘Luckily’ dramatizes these ideas, it does so by securitising male homosexuality, manipulating its perceived risk to evoke a future art that can revive these sentiments. That the story ends with the Account Representative still administering CPR, and so with the question of whether or not he has saved the older man left open, adds to this sense of speculating in the present on what may arise from their encounter.

The specific risk that ‘Luckily’ securitises also points to how *Girl*, and indeed Wallace’s texts more generally, equate anal intercourse between men with death. The story is therefore suggestive of how, as I noted above in relation to Edelman’s work, homosexuality figures as a privileged signifier of the death drive. Most obviously, the Vice President’s heart attack, and the homoerotic encounter that it instigates, positions homosexual desire firmly in the context of a risk to health. There are, however, more oblique suggestions that the car park in which the events of ‘Luckily’ occur is a figurative rectum. The ‘Executive Garage [lies] below the Staff Garage below the Building’s basement maintenance level’ (46), accessible by ‘the curving orifice of the Exit Ramp [which] spiralled darkly around and out of sight’ (47). Given how Wallace anthropomorphizes ‘the Building’ (45) throughout, the focus on this locale as its deepest section, and the description of the ramp as an ‘orifice’, the garage – similar to how The Flange in *Broom* implies an anus – is a figural rectum. Amplifying the sense of burial, we are told that the ‘ceiling [is] a claustrophobic eight-and-a-quarter feet’ (46), it is made up of tombstone-like ‘grey stone planes’ (46) with ‘thick concrete walls [... and] a cemented monoxide floor’ (50-51). In these ways Wallace answers the title question of Leo Bersani’s classic 1987 essay ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ in the affirmative.<sup>17</sup>

‘Luckily’ thus securitises homosexuality’s affront to futurity so that, though its association with death remains, it can be utilised as a source of managed volatility, and in order to stress the importance of patriarchal lines of inheritance. The closet as a device with which Wallace intimates and obfuscates psychological interiority is again significant here.

However, in contrast to Rick and Lang, such interiority in 'Luckily' is not specifically psychoanalytical. In fact, the intimacy that the Account Representative and Vice President share suggests that masculinity more generally harbours unknown interior depths. After the younger man has spotted the Vice President approach, the narrator relates how he was

preparing to feel that male and special feeling associated with the conversational imperative faced by any two men with some professional connection [...]: the obligation of conversation without the conversational prerequisites of intimacy or interests or concerns to share. They shared pain, though of course neither knew (48).

In an iteration of well-known stereotypes of male emotional reserve, 'Luckily' presents the social conventions of white collar masculinity as hampering these men's ability to express shared pain. However, if the Vice President's heart attack provides an occasion for querying this restraint, it is on the level of narrative, not character. The erotic descriptions of their encounter, in other words, remain distinct from the men's own experience of events. The closet is at work here in how Wallace depicts both men in the midst of an intimacy whose homosexual implications are evident but also removed. The interiority the story intimates, however, is not of repressed homosexual wishes, but rather of a broader sense of emotional life stifled by an exclusively straight male reticence.

Furthermore, although 'Luckily' presents heterosexuality as the corresponding 'high-quality' asset to homosexual risk, it also paradoxically implies that heteronormative bonds are insecure vehicles for emotional connection. Before the story begins its eroticised descriptions of the Account Representative giving CPR, Wallace notes how in 'the silent but well-lit business-district street above [...] two lovers walked, stately, pale as dolls, arms woven, silent' (50). Assuming that these lovers are male and female,<sup>18</sup> their unfeeling

procession contrasts with the eroticised panic of the two men's encounter. Unlike 'the happily married and blankly kind grandfather' (51) he tries to resuscitate, the Account Representative is 'newly divorced' (45) and 'again-single' (46). Though the description of the Vice President as 'blankly' kind should give one pause before arguing he symbolises patriarchal security (as should his heart attack), the fact remains that the Account Representative does not experience similar emotional guarantees. Despite these implied critiques of heterosexual mores, then, 'Luckily' retains them as signs of stability. Wallace writes that the Account Representative learned CPR from his recently divorced wife, a 'Red Cross volunteer instructor' (51). It is a procedure he was 'certified by her to do, one never knowing when it could save a life, he seduced utterly by his fiancé's dictum that you erred, in doubt, always on the side of prepared care and readiness' (51). As a source of risk management, his fiancé gives the Account Representative the skills with which to save the older man. The security of his heterosexual attachment thus allows him to control a risky, potentially homosexual encounter with the Vice President. As Nash notes, 'near the end of the story, the narrator's language also echoes that used in many marriage ceremonies: The VP's "life" is "now literally" the AR's "to have and to hold, for a lifetime"' (106n19). If on the one hand 'Luckily' presents heterosexual bonds, particularly for the Account Representative, as failing to ensure emotional connection, on the other hand the story mobilises traditional heteronormative imagery (the institution of marriage, no less) as harbouring a much needed stability. This stability works to facilitate and securitise the suggestion of homosexual desire in the two men's encounter.

In a generous reading this contradictory promotion yet denial of heterosexuality, along with the story's appropriation of homosexual desire as a valuable yet deadly risk, suggests how Wallace mobilises libidinal desire to exhaust it, pursuing intimacies that are irreducible to sex or gender. This accords with how Hayes-Brady and Ellerhoff read 'Little Expressionless Animals' and 'Lyndon', in which lesbianism is incidental to Julia and Faye's

bond, and homosexuality irrelevant to the respect that Johnson and his staffer feel for one another. To stop here, though, would be to miss how ‘Luckily’ still depicts heterosexuality as the more secure, productive asset. Indeed, the description of the Account Representative ‘clear[ing] the stricken executive’s cervically pink throat of tongue and foreign matter’ (50) implies that their encounter, for all its evocation of homosexual desire, is an attempt to inseminate the older man with the life necessary for him to function as a patriarch. The story thus imbues its same-sex encounter with a reproductively futurist ethos. As a risky asset, male homosexuality is contrary to such futurity, and so must be securitised in the story’s otherwise heterosexual imaginary in ways that deny its specificity while exploiting its risk. If ‘Luckily’ gestures to intimacies in which the gender and sexuality of participants does not matter, it does so out of a concern with the need to secure hetero-patriarchal bonds.

This concern resembles an influential cultural critique of the late 1980s. Specifically, *Girl*’s treatment of the closet is similar to Allan Bloom’s evocation of the same in his 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Sedgwick explains how for Bloom ‘the history of Western thought is importantly constituted and motivated by a priceless history of male-male pedagogic or pederastic relations’ (55). Frightened on the one hand that the homoerotic passions underpinning patriarchal traditions will petrify, the

other danger that, in Bloom’s view threatens cultural vitality [...] is not that these desires might be killed but that they might be expressed [...] [T]he stimulation and glamorization of the energies of male-male desire [...] is an incessant project that must, for the preservation of that self-contradictory tradition, coexist with an equally incessant project of denying, deferring, or silencing their satisfaction [...] So Bloom is unapologetically protective of the sanctity of the closet (56).



The closet for Bloom functions like a financial security as I have been describing it. It must contain the energies of homosexual desire, and exploit them for their vitality in the creation of future cultural value. At the same time, the closet must also prevent the risk of this desire's exposure. As well as positioning *Girl* as the articulation of concerns with cultural tradition, this comparison with Bloom helps one to see how elsewhere in the collection – and especially in 'Lyndon' – Wallace's manipulation of the closet talks to patriarchal lineages outside of a literary context. For if Bloom's worry is that, in Sedgwick's phrase, the 'canonical culture of the closet' (57) is in danger, it is also the worry that, as in 'Lyndon', a more general national decline is imminent if men do not securitise homosexual desire.

A sense of national declension indeed characterises 'Lyndon'. The story follows David Boyd, a closeted and fictional advisor to Lyndon Johnson. Beginning as a mail boy for Johnson when he was a senator in the 1950s, 'Lyndon' ends with Boyd as the president's closest confidant. In the story's final scene he stands at Johnson's deathbed, with Boyd's Haitian lover, whom the story implies is dying from HIV/AIDS, lying next to the president. That we receive the fragment of a 'Eulogy on the Passing of LBJ Austin, Texas, 1968' (109) – Johnson in reality died in 1973 – suggests that he is killed in a sense by the domestic unrest of the late 1960s. A scene in which Johnson views anti-war protesters from the oval office indeed has him reconsidering the aims of Great Society itself: 'these youth that are yippies and that are protestors and that use violence and public display. We gave it to them too easy, boy. I mean their Daddies' (106). This suggestion of lax paternal authority, reminiscent of Rick's failure to spank Vance, equates a general failure of fathers with the disrespect 'the Youth of America' (106) now displays for the country's patriarchs. That by the final pages 'the white Hot Line [is] blinking, mutely active' (117) at Lyndon's deathbed affirms this sense of impending catastrophe, the nation's father so enervated, Wallace implies, that he cannot attend to a potential nuclear conflict.

Alongside this generational cultural commentary, though, 'Lyndon' is a highly character-focused story, centred upon Boyd's relationship to Johnson and the possible homoerotic desires it may harbour. As Boyd's surname implies, it is also concerned with how boys carry on paternal legacies. Wallace presents Boyd's homosexuality as an inability to generate the future along hetero-reproductive norms. Indeed, Boyd's admission that 'it was the Fifties and I was young, burned-out cool, empty' (77) informs the irony with which he views such expectations. After a former lover outs him before committing suicide, Boyd remembers 'invoking a sort of god of glands as a shaman might blame vegetable spirits for a lost harvest' (86) to explain his sexuality to his real father. This comparison subtly establishes Boyd's ironic self-awareness of biological explanations for homosexuality while retaining the image of male sexuality as naturally geared towards a reproductive, and economic, futurism. In other words, attributing homosexuality to glands is as silly as blaming spirits for a lost harvest, but it is still the case that a harvest has been lost. Boyd's position as Johnson's amanuensis (his job entails writing down Johnson's more inspired maxims) and figurative son, and so the person in whom the latter's paternal legacy must be carried forth, is therefore questionable because of his future-negating homosexuality.

Nonetheless, because Boyd's homosexuality is an unspoken secret in Washington, and the nature of his bond to Johnson a source of intrigue for other staffers, the closet as Sedgwick perceives it in Allan Bloom's work remains active. In other words, despite Boyd's firm self-understanding – 'I was a homosexual' (85), as he matter-of-factly puts it – his relationship to Johnson displays the same 'denying, deferring, silencing' (56) that Sedgwick suggests is so important to Bloom's concern for a homoerotically imbued cultural tradition. Indeed, by the end of the story Boyd and Johnson's potential desires for one another remain closeted. Before he visits Johnson's deathbed, Boyd tries to deny to Lady Bird the 'several stories about me and about how I'm supposedly in love with Mr. Johnson' (113). Lady Bird,

a figure of enigmatic menace throughout, explains that Boyd in fact offers Johnson a form of love she no longer can. Boyd, ailing and confused over his own relationship to Johnson, then finds his lover Duverger next to the president in bed, the former near death from what is implied to be AIDS, and the latter critically ill from another (unconfirmed) heart attack. Who desires whom and in what ways in this closing scene is left unresolved, Wallace exploiting the closet's power to mobilise and deny knowledge of homosexuality to its fullest.

Similar to how 'Luckily' tries to exhaust sexual and gender identity, and in pursuit of intimacies that ostensibly transcend both, there are signs in these final pages of 'Lyndon' that Boyd and Johnson's bond is also inexplicable by such frameworks. As Boyd knocks on Johnson's bedroom door, 'the gently feminine clink of Lady Bird Johnson's willow-necked spoon was the masculine sound of my heavy old undergraduate ring' (116). By collapsing feminine and masculine into equivalency, this image implies the redundancy of both. It is also significant that, as Boyd and Johnson have their final exchange, the dying Duverger is mediating between them; indeed, 'Duverger's narrow fingers' (118) lie across the President's face as the two men acknowledge each other. Boyd's lover shares his surname with Maurice Duverger, the sociologist responsible for Duverger's Law. As Kenneth Benoit explains, this is 'the "law" that simple plurality electoral systems resulted in the two-party system' (70). Duverger's position in this scene – 'a frozen skeleton X ray, impossibly thin, fuzzily bearded' (117) – is a rejection of this law envisaged in sexual terms. In other words, having Duverger on the brink of death implies the similar frailty of a Duverger's Law of sexuality and gender; a law that, to follow this analogy, reduces the plurality of desiring positions to a binary system of masculine and feminine, hetero- and homosexual, and so on.

As with 'Luckily', though, this appeal to move beyond sex and gender works by securitising specifically male homosexual risk. From the perspective of 1987, the year that 'Lyndon' was first published in *Arrival* magazine, Duverger is risky in a very particular way.

Catherine Waldby relates how ‘the term “risk group” was first used in relation to AIDS in 1983 by the Centre for Disease Control (CDC)’ (85), and specified ‘initially the “three Hs” – homosexuals, haemophiliacs and Haitians – and intravenous (IV) drug users’ (85). Fulfilling two of the CDC’s categories, Duverger is very high-risk. Lying next to Johnson, a man who Wallace presents as being bombastically hetero-masculine throughout the story, Duverger represents the homosexual risk that must be managed in Boyd’s intimacy with the president. Managing such risk, however, does not mean eliminating it. Though Duverger is side-lined here as a necessary mediator but skeletal AIDS victim, Boyd is sick too, and from a weak immune system. Duverger is the abject expression of a risk that, though shared by Boyd, manifests in the latter in a less volatile way. If Boyd is ‘weak beyond description’ (109) and contracts ‘violent flu’ (109), he is not, like Duverger, near death. As such his homosexual risk is manageable, and indeed exploitable, as a securitised asset that enables his intimacy with the heterosexual Johnson to trigger the closet’s speculative energies.

Boyd and Johnson’s closeted relationship – they might be lovers, close friends, or intimate in ways that transcend sex and gender – therefore suggests that a certain amount of securitised homosexual risk is essential if the male-male pedagogies Bloom describes are to continue. ‘Lyndon’ indeed ends with a passage extrapolating this sense of necessary risk into a rich metaphor for U.S. global power. At Johnson’s bedroom door, Boyd’s narration shifts from its previous blank understatement to a tone of invocatory conviction:

Forget the curved circle, for whom distance means the sheer size of what it holds inside. Build a road. Make a line. Go as far west as the limit of the country lets you [...] and the giant curve that informs straight lines will bring you around, in time, to the distant eastern point of the country behind you [...] the circle you have made is

quiet and huge, and everything the world holds is inside: the bedroom: a toppled trophy has punched a shivered star through the glass of its case [...] (117).

This suggestion of a road that, starting from ‘Bodega Bay, not Whittier, California’ (117), curves around the globe until it hits the east coast (therefore subtly reaffirming ideas of U.S. exceptionalism – i.e. the U.S. is the country exempt from this globe-encompassing line), builds on Lady Bird’s explanation of Johnson’s ‘great intellectual concept’ (115). Namely, ‘love, he will say, is a federal highway, lines putting communities [...] in touch’ (115). Given how Wallace has Johnson doubt the Great Society, in ‘a reversal of his presidential resolve that the government’s *raison* was before all to reduce sum totals of suffering’ (111, italics in original), this image of a broken federal highway is apt. For the circle (or in an echo of Allan Bloom’s book, the American mind) to close in this analogy implies an overreach of state power, suffocating the creation of future value by removing the possibility of risk. Pat O’Malley explains how, for neoliberals, welfarist programmes treat risks ‘as pathologies [that] government should eventually (or ideally) eliminate’ (203). Risk for these critics is rather ‘a source or condition of opportunity, an avenue for enterprise and the creation of wealth’ (204). Like the ‘toppled trophy [that] has punched a shivered star through the glass of its case’ (117) risk is essential to reproducing patriarchal U.S. power, which must smash the petrifying tendencies of a state that seeks total security. Yet, as O’Malley also notes, ‘this is not to say that *all* risks are so conceived. Clearly, neo-liberalism would regard many *specific* risks as ones that can and should be prevented or minimized’ (204, italics in original). The story solicits homosexual risk not because all forms of volatility are good, but because this particular risk imbues hetero-patriarchal relationships with a manageable and animating sexual uncertainty. Homosexuality is the ‘curve that informs *straight* lines’ (117, italics

added), a figurative recursiveness that, though it can be exploited for the benefit of straight men, cannot be allowed to close into a ‘curved circle’ (117).

To recap, Boyd’s homosexual risk, and Johnson’s often hyperbolic heterosexuality, combine in the shape of their closeted relationship, which securitises the former to re-enchant the idea of male pedagogic bonds with a stimulating amount of danger. Despite suggestions that their intimacy is irreducible to sexuality or gender, moreover, it is Boyd’s homosexuality that provides the animating risk in this arrangement. Indeed, though ‘Lyndon’ has some basis in the case of Walter Jenkins, a top aide to Johnson who resigned after a sex scandal in 1964, the story reworks the historical record to make Johnson himself a figure of fresh intrigue, as if mining the legacy of this deceased patriarch for values that have since been lost. The title itself – ‘Lyndon’ – is significant in this regard, implying an intimacy with the President and forecasting personal revelation. Though, as Boswell notes, ‘Wallace deliberately undercuts the piece’s principal playful illusion, namely its promise to “get inside” and treat as “real” someone as public and unknowable as Lyndon B. Johnson’ (*Understanding* 85). In contrast to *Broom*’s manipulation of Freudian schemas, or the suggestion in ‘Luckily’ that men share reservoirs of unexplored emotional pain, ‘Lyndon’ implies that personal interiority is in fact non-existent. In other words, Johnson is merely the conglomeration of the various myths and mediations that intersperse, and indeed constitute, Boyd’s narration.

However, as the story’s fictional eulogist puts it, Johnson ‘like all great men, hell, *like all men*, [was] a paradox of mystery’ (108-109, italics added). The self-correction here is telling. It is not because Johnson was a ‘great man’ that he will never ‘be completely or totally understood’ (109), but because he was a man. In this, the story retains the idea of individual straight men as sources of mystery. Although ‘Lyndon’ does not present such mystery in psychological terms, the fact that, in Boswell’s words, Johnson ‘is a man of feeling turned into an abstraction’ (*Understanding* 84) also acts a key counterpoint to what

the story presents as the unfeeling ‘medical mystery’ (Sedgwick xv) of AIDS. As Boyd notes in relation to Duverger, his doctors, ‘like Aquinas before God, could think of nothing to do but define his decline via what it was not’ (110). Indeed they ‘could isolate nothing but a pattern in his susceptibility to [disease]’ (110). AIDS here is an impenetrable mystery that, unlike the subjective enigmas surrounding who Johnson really was, proceeds instead as an impersonal ‘pattern’. Indeed, the story suggests that medical understandings of personhood threaten to supplant more humanist concerns with discovering forms of emotional interiority. In the closing scene, for instance, Boyd notes ‘the big white Bufferin [a brand of aspirin] of the President’s personal master bed’ (117). Compounding descriptions of Johnson’s head as a ‘great big pill’ (102), this image implies that pharmaceutical conceptions of selfhood are as dangerously depersonalising as the illnesses they combat.

Male homosexuality in ‘Lyndon’ therefore does position straight men (namely, Johnson) as figures of unknowable emotional depths, but in manners that are, firstly, not psychologised, and secondly, counterpoised with medical models for examining interiority. That Duverger is a ‘frozen skeleton X ray’ (117) by the story’s end aligns such medical inspection of interiority with AIDS especially. The tension between individual interiority as a matter of subjective richness on the one hand, and as a matter of technocratic inspection on the other, is common throughout Wallace’s output, as is most clear in its satirical depictions of mental-health professionals. However, this tension takes on particular importance in his texts’ endeavours to securitise homosexual risk. *Infinite Jest* for instance delineates between images of AIDS that are evocative of biomedical processes, and suggestions of unconscious homosexual cathexes between straight men. As in ‘Luckily’ and ‘Lyndon’, these images also appear in the context of father-son relationships, the novel sharing those stories’ concern with patriarchal influences. That said, *Infinite Jest* foregrounds the perceived threat of biomedical ideas of selfhood, and especially in relation to HIV/AIDS, to a far greater extent than *Girl*. As

I will now demonstrate, it does so in order to suggest that male homosexuality's value as a risky asset decreases when it becomes articulable in terms of viral infection and biomolecular science, rather than the subjective experiences of individual men.

Bottom to Bottom: Meta-Disease in *Infinite Jest*

Homosexuality is a scattered and yet persistent presence throughout *Infinite Jest*, as is HIV/AIDS. Though he has not contracted the virus, the novel's most pronounced gay character is the very dangerous-to-know Poor Tony Krause: a transvestite, drug addict, prostitute, mugger, and part-time terrorist for a Quebecois insurgency group. Poor Tony's circle includes fellow prostitute Stokely Darkstar, a man who 'petaled ass' (129) and who 'got freetested again at the Fenway and confirmed a big Boot 8.8 he's got the Virus for sure [...] and the Word was out&about dont' share Stokely Darkstars' works' (129). The novel therefore closely associates the 'Virus' with homosexuality (particularly in relation to anal intercourse) and drug addiction. The halfway house in which a substantial amount of *Infinite Jest* unfolds includes two HIV infected residents – former prostitute Charlotte Treat and, as Calvin Thrust intimates to Gately, the homosexual Morris Hanley (826). One of Gately's duties at this house is in fact to dispense 'Virus-meds' (593), even though he is 'terrified of the Virus, which in those days was laying out needle-jockeys left and right' (914). HIV infection in these ways is a clear health threat within the drug addiction and recovery milieus the novel documents. This threat compounds how the novel more generally presents anal intercourse between men as a source of abject but useful risk.

For instance, in an image that succinctly contains suggestions of anal sex, Freudian psychoanalysis, and homosexuality as future-negating death, Gately notes how two 'pillow-biters from the Fenway were having this involved conversation about some third fag having to go in and get the skeleton of some kind of fucking rodent removed from inside their



butthole' (274). This passage evokes Freud's case history of the 'Rat Man', who suffered from the idea that his father and fiancée would have rats eat into their rectums. 'Pillow-biters' meanwhile defines homosexuality in relation to (a homophobic conceived notion of) anal intercourse, while the idea of a gay man giving birth, from his anus, to a dead animal presents homosexuality as a threat to reproductive futurism. These factors – abject anal intercourse, Freudian psychoanalysis, and homosexuality as a threat to the future – are central to how the novel depicts homosexuality as a securitisable asset. They are also important to how it securitises this risky asset to elucidate male psychic interiority in the face of biomedicine's apparent hollowing-out of same. That '*pillow-biter*'s a North Shore term, one Gately grew up with, and it and the *f*-term are the only terms for male homosexual he knows, still' (1003n91, italics in original) is telling in this light. By broadcasting an awareness of homophobic prejudice, this admission depicts homosexual risk as a resource to be neutrally manipulated. That it does so by pointing to Gately's ignorance, moreover, suggests how such manipulation facilitates insights into the subjective histories of individual straight men.

It is not Gately however through whom the novel chiefly performs this securitising process, but Hal, and in ways that, similar to *Girl*, focus on his relationship to his father. This relationship, and the paternal history of the Incandenzas generally, is of key importance in a novel so self-consciously concerned with how 'fathers impact sons' (*Infinite Jest* 32). A particular instance of male intergenerational communication notable for my purposes is Hal's account of his father's meta-gay porn film, 'Accomplice!' This is one of the novel's many ekphrastic vignettes, in which the description of an audio-visual text becomes so thorough that it momentarily supplants the main narrative frame. As Hal recounts, the film follows 'a beautifully sad young bus-station male prostitute' (945), who is picked-up by a 'dissipated-looking old specimen with gray teeth' (945). The older man takes offence at how the boy 'size[s] him up as a health risk. The obvious health risk here is referred to [...] merely as *It*

[HIV]’ (945, italics in original). Consequently, he decides to scare him by cutting his penis with a razor during intercourse. Unknown to the older man, though, is that the boy himself has ‘It, the Human Immuno Virus’ (945); revealed when he withdraws his penis and notes, ‘at the crease of [the boy’s] bum’ (945), the ‘sign of Kaposi’s Sarcoma, that most universal symptom of *It*’ (945, italics in original). As the boy ‘shrieks “*Murderer! Murderer!*” over and over’ (946, italics in original), the pun becomes clear – if the man is a murderer, then the boy is an accomplice, and vice versa if the boy’s shrieks refer to himself.

With ‘Accomplice!’ the novel self-consciously registers its own manipulation of male anal intercourse and HIV as sources of potentially mortal risk. Carefully placed clues as to James’ motivation for making the film, and the emphasis on Hal’s jaded response to it, also suggest how ‘Accomplice!’ works in relation to the novel’s wider securitisation of such risk. As the age differences between the ‘old specimen’ (945) and the ‘beautiful boy’ (945) imply, their roles are evocative of father and son. Wallace compounds this association by relating how the older man, like James’ grandfather who smoked ‘a long filter’ (164), also smokes ‘through a long white FDR-style filter’ (945).<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the boy, ‘who is inarticulate’ (945) and voices a ‘mute howl’ (946) after the older man removes his penis, echoes James’ delusion in the years before his death that, in Hal’s words’, ‘I’m mute’ (31). The novel therefore suggests that ‘Accomplice!’ is James’s articulation of concerns with paternal inheritance and intergenerational communication similar to those that are evident in ‘Luckily’ and ‘Lyndon’. The fact that Hal responds to this film with a complete lack of affect – its ‘abstract and self-reflexive’ (946) nature means that ‘we end up feeling and thinking not about the characters but about the cartridge itself’ (946) – is also significant. Specifically, if ‘Accomplice!’ fails to move Hal because its ‘metasilliness’ (704) prevents any emotional engagement with its characters, then this self-reflexive excess dovetails with the film’s – and the novel’s – depiction of HIV/AIDS more generally.

For example, Wallace's explanation of HIV here as 'the Human Immuno Virus' (945) – instead of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus – subtly changes its meaning. Indeed, this truncation mirrors an earlier description of HIV as a 'Human Immuno-Virus' (202), implying that the phrase is the result of authorial design rather than Hal's narration. By removing 'deficiency', Wallace implies the virus is risky not because it depletes a subject's resilience to infection, but because it makes one immune to being 'Human'. Recalling 'Lyndon', the novel thus suggests that HIV as a biomedical epidemic is dangerous because it threatens humanist conceptions of personhood; here broadly defined as the ability Hal outlines to feel and think 'about the characters' (946) in a text rather than just the text itself. Wallace develops this point elsewhere in endnote 238, which is appended to Pemulis's explanation of annular fusion, a self-replenishing energy creation process that evolved out of a 'micromedical model [... of] bombarding highly toxic radioactive particles with massive doses of stuff even more toxic than the radioactive particles' (572). The note relates that 'while the annular meta-disease treatment is highly effective on metastatic cancers, it proved a disappointment on the HIV-spectrum viri, since AIDS is itself a meta-disease' (1044n238). Putting to one side the inaccurate description of AIDS here as a disease, this endnote suggests that its status as a meta-virus, and so one that works self-reflexively, is what makes it so virulent.

By unpacking this image further, one can see how the novel positions HIV/AIDS as indicative of biomedicine's threat to traditional ideas of straight male interiority. In the sense that AIDS can arise from HIV, and is therefore a collection of second-order diseases that result after the original viral infection, then it can be considered a 'meta-disease' (1044n238) of sorts. However, the endnote states that it is 'the HIV-spectrum viri' (1044n238) in particular that proves so resistant to *Jest*'s fanciful medical treatment. Waldby observes how HIV's "'strategic" status as a kind of metavirus within biomedicine, derives from a lack of proper, singular viral identity' (118). As a virus that infects healthy host cells in order to

mimic their processes, HIV works recursively; indeed, it is a *retrovirus*. This term refers to how, after having infected the body's CD4 cells (by targeting specific proteins found on the surface of immune cells), HIV begins a process of reverse transcription. This process allows HIV's genetic material to convert into DNA, which is essential to allowing HIV to enter the CD4 cell's nucleus. From here, HIV controls a CD4 cell's mechanisms in order to reproduce itself, acting in the words of one commentator 'like a broken copying machine' (Kolata, quoted in *AIDS Narratives* 7), and in doing so, destroying further host CD4 cells.<sup>20</sup> In this light, then, annular fusion is an ineffective way to treat HIV because it aggravates one self-replicating process through the application of another.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, scientific explanations of these cellular processes are often marked in ways that present the virus in accordance with homophobic ideas of gay sexuality. Steven F. Kruger explains how, in 'the phallic imagination at work in visualizing viral activity' (36), the invading virus, 'like sperm [...] is conceived as a package put together primarily to introduce genetic material into a cell' (35). Yet, given that the host cell 'already represents a "marriage" of male and female, nucleus and cytoplasm' (37), this invading sperm-like virus is envisaged as 'a debased but also threatening homosexual masculinity' (38). Thus, while HIV's genetic information

can be "convert[ed]...into DNA," and incorporated seamlessly into the cell's "proper" genome, it remains essentially different from and foreign to its "host" [...] in its challenge to the [...] "properly" unidirectional flow of information in the cell, the retrovirus – directing information *backward* – represents a perverse threat to the coherence of linguistic process imagined at the cellular level [...] In a geometry that evokes anal sex, cellular DNA is made to "bend over" so that the virus can "sneakily" insert itself into the host chromosome (37-39, italics in original).

Wallace's suggestion that HIV is a 'meta-disease' (1044n238), and his presentation of anal intercourse as an abject source for its transmission, follows these associations of retroviral processes and homosexuality as risks to straight masculinity. What is most significant here, though, is that the novel only hints at this backdrop. Like the mysterious 'pattern' that is killing Duverger, the novel figures HIV as an unknown biomolecular process occurring inside the (heterosexual, male) body. In his reading of Wallace's 'A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life', Stephen J. Burn observes how this story obliquely invokes the human genome, the chromosomes 'that below our everyday conception of character influence so much about human behavior and development' (*Reader's Guide* 18). A similar invocation of oblique biomolecular processes can be said to occur here.

However, the novel presents HIV in this way not (or not only) to suggest the presence of 'mechanisms that enable or limit thought and that predominantly operate below the level of consciousness' (Burn, *Reader's Guide* 19). *Infinite Jest* evokes HIV as a mysterious molecular process, and especially in relation to anal intercourse between men, to highlight by contrast the idea that homosexuality forms part of an individual's psychic life. It does so to suggest how the former understanding of straight male interiority endangers the latter, and in turn, the closeted homoeroticism Wallace implies is essential to securing patrilineal bonds. Indeed, the novel manipulates Freud's theory of the primal scene, particularly as articulated in his case history of the Wolf Man, to establish this juxtaposition in connection to Hal and his forbears. By tracking the novel's many references to this case history, one can see how it mobilises psychoanalytical understandings of homosexuality to renew intimacies between interiorised men. As such, the financial logic evident in *Broom* and *Girl*, where the closet works to securitise homosexuality to speculate on the return of intimacy between straight men, undergoes a specification here. The novel modulates its presentation of homosexual risk

to compel men to invest in the ‘right’ models of interiority; models which position them as sources of inner psychic life, rather than mere biomolecular processes.

Wallace reworks Freud’s primal scene in the tale of how James, as a boy, started to think about the possibilities of annular fusion. This section of the novel is presented as an excerpted chapter from ‘*The Chill of Inspiration: Spontaneous Reminiscences by Seventeen Pioneers of DT-Cycle Lithiumized Annular Fusion*’ (1034n208, italics in original). Far from spontaneous, though, this chapter is artfully crafted by James, and we only learn in its final paragraphs of how he first thought about the recursive process of energy-creation-via-waste-consumption mentioned above. The preceding eleven pages relate how James once helped his parents take apart their bed to locate the source of a squeaking noise. The image of a boy in the presence of his parents’ bed is reminiscent of Freud’s most detailed account of the primal scene in relation to the Wolf Man. Around one and a half, this male patient saw his father having sex with his mother from behind, ‘the man upright, and the woman bent down like an animal’ (‘Infantile Neurosis’ 270). This experience instigated the patient’s identification with his mother, and therefore a wish to be loved by his father. After a later dream reactivated this wish, ‘the result was terror, horror of the fulfilment of the wish, the repression of the impulse’ (267), and ‘fear of his father appeared in its place in the shape of the wolf phobia’ (279). The cause of horror was the revelation that, to be loved by his father, he must undergo castration; a fact that his ‘libido [...] in the form of concern for his male organ’ (279) resisted.

These details are important to how James’s reminiscence rebounds upon Hal, and indeed on the closeted homosexual wishes the novel securitises in their relationship. Yet James’ chapter also alters the primal scene as related by Freud to suggest the collapse of paternal authority augmenting it. This chapter’s many references to how James’ father is dressed in white (in his capacity as an actor playing a corporate mascot) echoes ‘the *white* wolves’ (‘Infantile Neurosis’ 269n1, italics in original) of the Wolf Man’s phobia. Far from

being a figure of intimidation, though, James's father ends the chapter emasculated, and in the position of the Wolf Man's mother. Falling ill, his father collapses over the bedframe, 'face-down, with his bottom high in the air [..., his] crack all the way down to the anus itself was now visible' (501). In Freud's words, 'the wolf that he [the Wolf Man] was afraid of was undoubtedly his father; but his fear of the wolf was conditional upon the creature being in an upright posture' (272). With his anus vulnerable to penetration, James's father is the inverse of such intimidation. James then runs to his bedroom and, jumping on his bed, dislodges his closet door knob, whose peculiar roll inspires him to think about the possibility of annulation. With the collapse of the father as a figure of intimidating power comes the discovery of the same recursive system that gives rise to annular fusion. If 'Accomplice!' presents male-male anal intercourse as a source of meta-disease, then the potential anal eroticism here similarly figures as the cause of a dangerously self-referential process.

That James' father's initial 'bearing-down action [on the mattress] looked very much like emergency compression of a heart patient's chest' (491) is suggestive of how this scene aligns paternal failure with a collapse of psychoanalytical frameworks. Reiterating Wallace's trope of defective hearts as symbols for broader ideas of deficiency, James crafts this chapter to imply that the rise of annular fusion corresponds with the decline of models of psychic interiority organised around fatherly authority. The mattress on which a possible primal scene would occur is 'flaccid and floppy as [James and his father] tried to jockey it' (495) out of the room. The need to apply CPR to such frameworks, and the idea of male psychic interiority, informs how the abject anal intercourse depicted in 'Accomplice!' affects Hal. Before we receive his account of the film, Hal's encounter with Kenkle and Brandt – the tennis academy janitors hired by James – contains another specific reference to Freud's Wolf Man. Kenkle, talking to the 'Submoronic-to-Moronic' (873) Brandt as Hal approaches, asks 'what is the essence of Christmas morning but the childish co-eval of veneral interface, for a child?'

(874). Kenkle's remarks are telling references to how the Wolf Man, for Freud, equated 'Christmas with its presents [with] the deeper wish [...] for sexual satisfaction from [his] father' ('Infantile Neurosis' 277n2). Though not an exact equivalence – Kenkle proposes a relation 'between unwrapping a Christmas present and undressing *a young lady*' (874, italics added) – this reference positions Hal within his father's psychic history. Indeed, Kenkle then goes on to inveigh against anal intercourse, because it is a '*hunched* way to have interface' (875, italics in original). Kenkle however 'will wager [that Hal] rar-e-ly hunches' (875). The word 'hunch' in relation to anal sex then lodges in Hal's first person narration, occurring several times in his description of 'Accomplice' and the 'hunched, homosubmissive position' (945) of its young male prostitute. By establishing this oblique string of references to Freud's primal scene, and the significance of anal intercourse within such, Wallace positions Hal as the inheritor of a patrilineal line of unconscious homosexual wishes.

The point of all this detective work is that, by tracking the novel's various references to the Wolf Man, one can see how *Infinite Jest* uses the image of male anal intercourse as a source of HIV to facilitate what it presents as its opposite; namely, homosexual desire as an animating but repressed element of straight male psychic life. Moreover, unpacking these references suggests how Wallace orchestrates them – notably by placing clues at the novel's beginning and end – in a way that encourages the reader to invest in the 'right' form of homosexual risk. As the novel proceeds towards its end, references to Hal and same-sex desire increase. As well as his synopsis of 'Accomplice!', and his encounter with Kenkle and Brandt, we receive Hal's reaction to the possibility that two male friends are sharing a bed. Despite the fact that 'the universe seemed to have aligned itself so that even acknowledging it would violate some tacit law' (872), Hal cannot help but reflect on such 'unthinkable possibilities' (872). These references ensure that we leave Hal with the question of his possible homosexual wishes at the forefront of his and our minds. In fact, the last we hear



from his first person narration are details about how ‘it was impossible for me to imagine Himself [i.e. James] and the Moms being explicitly sexual together’ (957). As with his father in his reconstruction of the circumstances that led him to discover annular fusion, Hal cannot imagine a primal scene as Freud describes it with the Wolf Man, but only its failure; indeed, Hal’s final paragraph as narrator focuses on his mother’s cuckolding of James.

The novel closes not with Hal though but with Gately, hospitalized with a gunshot wound and remembering the murder of his crime partner, Gene Fackelmann. Precipitating this final section, Gately hears somebody laugh at how ‘it was getting harder these days to tell the homosexuals from the people who beat up homosexuals [...] He remembered two of his Beverly High teammates beating up a so-called homosexual kid while Gately walked away, wanting no part of neither side. Disgusted by both sides of the conflict’ (973). The first remark implies Gately has contracted HIV, the virus’s association with homosexuality comically at odds, from this suggested homophobic perspective (which given the context is most likely that of a doctor), with Gately’s macho physique. The following memory, which registers Gately’s disgust at homophobic violence as well as with homosexuality, evokes how the novel more generally positions the latter in relation to straight men. By having Gately walk away from this conflict (or rather, homophobic attack), while stressing his disgust with gay men, Wallace positions homosexuality as a source of abjection that is nonetheless undeserving of violent renunciation. Rather, homosexuality as I have suggested throughout is a useful form of risk which, once securitised, can facilitate insights into the emotional lives of straight men. Indeed, the way in which these final intimations of homosexuality in Gately’s narrative loop backwards to the novel’s beginning serve this purpose.

Through references to archival materials and letters between Wallace and his editor, Casey Michael Henry convincingly explains how *Infinite Jest*’s end is designed to circle back to its start. Furthermore, the beginning and end respectively concern ‘Hal and Gately’s two

final transformations and bottoms' (481). 'Bottom' is an Alcoholics Anonymous term for the 'cliffish nexus of exactly two total choices' (*Infinite Jest* 349) which works as an epiphanic moment of decision for the addict – to surrender to AA or die from their addictions. Reaching Gately's bottom, we are compelled to turn back to Hal's bottom, in a process mimicking the fatally entrapping 'Infinite Jest' film. If we consider how 'bottom' here puns on buttocks, though, then this recursive looping back is evocative of how the novel presents male anal intercourse as the source of HIV's meta-disease. Indeed, before the novel's final sequence begins, Gately 'felt an upward movement deep inside that was so personal and horrible he woke up [into his recollection of Fackelmann's murder]' (974). Though implying Gately is lifted up on a gurney, this remark's proximity to information concerning his possibly having HIV means it resonates with a suggestion of penetration. In this sense, the novel's looping back mimics the retrovirus, which in Kruger's words affronts the 'unidirectional flow of information [... by] directing information *backward*' (38, italics in original), as well as the image of male anal intercourse as working from behind.

By encouraging us to return to Hal's bottom, the novel indeed sends one back to another scene of homosexual intrigue. As he is interviewed by a university admissions board, in a scenario reminiscent of Boyd's interview by Johnson in 'Lyndon', Hal is subject to what he suspects is a come-on. The Director of Composition 'emerged as both the Alpha of the pack here and way more effeminate than he'd seemed at first, standing hip-shot with a hand on his waist, walking with a roll to his shoulders [...] cupping what I feel to be a hand over my sportcoat's biceps (surely not)' (9). This echoes how a Flange patron in *Broom* attempts to pick up Lang, 'gauging the man's bicep under his sportcoat' (224). The Director of Composition though also disturbs Hal's sense of Alpha and effeminate (and in the novel's imagining here, heterosexual and homosexual) men. His come-on in this way troubles the security of a distinction between the two, as Hal's parenthetical 'surely not' (9) suggests.

What Henry describes as ‘the psychological reverberations of these polarized bottoms’ (490) therefore are distinctly sexualised in terms of Hal and Gately’s subjective estimations of homosexuality. Both men’s encounter with possible same-sex desire – Hal’s with a potential come-on, but also in the novel’s Wolf Man references, and Gately’s intermittent homophobia with closing suggestions that he has HIV – stresses their status as interiorised men. Wallace loops the novel in such a way so that the intimation of HIV and anal intercourse as ostensibly similar recursive processes situates the two straight male protagonists as sources of psychic depth. To the extent that this circularity mimics HIV’s reverse transcription, then a bio-scientific understanding of interiority secures what Wallace presents as its opposite; namely, Hal and Gately as subjects formed by personal psychological histories.

Furthermore, this securitising process interpellates the reader. In other words, we are compelled to carry on securitising homosexuality envisaged as narcissistically recursive so that straight men figure as sources of mystery. As Henry notes, the novel’s ‘narrative system [is] a circle of self-enclosed thought, broken only with a disruptive and reflexive insight’ (481). Thus, ‘breaking the self-enclosed annular rings that we might understand the novel’s arrangement prompts’ (481) involves speculating on the missing year between Gately’s recollection and Hal’s interview, and particularly to better understand the fates of both men. This aporia allows for multiple interpretations, encouraging one to go over the clues that Wallace provides so that we may reconstruct what happened. As such, the missing year functions as a closet of sorts. Though it does not tease sexual knowledge per se, it works like the closet as seen in *Broom* and *Girl* to render heterosexual men (Hal and Gately) mysterious. Given Hal’s come-on and Gately’s contraction of HIV at the novel’s separate bottoms, an encounter with male homosexuality can be said to instigate this elision. What interrupts *Jest*’s recursive loop, and thus aims to save us from the dangers of recursive systems, are questions surrounding straight men whose heterosexuality the novel productively troubles.

However, an encouragement to break from the novel's self-enclosed loops does not necessarily mean an encouragement to renounce them, in what David Hering argues is the novel's 'rejection of solipsistic and claustrophobic closed systems' ('Form as Strategy' 141). This may be true for what Wallace intends, but it falls short of accounting for how these recursive structures, despite the novel's general denigration of such, are key to effecting the 'way out' (981) that is so ostensibly needed. Much like the 'curve that informs straight lines' (117) with which 'Lyndon' ends, *Jest*'s missing year only registers as an escape from the novel's recursive loop if said loop still presents the threat of closure. If we consider this loop as the recursion of HIV and anal intercourse between men in particular, which if unchecked will flow from bottom to bottom, then the novel securitises this risk by making it productive of the excised or 'closeted' year whose enabling mysteries centre on Hal and Gately. Put differently, in the same way that the novel presents homosexual abjection as an asset to be manipulated, so too does it figure its recursive yet punctured narrative structure – i.e. as the appropriate amount of risk required for creating its absent temporal capstone. That the task falls to the novel's reader to fill in this missing year means that, by doing so, we legitimate the securitisation the novel performs to create it. In other words, our labour facilitates the future value that the novel's securitised narrative loop endeavours to spark.

The criticism can be made that this argument rests too heavily on comparing *Infinite Jest*'s circular narrative with its depiction of homosexuality as dangerously recursive, and particularly because of its perceived association with anal intercourse and HIV. It is certainly the case that annularity as a motif does not pertain to same-sex desire exclusively. Meta-fiction, drug abuse, and ecological damage are just a few of the many phenomena the novel critiques for their recursive inwardness. That said, honing in on *Infinite Jest*'s association of annular processes with homosexuality sheds light on its investment in male heterosexuality as an asset to be capitalised on in a way that these other factors, arguably, do not. Pursuing this

line of enquiry has shown how the novel securitises male homosexuality as a specifically (i.e. in light of HIV) biomedical risk to the ‘human’, and to reaffirm straight men as subjects of interior mystery. References to Freud’s primal scene work in conjunction with the novel’s presentation of HIV as a meta-disease to propose such inner mystery, which if not necessarily Freudian, retains that discourse’s focus on the individual as a source of inner psychic life. The novel’s securitisation of homosexual risk to effect such mystery informs its organisation as a loop broken primarily by the withheld experiences of two heterosexual men. Moreover, similar to how ‘Luckily’ and ‘Lyndon’ attempt to forge intimacies that transcend sexuality or gender, the novel’s aporia enlists us in a process (of finding out more about Hal and Gately) that prioritises questions of straight male interiority under the guise of empathic exchanges – here between reader and text – ostensibly unmarked by such issues.

### Conclusion

Wallace’s texts securitise the risk of male homosexuality by depicting it as an animating yet unacknowledged desire inhering in straight men. A psychologised idea of the closet works like a financial security to bundle together notionally distinct forms of desire: specifically, a low-risk enervated heterosexuality with a high-risk, abjectly active homosexuality. The prospected benefit of such securitisation is that same-sex desire will replenish heterosexuality with the risk needed to facilitate empathy for, and between, heterosexual men. That this process gestures toward the future, and by affirming the importance of patriarchal lines of inheritance, presents male sexuality as useful to the extent that it confirms a reproductively futurist ethos. Male homosexuality may be adverse to this ethos, but its risk proves to be a manipulable asset for achieving such. Indeed, Wallace’s securitisation of homosexuality implies that risk taking and risk management are essential to creating future value. The nature of this value changes throughout his fiction, from *Broom*’s broad humour, to *Girl*’s concern

with cultural tradition, and to *Infinite Jest*'s defence of psychic interiority in the face of biomedical models of selfhood. Consistent, though, is the capitalising impulse of these representations. In other words, Wallace depicts the appropriate securitisation of homosexual risk as a way to procure a previously unavailable or unrealised emotional gain. This gain persistently relates to intimacies between heterosexual men.

My reading of these dynamics has closed with *Infinite Jest* because, after this novel, Wallace's texts do not engage with male homosexuality on the same level as they previously had. In fact in the short story 'Good Old Neon', collected in *Oblivion* (2004), one can see an attempt to relinquish links between male homosexuality, risk, and the closet. The protagonist, Neal, has realised that psychoanalysis is a dead-end when it comes to tackling the feelings of fraudulence that eventually lead to his suicide. Key to this realisation is how he finds himself able to outwit his analyst, Dr Gustafson, not least on the basis of the latter's repressed same-sex desires. Indeed, reflecting from what is an implied afterlife on Gustafson's terminal colon cancer, Neal observes how the idea of 'using your rectum or colon to secretly *harbor an alien growth* was a blatant symbol both of homosexuality and of the repressive belief that its open acknowledgment would equal disease and death' (163, italics in original). This awareness of homophobic ideas is qualitatively different from that shown in a story such as 'Lyndon', as it implies that to read the story in question with these ideas in mind is banal. Of course, whether or not 'Good Old Neon' escapes said homophobia as a result is debatable. What is significant for my purposes is how these remarks suggest that by the time of *Oblivion* Wallace no longer approaches male homosexuality as a risk to securitise.

It remains, though, that from *The Broom of the System* to *Infinite Jest* securitisation helps further the idea that male homosexuality is a toxic risk – and, indeed, that it is useful by virtue of being so. By framing this risk as an asset to neutrally manipulate, Wallace's texts reaffirm homophobic constructions of gay men. For the securitising processes that I have

identified to work, in other words, one must accept that homosexuality is a 'shameful, dirty, secret' ('Good Old Neon' 163) to begin with. This is not to imply that there is no room in which to read Wallace's depictions of male-male bonds, as Haddad does, as affirmative. His texts place value in relationships between men that, by nearing the brink but refusing to fall into homosexual revelation, evoke their sense of emotional intimacy. The affirmation arising from such vertiginous homosociality, however, rests upon a refusal to question the idea that male homosexuality is abject. Similar to Wallace's (sometimes) self-conscious depictions of misogyny, this has the effect of resolving tensions concerning male heterosexual privilege by implying that the phobic understandings such privilege rests on are – however lamentable – not open to change. Although the next two chapters recalibrate my focus from negativity to violence, this process only gains further purchase, albeit in more abrasive forms.

### Chapter 3

#### Contract: Gazing within Masochism

Jonathan Franzen's 2002 essay 'Mr Difficult' proposes two opposing models of literary value. On the one hand, Franzen suggests that there is the 'Status model' (100). In this model a text prizes formal difficulty as a sign of its distinction from a lay readership, and so 'invites a discourse of genius and art-historical importance' (100). On the other hand is the 'Contract model' (100), where 'the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness' (100). Though he is aware that this model, if 'taken to its free-market extreme' (100), positions the reader as a consumer and the author as a kind of service provider, Franzen is sympathetic to it nevertheless. This is because he values what he believes is the Contract model's ability to create connections between text and reader, even if 'the Contract sometimes calls for work' (111) from the latter – a stipulation that suggests he has something akin to an employment contract in mind. Wallace's texts complicate Franzen's dichotomy. As Severs notes, they are 'disdaining [of] Contract models of reading' (*Balancing Books* 220), displaying the formal difficulties that Franzen associates with the Status model. However, Wallace's disdain for contracts, whether as a metaphor for the relationship between reader and text or as a more general means of capitalist organisation, does not arise from his hostility towards connectedness. It arises, rather, from the suspicion that contracts create a power relationship in which one party is subservient to another.

As Walter Benn Michaels explains, neoliberal thinkers like Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises object to contracts on similar grounds. For them and their followers, contracts are 'too constraining, or, at least, constraining in the wrong way' (29). Whereas traditional employment contracts are 'binding in a way that necessarily limits the will' (29), neoliberals promote contracts that will protect individual self-determination. One result of



this, as Ted Schrecker and Clare Bambra note, is that since the rise of neoliberal policies in the U.K. and the U.S. ‘more and more people are working on either temporary contracts or no contracts’ (45). Indeed, ‘the once standard full-time, permanent contract with benefits has been superseded’ (45) by forms of temporary employment ‘which tend to be characterized by lower levels of security and poorer worker conditions’ (45). Quoting Andrew Hoberek, Michaels writes that ‘in this world [...] contract begins to look (but only for the worker) like “a site of nostalgia”’ (30). There is no such nostalgia in Wallace’s depictions of contracts.<sup>22</sup> Severs is right to say that his texts show an ‘anticontract stance’ (219), whether out of a belief that contracts inflict ‘second-order rules’ (45) onto more authentic connections, or because they mean – to use his example of Lenore in *The Broom of the System* – ‘loss of individual efficacy of will’ (45). Wallace’s texts suggest that the contract between reader and text needs to be reformed, and out of a neoliberal concern with protecting the former’s agency.<sup>23</sup>

That this agency pertains, in part, to their ability to feel what Franzen describes as a ‘sense of connectedness’ (100) with a text chimes with my previous analyses of Wallace’s interest in emotional intimacy. However, there are two important ways in which my readings here differ. First, Wallace’s hostility to contracts expresses less a desire for intimacy than it does for a sense of unmediated reality. One of the problems with thinking of the relationship between reader and text as a contract, for Wallace, is that it buffers the reader’s ability to connect with something ‘real’. This points to the second difference: Wallace associates this unmediated reality with ideas of male sexual violence. In *Infinite Jest* scenes of rape, torture, and suicide work *within but against* the contract between reader and text to remind the latter of an apparently male desire for inflicting harm. This chapter thus marks a shift in my reading of Wallace’s hideous neoliberal spermatics, from the Edelman inspired notion of a tamed or securitised sexual negativity, to what Sally Bachner describes as the prestige of violence. To recap, for Bachner an influential strand of contemporary U.S. fiction figures violence as an

extra-linguistic reality, one whose resistance to representation affords those who try to write about it a degree of literary-cultural prestige. In *Infinite Jest* male sexual violence plays this extra-linguistic role, the prestige in question arising from the struggle to depict said ‘reality’ in defiance of contractual constraints. Wallace prioritises one activity especially here: men’s capability, and ostensibly their desire, for sadistic gazing.

This brings to mind Laura Mulvey’s theories of gender and spectatorship, especially in her essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975). Here Mulvey explores ‘the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form’ (14). Working in a generally Lacanian framework, she argues that cinema replicates formative psychic processes for male spectators. In particular, ‘the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men’ (22) in classical narrative film instigates castration anxiety, to which men can respond either by ‘re-enactment of the original trauma [...] counter-balanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object’ (22) or ‘disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object’ (22). Significantly, for Mulvey ‘the first avenue, voyeurism [...] has associations with sadism’ (22). Wallace’s texts are invested in this notion of specifically male sadistic looking. However, this is not to suggest that he follows Mulvey’s work to the letter. What I describe as the male gaze in relation to his texts, in fact, shows little sign of the psychoanalytic ideas or the feminist politics driving her theories. Consequently, although I use the phrase ‘male gaze’ in this chapter to evoke the influential understanding of spectatorship that Mulvey’s work gives rise to, I do not try to evaluate its analytical accuracy. In my usage the male gaze refers to a mode of spectatorship, coded as heterosexual and male, that positions the subject in a sadistic relationship to that which he gazes at.

In fact, to understand how this gaze functions in Wallace’s texts, it is necessary to consider how those writing in Mulvey’s wake have challenged her work. As Michele Aaron argues, Mulvey’s theories of spectatorship suggest that cinema is ‘an institution that inflicts

and allows to dominate, if not to triumph, the gaze of the aggressor' (52). In this sense, male spectators are helpless before cinema's ability to turn them into voyeurs; forcing them to comply with this position, it grants men the illusion of mastery over the events onscreen. Following in the footsteps of Gaylyn Studlar, however, Aaron proposes that it is more useful to think of spectatorship as a masochistic activity. For Aaron, 'sadism cannot characterise spectatorship for it opposes complicity, where spectatorship, like masochism, is by nature contractual' (90). Central to Studlar and Aaron's readings is Gilles Deleuze's argument, in his study *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (1989), that 'the masochistic contract implies not only the necessity of the victim's consent, but his ability [...] to train his torturer' (75). The spectator enters a consensual, masochistic contract with a film, which allows them to disavow their complicity (namely, in deciding to suspend disbelief) in upholding the fantasy taking place on screen. To enjoy the illusion that a film affords, the spectator pretends they are being 'done-to' against their will. In reality, though, the film is a pseudo-sadist, for it depends on the spectator's active disavowal of its fakery to run smoothly.

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace tries to problematise these dynamics by soliciting the male gaze. The focus on contract in Deleuzian-inspired theories of spectatorship, not to mention how such masochistic models legitimate what Aaron calls 'activity-in-passivity' (62), runs counter to his desire to remind readers of their own 'male' capability for gazing. Indeed, as my reading of his essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' will demonstrate, for Wallace the spread of meta-fiction in popular culture undercuts the enjoyment to be had from masochistic contracts. This is because television shows and films now highlight their own fakery, thus compromising the spectator's ability to suspend disbelief. Such self-awareness, for Wallace, has important implications for how spectators engage with images of violence and suffering in particular. He suggests that spectatorial self-reflexivity disenchant these images, specifically by encouraging the entertainment industries to treat 'shock, grotesquerie,

or irreverence' ('E Unibus' 40) as little more than 'PR techniques' (40), and by presenting violence itself as a source of irony. Examples of such neutering can be seen in *Infinite Jest*'s account of the demise of television advertising, and in Wallace's criticism, in 'David Lynch Keeps His Head', of film director Quentin Tarantino. Indeed, given the importance of male sexuality to these dynamics, 'neutering' is a suitable term.

Such images for Wallace do little to undermine the self-reflexivity his texts diagnose; as the example of 'Accomplice!' in the last chapter shows, they can actually reinforce it. In contrast he presents scenes that, by trying to subject readers to 'real' extra-linguistic violence, aspire to break through the textual self-reflexivity that the idea of contract perpetuates. That said, my priority is not to assess how successful Wallace's texts are in achieving this goal. The force of Deleuzian inflected readings of spectatorial sadism, in fact, arises from how they render such a goal impossible. In other words, Wallace cannot subject readers to the fate of Gene Facklemann at the end of *Infinite Jest*, held to a chair with his eyelids sewn open and forced to watch his imminent torture. I am interested, rather, in what the endeavour to inflict and solicit sadism implies about his texts' attitudes to male sexuality, the gaze, and contract. Moreover, throughout this chapter I approach Wallace's texts through theories first deployed in film studies. In doing so, I concur with Philip Sayers that Wallace pursues 'a semiotically hybrid project, in which novel and film are shown to be fundamentally intertwined' (108). Sayers is referring to *Infinite Jest* here, but his observation is also applicable to other areas of Wallace's *oeuvre*. Indeed, for Stephen J. Burn 'his fiction – indeed his very theory of fiction – is profoundly visual' ('Toward a General Theory' 86). Though I am careful not to conflate literature with film, therefore, I draw on accounts of the latter in the conviction that they are appropriate tools with which to assess Wallace's use of the male gaze.

The idea that sadistic gazing challenges the subservience that, for Wallace, contracts impose, also points to the spermatic metaphors underpinning my readings in this chapter. In

Chapters 1 and 2 my metaphors derived from spermatic economy – hence notions of waste and investment. The current chapter, by contrast, works with ideas of blockage and release. As Sally Robinson observes, male liberationist discourse since the 1970s has often conflated ‘emotional, sexual, and violent “release” (154). In fact, the assumption ‘that emotional and sexual forces *must* be released constructs a blocked masculinity in order to legitimize various forms of release’ (130, italics in original). My next chapter considers the relationship between Wallace’s texts and male liberationist politics in more detail. For now I wish to emphasise how the dynamics Robinson spotlights, whereby a need for release retroactively legitimates the idea that male sexuality is blocked, informs their depictions of the male gaze. Wallace’s texts use the male gaze to suggest the possibility of release from masochistic contracts that hamper a reader’s ability to access – and acknowledge their capacity for carrying out – ‘real’ violence. The possibility of such release, though, is more important than its actuality, for in *Infinite Jest* especially Wallace works within masochistic dynamics to resist them.

The presumption here that men’s desire to gaze stems from a sadism they harbour *as men*, moreover, furthers Wallace’s suggestion that male sexual hideousness is incontestable. Chapter 1 argued that for Wallace men must manage, rather than challenge, their sexual negativity, chiefly envisaged as their desire for casual sex and masturbation. In Chapter 2 I showed how this management extends to the more abject negativity of male homosexuality, whether in relation to its presence in the psychic life of heterosexual men or in relation to anal intercourse between men. In the current chapter I explore how Wallace’s attempt to cultivate the male gaze in response to images of violence and suffering implies that sadism is an inevitable characteristic of male sexuality. True to the performative logic that characterises his hideous neoliberal spermatics, Wallace’s effort to reform the contract between reader and text on the basis of a (seeming) equality constructs the desire to gaze that he seeks to protect. If Chapter 3 thus acts as a pivot point in my thesis – from a concern with emotional intimacy

to ideas of unmediated reality; from spermatic metaphors of investment and waste to those of blockage and release; from non-reproductivity to the prestige of violence – my interest in male sexual hideousness in Wallace’s texts remains constant. The story ‘B.I. #48’, concerned as it is with an apparent sexual sadist, offers a good starting point for my investigation.

### ‘B.I. #48’ and the Masochistic Contract

Although ‘B.I. #48’ does not focus on spectatorship or visual culture, it is Wallace’s most concentrated treatment of male sexuality in relation to ideas of masochism and contract. Indeed, this story articulates the same dissatisfaction with contracts – that they prevent access to ‘real’ experience and undermine individual will – that inform his texts’ attachment to male gazing. Like many (but not all) of the stories in the ‘Brief Interviews’ cycle, ‘B.I. #48’ takes the form of a one-sided conversation, in which the female interviewer Q – whose dialogue Wallace withholds from the reader – questions a man about sex. In ‘B.I. #48’, the interviewee explains the process by which he asks his female dates “‘how would you feel about my tying you up?’” (86). In addition, he analyses his motivations for this ostensibly sadistic activity, which he attributes primarily to an emotionally abusive mother. The details that he gives Q come to evoke the constraints Wallace suggests contracts pose, especially to ideas of male sexual violence. Reading this story closely, therefore, can help to illuminate the conceptual context in which Wallace mobilises the male gaze. To the extent that he does so in opposition to Deleuzian ideas of masochistic contract, moreover, then ‘B.I. #48’ is even more useful. Although Boswell reads this story as a parody of Lacanian psychoanalysis (*Understanding* 192), it is more accurate, I believe, to interpret ‘B.I. #48’ as an oblique but precise response to Deleuze’s arguments in his study *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*.

Through a critical reappraisal of the work of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, most famously the author of *Venus in Furs* (1870), Deleuze questions the idea of sadomasochism.

Describing the conjunction of sadism and masochism as ‘a semiological howler’ (134), he seeks to emphasise their irreconcilability. Most significant for my purposes, and a central plank of the theories put forth by Aaron that I outlined above, is Deleuze’s argument that ‘the masochist draws up contracts while the sadist abominates and destroys them’ (20). In fact, ‘a genuine sadist could never tolerate a masochistic victim [...] Neither would the masochist tolerate a truly sadistic torturer’ (40-41). While a genuine sadist requires that their victim be non-consenting, masochistic fantasies require a torturer who is willing to play along with the *illusion* of such non-consent. The man of ‘B.I. #48’ has internalised such arguments. For example, he stresses that ‘it is not [...] *S and M*, and I am not a [...] *sadist*, and I am not interested in subjects who wish to be [...] *hurt*’ (88, italics in original). Moreover, he refers to his desires ‘in the phrase of Marchesani and Van Slyke’s theory of masochistic symbolism, as *proposing a contractual scenario*’ (88, italics in original). In place of Marchesani and Van Slyke – who are theorists of Wallace’s invention – one can read Deleuze, and specifically his argument that masochism involves a ‘world of fantasy and symbols’ (65) which rests on the contractual agreement to disavow its own fictitiousness.

If the interviewee of ‘B.I. #48’ is thus a pseudo-sadist – to the extent of binding his dates to ‘bedposts [that] are decorative and not at all sturdy and could no doubt be snapped by a determined effort to free themselves’ (96) – then his ‘victims’ are seemingly in control. As he explains further, ‘the play is in [...] freely and autonomously submitting to being tied up [...] the contract ensures that all abdications of power are freely chosen’ (90). This resonates with Michaels’ discussion. The neoliberal objection to employment contracts, for Michaels, can be understood as an objection to ‘the relation between a “Dominant” and a “Submissive” [which] would seem like the exemplary instance of asymmetry’ (29). Reading masochism in the terms derived from Sacher-Masoch, however, reconfigures ‘that relation as one that the Submissive desires and to which she consents’ (29), and so ‘renders them [i.e. Dominant and

Submissive] symmetrical' (29). What makes this reconfiguration conducive to neoliberal thought is that it denies material inequalities in favour of the idea that we are all independent contractors, free to invest our human capital. Thus, to argue that the interviewee's 'victims' approach the erotic activity with the same (if not more) power as the man who ties them up downplays the fact that he is still the one who authors the scenario. Deleuze's masochist may enjoy the psychic power of knowing *they* control the fantasy, but they lack a material power that would afford them more determinate forms of social agency.

One could thus read 'B.I. #48' alongside Michaels' essay as critiquing neoliberal masochism, in that the story aligns the speaker's orchestration of a contractual scenario in which no one is actually bound with what turns out to be his psychological damage. There is a subtle difference between the two, however, that undercuts this reading. For Michaels the activity-in-passivity to be derived from masochistic contracts is questionable because, when applied to the employer-employee relationship, it masks capital's exploitation of labour by suggesting that the latter's willingness to work is a sign of its empowered self-determination. This is the belief that 'what workers really want is to be fucked' (31). By contrast, Wallace's objection to such activity-in-passivity is that the empowerment it produces is not empowering *enough*; to use Michael's metaphor, instead of wanting to be fucked, the reader should be fucking.<sup>24</sup> The task for the reader is not what Michaels implicitly suggests it is for the worker – to realise the capital-labour relationship is exploitative, and so demolish it – but, rather, to seek forms of agency that activate their potential as bearers of (human) capital themselves. As I argue later on in this chapter in relation to *Infinite Jest*, this does not mean that Wallace escapes Michaels' objection, so much as that he proves its pertinence at a further remove. In other words, the activity that the novel tries to stoke in readers as male gazers itself comes to mask power disparities between the two. For now, it is enough to say that in 'B.I. #48' the



closing revelation that the speaker occupies the role of masochist affirms this apparent need for a more empowering, because violent, individual agency.

Having explained to Q the process of tying up his dates, and of then asking them to assure him that they know he will not ‘betray or abuse the power I’ve been ceded’ (97), the scenario reaches ‘a sustained climax which persists for exactly as long as it takes me to extract these assurances from her’ (97). If this language is suggestive of an orgasmic build up, not only does its consummation – in the form of his ‘victim’s’ assurance – counter any sense of phallic aggression, but so does the fact that ‘I weep. It is then that I weep’ (97). Despite being ‘restricted [...] by the bonds [he’s] made’ (97), his dates ultimately occupy the role of (pseudo-) sadist rather than masochist – for it is they, in their solicited assurance, who allow the speaker to indulge in his suffering. Wallace hints at this in an earlier slip-of-the-tongue – the man’s psychological complexes force him into ‘contracted rituals where [...] control [is] ceded and then returned of my own free will. [Laughter.] Of the subject’s, rather. Will’ (94, third brackets in the original). Hence Severs is inaccurate to read ‘B.I. #48’ as an example of how Wallace’s texts make ‘contracts’ mastery the province of sadists, characters who inflict pain and call it pleasure’ (149). Far from being proof of his sadism, the speaker’s need to form contracts is part of a convoluted attempt to surrender his will to partners who, though immobilised, can stand in judgement of his suffering.

Convolution is indeed the key term here, as it points to an aspect of the neoliberal objection to contracts that eludes Michaels’ focus, but which is important to ‘B.I. #48’. This is the constraint that arises less from the disciplinary nature of contracts, and more from their excessive obfuscation. As Gerard Hanlon observes, ‘a dominant neo-liberal motif has been to burn red tape’ (179), understood as bureaucracy and regulation that reduces efficiency. In ‘B.I. #48’ the speaker’s use of ‘sustained and increasingly annoying f.f.’ (91), i.e. the ‘flexion of upraised fingers to signify tone quotes’ (85), is evocative of a form of interpersonal red-

tape. The phrase ‘flexion of upraised fingers’ (85), and variations or abbreviations upon it, appear 57 times in this 13 page story, suggesting the contractual mesh in which its speaker resides. At first blush, this constant self-reference indicates the speaker’s attempt to control the interpretation of his speech, hence Severs’ suggestion that he exemplifies the ‘legalistic tyrants, even fascists’ (*Balancing Books* 221) in Wallace’s texts who use contract language. Yet, given how the speaker is in fact a masochist in the guise of a (pseudo-)sadist, it is more accurate to read his finger flexions as a sign of his subservience to scenarios that, though of his own making, undercut his individual agency. Hence the irony of his and the story’s final sentence – ‘sometimes one just has to go with the mood’ (97). The contractual red-tape with which he surrounds himself makes any such impassioned action unlikely.

Moreover, Wallace suggests that breaking the contract by demystifying its mechanics does little to cut through said tape. ‘B.I. #48’ is one long demystification of the processes that masochistic fantasies normally keep in the dark – i.e., the fact that the pain inflicted is with a victim’s consent, who is a complicit party in the fantasy’s unfolding. As the interviewee puts it, ‘I know precisely what the whole thing is about’ (88). This echoes Wallace’s complaint that meta-fiction only offers a faux transcendence of textual mediation, in what he argues is the misguided notion ‘that revelation of imprisonment led to freedom’ (‘E Unibus’ 67). The speaker’s knowledge of his desire to form masochistic contracts cannot free him from what Wallace implies are its debilitating effects. The need arises, therefore, for a more effective means of challenging such contracts, which as I show below, Wallace explores through the male gaze. When issues of vision do appear in ‘B.I. #48’, they reiterate the speaker’s inability to act sadistically. He explains how, as his dates process his proposal, ‘I answer their intense gaze with a bland gaze of my own [...] But again please note I am in no way aggressive or threatening about it. This is what I meant by [f.f.] *bland gaze*’ (92, italics in original). For Wallace, contemporary U.S. culture makes the male gaze bland on account of how the same

self-reflexivity the man in 'B.I. #48' exhibits has spread throughout popular media. Wallace directs most of his blame for this state of affairs at television.

### Tongue Scrapers and Born Oglers

In 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' Wallace discusses the effect that television has on spectatorship. Though his chief focus is on writers – 'oglers' who 'lurk and stare' (22) and about whom there is 'something creepy, somehow. Almost predatory' (22) – his arguments also aim for a broader cultural relevance. For 'Joe Briefcase', Wallace's 'average U.S. lonely person' (22), television is 'almost like voyeurism' (23) because it allows for the illusion of 'espial on the forbidden' (45). However, in contrast to 'genuine Peeping Tomism' (23), 'television is performance' (23), so what appears to be a forbidden reality is in fact pre-fabricated. In this light Wallace describes television in ways that imply a masochistic relationship between audience and screen, as 'illusions of voyeurism and privileged access require serious *complicity* from the viewer' (24, italics added). Thus, the illusion of true voyeurism rests on a complicit understanding of how this voyeurism is fake; we are only a 'pseudo-spy, when we watch', but 'we choose to ignore' (24) this fact to enjoy the illusion. Wallace's descriptions evoke the masochistic contracts that Aaron argues characterise spectatorship. As my analysis of 'B.I. #48' suggested, his suspicion of these dynamics arises from a belief that they hamper an individual's ability to experience – and feel as though they can perpetuate and enjoy – an authentic male sexual violence. In 'E Unibus Pluram' Wallace argues that this problem is exacerbated by a phenomenon he calls 'meta-watching' (33).

He uses this term to refer to a culture of self-aware spectatorship. Television has helped to create this culture, Wallace argues, by incorporating the self-referential techniques of postmodern fiction. Consequently, meta-watching forestalls a spectator's ability to believe that what they see on television is real – or, at the very least, that it points to 'versions of "real

life” made prettier, sweeter, livelier’ (33). Indeed, television ‘has become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it’ (33). The meta-watching that this self-referentiality inculcates, for Wallace, is a ‘disease from which [...] watchers, and readers all suffer’ (49). This is because such a ‘metastasis of self-conscious watching’ (34) has led – in what is now a commonplace in Wallace studies – to an emotionally alienating hyper-reflexivity. Most important for my purposes is how Wallace envisages this process in terms that are suggestive of masochistic contracts. For ‘we are responsible [for this suffering] basically because nobody is holding any weapons on us forcing us to spend amounts of time second only to sleep’ (37) watching television. Spectators are not subject to sadism – no one forces them to watch at gun point – but willing victims of the emotional suffering that meta-watching creates. Hence ‘the very idea of pleasure’, understood as the ability to suspend disbelief in illusions, ‘has been undercut’ (59), and in its place has arisen the substitute (and for Wallace, paltry) satisfaction of knowing one is not being fooled.

In this respect, the ‘quiet psychic intercourse between images and oglers’ (53) that spectatorship depends upon is no longer quiet. Instead spectators for Wallace now occupy a position similar to that of the interviewee in ‘B.I. #48’; they are thoroughly aware that passivity before screen media is the result of a consensual decision. Further, if masochistic theories of spectatorship stress how, in Aaron’s words, masochism ‘is an active desire played out through passivity’ (52), then spectators’ awareness of this fact allows them to manipulate their own activity-in-passivity as a form of capital. In other words, spectators will not watch texts that do not promise a return on their spectatorial investment. As a result, for Wallace when ‘networks do occasionally abandon time-tested formulas the Audience usually punishes them for it by not watching the shows’ (40). This is important because it suggests how his objection to masochistic modes of spectatorship is, in part, indicative of his suspicion that entrepreneurial logics have crept into the relationship between texts and spectators. There is

thus room to read Wallace's descriptions of spectatorship as anti-neoliberal, as he scorns the entrepreneurial approach to texts that, in Greenwald Smith's words, posit that 'investment of energy needs to be justified by the return reward or pleasure' (*Affect and American Literature* 36). That said, his problem with the faux nature of this agency – that it is acted out through passivity – trumps his problem with its entrepreneurial implications.

One can see this in his discussion, towards the end of 'E Unibus Pluram', of George Gilder's *Life After Television: The Coming Transformation of Media and American Life* (1990). Ostensibly, the scepticism that Wallace shows for Gilder's arguments suggests his distance from the idea that contracts suppress individual agency. Indeed, he quotes Gilder's belief that the technological limitations of television means that it relies on 'a "master-slave" architecture' (quoted in 'E Unibus', 71). Gilder's solution – technological advancements that will give viewers more control over what they watch – accords with the idea of making them more entrepreneurial. As their 'own manipulator of video-bits' (73), spectators can choose to invest their attention only in those texts which provide a pleasurable return. Yet this solution strikes Wallace as 'wildly unrealistic' (74): Gilder's 'new tech would end "the passivity of mere reception"' (74), but it would not end 'the dependency that is part of my relation to TV or the impotent irony I must use to pretend I'm not dependent' (75). Thus, though Wallace is sceptical of Gilder's desire to allow spectators to 'break from the coffle and choose freely' (74), he still subscribes to the idea that television *does* dominate audiences – albeit, in ways that convince them that their dependency is a sign of their empowerment. A more genuine agency that will challenge screen media's domination of spectators is possible for Wallace, one that, as I will show, he associates with sadistic male gazing.

Wallace sees the possibility of such agency in the films of David Lynch, which in their depictions of sexual violence try to remind male spectators of their propensity for same. Before I explore how this works, though, it is important to consider the role of images of

violence and suffering in his *oeuvre* more generally. For the violence that Wallace lauds in Lynch's films, and which I argue he tries to replicate in *Infinite Jest*, is an exception to his texts' otherwise pessimistic estimation of extreme visual content. His most sustained focus on this is in *Oblivion*'s closing story, 'The Suffering Channel'. In part about a television channel showing 'real life still and moving images of [the] most intense available moments of human anguish' (291), the story suggests how 'shock, grotesquerie, or irreverence' ('E Unibus' 40) lose their power to affect spectators when they become implicated in the marketing strategies of entertainment industries. However, a more productive example of this process appears in *Infinite Jest* itself, namely in Hal's account, in one of his school assignments, on 'the fall and rise of millennial U.S. advertising' (411).<sup>25</sup> This vignette relates the circumstances in which television in *Infinite Jest* comes to be replaced by a technology much like Gilder's proposed 'telecomputer' (quoted in 'E Unibus', 72). Here the most disturbing images of suffering only lubricate forms of spectatorship that, in their focus upon a spectator's agency-in-passivity in a consensual framework, follow the logic of masochistic contract.

The disturbing images in question appear in commercials for aspirin, liposuction, and tongue-scrapers, and all utilise bodily suffering that spectators find 'so excruciating that they were buying the product but recoiling from the ads' (412). Adverts for 'NoCoat Inc.' (413), in particular, with their 'close-up on an extended tongue that must be seen to be believed' (414), 'crossed some kind of psychoaesthetic line' (413). Seemingly, then, these images of suffering sadistically affect spectators, for they are 'so violently unpleasing to look at that they [...] awakened legions of these suddenly violently repelled and disturbed viewers to the power and agency their thumbs actually afforded them' (413). The irony that such agency amounts to changing the channel is compounded by how cable providers launch a campaign attacking 'the "passivity" of [...] pussified Network broadcasters', by 'extoll[ing] the "empoweringly American choice" of 500-plus esoteric cable options' (412). Not only does

spectators' power to change the channel make them active in their passivity, but cable providers manipulate this power to sell products. Wallace's critique of Gilder's idea that better technology will end the spectator's passivity applies here, locked as audiences are into the '*appearance of freedom*' (1031n164, italics in original). Hence 'violently unpleasing' (413) images in this scenario, rather than reminding spectators of their ability to perpetuate violence, only further implicate them in a masochistic subservience to their screens.

The result of this use of images like tongue-scrapers is the rise of InterLace, the Gilder-esque televisual technology behind which stands Lace-Forche – a 'woman called by Microsoft's Gates "The Killer-App Queen" and by Blockbuster's Huizenga "The only woman I personally fear"' (415). After teaming up with 'ad-maestro P. Tom Veals' (415), Lace-Forche sets out a vision for empowering the 'vox- and digitus-populi' (416) in a way that highlights her gender. For 'what if, Veals's spokeswoman ruminated aloud, what if the viewer could become her/his own programming director; what if s/he could define the very entertainment-happiness it was her/his right to pursue?' (416, italics in original) The idea that Lace-Forche is merely Veals's 'spokeswoman' is misleading given that she has had Interlace 'idling ever since she'd first foreseen broadcast apocalypse in the Nunhagen ads' (415) for aspirin, and that it is she who 'ruminate[s] aloud' here undercuts Veals's apparent seniority. One can attribute 'her/his' and 's/he' to her, the repetition of the former implying that these terms signal more than just gender parity. By pointedly prioritising a feminine pronoun, they signal how Wallace links the intensified passivity that arises from InterLace with women. In addition to its gender traditionalism, this link implies that treating images of violence as little more than a way to sell products emasculates male spectators.

These dynamics echo my investigation of pornification in Chapter 1, notably in how Wallace urges readers to question women's consumerism. Moreover, his comment in 'Big Red Son' that pornography's need to retain an aura of unacceptability despite its cultural

prominence means that ‘the real horizon late-’90s porn is heading towards is the Snuff Film’ (28n23) resonates with my current discussion. One can indeed interpret Wallace’s concern with visual extremes in the context of his treatment of pornification; it is no accident that the broadcast proposals for the Suffering Channel mention ‘MCI Premium’s Adult Film Channel rate variance per prorate’ (291) as a model. A difference here, of course, is that pornification as I have examined it previously pertained to texts that solicit literal sexual expenditures. By contrast, with advertisements for tongue scrapers and liposuction it is a case of soliciting a more general prurience. Helen Hester has argued that, with the rise of genres such as torture porn, ideas of the pornographic have started to refer to ‘a realm of representation that not only sporadically eschews or displaces sex, but that *need not be sexually explicit at all*’ (15 italics in original). Wallace’s notion that hard-core pornography will naturally lead to snuff films of the kind that appear on the Suffering Channel supports Hester’s argument. Still, that he approaches these images via a concern for men’s threatened capability for sadistic gazing confirms how male sexuality remains a key reference point.

Indeed, the sadistic gazing that Wallace suggests televisual culture inhibits in ‘E Unibus Pluram’ is distinctly reminiscent of the male gaze. As the above descriptions of a lost ability to ‘ogle’ in a ‘creepy’ and ‘almost predatory’ way imply, the voyeurism that television endangers is a stereotypically male form of sadistic looking. Though Wallace notes that ‘born oglers’ (81) include those worried about ‘whether their shirttail might be hanging out of their fly, [or] whether there’s maybe lipstick on their teeth’ (21), this gender parity does not bear out. In fact, alongside his comment that television has hold of ‘my generation’s cojones’ (41), his invocation of the parodically banal Joe Briefcase, and his recourse to the phrase ‘Peeping-Tomism’ (23), it is clear that the ogling that Wallace presents as under threat is specifically male. That it is also heterosexual, moreover, is implied in the image he uses to warn against Gilder’s interactive technologies: namely, he wonders ‘who’s going to want to take such stuff



[i.e. guides for aesthetic worth] seriously in ecstatic post-TV life, with Kim Basinger waiting to be interacted with?’ (76) From the perspective of 1993 (the publication year of ‘E Unibus Pluram’ in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*), Basinger’s fame rested on her status as a sex symbol in films such as the erotic thriller *9 ½ Weeks* (1986) or the spoof comedy *Wayne’s World 2* (1993), where she plays a character named Honey Hornée. Wallace’s mention of her, then, reaffirms how the ‘erotically charged’ (23) voyeurism he believes television undercuts is a characteristic of heterosexual men in particular.

Too much might seem to rest here on comments that appear incidental to Wallace’s central arguments in ‘E Unibus Pluram’ concerning irony, meta-fiction, and television. His at times cartoonish expressions – for example, complaining that television has ‘a hold on my generation’s cojones’ (41) – also encourage one to take these comments as mere slapstick flourishes. Nevertheless, they indicate the specifically heteromasculine frameworks through which Wallace advances his arguments, frameworks, I argue, that fundamentally colour his understanding of spectatorship. By focusing on similar aspects in ‘David Lynch Keeps his Head’, it becomes even more apparent how important male sexuality is in this regard. For Wallace, Lynch’s films hold out the promise of challenging the masochistic contracts that, he suggests, undermine the power of violent images to remind spectators of their own potential sadism. Reading this essay in light of ‘E Unibus Pluram’, as well as alongside his comments elsewhere on mainstream cinema, allows me to better coordinate Wallace’s own attempts to solicit male gazes in *Infinite Jest*. As will become clear, Wallace draws energy from what he considers to be Lynch’s disregard for spectatorial contracts. He does so, however, in order to appropriate those aspects that gel best with the neoliberal desire to make contracts between film and spectator, or reader and novel, ones of seeming equality.

#### Gazing with David Lynch

In 'David Lynch Keeps His Head' Wallace explores spectatorship in ways that are reminiscent of his arguments in 'E Unibus Pluram', albeit in relation to cinema rather than television. Indeed, Wallace's descriptions of spectatorship here suggest that both mediums share similar masochistic dynamics. Ostensibly, 'movies are an authoritarian medium. They vulnerabilize you and then dominate you' (169). This seems to conflict with his suggestions in 'E Unibus Pluram' that nothing forces people to watch so much television. Yet, the fact that 'part of the magic of going to a movie is surrendering to it, *letting it* dominate you' (169, italics added), implies that a spectator's consent is vital to such domination taking place. In this light, Wallace conceives of cinema and television as both depending upon the spectator's ability to pretend they are being 'done to' against their will. This is not to say that Wallace thus simply equates the two. David Hering is arguably over-generous in describing Wallace's criticisms of television as 'rather reductive' (*Fiction and Form* 176n13). Although Wallace displays similar ire for certain films (as I will show below in relation to *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* [1991]), his texts also allow for the idea, as Sayers points out, that art film in particular can 'reverse the sleep-inducing effect of [commercial] entertainment' (112). Wallace is attracted to Lynch's work because it complicates the distinctions between 'art film and commercial film' (170), but he values its ability to wake spectators up to realities they would rather not face. Chiefly, his films remind them of their propensity for male gazing.

Discussing the relationship between Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) and Frank Booth (Dennis Hooper) in *Blue Velvet* (1986), Wallace suggests that with Jeffrey 'we too peeked through those closet vents at Frank's feast of sexual fascism' (207), as the latter rapes Isabella Rossellini's character, Dorothy. When Frank turns to Jeffrey in a later scene to tell him that "'You're like me'", Wallace 'just ha[s] to sit there and be uncomfortable' in his awareness that Frank is also talking to him (207, italics in original). In a footnote he then states that 'I don't think it's an accident that of the grad-school friends I first saw *Blue Velvet* with [...] the

two who said they felt like either the movie was really sick or they were really sick or both they and the movie were really sick [...] were both male' (207n58, italics in original). *Blue Velvet*'s depiction of sexual violence, Wallace implies, resonates with men in particular, who find 'the sadism and degeneracy he [i.e. Jeffrey] witnesses compelling and somehow erotic' (167). That he does not entertain that men might identify with Dorothy – and so a suffering, masochistic position – compounds how his interest lies in the film's power to force men into acknowledging their capability and desire for sadism. Indeed, 'nothing sickens me like seeing on-screen some of the very parts of myself I've gone to the movies to try to forget about' (166). Film spectatorship may work within a masochistic dynamic, but *Blue Velvet*, for Wallace, shows how an artist can challenge this in order to sadistically affect spectators; in this instance, men whom Lynch forces to confront their own desire to gaze.

Wallace attributes this sadistic power to the fact that Lynch's depictions of violence are 'qualitatively different from Hollywood or even anti-Hollywood's hip cartoon-violence. Lynch's violence always tries to *mean* something' (165, italics in original). Wallace points to the films of Quentin Tarantino as exemplifying the 'violently ironic' (165) character of anti-Hollywood in particular. For 'unlike Tarantino, D. Lynch knows that an act of violence in an American film has, through repetition and desensitization, lost the ability to refer to anything but itself' (165). By implication Lynch's violence refers outside of itself, and refuses to flatter the spectator's knowledge of 'hip cartoon-violence', so that it can '*mean* something' for men especially. In this regard Tarantino's 'hip' violence, by affirming the spectators' ability to get the joke or understand a reference, has much the same effect as the meta-watching Wallace describes in 'E Unibus Pluram'. To reuse a line from that essay, Tarantino's violence 'lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it' (33). This suggests that, by forestalling the spectator's ability to believe that such violence is real, or at least points to the real, films like Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) flatter the spectator's awareness of being within cinematic

conventions. As a result, for Wallace the scene in said film ‘where Michael Madsen, dancing to a cheesy ’70s tune, *cuts off a hostage’s ear*’ (164, italics in original) can only register as an ironic intertextual reference (indeed, to the severed ear in *Blue Velvet*). Tarantino leaves the spectator’s own possible desire to cut off people’s ears unprovoked.

Wallace goes on to write in ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’ that ‘if we know on some level what a movie *wants* from us, we can erect certain internal defenses that let us choose how much of ourselves we give away to it’ (170-1, italics in original). With Lynch’s films, by contrast, ‘you don’t feel like you’re entering into any of the standard unspoken/unconscious contracts your normally enter into’ (170). Apparently, then, Lynch bypasses the masochistic contracts that underpin spectatorship, and sadistically affects male spectators as a result. Yet the qualifying phrase ‘*you don’t feel like you’re entering*’ (170, italics added) these contracts forestalls the idea that Lynch contravenes the spectator’s consent entirely, implying as it does that the contract is still at work but without the spectator’s knowledge. This contrasts with the speaker’s self-awareness in ‘B.I. #48’, and Wallace’s arguments in ‘E Unibus Pluram’ that spectators only invest in texts which promise them a satisfying return. If Lynch’s films create the impression of an unmediated connection between film and spectator, they do so in ways that deny spectators the ability to manage their own consent in being ‘dominated’. In this sense, his films, for Wallace, work within masochistic contracts to resist them. Frank’s rape of Dorothy in *Blue Velvet*, then, confronts male spectators with a seemingly genuine sadism, unhampered by the psychic defences that contracts allow for.

It is not just anti-Hollywood, however, against which Wallace contrasts Lynch’s films. He also critiques mainstream Hollywood for pandering to audience expectations. This is most evident in his comments on how ‘most U.S. mystery and suspense and crime and horror films [...] massage [...] our moral certainties’ (209-10n60). Consequently, ‘when a filmmaker fails to wrap his product up in the appropriate verity-confirming fashion [...] we

feel an unspoken but very important covenant has been violated' (210n60). This implies that masochistic modes of spectatorship are conducive to genre film – indeed, as it is 'inarguable, axiomatic' (209n60) that these kind of films conclude in forms of 'commercial catharsis' (203), 'the discomfort we feel at [for example] "suspense" movies is perceived as a pleasant discomfort' (210n60). For the film scholar Thomas Schatz, if 'genre exists as a sort of tacit "contract" between filmmakers and audience, the genre film is an actual event that honors such a contract' (16). The applicability of this observation to the masochistic contract is clear: the spectator disavows their knowledge that what they see is not real in the expectation that a film will fulfil what Schatz calls a 'system of conventions' (6). Notably, Wallace's complaint lies with the conventionality of these processes, not with the creation of suspense or 'pleasant discomfort' (210n60) itself. To see how this informs his desire to solicit the male gaze, it is useful to turn to his reading of James Cameron's *Terminator 2*.

In 'The (As It Were) Seminal Importance of *Terminator 2*', Wallace argues that this film is responsible for 'inaugurating what's become this decade's new genre of big-budget film: Special Effects Porn' (177). This is because such films consist of 'half a dozen or so isolated, spectacular scenes [...] of riveting, sensuous payoff – strung together via [...] often hilariously insipid narrative' (177). Wallace's analogy supports Hester's notion that "'porn" has become attached to a surprisingly diverse set of texts and affects, few of which actually put the sexual body front and center' (14). In place of the violence that Wallace conceptually links to hard-core porn in 'Big Red Son' or 'The Suffering Channel', though, the payoff here pertains to computer generated spectacles. Most notable for my purposes is that he describes these spectacles as payoffs, in the sense of the film industry's desire for profit, but also in the sense of the genre films' expected pleasures. Yet for Wallace, the pre-sell in 'the popular entertainment media before *T2* even goes into production' (183) means that 'one of the few things that keep us on the edge of our seats during the movie is our suspense about whether

James Cameron can possibly weave a plausible, non-cheesy narrative' (183). If Hollywood's reliance on lucrative genre conventions inhibits its power to challenge spectators, the meta-watchful context of *Terminator 2* further ameliorates this power to the point that, for Wallace, its products follow the same formulas as 'hard-core cheapies' (177).

Wallace's spermatic puns in this essay – namely, why *Terminator 2* is *seminally* important – are also significant. He concludes by noting that 'popular entertainment media report that Cameron's new *Titanic*, currently in post-production, is (once again) the most expensive and technically ambitious film of all time. A nation is even now pricing trenchcoats and lubricants in anticipation of its release' (188-9). This image of a stereotypical male porn consumer compounds Wallace's idea of 'the F/X Porn genre' (182), whereby male orgasm figures as a metaphor for Hollywood's generic pleasures. Further to this, the more oblique pun here – that these consumers wait in 'anticipation of its release' (189) – is telling of how male orgasm, masochistic/generic contracts, and suspense intertwine. *Titanic* promises the same meta-watchful awareness as *Terminator 2* did, where an abundance of industry pre-sell reduces the suspense available for male spectators to the level of routinised ejaculation. Hence the irony of Wallace's parting remark: the release of coming has little value when the anticipation involved is so dependable spectators can prepare for it in advance. Echoing the dynamics I explored in Chapter 1 concerning how pornification's easy gratifications devalue male sexuality, Wallace suggests that F/X Porn undermines the tension and suspense that – for him, at least – makes ejaculation worthwhile.

By contrast, Wallace asserts that *Blue Velvet*'s 'real climax, and its point [...] comes unusually early' (207), a remark he footnotes with the single word '(prematurely!)' (207n57). This climax pertains to the aforementioned moment when Frank tells Jeffrey "'*You're like me*'" (207, italics in original). By describing what he believes is the film's central point – forcing spectators to recognise how, like Jeffrey, they have a propensity for sadistic gazing –

through an image of premature ejaculation, Wallace distinguishes Lynch's violence from mainstream Hollywood's generic pleasures. Further, this image also undercuts the figurative value of male ejaculation to the narrative's progress, and so to the catharsis that a spectator would expect from a less challenging film. As Wallace goes on to note, Jeffrey's response to Frank's statement is to punch him 'in the nose [...] In the film's audience, I, to whom Frank has also just claimed kinship, have no such luxury of *violent release*; I pretty much just have to sit there and be uncomfortable' (207, italics added). Having prematurely climaxed, *Blue Velvet* denies spectators what films such as *Terminator 2* cater for: an ejaculatory, aesthetic satisfaction that confirms their preconceptions, in this instance, that they are different 'from sadists and fascists and voyeurs' (207). That Wallace must sit and feel uncomfortable signals how this furthers the film's power to implicate him in its sexual violence.

In *Infinite Jest*'s scenes of rape, suicide, and torture, Wallace pursues many of the same effects that he lauds in Lynch's films; chiefly, their attempt to remind spectators, as he puts in the Lynch essay, of 'the psychic spaces in which [straight, male] people are capable of evil' (203). More specifically, these scenes manipulate the masochistic contract between an imagined male spectator/reader and text to remind the former of their propensity for sadistic gazing. Yet there are important differences between Lynch's methods and those deployed in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace leavens his enthusiasm for what he describes as the 'sick' (166) nature of Lynch's films with an awareness that, while 'some of them are brilliant and unforgettable; others are jejune and incoherent and bad' (166). Beyond this explicit equivocation a more important difference arises from the fact that, although Lynch can remind male spectators of their capacity for sadistic gazing, he does not remind them of their contractedness. The effect of feeling 'like you're [not] entering to into any of the standard unspoken/unconscious contracts' (170) with Lynch may be positive for helping to remind men of their sadism, but it does not assist in reforming contracts so much as (providing an impression of) doing without

them. In the passages of *Infinite Jest* I examine shortly, the point is not just to remind a male reader of their sadism, but in doing so, to transform the masochistic contract between reader and text from one of dominance-submission to one of seeming equality.

To return to Michaels, neoliberalism ‘won’t just let contract go [...] because it’s only employment contracts that it really wants to get rid of’ (31). The point is to replace a ‘liberal relation between employer and employee’ (31) with ‘the neoliberal relationship between independent contractors’ (31), because in doing so, ‘real capital saves itself a lot of money’ (31). *Infinite Jest*’s reasons for transforming contract in this way do not arise from a desire to save resources (the scenes I look at are some of the novel’s most descriptively rich), but out of an ideological conviction that Michaels’ readiness to ascribe blame to ‘real capital’ elides. The novel reminds male readers of their propensity for sadistic gazing because contracts in which no party dominates are, ostensibly, more respectful of individual will. Additionally, by placing text and reader on a seemingly equal footing when it comes to such gazing, Wallace implies that reformulating contracts thus facilitates a greater intimacy with an unmediated, ‘real’ violence. Indeed, whereas *Blue Velvet* depicts sexual violence so that ‘the colors are so lush and the *mise en scene* so detailed and sensual’ (206n56), similar scenes in *Infinite Jest* – despite their lushness – figure violence as a reality that escapes representation. By looking at an AA speaker’s tale of her sister’s rape, Joelle’s suicide attempt, and Gene Facklemann’s torture, one can see how the novel works within but against masochistic contracts to position a male reader and the text as equally gazing at elusive depravities.

‘Cruel is spelled with a u, he remembered’ (*Infinite Jest* 980, italics in original)

What Bachner describes as the prestige of violence in contemporary U.S. fiction is based on something of a paradox. Violence in the texts she examines is ‘the extralinguistic ontological order’ (4) which said texts ‘gesture [toward] but insist they cannot reach’ (4). Hence,



‘violence remains outside, above, or below the reach of language’ (3), but we only know this because writers keep insisting on its inviolability through language. The scenes from *Infinite Jest* that I look at here illustrate this paradox. Despite their linguistic density, they represent the violence in question as – to borrow a cinematic image from Wallace’s description of the end of *Infinite Jest* – ‘projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame’ (quoted in Staes, 29). Wallace uses this elusiveness to suggest that reader and text are therefore equally frustrated in their attempt to access such violence. Reminding them of their propensity for sadistic male gazing, these scenes reconfigure the contract between reader and text along the neoliberal lines of a seeming equality. That this means reforming rather than voiding said contract, moreover, is evident in how the rape, suicide, and torture that I explore mobilise a masochistic suspense of the kind, in fact, that Wallace argues F/X Porn films like *Terminator 2* neuter. In the spermatic imagery of these passages, Wallace gestures towards orgasmic climaxes he never provides, compounding the impression of a figurative impotence before unmediated realities that *Infinite Jest* shares with its reader-cum-male gazer.

To understand what makes this suspense masochistic, one has to return to Deleuze. Dissatisfied with attempts to explain masochism in terms of its content (chiefly, the apparent reversal of pain into pleasure) Deleuze proposes that one can consider it more accurately in formal terms. Paramount here is the idea that ‘masochism is a state of waiting’ (71), whether for ‘the whip or the sword that never strikes, the fur that never discloses the flesh, the heel that is forever descending on the victim’ (70), or so on. Such waiting, says Deleuze, can be divided into two currents: that which is *awaited*, ‘something essentially tardy, always late and always postponed’ (71), and that which is *expected*, ‘on which depends the speeding up of the awaited object’ (71). Consequently, ‘the masochist waits for pleasure as something that is bound to be late, and expects pain as the condition that will finally ensure [...] the advent of pleasure’ (71). As Aaron explains, ‘rather than pleasure being achieved and enhanced by the

wait being over [...] pleasure is heightened through anticipation itself (excitement grows with expectation of the desired object's arrival ... having it could only be disappointing)' (60).

The scenes from *Infinite Jest* I examine below illuminate this dynamic. Their accumulating violence figures the expectation of pain as an anticipatory prerequisite for awaited pleasure, which – and the following pun is significant – never actually comes.

This is clear in an AA speaker's tale of how she witnessed, and became complicit in, her stepfather's repeated rape of her paralyzed stepsister. Wallace moves from descriptions of the sister's formlessness, to the revelation that the father forces her to wear a Raquel Welch mask, to how the speaker hides evidence of the abuse from her stepmother, to how the sister enjoys being raped, and so on. Delivered in one paragraph over four and a half pages, this gradual increase of information subjects readers to the expectation of ever new depravities. That the speaker removes the mask from her stepsister after each rape, moreover, makes her complicit in the abuse: the father 'never once acknowledged the adopted daughter's little post-incestuous tidying-up. It's the kind of sick unspoken complicity characteristic of wildly dysfunctional families' (372). This 'sick unspoken complicity' also extends to the reader, whom Wallace positions as gazing at the events in question. Before she begins her tale, the speaker's admission that she was 'a stripper and semi-whore at the infamous Naked I Club' (370) causes 'a number of male eyes in the audience [to] flash with sudden recognition, and despite all willed restraint automatically do that crawly north-to-south thing down her body' (370). Wallace frames the story from the start, then, in the context of the male gaze. This diegetic recognition of being implicated in her suffering, and the subsequent compulsion to gaze regardless, models a similar response for the reader.<sup>26</sup>

If the passage's breakneck delivery and proliferative detail (the sister does not just wear a mask, but 'a cheesy rubber Raquel Welch full-head pull-on mask' [371]) urges the reader to become caught up in the suspense of what fresh indignity Wallace will relate next,

this expectation does not result in any final payoff. In fact, echoing the way in which *Blue Velvet* climaxes prematurely, Wallace includes an image of male orgasm that suggests a lack of release. When the speaker realises her sister has enjoyed being raped, we are told that her ‘face looked post-coital sort of the way you’d imagine the vacuole and optica of a protozoan looking post-coital after it’s shuddered and shot its mono-cellular load into the cold waters of some really old sea’ (373). Far from signalling escape, where the pain the speaker’s auditors endure in listening to her would give way to the pleasure of relief from such, this prehistoric ejaculation is just another step in the unfolding description of her suffering. For the passage does not end with this ‘climax’, but continues with more revelations. She relates, for instance, how her stepmother tasks her with lifting the stepsister from a ‘never-mentioned wheelchair’ (373) so they can worship a photo of Bernini’s statue *The Ecstasy of St Theresa*. Affirming the masochistic suspense, then, this protozoan orgasm forestalls the possibility that awaited pleasure will eventually succeed the suffering being related.

It is from within this masochism, however, that Wallace implicates the reader into gazing at a male sexual violence beyond representation. In the speaker’s telling, her sister’s expression of ‘carnal bliss’ (373) is the same expression as that found on Bernini’s statue, ‘that exact same shuddering-protozoan look beyond pleasure or pain’ (373). Given that Wallace genders this protozoan as being male (shooting its ‘mono-cellular load’ [373]), one can conclude that the text interprets St Theresa’s ecstasy in terms of *male* pleasure. This is significant because Wallace’s mention of Bernini’s statue recalls Jacques Lacan’s invocation of it in his essay ‘God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman’ (1985). Notoriously, Lacan argues the statue epitomises a feminine pleasure that cannot be grasped by a masculine signifying economy.<sup>27</sup> By focalising this non-representable feminine bliss in terms of a male protozoan ejaculation, and one that emerges as the result of the stepfather’s abuse, Wallace suggests that what actually eludes grasp here are the effects of male sexual violence. For the novel, and the

interpolated reader-as-gazer, this sadism is beyond comprehension. In turn, both the text and reader can only look on at an ‘unspeakably, unforgettably ghastly and horrid and scarring’ (373) scene, aware of their own inability to fully experience it but compelled to gaze at its intimation of unmediated, ‘real’ violence nonetheless.

Accordingly, this scene places readers on the same level as the text. The masochistic contract between them does not entail the former’s subservience to the latter, but rather their equal standing. That the speaker’s story reforms rather than cancels this contract, moreover, is evident in how the scene prevents readers from forgetting (as Wallace argues that Lynch’s films do) that they are still within a contract with what they are reading. For in the midst of the speaker’s story of how ‘she was forced to gaze [...] on Its lit-up paralytic post-diddle face’ (373), endnote 142 interrupts the heretofore continuous prose with the fact that ‘the speaker doesn’t actually use the terms *thereon*, *most assuredly*, or *operant limbic system*, though she really had, before, said *chordate phylum*’ (1026, italics in original). This endnote compounds the free indirect discourse, the speaker’s voice blurring with that of the implied narrator. More than this, though, such seemingly incidental information momentarily takes the reader out of the speaker’s immersive tale. Consequently, this endnote acts as a reminder of the fact that, not only is the violence here mediated, but by continuing to consume it, one does so voluntarily. The passage foregrounds a reader’s contracted position at the same time as its intimation of unrepresentable male sexual violence suggests ‘he’ is not bound to the text; he is, rather, a complicit participant, gazing of his own free will.

This is what it means to say that Wallace works within but against the masochistic contract between reader and text. The scene I have just unpacked is thoroughly masochistic in the way that it subjects readers to a suspenseful suffering that lacks payoff. When the novel breaks from the speaker’s tale, in fact, her AA audience can only sit in ‘empathetic distress’ (374). Significantly, by positioning the reader as a complicit male gazer on the scene, and

with reference to a violence that ‘he’ and the text are unable to fathom, Wallace reworks the masochistic contract from one of subservience (where the reader passively receives details of the speaker’s suffering, no matter the supposed activity-in-passivity this might entail) to one of seeming equality (where a reader, though contracted to the text, actively tries to gaze at a sadism that eludes them both). I say ‘seeming’ because, for this to signify as equality, one has to ignore the overwhelming descriptive arsenal that the text, unlike the reader, has recourse to in describing the sister’s abuse. If the neoliberal logic of contract is to suggest that an unequal relationship between capital and labour is an equal relationship between independent human capitals, this maps on to how the speaker’s tale figures the relationship between a maximalist, encyclopaedic novel and a reader as one of shared epistemological limits – and in regards to a knowledge of violence, moreover, that the former determines access to.

One can refine these points further, and show how the dynamics I identify signal a sustained rather than anomalous aesthetic strategy, by turning to two other scenes of violence and suffering in the novel. The first is Joelle’s suicide attempt, which presents a range of interlinking images for the male gaze. Before Joelle moves to the bathroom where she tries to kill herself, ‘she lets herself slide forward from Méliès’ lap’ (231). That she sits in a chair moulded into the shape of George Méliès evokes the iconic image of his film *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), which in light of her concern with how ‘the moon never looked away’ (222), positions it as a symbol for the gaze. Wallace compounds this equation with gazing and light with the scene’s closing sentence: ‘bladed vessels aloft in the night to monitor flow, searchlit helicopters, fat fingers of blue light from one sky, searching’ (240). With moonlight, blades, searchlights, and fingers, Wallace over-determines the scene with phallic gazes. ‘Fingers’ is particularly significant in how the only other experience she can compare to taking cocaine is going to the cinema with her father, with ‘his hand in her lap her hand in the [Crackerjack] box and rooting down past candy for the Prize’ (239). Given revelations later on in *Infinite*

*Jest* that her father harbours incestuous desires for Joelle, one can detect intimations of past sexual abuse. As the recipient of so many male gazes, her suicide attempt works intra- and extra-diegetically as an invitation for men to gaze at her suffering.

As with the AA speaker's tale, the suspenseful expectation of pain that quickens an awaited pleasure, but which ultimately never arrives, characterises Joelle's suicide attempt. For instance, the 'party-noise' (240) around her reaches a 'precipice of volume to teeter on just before the speakers blow' (240) as the cocaine reaches its 'highest spiked prick, peak, the arrow's best descent' (240). The slip and subsequent correction of 'prick, peak' here figures this sense of imminent yet foreclosed release in terms of a frustrated male orgasm. Taking 'prick' as a colloquialism for penis, which is in keeping with descriptions of the cocaine as a 'lover' (237) that makes Joelle 'feel about to be entered by something [...] all about making her feel good' (237), Wallace frames the violence of her attempted suicide via reference to (a heteronormative understanding of) male sexual pleasure. Significantly, that Joelle 'sees, after inhaling, right at the apex, at the graph's spiked tip, Bernini's "Ecstasy of St Theresa"' (235) again implies that this violence is beyond representation. If the effect here is to suggest that reader and text are therefore both limited in their ability to access this violence – which, as the expression of so many male gazes, Wallace codes as being distinctly heterosexual and male – this only makes sense if one again ignores how the novel controls and delimits the parameters within which this seeming equality becomes apparent.

Furthermore, Wallace stresses how this scene relies upon a reader's contracted complicity; not, as with the AA speaker, in the use of an endnote, but through how Joelle meta-watches her own efforts to kill herself. For instance, she reflects on how cheap horror films usually finish 'by putting ? after *THE END*, [and this] is what pops into her head: *THE END?* amid the odors of mildew and dicky academic digestion?' (235, italics in original). This savviness to generic convention shows how Joelle refuses to be taken in by the pathos of

her situation. Aware of how ‘sentimental and banal’ (239) it is to think about those that she will leave behind, she is conscious of the volitional nature of her actions throughout; as, in turn, is the passage’s projected reader. For insofar as these indications of the scene’s banality inform the narrative voice, notably in how Wallace’s free indirect discourse aligns said voice with Joelle, then the novel forestalls one’s ability to disavow complicity in gazing at her pain. Even the passage’s final paragraphs, which are the most suspenseful in their lyrical, flowing descriptions of Joelle’s potential overdose, are interrupted by a partygoer’s knock and ‘Look here then who’s that in there?’ (240) Her suicide attempt may suggest that reader and text are equally limited in comprehending male sexual violence, but it does so by foregrounding how the need to ‘look here then’ (240) is contractually mediated.

My examples thus far have hinged upon women as the objects of male sadistic gazing. In this regard, Mulvey’s understanding of the gaze as something that men actively inflict on passive women holds true for Wallace’s scenes of violence and suffering. However, there is enough in these passages to suggest that Wallace is aware of this feminist critique. Though he uses Lacan’s invocation of *Ecstasy* to suggest a realm beyond representation, he stresses the phallic constitution of this idea that Lacan’s critics have objected to. Luce Irigaray, as Tom Hayes relates, argued Lacan ‘had failed to understand that he was referring to a statue made by a man who was a master deployer of what she called “the phallic gaze” [...] by which she meant the way men look at women as objects’ (333).<sup>28</sup> Wallace descriptions of *Ecstasy* stress the presence of phallic aggression in Bernini’s own artistry, namely in the ‘psychotic-looking cherub-type angel standing on the lady’s open thighs and pointing a bare arrow’ (373). The difference, of course, is that where Irigaray’s objection queries Lacan’s use of the feminine as a sign of unrepresentability, Wallace uses it in order to position male sexual violence as the source of such instead. Furthermore, my last example – Gene Fackelman’s torture as seen

by an immobilised Gately – demonstrates how the dynamics I have been exploring also work independently of explicit references to women and femininity.

Incapacitated after a drug binge, Gately watches as crime boss Whitey Sorkin's underlings torture his partner Gene Fackelmann by sewing his eyelids open. Burn suggests that 'Fackelmann's bloody end (with which Wallace significantly decides to close *Infinite Jest*) is presumably intended to prophesize the violence that reconfiguration [of the United States, Mexico, and Canada into ONAN] will bring' (*Reader's Guide* 39). I agree that this scene forecasts violence even greater than that which it already depicts. The impenetrability of such violence though – projected as it is 'somewhere beyond the right frame' (quoted in Staes, 29) – is, I argue, more significant than how it evokes specifically geopolitical strife. Similar to Wallace's use of Bernini's *Ecstasy* in relation to Joelle's suicide attempt and the AA's speaker's tale, the violence which *Infinite Jest*'s final scene leads up to, but does not fulfil, figures as an unmediated 'real' that reader and novel are seemingly equally limited in accessing. Indeed, as Gately realises that those who are torturing Fackelmann have given him a drug to make his torture all the more sharply felt, he reflects that '*Cruel* is spelled with a *u*, he remembered' (980, italics in original). As a homonym for 'you', this italicised 'u' not only refers to Gately, but also to the reader. In this sense, the scene endeavours to remind readers of their own complicity in viewing the violence at hand.

That it does so through reference to male gazing is evident in Wallace's descriptions of Gately. His vision takes on the characteristics of a camera: 'only one of his eyes would open because the floor's impact had shut the other up plump' (974), and he 'could focus best when he squinted' with 'one eye still swollen shut' (976). Added to how he receives a 'rotary view of the whole room in almost untakable focus' (980), these descriptions position Gately as having a camera's monocular, mechanical viewpoint. Wallace genders this viewpoint as male; after being kicked in the groin, Gately wonders 'why is it you feel it in your gut and not



your nuts per se, when you get brodied?’ (977) The free indirect discourse here means that this rhetorical question, in addition to signifying Gately’s query to himself, also works as the narrator’s question to the reader, assuming a knowledge between men. Indeed, though the absence of a feminine object would seem to undermine the sexual nature of the male gaze, Wallace notes how ‘Gately was trying to think. Too they wouldn’t have got him. Him. Got him off’ (980). Sorkin’s men have injected Gately with a powerful type of heroin called Sunshine, and on one level the sentence’s fragmentation represents his struggle to maintain consciousness. Wallace’s isolation of ‘Him’ and ‘Got him off’, however, not only highlights the scene’s preoccupation with a male subject (‘him’ includes Gately, the narrator, and the imagined reader), but is also suggestive of orgasmic build-up.

That Wallace forestalls Gately’s ‘getting off’, though, and so works within the same masochistic dynamic as is present with Joelle and the AA speaker, is evident in how he uses the imagery of growing light in this scene. After relating that ‘it felt like a sun in [Gately’s] head’ (973) (he either remembers or hallucinates this scene while in hospital), Wallace notes ‘the rising sun’ (974), that ‘it was dawn outside’ (974), and ‘the room brightened as the sun climbed’ (975). In this ‘sunny room’ (978) he is injected with ‘pharm-grade Sunshine’ (979), and as a result ‘the air in the room got overclear, a glycerine shine’ (980), ‘the arterial roar of the Sun’ (980) meaning the ‘window exploded with light’ (980). By associating the scene’s escalating horrors with the growing s/Sunshine, Wallace not only employs a kind of pathetic fallacy for Gately’s near death condition – he is, in a sense, on the verge of ‘walking towards the light’ – but also evokes a sense of imminent climax. That he denies such consummation compounds the masochistic suspense that animates this scene’s solicitation of the male gaze. Of course, the novel’s final phrase, ‘way out’ (981), seems to imply that the awaited pleasure of relief *does* break the expectation of further suffering. Yet, the fact that Wallace leaves one ignorant of Gately’s fate, and indeed with an abundance of unsolved mysteries, suggests that

a suspended climax, and the continuation of suffering, is the point. In stark contrast to how a genre film sets out to fulfil a system of conventions, Wallace leaves the reader aware of how the contract they are in with *Infinite Jest* lacks any such resolution.

This distinction from texts like *Terminator 2*, in fact, speaks to how the *prestige* of violence is at work. Bachner accounts for this prestige through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, where "taste" – in this case, taste in particular subjects by authors and critics – participates in the legitimation and replication of class values, positions, and interests' (4). To the extent that *Infinite Jest*'s handling of the subject of violence works to distinguish the novel from more formally generic texts, then my above examples confirm Bachner's point. However, I have been less concerned with this sociocultural use of the term 'prestige' than I have been with the common sense understanding of it as signifying authority and power. In other words, the AA speaker's take, Joelle's suicide attempt, and Gene Fackelmann's torture figure male sexual violence as harbouring an authority and power that, before which, reader and text are epistemologically humbled. The consequences of this humbling, as I have traced them, are twofold. First, and my most explicit object of inquiry, has been how it works within masochistic contracts between reader and text in order to resist power imbalances, therefore fulfilling Wallace's neoliberal desire for contracts that protect a – seeming – equality. Second, by using the imagined reader's propensity for male gazing, these dynamics help to construct the idea that sadistic gazing is, in and of itself, an irrefutably heterosexual male trait.

### Conclusion

An interest in looking is evident throughout Wallace's texts. My focus on the male gaze in relation to masochism and contract can only account for one specific aspect of this. Burn's investigation of the physiology of eyes in *The Pale King*, for instance, is a testament to how

deeply Wallace engaged with issues of looking ('Toward a General Theory'). Indeed, discussing the ways in which critics can assess the role of vision in literary texts, Burn notes how, in one approach, 'an imported theoretical framework allows a critic to address the more abstract dimensions of vision. With this approach, power structures typically become visible' ('Toward a General Theory' 87). Chapter 3 follows this approach, concerned as it has been with how Wallace uses the male gaze as theorised in film studies to remind projected readers of their 'male' capacity for sadism. *Infinite Jest*'s scenes of violence and suffering have been my key examples in this regard. Yet, by tracing how similar concerns preoccupy 'B.I. #48', 'E Unibus Pluram', and 'David Lynch Keeps His Head', I have also shown how Wallace's texts more generally display a desire for sadistic gazing. David Hering's 'theory of the mirror and reflection in Wallace's fiction' (*Fiction and Form* 83) comes close to my reading in what he describes as 'a motif of *refraction*' (87, italics in original) by which Wallace 'reframe[s] looking and watching as a communicative, dialogic gesture' (87). Whereas Hering leaves the exact character of this looking untheorised, though, I have argued that one can account for Wallace's desire for such through recourse to the male gaze.

Furthermore, if Hering interprets refractive looking as a potentially dialogic gesture, my reading of the male gaze stresses how Wallace's texts control and delimit such seeming reciprocity. I have argued that they do so in order to push against the masochistic contract between reader and text from within, and out of the conviction that such contracts put readers in positions of subservience. Connecting this to the neoliberal desire for contracts that protect individual self-determination, I showed how the resulting equality between reader and text that arises from *Infinite Jest*'s scenes of violence and suffering is false. For these scenes only register a humbled equality before unrepresentable male sexual violence if one elides how it is the novel that sets the parameters for, defines access to, and (paradoxically) represents, in exhausting detail, the violence in question. Extrapolating from this point, one can tentatively

posit that analyses supporting the idea that Wallace empowers readers – like Hayes-Brady’s notion that he ‘prevents the closure of the system of interpretation’ (*The Unspeakable* 107), or Adam Kelly’s belief that his texts are ‘structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader’s attestation and judgement’ (‘The New Sincerity’ 145) – exemplify such elision. In short, if *Infinite Jest* in particular ‘employs’ us to work towards meanings that ‘break with representation’ (Kelly, ‘The New Sincerity’ 143), it does so via the disingenuous idea that it, like readers, can only try and fail to penetrate such unfathomableness.

This, of course, goes to the heart of Bachner’s notion of the prestige of violence, animating as it does texts ‘that announce the persistence of something real most powerfully through their failure to record it’ (54). There is an important aspect of her argument, though, that I have yet to consider in detail. As noted in my Introduction, for Bachner this focus on seemingly unrepresentable violence ‘enables a deeply therapeutic and illusory reckoning with that violence’ (5). Thus, the texts she examines try to resolve the anxiety of being implicated in violence by foregrounding their incapacity to account for it. Applied to Wallace’s texts as I have explored them in Chapter 3, the anxiety of being complicit in patriarchal violence (after all, *Infinite Jest* does stress how *Ecstasy* is the object of Bernini’s phallic gazing) leads them to present such violence as the intransigent ‘real’ of masculinity. Reckoning with male sexual violence *as* something unrepresentable, in other words, allows Wallace to both acknowledge its disturbing power and to reaffirm its intractability. Turning to Chapter 4, this dynamic is especially notable in his depictions of feminism. The ‘Brief Interviews’ story cycle, in fact, implies that only by facing up to a failure to definitively represent male sexual violence can one hope to articulate an efficient feminist critique of same.

## Chapter 4

### Property: Privatising Feminist Critique

In the climactic scene of Steven Soderbergh's 1989 film *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, Ann (Andie MacDowell) confronts her husband's old friend, Graham (James Spader), about his hobby of interviewing women on camera about their sex lives. 'You've got a problem', Ann tells him, and despite Soderbergh's non-judgemental depiction of Graham, most audiences would probably agree. After the end of a previous relationship, Graham has suffered from erectile dysfunction for nine years, and can only attain sexual satisfaction by masturbating to his collection of video interviews. Graham's response however is not remorseful. Rather, with a small chuckle followed by a growing look of conviction, he confirms to Ann that 'you're right...I've got a lot of problems...But they belong to me'. Wallace's short story cycle 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men' can be said to rework Graham's peculiar hobby, so that it is an unnamed and muted female interviewer – Q – asking the questions, and of men rather than women. Much like Graham though, these men all have various sexual problems; moreover, they are also decisively sexually problematic. Amongst the 18 interviews, which appear as selections from a series of at least 72, are those of a man who argues that surviving gang rape can be character-building; another who manipulates women into sex by exploiting their sympathy for his withered arm; and a man who cannot help but shout 'Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!' ('B.I. #14' 14) when he ejaculates. Q's questions may lack Graham's masturbatory motives, but as in Soderbergh's film, their effect is to position heterosexual men as the bearers of repulsive desires and behaviours.

A comparison with Graham though is only useful to some extent, as his sensitive demeanour is the inverse of Wallace's hideous men. A productive counterpoint to him can be found in Paul Thomas Anderson's 1999 film *Magnolia*, specifically in the character of Frank

T.J. Mackey (Tom Cruise). Through his self-help program ‘Seduce and Destroy’, Frank preaches a mantra of ‘Respect the Cock and Tame the Cunt’ to men who want to pick up women. Significantly for my purposes, he tells his male audience at one point that

Men. Are. Shit. What? Men. Are. Shit! Well isn’t that what *they* say? Isn’t that – because we do bad things don’t we, we do horrible, heinous [*sic*]...*heinous*, terrible things. Things that no woman would ever do [...] I will not apologise for who I am. I will not apologise for what I need. I will not apologise for what I want!

Like Graham, Mackey asserts a proprietary relationship to his own status as a male ‘shit’. More pronounced here, however, is how the shittiness that Mackey embraces – the ability to do ‘horrible [...] *heinous*, terrible things’ – stems precisely from the perceived accusation of such from a female (and implied feminist) other. By embracing ‘what *they* say’ about men and, given the context of Seduce and Destroy, as it pertains to straight male sexuality in particular, Mackey claims this idea of shittiness for himself. A similar dynamic plays out in ‘Brief Interviews’. When they are not anticipating charges, as one interviewee puts it, of being the type of man that ‘you [...] bra-burners can see coming a mile away’ (‘B.I. #20’ 259), and thus their own potential interpolation into pre-set narratives of male chauvinism, the men that Q questions are all to various degrees aware of their own hideousness. In some cases, as with the aforementioned ‘Johnny One-Arm’ (‘B.I. #40’ 69), this self-awareness serves Mackey’s goal of emotionally manipulative seduction.

If these stories present men who ‘own’ their hideousness then, they also position it as the property of male heterosexuality more broadly, and particularly as it has been outlined by (a perceived) feminist critique. As D.T. Max suggests, with the ‘Brief Interviews’ ‘it was as if he [Wallace] were challenging women, saying, You [*sic*] think men are disgusting? I’ll show

you disgusting men' (*Every Love Story* 247). Max's attempt to account for why Wallace wrote these stories says more about his goals as a biographer than as a literary critic. Yet his identification of a challenge at work in the 'Brief Interviews' – and a challenge specifically aimed at feminist women – is astute. Scholars have certainly picked up on the collection's attempt to provoke with its depictions of such grisly characters. In his early consideration of these stories, Boswell argued that they 'test the boundaries of our willingness to "empathize"' with men who are 'sexist, self-protective, self-absorbed, objectifying, and most of all, cruel' (*Understanding* 189). More recently David Coughlan suggests that in a book as 'disquieting, challenging, provocative, and dark' (163) as *Brief Interviews*, 'Wallace's desire [is] to make us aware of, and question, who and why we are judging' (173). What Max acknowledges, however, and what Boswell and Coughlan skirt around, is how this desire to provoke is aimed at the apparent pieties of a feminist critique of male heterosexuality. Moreover, the collection's attempt to challenge such pieties – like the idea, caricatured by Mackey, that 'what *they* say' is men are shit – reasserts men's claim to own such hideousness in ways that, I argue, are comparable to reasserting private property rights.

The notion that such rights need *reasserting*, of course, implies a prior attenuation. Ann's response to Graham's belief that his problems 'belong to me' is illustrative in this regard: 'you think they're yours, but they're not. Everybody that walks in that door becomes part of your problem'. Soderbergh's fairly conventional denouement positions Ann as a healing feminine influence, bringing Graham back into the fold of heteronormative romance by convincing him of the necessity – indeed, the inevitability – of relinquishing individual control over his (formerly) private problems. Wallace's reassertion of male hideousness as a form of private property proceeds from the notion that women like Ann deprive men of the ability to speak about their own sexuality. In this, the 'Brief Interviews' articulate through sexual relations one of the cardinal beliefs of thinkers who are now often labelled neoliberal.

Simply put, this is the notion that Western welfare states, through an excess of government intervention, have weakened the freedoms attendant on a strong system of private property rights. One can see the significance of such rights to neoliberal thinkers in the response Friedrich von Hayek once gave when asked to sum up ‘everything that was meaningful and significant’ to his work: ‘if we destroy [...] the recognition of private property, I think it will destroy the sources which nourish present day mankind and create a catastrophe of starvation beyond anything mankind has yet experienced’ (pipewerkz, 2012). The ‘Brief Interviews’ may not match Hayek’s histrionics here concerning the importance of private property, but their depictions of male hideousness rests on similar grounds. Namely, feminists’ supposed newfound authority over what can be said about straight male sexuality solicits a complex attempt to reassert men’s right to speak about it themselves.

Rights to private property, however, are a hallmark of liberal capitalism as much as they are of its neoliberal reboot. John Gray observes the ‘vital role, theorized in the classical liberal intellectual tradition, that the institution of private property and its corollary, the free market, play in constituting and protecting the basic liberties of the individual’ (61). What makes Hayek’s defence of private property neoliberal, in this sense, is its reactive stance in the face of an attempt to dilute such. Furthermore, Matthew Eagleton-Pierce explains how ‘if private property is a foundational principle within capitalism, then the movement towards the privatisation of state-owned assets or services carries a more distinctive neoliberal edge’ (147). To the extent that the ‘Brief Interviews’ remove charges of male hideousness from the anonymous Q, and so that individual men can embody such hideousness themselves, then these stories follow such a privatising logic. Indeed, accusations that Q’s line of enquiry is ‘full of knee-jerk politics’ (‘B.I. #46’ 105) and eager to ‘have everything tied up all nice and tight and tidy’ (‘B.I. #15’ 16), suggests that this privatising manoeuvre protects those ‘basic



liberties of the individual' that Gray identifies, and in ways that will allow for a complexity that her ideological questioning apparently suffocates.

However, it is too easy to argue that the 'Brief Interviews' are wholly symptomatic of a pushback against feminism during the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of the kind Susan Faludi documents in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991). As Rachel Haley Himmelheber notes, '*Wallace means for the reader to both feel implicated by their [i.e. the men Q questions] hideousness and separate enough from it to judge it*' (522, italics in original). At the same time as these stories implicate readers in their defence of male hideousness as a form of private property, they also encourage them to simultaneously judge these men. Their privatisation of hideousness takes on an added resonance in this regard. For by allowing men to speak of their own hideousness, and in doing so, having them damn themselves through unintentional revelations of their own repugnancy, the 'Brief Interviews' imply that feminism is best served by privatising its critique. In other words, if justifications for privatisation centre on the inefficiencies, in Lisa Duggan's words, of 'coercive, plodding, incompetent, intrusive' (13) governments in achieving their goals, then a similar logic drives these stories' depictions of feminism. Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all idea of male hideousness on these men, the stories suggest that feminist critique will work more efficiently if it allows individual men to articulate their own sexual problems.

Given the focus in Wallace's texts on the virtues of community and civic engagement, it may seem odd to suggest that the 'Brief Interviews' stories advocate a neoliberal logic of privatisation. One need only look to *Infinite Jest*'s system of 'Subsidized Time' (234), where the O.N.A.N. government allows corporations to compete for advertising rights to each year, to get a sense of how Wallace's satire is aimed at capitalism's erosion of the commons. Yet there is much to be gained in this respect from setting aside what Wallace may have intended for his texts. By doing so, one can see how the 'Brief Interviews' privatise feminist critique in

the pursuit of a more effective anti-masculinist politics. The stories pursue such privatisation not only in order to delegate more control to individual men, but because it is ostensibly more efficient and productive than the feminist methodologies that Q is taken to represent. In what follows, I explore how the ‘Brief Interviews’ stories – and to a lesser extent, *Infinite Jest* and Wallace’s late non-fiction – endorse these privatising manoeuvres. I show how a feminist interrogation of male hideousness gives way, first, to men’s reassertion of such as private property, and second, to a privatisation of that initial feminist critique. These manoeuvres suggest that, because of its disciplinary narrow mindedness, feminist critique as practiced by Q blocks a true comprehension of her interviewee’s hideousness. Indeed, although seminal metaphors are less pronounced here than they were in my previous chapters, the reclamation of hideousness that I explore works as a form of release from this blockage.

‘Men mostly are shit, you’re right, heh heh’ (‘B.I. #3’ 22)

As my recourse to *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and *Magnolia* implies, reclaiming straight male hideousness as a form of private property is not exclusive to Wallace’s texts. Indeed, these films’ respective release dates – 1989 and 1999 – bracket the 1990s as a decade in which images of sexually problematized and problematic straight men enjoyed a heightened cultural visibility. The classic account of this phenomenon is Sally Robinson’s *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (2000). In this study Robinson looks at a range of literary, popular, and academic texts produced since the 1960s to argue that U.S. men in the closing years of the twentieth century were invested in ‘an identity politics of the dominant’ (3). In other words, for Robinson ‘announcements of a crisis in white masculinity, and a widely evidenced interest in wounded white men, themselves perform the cultural work of *recentering* white masculinity by *decentering* it’ (12, italics in original). Hamilton Carrol has recently updated Robinson’s arguments for millennial U.S. culture through his notion of white male ‘*lability*’

(10, italics in original). This refers to those ‘strategies by which white masculinity has transformed the universal into the particular as a means of restaging [its] universality’ (10). Wallace’s texts often self-consciously exhibit this marking of white masculinity. ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’, for instance, is plaintively concerned with ‘nameless faceless Great White Male’ (303) experience, while in ‘Good Old Neon’, the protagonist Neal coolly apprises his analyst’s suggestion that ‘America’s culture had a uniquely brutal and alienating way of brainwashing its males’ (163). Wallace’s treatment of such marking may not remain the same from text to text, but its persistence as a topic speaks to its importance in understanding his depictions of masculinity.

However, while Robison and Carrol investigate a broad cultural marking of white masculinity during this period, I wish to isolate a specific strand of this process in the ‘Brief Interviews’. Namely, these stories are indicative of how, as David Greven usefully puts it, ‘the late 1990s prognosticated a new form of depraved masculinity’ (‘American Psycho Family Values’ 143), and one in which the moral reprehensibility of straight male sexual behaviour figured prominently. Greven’s focus is on millennial Hollywood, and cinema from the time is again illuminating. When Lorin Stein interviewed Wallace about the publication of *Brief Interviews* in 1999, she titled her piece ‘In the Company of Creeps’ (89-93), thus, one can assume, playing upon the title of Neil Labute’s 1997 debut *In the Company of Men*. In this film two male middle-managers seduce a deaf female co-worker, waiting until she has fallen in love with one of them so that they can end the relationship in the most damaging way possible. Prefiguring the conscious amorality that characterises some of the men in Wallace’s ‘Brief Interviews’ (and as the pun on ‘company’ implies, also how these stories present late capitalism as conducive to such amorality), Labute’s film explores the idea that hideousness may indeed be a property of male sexuality.<sup>29</sup> As was perhaps to be

expected given this context, in 2007 John Krasinski adapted the 'Brief Interviews' into a film, suggesting if nothing else that representations of sexually problematized and problematic men continue to appeal into the early years of the new century.

Given the above, it is useful to see the male sexual 'hideousness' that Wallace writes about in the 'Brief Interviews' stories as forming part of a wider discourse in 1990s US culture. For Foucault, one can 'call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation' (*Archaeology* 131); in other words, the same field of relations between dispersed 'objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, [where] one can define a regularity' (*Archaeology* 41). Wallace's 'Brief Interviews' belong to the same discourse of male sexual hideousness as the aforementioned films, insofar as they all exhibit a common discursive regularity. Specifically, this is their shared depiction of male sexuality as being amoral, narcissistic, manipulative, and so on, and of straight men who articulate such hideousness in manners that evoke ideas of private property. In fact, these men's attempts to reclaim a hideousness whose definitional contours arise precisely *from* feminist critique is suggestive of what Foucault calls a "'reverse" discourse' (*Will to Knowledge* 101). Foucault expands on this idea in a 1977 interview with Bernard-Henri Lévy:

Take the case of homosexuality. Psychiatrists began a medical analysis of it in the 1870s: a point of departure certainly for a whole series of new inventions and controls [...] But taking such discourses literally, and thereby turning them around, we see responses arising in the form of defiance: "All right, we are [...] sick or perverse, whichever you want. And so if we are, let us be so, and if you want to know what we are, we can tell you better than you can" ('Power and Sex' 115).

Homosexuals thus began to assert their own legitimacy through the same discourse that had constructed them as abnormal – ‘in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which [homosexuality] was medically disqualified’ (Foucault, *Will to Knowledge* 101). This is what Wallace’s hideous men (and, indeed, the stories they appear in) do, whether explicitly or not. They reverse a feminist discourse that positions them as ‘sick or perverse’ (‘Power and Sex’ 115) in order to elucidate such sickness and perversity themselves. Significantly, this ‘feminist discourse’ is a homogenised caricature, in line with Wallace’s tendency in *Infinite Jest* to reduce feminist politics to a reductive idea of ‘Dworkinite’ (929) anti-male critique.

Indeed, the idea that Wallace’s hideous men, like homosexuals around the *fin de siècle*, are on the receiving end of a discourse that they resist by reversing, rests on two very questionable assumptions. First is the notion that a popular pathologisation of straight male sexuality in 1990s U.S. culture is somehow akin to the historical persecution of gay men. Wallace’s reported comments to Jonathan Franzen that ‘it’s not an accident that so many of the writers “in the shadows” are straight white males’ (‘Perchance to Dream’ 51) implies his sympathy for this opinion; the phrase ‘in the shadows’, in fact, is redolent of the homosexual closet. Second, the assumption that U.S. culture marginalises heterosexual men for their sexual desires, itself confirming Robinson’s ‘identity politics of the dominant’ (3), positions feminist critique of the same period as enjoying an oppressive, hegemonic influence. These ideas are difficult to sustain, if not outright false. Still, frustration on the behalf of white male novelists with feminism’s apparent excesses is detectable in Wallace’s key contemporaries. As well as Franzen’s own notorious baiting of feminists, most notably in his 2015 novel *Purity*,<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Marriage Plot* (2011) (which includes a character loosely based on Wallace) displays similar resentments (157-163). By arguing that Wallace’s men reverse feminist discourse, I unpack power relations which, though they have questionable

correspondence to sociological realities, are integral to how the ‘Brief Interviews’ present men who reclaim their hideousness as a form of private property.

Two further concepts from Foucault’s thought on the regulation of discourse offer a useful way to unpack this dynamic: the author, and the discipline. The idea of the author for Foucault constitutes one of the internal ‘procedures for controlling and delimiting discourse’ (‘The Order of Discourse’ 56). This is not ‘of course, in the sense of the speaking individual who pronounced or wrote a text, but in the sense of a principle of grouping of discourses, conceived as the unity and origin of their meanings’ (‘The Order of Discourse’ 58). Indeed, he describes this procedure elsewhere as the ‘author function’ (‘What is an Author?’ 211). Most notably for my purposes, however, Foucault suggests that ‘the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive, a role quite characteristic of our era [...] of individualism and private property’ (‘What is an Author?’ 222). As Carla Hesse explains, he suggests therefore that the author ‘emerged historically as the cultural incarnation of a new axis of sociopolitical discourse: the inviolable relation between the rights-bearing individual and private property’ (109). Additionally, Foucault observes how ideas of the discipline also work to regulate discourse. The discipline

is opposed to the principle of the author because a discipline is defined by a domain of objects, a set of methods, a corpus of propositions considered to be true, a play of rules and definitions, of techniques and instruments: all this constitutes a sort of anonymous system at the disposal of anyone who wants to or is able to use it (‘The Order of Discourse’ 59).

In this light, one can understand attempts to reclaim hideousness in the ‘Brief Interviews’ as reasserting individual men’s authorship of said discourse as a form of private property – so

that, in the words of B.I. #59's interviewee, 'I alone have any rights to speak of it' (191). This is opposed to Wallace's depiction of a feminism which, as an anonymous discipline with 'a set of methods, a corpus of propositions' ('The Order of Discourse' 59), and so on, opposes the relationship between an author and the texts he produces.

One last caveat is needed, though, before proceeding with this reading. The pure authorship that Foucault dismisses – 'the speaking individual who pronounced or wrote a text' ('The Order of Discourse' 58) – is an ideal that Wallace never relinquishes. In fact, as John Roache demonstrates, Wallace was sceptical of Foucault's arguments on authorship,<sup>31</sup> an antipathy that is also clear in his gloss of post-structuralism in 'Greatly Exaggerated'. In this review of H.L. Hix's *Morte d' Author: An Autopsy* (1987), Wallace shows a general enthusiasm for Hix's interrogation of 'one of the true clarion-calls that marked the shift from New Criticism to structuralism to deconstruction, Roland Barthes' 1968 announcement of "The Death of the Author"' ('Greatly Exaggerated' 138). After summarising post-structural attempts to show that the 'author-as-owner is not just superfluous but contradictory' (141), Wallace ends with a guarded withdrawal into sentimental biologism: 'for those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane' (144). Most interesting for my purposes here is how Wallace focuses on the author's '*ownership* of meaning' (140, italics added). By presenting post-structural critique as being levelled at authorial property, and also ultimately (if surreptitiously) siding against Foucault and co.'s<sup>32</sup> interrogation of such, Wallace sets up a dynamic that particularly comes to the fore in the 'Brief Interviews'. His depiction of men reclaiming 'author-ity' (143) over their hideous sexuality, though by no means endorsing a simplistic one-to-one relation between an individual and 'his' text, attempts to bolster men's property rights to such. Central to this process is Wallace's suggestion that feminist critique makes public what is otherwise men's private sexual hideousness.

### The Monthly Diddle-Check

Krasinski's film adaptation of the 'Brief Interviews', by presenting Q as a graduate student (named as Sara Quinn, and played by Julianne Nicholson) interviewing men to understand their hideousness, makes explicit various dynamics the stories themselves only hint at. As Himmelheber observes, throughout these stories 'Wallace uses single quotation marks around the men's speech, indicating that these partial transcripts are not only of a larger piece, which is contextually obvious, but are of a *constructed piece*' (525, italics in original). In other words, it is not only the men Q interrogates that Wallace presents for our consideration but, more obliquely, Q's project itself. As Himmelheber also goes on to suggest, 'because this implied narrator is constructing a narrative arc through the beginning, middle, and end of each interview [...] there is ample evidence that the narrator(s) is critiquing the interviewee characters' (525). Rather than a neutral and yet muted interlocutor presenting freely given information, Q proceeds from a predetermined ideological objective – identifying and documenting examples of straight male hideousness. As someone 'interested in critiquing gender relations' (Himmelheber 525) on the basis of straight male behaviour, she starts from the broadly feminist project of bringing to light the hidden ways in which men sexually oppress women. As such, Q's project accords with what Antony Easthope, writing in 1990, described as the main goal of feminist masculinity studies: to expose how, traditionally, 'masculinity has stayed pretty well concealed. This has always been its ruse to hold on to its power' (1). The confessional interview format that Q uses, in fact, attests to how her attempt to serve this public good works precisely by depriving straight men of their ability to practice such power in private. Such expropriation shifts author-ity over what can be said about this hideousness from individual men to an anonymous feminist discipline.



It is in *Infinite Jest* though, rather than the ‘Brief Interviews’, where Wallace first aligns this process with the expropriation of private property. This is evident in the scene where Hal and a few other students are sitting outside the principal’s office, waiting to be reprimanded for their inaction during an event that leaves several younger students injured. As they are waiting, in a nearby office Avril is ‘with pretty much every E.T.A. female under thirteen’ (510), covering for academy counsellor Dr Dolores Rusk’s duties in carrying out ‘administrative diddle-checks’ (510). That she is standing in for Rusk here implies how Avril is carrying out an impersonal task, the diddle-check furthering a discipline in Foucault’s sense that it is ‘at the disposal of anyone [...] able to use it (‘The Order of Discourse’ 59). These checks are of young women considered ‘to be potential diddlees’ (511), and are ‘required at all North American tennis academies since the infamous case of coach R. Bill (‘Touchy’) Phiely’ (510). Echoing Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), Phiely’s ‘hair-raising diary and collection of telephotos and tiny panties – discovered only after his disappearance into the Humboldt County hill country with a thirteen-year-old’ (510) – mean that these meetings are designed to ‘nip any potential Phielyisms in the bud. Monthly diddle-checks are in Rusk’s contract because they’re in E.T.A.’s O.N.A.N.T.A. accreditation-charter’ (511). Identification of one man’s hideous behaviour leads to government attempts to manage such. This hideousness, once privately embodied in a diary and a secret collection of photos and panties, is brought into the open as a result of the diddle-check to serve a public good – to make young women aware of sexual predators.

Wallace emphasises the diddle-check’s distinctly public orientation through the scene’s descriptions of Avril. We know by this point in the novel that she has ‘a black phobic dread of hiding or secrecy in all possible forms with respects to her sons’ (51), but this phobia also manifests outside of her maternal role. ‘It’s impossible not to overhear’ (514) the diddle-check, as ‘the absence of a door to the Moms’ office means you might as well be in there’

(511). Though we are told ‘she has little sense of spatial privacy or boundary’ (511) due to ‘having been so much alone when a child’ (511), it is also ‘simply [for] enclosure-reasons’ (512) – ‘she’s in there unenclosed right now’ (510), ‘serv[ing] (pro bono) as E.T.A.’s Dean of Academic Affairs and Dean of Females’ (510). The term ‘enclosure’ has special resonances in the history of capitalism. As Daniel Bollier explains, ‘the English enclosure movement, which flourished [...] from 1750 to 1860 [...] allow[ed] the ruthless seizure of millions of acres of commonly used forests, meadows, and game’ (5), therefore ‘lead[ing] to the creation of modern industrial markets’ (5). By pointing out how Avril is anti-enclosure, this scene presents her diddle-check as working as an obstruction to private property. That she performs her task pro-bono, moreover, reiterates how, as a representative of the state via ‘E.T.A.’s O.N.A.N.T.A. accreditation charter’ (511), Avril furthers a public good by helping to deny men like Phiely the privacy to carry out their sexual desires.

In these regards, Avril can be said to represent the kind of state intervention that, as my above reference to Hayek demonstrates, so disturbs neoliberal thinkers. One of the most cogent expressions of the neoliberal opposition to such intervention is clear in the founding statement of Mont Pelerin Society; the ‘thought collective’ (4), to use Dieter Plehwe’s phrase, that would prove so influential to neoliberalism’s “‘long march’” (Harvey 40) to dominance in the later twentieth century. For those associated with this society, freedom was under threat ‘by the spread of creeds which, claiming the privilege of tolerance when in the position of a minority, seek only to establish a position of power’ (‘Statement of Aims’). The creeds in question, as Ben Jackson explains in his overview of the origins of neoliberal thought, were those that espoused ‘socialist central planning’ (133). In the founding statement’s terms, such planning fostered ‘a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market’. The notion that planners who, though ‘claiming a privilege of tolerance’ (‘Statement of Aims’), are actually working to destroy private property rights, resonates with Avril’s activities in the

diddle-check scene. For, if nothing else, these diddle-checks have occurred ‘monthly’ (511) ‘for the last four years’ (511) at ETA, and therefore exemplify planning.

To be more specific, though, the type of planning that early neoliberals objected to was, in Hayek’s words, the ‘central direction of all economic activity according to a single plan, laying down how the resources of society should be “consciously directed” to serve particular ends in a definite way’ (*The Road to Serfdom* 36). Avril’s attempt to find evidence of abuse amongst her female charges accords with this idea. Although she ‘gives them verbal space, [she] tried gently to steer the topic close to true Phielyism’ (514), thus directing the available data to confirm her pre-set goals. For instance, she asks the girls ‘have any of you been kissed or nuzzled or hugged or rubbed or pinched or probed or fondled or in any way touched by a tall person in a way that’s made you uncomfortable?’ (513). The proliferation of different forms of potential physical abuse here, which by the end of the sentence Avril has subsumed under the single rubric of feeling uncomfortable, enacts syntactically the logic that motivates her diddle-check. The object in question – a private propertied idea of male sexual hideousness – loses its variety in the process of Avril’s attempt to identify it. She expropriates such private idiosyncrasy from these girls’ possible testimonies in order to serve a public good (i.e. diddle-prevention) whose overt ideological objectives suffocate nuance. Indeed, Wallace’s salacious slapstick in naming this molester ‘R. Bill (‘Touchy’) Phiely’ (510) evokes a vibrancy that is missing from the anonymous bureaucratised of ‘E.T.A.’s O.N.A.N.T.A. accreditation charter’ (511). That ‘Phiely’ is a near homonym for ‘freely’ (this former noun’s absent ‘r’ isolated and capitalised at the name’s beginning) also reiterates how Avril’s actions here work against the freedoms supposedly attendant on private property. For Wallace, then, those left with the ‘Bill’ in this regard are heterosexual men, charged with bearing hideous desires they must pay for in manners that deny their individuality.<sup>33</sup>

Notably, however, Wallace counters the expropriation Avril's diddle-check performs in this scene through his description of how Axford objectifies her. As Avril talks 'in full if kind of oblique-angled view of the people in the waiting room' (510), we learn that she has 'legs whose taper you can see T. Axford is appraising with the frankness of adolescence' (510). The novel then sends readers to endnote 210, relating how 'Hal and Mario have long since had to accept<sup>a</sup> the fact that Avril, at 50+, is still endocrinologically compelling to males' (1035n210). In a footnote to the word 'accept', we are told that "'accept" isn't the same as "be crazy about," of course' (1035n210). As Avril encourages the girls to give examples that confirm male sexuality's hideousness, and to put them on guard against the dangers of such, Axford's gaze subtly undercuts her endeavour. The obstinately hormonal here affronts a loosely feminist (the diddle-check is designed to be 'nurturingly empowering' [511]) attempt to mark and prevent straight men's hideous desires. In fact, the endnote implies that Avril works against biology – against what is 'endocrinologically compelling' (1035n210), something that like Hal and Mario we may not 'be crazy about' (1035n210) but which it is best to 'accept' (1035n210) as inevitable. That these remarks appear in an endnote within an endnote suitably positions their sentiments as marginalized yet persistent. The diddle-check may expose men's predatory desires to serve the goal of their prevention, but Axford's objectification of Avril, presented as inevitable, suggests this project runs against a male hideousness that however critiqued, cannot be denied.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, if feminist critique here works as a form of expropriation, and is thus in conflict with an obdurately individual male sexual hideousness, the scene also complicates the purity of a public versus private binary that this conflict seems to imply. That it is with 'the *frankness* of adolescence' (510, italics added) that Axford objectifies Avril undermines the idea that there is anything necessarily private about his licentiousness. Also, despite the fact that the diddle-check takes place 'in full if kind of oblique-angled view' (510) of those in

the next room, it remains exclusively geared to the young girls in her charge. As public as it is, the diddle-check remains, at least notionally, a private affair. In these ways, the scene blurs what is otherwise a clash between private male hideousness and an expropriating feminism. One could make a similar point about the relationship between Q and her interviewees in the 'Brief Interviews'. Indeed, these stories are an assemblage of the men's private experiences and what Wallace implies are Q's public minded methods and intentions. However, to stop here would be to miss how the imbrication of private and public in this story cycle, as in the diddle-check scene, is still weighted towards a need to bolster the former. In the face of Q's implied attempt to critique her subjects, these stories reassert individual men's property rights over a hideousness that, ostensibly, they are best placed to talk about.

#### Reclaiming Hideousness as Private Property

David Hering argues that Wallace's attempts to resuscitate authorial presence in the wake of post-structural critique often centres upon the figure of the ghost. He observes that such figures develop from the "absent possessor" (*Fiction and Form* 20) to a "companion ghost" (29), and as a means for Wallace to address 'problems of authorial monologism' (19). The absent possessor exemplifies 'the prescriptive authority of unseen forces' (20), while the companion ghost, by contrast, 'makes plain its desire for *interaction*, rather than a kind of remote orchestration' (29, italics in original). This reading chimes with dynamics at work in the 'Brief Interviews'. Such movement away from 'being externally controlled or possessed' (21), and '*towards* an engagement with dialogism [...] through awareness of [...] monologic tendenc[ies]' (35, italics in original) captures well how these stories present men reclaiming hideousness as private property. The expropriating manoeuvres of an assumed feminism that Q, in part, represents, works as the absent possessor in this equation. These men's attempts to reclaim 'their' hideousness though puts her project more in the role of the companion ghost –

as a co-creator of the discourse that results, but one whose implied monologism is potentially transformed by refraining to speak *for* her male subjects.

It is thus important not to see the men's reclamation of hideousness as rejecting all forms of control or 'remote orchestration' (Hering, *Fiction and Form* 29). Wallace in fact parodies such an absolutist idea of private property in *Brief Interviews*' second story, 'Death is Not the End'. As Mary K. Holland helpfully summarises, 'running three and a half pages but comprising one paragraph and only three sentences, the story merely describes a man lying motionless outside' ('Mediated Immediacy' 114). He is an 'accomplished poet, reading his magazine in his chair on his deck by his pool behind his home' ('Death is Not the End' 3). This chain of possessives echo the opening page's long list of national awards this poet has received (at least a dozen), reiterating how he is completely ensconced by forms of property. Notably, Wallace describes the scene as an '*enclosed* tableau [...] wholly still and composed and *enclosed* [...] the silent living *enclosing* flora's motionless green vivid' (3, italics added). If Avril, particularly during the diddle-check scene, is anti-private property to the extent that she is anti-enclosure, then this poet is the obverse. Indeed, 'the trees and shrubbery [...] are densely interwoven and tangled and serve the same essential function as a red-wood privacy fence or a wall of stone' (3). This quite literal enclosure, Wallace implies, is suited to such a grotesque figure; wearing 'a black Speedo swimsuit' (1), middle-aged, overweight, and with a 'hairline unevenly recessed' (1) due to various hair transplants, this author is not so much resting on his laurels as he is wilfully suffocated by them.

Despite the story's cloistered atmosphere, however, there is as Hering observes 'an implicit counterforce [...] that incorporates a recognition of a world outside the protective sealed space' (*Fiction and Form* 70). This is 'the final, gnomic footnoted pronouncement [..., that] seems to defy the hermetically sealed space of the story both by its contrarianism and physical placement outside the body of the main narrative' (70). Hering then compares this

footnote to ‘the entry of an interviewer’ (70) in ‘B.I. #59’, who ‘brings his story into the environment outside’ (70). This is in fact Q’s role throughout the ‘Brief Interviews’. She is the expropriating force without whom these men’s testimonies could not be communicated to us. Nonetheless, if her project forestalls the kind of static hiddenness that the poet in ‘Death is not the End’ evokes, it still allows her subjects to reclaim hideousness as private property. Q may be the mediator of these interviews, but in contrast to Avril’s diddle-check, her project stokes these men’s expressions of hideousness. As a reverse discourse, these expressions affront what Wallace caricatures as feminist endeavours to speak with author-ity on male sexuality.

Brief Interviews #14 and #40 offer compelling examples of these dynamics at work. Before proceeding to show this, however, a clearer idea of what private property means is needed. The multifarious approaches to this topic means that there is, in Jeremy Waldron’s words, a ‘lack of a generally accepted account of what private property is and how it is to be contrasted with alternative systems of property rights’ (26). My interpretation of private property in the ‘Brief Interviews’ is accordingly heuristic rather than definitional. I aim to demonstrate how the reclamation they carry out accords with a neoliberal desire to defend and reassert private property against supposed attempts to undermine it. Paul H. Rubin and Tilman Klump offer a useful framework through which to conceive of property, and in turn to unpack its significance to these stories. They suggest that

in its idealized form, a property right entitles its holder to a strong form of authority over an asset, called ownership. Ownership can be viewed as a “bundle of sticks,” composed of the following rights:

C: The right to *control* the asset and decide on its use.

V: A claim to the *value* the asset generates.

*E*: The right to *exclude* others from using the asset.

*T*: The right to *transfer* the bundle *C, V, E, T* to another holder.

(205, italics in original).

The third of these, ‘the right to *exclude* others from using the asset’ (205), resonates with how the ‘Brief Interviews’ stories reverse a perceived feminist discourse in order to bolster men’s ‘*control* [of] the asset’ (205) – their hideousness – as private property. Further, Rubin and Klump also point out that ‘rarely, if ever, does one encounter the bundle of sticks *C, V, E, T* in its entirety’ (205), and a complex mixture of these rights are evident in ‘Brief Interviews’. Indeed, Q’s role as the overarching mediator of these men’s testimonies implies how such rights to exclude or control cannot be individually self-sufficient.

In fact, the coprolalia-afflicted interviewee’s admission that he shouts ‘Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!’ (‘B.I. #14’ 14) as he ejaculates suggests his powerlessness; it is ‘uncontrolled. It’s like it comes out the way the spoooge comes out [...] I’m not even thinking it until it comes out and I hear it’ (14). Seminal discharge as a result of ‘some girl, it doesn’t matter who’ (14) not only limns with the interviewee’s inability to control his speech, moreover, but with Q’s expropriating measures as well. The fact that ‘I just about die of the embarrassment’ (14) in the sexual scenario, and that ‘god, now I’m embarrassed as hell’ (15) after admitting such to Q, suggests this correspondence. Additionally, his admission confirms a commonplace in feminist interpretations of male sexuality: namely, that it is characterised by violence. As Ken Plummer explains, ‘certain themes consistently reappear in feminist discussions of male sexuality, and accounts of male sexuality as prone to violence, pressure, coercion, and objectification abound’ (‘Male Sexualities’ 182). The phrase ‘Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!’ (14), like Mackey’s ‘Seduce and Destroy’, confirms the male hideousness that Q’s project sets out to document – specifically, the idea that men’s



‘shooting off’ (15) is a form of violence. In these ways, this man’s ownership of ‘his’ sexuality is compromised from the very beginning. Not only does he lack the right to control the meaning of his orgasm, he confirms meanings produced by feminist others. In turn, this shows his inability to exclude said feminist interpretations from speaking with author-ity over the nature and significance of his sexual problems.

If perceived feminist discourse thoroughly constitutes this interviewee, it is from this position of subjection that his account can be seen to ‘talk back’ to the critique Q stands for. This process is more complex than the self-conscious embrace of ‘shittiness’ that Mackey’s programme exemplifies, even though there are elements of such elsewhere in the story cycle. As David M. Halperin explains, for Foucault a reverse discourse does not have to ‘simply produce a mirror reversal – a pure one-to-one inversion of the existing terms of the discourse it reverses’ (59). This interviewee does not embrace his coprolalia and ‘recapitulate [it] in an affirmative vein’ (Halperin 59) – he notes that ‘it’s so fucking weird’ (‘B.I. #14’ 15). Rather, by the end of the story he has reproduced the hideousness his orgasmic outbursts imply, but, in Halperin’s words, ‘in a new direction’ (59). Commenting that ‘it’s the ones that’ll act all understanding’ (15) that ultimately get him ‘pissed off’ (15) – ‘those are the ones [...] the ones that say “I think I could love you anyway”’ (5) – the interviewee ends in a position of greater rhetorical authority. Rather than being spoken for, he is now speaking for, contemptuously mimicking a woman’s attempt to understand his problems. The repetition of the phrase ‘the ones’ here implies how this process inverts the power dynamics at play. Q’s attempt to categorise men as hideous, and so to subject them to a typology of pre-set actions, rebounds into this man’s misogynistic grouping of women into certain types.

David P. Rando, in his reading of male hideousness in Wallace’s texts as a form of affective lovelessness, suggests that this ‘persistent “typological” imagination of women’ (581) is one of the ways in which ‘B.I. #20’ and ‘Good Old Neon’ present revelations of

men's inability to love. Notably, he also argues that 'B.I. #20' undermines the interviewee's endeavour to 'preempt the feminist interpretation to which he imagines the interviewer will subject his story by formulating it himself' (581) – his attempt, in a sense, to reverse her discourse. It does so when the woman whose anecdote that he is relating to Q speaks 'with [a] devastating power' (582) that proves to be life-changing for him. This focus on an attempted male appropriation of women, which in turn fails when said women 'speak' from within the male voice that is appropriating them, is prevalent elsewhere in Wallace criticism. Hayes-Brady calls this 'the appropriative power of the reported feminine' ('Language, Gender, and Modes of Power' 148) in Wallace's texts, while Holland notes that 'Wallace explored the bestial male appropriation of the female other' ("By Hirsute Author" 7) throughout his career. These readings are compelling, but they miss how such male appropriation of women, and said women's ability to 'subvert the controlling power of the narratively articulate men by taking control of the masculine voice' (Hayes-Brady, 'Language, Gender and Modes of Power' 143), still position the men in question *as* hideous; indeed, they compound the link between male sexuality and repulsive attitudes and behaviours.<sup>35</sup>

This is evident in 'B.I. #40', in which Johnny One-Arm recounts how he exploits women's responses to his withered appendage in order to sleep with them. Several passages of his testimony report how these women react to seeing 'the Asset' (69). For instance, they say 'how I'm such a nice young fella and it breaks their heart to see me talk about my own part of me that way' (70), or 'how I'm such a good listener and sensitive [...] and she can't believe there's any way the arm's as bad as I'm making out' (71). When Johnny has cornered his subjects – ensuring his arm is so ugly that for them to leave would confirm that 'It Was Because Of The Arm' (71), and in turn the shallowness of their compassion – these women 'just cry and cry. Sometimes they get me crying too' (72). Reported feminine voice and expression plays a significant role in this story, and even lead to the protagonist's admission

of occasional emotional breakdown. As a consequence, however, Johnny simply reaffirms his hideousness in manipulating women into sex. In response to Q's last question, which we can imply is along the lines of 'how often are your tactics successful?', he responds 'more pussy than a toilet seat, man. I shit you not' (72). Feminine appropriation of Johnny's voice thus strengthens rather than undercuts his author-ity over hideousness. This complicates the idea that women's infiltration of these men's communication, in and of itself, weakens said men's reclamation of control over what is said about their hideousness.

Indeed, as noted above, reverse discourse works precisely by redeploying received expressions towards counter-oppressive goals. In comparison to 'B.I. #14', the connection between Johnny's testimony and a reversal of perceived feminist pieties is less apparent. Yet, as with the coprolalia-afflicted ejaculator, Johnny's narrative duplicates the sexual scenario, in modified form, at the level of Q's interview. As he recounts, 'I show it [his arm] to her just like I just did you' (71). In fact, Johnny's seduction stages the appropriative process by which Q makes these men's hideousness public. By positioning his sexual conquests as liberating him, professing that 'Don't You See You Have Set Me Free of Being Shameful Of The Arm Thank You Thank You' (72, *sic*), Johnny controls the breaking of his privacy these women ostensibly carry out. Furthermore, the story's excremental imagery suggests how this author-ity also works as a right to exclude. By getting 'more pussy than a toilet seat' (72), Wallace implies Johnny's embrace of 'shittiness', an association the near pun on *asset* reiterates. This shittiness works as self-demarcation in the face of Q's attempt to document his hideousness, as the phrase 'I shit you not' (72) subtly evokes. If 'I shit' signifies 'Johnny is a shit', and 'you not' that 'Q is not a shit', then the testimony Q has expropriated from Johnny ultimately affirms the latter's distinctly male hideousness. Consequently, the 'my own part of me' (72) Johnny reclaims in this story is more than his withered arm. It is a renewed author-ity to speak on his hideousness, and which arises from a complex manipulation and reversal of

women's attempts – whether in his sexual partners' compassion, or, far more obliquely, in Q's potentially ameliorative feminist goals – to do so for him.

The testimonies in 'B.I. #14' and 'B.I. #40', then, reclaim hideousness as these men's private property. They do so through their complex reversal of feminist discourse, reasserting their rights to control what can be said about their hideousness, and to exclude said feminists from similar authority. Significantly, the perceived feminist discourse in question here varies in terms of its specificity. If the ejaculator's outburst risibly confirms feminist commonplaces about male sexuality and violence, Johnny's manipulation of his partners' self-perceptions as compassionate people is more indirect. His testimony affronts rather the (apparent) general assumption that women can talk about male hideousness, whether to help 'cure' said men (as Soderbergh's Ann does for Graham, for example), or in order to condemn it (as is implied, if only by these men's paranoid pre-emptions, that Q's project attempts to do). Reclaiming such hideousness as private property, moreover, does not entail a rejection of all control in favour of unfettered individualism. Q is essential to the cycle, its necessary mediator and instigator – the companion ghost whose 'absent opacity' ('Language, Gender and Modes of Power' 148), to use Hayes-Brady's description of femininity in Wallace's texts, co-ordinates the various testimonies we receive whilst minimising her own influence.

This minimisation of control is important to how, by reasserting private property, the 'Brief Interviews' also work to privatise feminist critique. The reluctance to speak *for* these men, and thus, in Hering's words, a movement '*towards* an engagement with dialogism [...] through awareness of [...] monologic tendenc[ies]' (*Fiction and Form* 35, italics in original), implies judgements about the value of individual voice (created, but not dominated, through dialogic means) over being 'told' by an anonymous other. Such judgements inform how the story cycle endeavours to 'improve' the feminism that we can imply motivates Q's questions. What needs improving, as intimated above, is feminism's apparent reduction of these men's

attitudes and behaviours to overly restrictive ideas of hideousness. Wallace suggests, then, that attempts to know and transform male hideousness through feminism used as a discipline fails to the extent that it neglects men's position as authors. By respecting this position, and in turn allowing men to reclaim author-ity over hideousness, the anti-masculinist politics that Q pursues can ostensibly be more effective. What Wallace designated his 'parody (a feminist parody) of feminism' (quoted in Max, *Every Love Story* 247), in this respect, accords with some of the central justifications that neoliberal governments often give for privatisation. Specifically, these are that services can be improved, and particularly in ways that increase efficiency and reduce waste, if ownership moves from public to private hands.

### Privatising Q

Avril's diddle-check proves to be comically inefficient in identifying examples of abuse. After asking 'about being touched by a tall person in an uncomfortable way' (513), one girl notes that "'Gramma pinches my cheek'" (513), another that "'I hate it when some adult pats my head like I'm a schnauzer'" (514). Ultimately, the session degenerates into the girls 'exchanging data on what kinds of animals members of their own biologic families either imitate or physically resemble' (526). The only instance of potential abuse is slight – one girl's complaint that 'my daddy gives me these small little shoves in the small of the back when he wants me to go into rooms' (514). Avril's response – 'Mmmmmm-hmm' (514) – however, implies that such information is conducive to her goals. Wallace not only presents the diddle-check as inefficient, then, but also as unduly biased towards finding examples of male hideousness, however innocuous the evidence. The inefficiency of disciplines that set out to confirm pre-set assumptions appear throughout Wallace's corpus, most often embodied by psychotherapists and medical professionals. Feminism in Wallace's texts, imagined as a group of ideas about male hideousness, is part of this dynamic. As well as the diddle-check,

for instance, Rusk's attempt to diagnose male students with various sexual pathologies (437, 550) shows her disciplinary narrowmindedness. Elsewhere, the novel's parodic feminist group – the 'Female Objectification Prevention and Protest Phalanx' (929), or 'FOPPP' (929) – is suggestive of similar faults. As well as being risibly militant, to the extent of assaulting and kidnapping cheerleaders (929), their abbreviation implies inefficiency. The misogynistic irony of naming them 'fop', a term that designates male dandies and thus vain ineffectuality, is compounded by the unnecessary and wasteful extra 'P's'.<sup>36</sup>

Cutting waste and boosting efficiency is one of the major justifications, in neoliberal thought, for privatisation. As Duggan notes, this 'primary strategy of turn-of-the-millennium neoliberalism' (12) equates 'economic activity with voluntary, uncoerced, private freedom, and with productivity, efficiency and wealth expansion' (12). It is the Reagan and Thatcher governments of the 1980s, though, that most famously implemented privatisation in pursuit of these goals. Significantly, privatisation for these governments was intimately associated with property rights. For Thatcher, state ownership entailed

ownership by an impersonal legal entity: it amounts to control by politicians and civil servants [...] Through privatisation – particularly the kind of privatisation which leads to the widest possible share ownership by members of the public – the state's power is reduced and the power of the people enhanced (quoted in Evans, 35).

Privatisation, in this sense, means reasserting private property against the state's overreach, and out of the conviction that private control is morally and logically preferable to delegating such, in Hering's phrase, to an 'absent possessor' (*Fiction and Form* 20). Paul Starr explains how, from this angle, the efficiency benefits of privatisation lie in how 'the more individuals stand to gain from tending to their property, the better will it be tended' (20). Conversely,

‘the more attenuated and diluted their property rights, the less motivated individuals will be to use property under their control efficiently’ (20). This logic informs how the ‘Brief Interviews’ stories privatise feminist critique. By reasserting men’s author-ity over their hideousness, these stories imply that men can gain an individuality that overly broad feminist methodologies elide. This in turn implies that a feminist project of identifying and explicating hideous male behaviour is most efficiently achieved if men speak for themselves.

Significantly, this does not mean that Q’s feminist goals are completely delegated to individual men, any more so than privatisation means complete state withdrawal in favour of private enterprise alone. Indeed, the supposed efficiency that Wallace implies feminism can gain by not talking ‘for’ these men at times occurs without their consent. In other words, Q’s subjects often inadvertently damn themselves, thus advancing a critique of male hideousness without suppressing their individual voices. The ejaculator of ‘B.I. #14’, for instance, in his attempt to distinguish his outburst from any political position, states that ‘I’m not one of these America First, read the newspaper, will Buchanan get the nod people’ (14). The ‘America First Committee’ was a 1940-41 pressure group that urged against U.S. involvement in the Second World War. Pat Buchanan, meanwhile, is a conservative politician and celebrity, notable for his non-interventionism and indeed for using the phrase ‘American First’ during his campaigns. That the ejaculator anxiously avows his dissimilarity to both undercuts his denial that ‘Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!’ (14) is a political statement. By stressing his difference from non-interventionist political groups and figures, he ends up inadvertently confirming the militaristic connotations of his orgasm. The feminist objective of identifying male hideousness has proceeded without weakening the ejaculator’s author-ity over such, and in a way that is more efficiently precise than the blanket statements to which – as Wallace presents them – feminist estimations of men subscribe.

Foucault's description of the author is suggestive of this emphasis on efficiency. For when 'one is thrifty not only with one's resources and riches but also with one's discourses [...] the author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning' ('What is an Author?' 221). Wallace's reassertion of these men's author-ity over hideousness is thus suggestive of privatisation's focus on thrift over perceived largesse. The latter characterises feminism as a discipline in Wallace's texts, and this inefficiency indeed dovetails with how feminism, as he presents it, fails to adequately engage with the male hideousness it tries to critique. Foucault suggests that 'in a discipline [...] what is supposed at the outset is not a meaning which has to be rediscovered [...] but the requisites for the construction of new statements' ('The Order of Discourse' 60); indeed, 'there must be the possibility of formulating new propositions' ('The Order of Discourse' 60). In Wallace's depiction, feminism as a discipline has calcified into positions that can only rediscover established meanings. This is clear in the classes that FOPPP member Mary Esther Thode teaches, which have included 'The Toothless Predator: Breast Feeding as Sexual Assault' (307). When Ted Schact easily answers her exam question on double-binds with '*mail fraud*' (308, italics in original) – thus punning on 'male fraud' – the implication is that Thode is so 'politically rabid' (307) that even in notionally non-feminist contexts she can only regurgitate an unthinking antipathy towards men.

Foucault goes on to argue that a 'discipline recognises true and false propositions; but it pushes back a whole teratology of knowledge beyond its margins [...] there are monsters on the prowl whose form changes with the history of knowledge' ('The Order of Discourse' 60). Taking the example of botanist Gregor Mendel, the significance of whose work was not truly appreciated until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Foucault suggests 'it is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exteriority, but one is "in the true" only by obeying the rules of a discursive "policing"' ('The Order of Discourse 61). As Mendel's findings did not accord with the disciplinary conditions that were prevalent during his lifetime, he 'spoke the



truth, but he was not “within the true” (‘The Order of Discourse’ 61). A similar dynamic is evident in how Wallace presents his hideous men, whose behaviours and attitudes, if nothing else, make them prowling monsters. Wallace implies that these men speak the truth of male sexual hideousness, but are not ‘within the true’ of feminist discourses of such. Privatising the disciplinary methods Avril, Rusk, Thode, or Q represent, Wallace’s texts reaffirm men’s author-ity over hideousness as a form of private property, and thus a renewed willingness to engage with such monsters. Consequently, these stories suggest that feminism can more efficiently advance an anti-masculinist politics that will be able, qua Foucault, to formulate new propositions, rather than reproducing commonplaces about male shittiness.

‘B.I. #28’ is the perhaps most pointed example of this. One of the two interviews that follows a pair of men in conversation, this story concerns E and K’s discussion of ‘what does today’s woman want [...] In terms of the old mating dance’ (192). E and K are students savvy to feminism; like the women whom they claim are in a double-bind of postfeminist pressure and pre-feminist expectations, both ‘have the empowerment-lingo down pat, that’s for sure’ (192). Indeed, ‘whether it sounds Neanderthal or not’ (192), they posit that ‘today’s women’ (192) only espouse feminist ideas as a coded plea for men to rescue them from the pressures of such. Their misogynistic remarks that women ‘do make great moms’ (199) and that ‘*No* doesn’t meant yes, but it doesn’t mean no, either’ (199, italics in original) encourages us to doubt their ideas. At the same time, however, their colloquy offers an incisive take on how consumer culture co-opts female empowerment to reaffirm traditional gender roles, thus bolstering women’s supposed need for ‘just-another-Neanderthal-male’ (197). In this, E and K speak truths that are not ‘within the true’ of a perceived feminist discipline. Their hideousness contravenes the discursive policing of a feminism that works against misogyny, whilst implying that this feminism should expand its disciplinary parameters to accommodate E and K’s analysis. If letting E and K speak confirms their hideousness with (ostensibly) a

greater precision than an impersonal feminist discipline would allow, such privatisation will also urge said discipline to develop its otherwise stale modes of analysis. Listening to the monsters who currently lie outside of its disciplinary comprehension, Wallace suggests, will spur feminist critique into more nuanced estimations of male hideousness.

The need to engage with ideas and opinions that one may find reprehensible marks much of Wallace's writing around the time of *Brief Interviews*. As well as this book, 1999 saw the appearance of 'Big Red Son', and also his review of John Updike's chauvinism in *Towards the End of Time*. Most pertinently for my present discussion, in 1999 Wallace also published 'Tense Present', later collected in extended form as 'Authority and American Usage' in *Consider the Lobster* (2005). This review of Bryan Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (2003) moves from asking 'whence the authority of dictionary-makers to decide what's OK and what isn't?' (75), to broader meditations on the political impasse between liberals and conservatives. Relating how he forces his black students not to write in an African American vernacular, or of how his pro-life convictions entail a pro-choice recognition that he should not interfere with others' lives, Wallace comes across as a self-aware conservative frustrated with 'Politically Correct English' (110). For him, this language 'burke[s] the sorts of painful, unpretty, and sometimes offensive discourse that in a pluralistic democracy lead to actual political change' (112). The validity or otherwise of this idea aside, the implication that 'PC progressives' (111) undermine their own causes by 'pussyfooting around these [tough] realities with euphemistic doublespeak' (109) accords with how the 'Brief Interviews' stories suggest that feminism, if it privatises its methods and so supports men's author-ity over their hideousness, can achieve its goals more effectively.

'B.I. #20', the longest interview of the entire cycle, closes with a provocative confirmation of this idea. The interviewee, concluding his story of how he fell in love with a woman after she tells him about being brutally raped and almost murdered, informs Q that

I know how this sounds, trust me. I know your type and I know what you're bound to ask. Ask it now. This is your chance. I felt she could save me I said. Ask me now. Say it. I stand here naked before you. Judge me, you chilly cunt. You dyke, you bitch, cooze, cunt, slut, gash. Happy now? All borne out? Be happy. I don't care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story (271).

Critics have tended to read these parting remarks as the interviewee – whom Wallace hints is named Eric (266) – falling apart, undermined by Q's questioning and the raped woman's – whom Wallace implies is called Sara (266) – implicit manipulation of him. Hayes-Brady, for instance, suggests that Eric's 'incoherent tirade' ('Language, Gender and Modes of Power' 146) signals how 'he loses his control over language altogether' ('Language, Gender, and Modes of Power' 146). Rando similarly posits that these lines betray 'Eric's own inability to control the interpretation of his narrative' (582). Given that Eric's insults are perfectly coherent, and coldly measured in their deliberateness, it is more accurate to read them as a final assertion of author-ity over his own hideousness. This passage presents us with the kind of 'painful, unpretty, and sometimes offensive' ('Authority' 112) language that, for Wallace, politically correct forces censor. Notably, when *Harper's* originally published this story, the question 'all borne out?' appeared as 'all judgements confirmed?' ('#6'), suggesting Eric's remarks are indeed intended as one last affront to Q's ideas about male hideousness. Wallace implies that by privatising her critique, and so allowing Eric to damn himself in ways that are more efficient and precise than apparent feminist judgements, dovetails with airing various abhorrent realities the 'PC left' ('Up, Simba' 188) cannot handle.

B.I. #46 offers an extended exploration of this premise. Its interviewee suggests that 'if there wasn't a Holocaust there wouldn't be a *Man's Search for Meaning*' (98), Victor

Frankl's 'great, great book' (98) about his experiences in Auschwitz. Similarly, there is no reason that being assaulted and raped 'can't have their positive aspects for a human being in the long run' (99); indeed, 'everybody gets hurt and violated and broken sometimes, why are women so special?' (99). The interviewee takes pains to establish that he is not suggesting such abuse is justifiable, but rather that the 'experience in the human Dark Side' (98) that it affords can be valuable. In this regard, Wallace presents us with another man whose hideous expressions ostensibly speak the truth without being 'within the true' of feminist discourse. This aversion to being 'so smug and knee jerk' (104) about women who survive rape doubles as an antipathy to feminist disciplines, whose frameworks supposedly lack an appreciation of harsh realities. Rape is potentially beneficial, for the interviewee, because it forces proximity to 'the genuine Dark Side' (101): 'now you really *know*. Now it's not just an idea or cause to get all knee-jerk about' (101, italics in original). This suggestion depoliticises the issue; ideas or causes, the interviewee suggests, cannot hope to grasp the lived reality of such events. Like a hypothetical 'speechmaker at a school assembly [who] has you all repeat you're Somebody you're Strong over and over' (100), political ideas of female agency and empowerment are at fault for their rote, planned implementation. Such ideas, the story implies, inhibit awareness of the actual experiences of male hideousness they document.

Advocates for privatisation tend to suggest that it is unconcerned with politics. For by prioritizing efficiency and reducing waste, privatisation in Brown's words 'promulgates a market emphasis on "what works"' (130). As Duggan notes, this 'is usually presented not as a particular set of interests and political interventions, but as a kind of nonpolitics – a way of being reasonable' (10). Wallace's antipathy to Politically Correct English in 'Authority and American Usage' is suggestive of how such a reasonable nonpolitics, for him, is a more productive way to achieve the left's goals. Wallace suggests that the 'ideological principles' (110) that informed the rise of PCE have resulted in 'a kind of Lenin-to-Stalinesque irony'

(110), whereby egalitarian intentions ‘have now actually produced a far more inflexible Prescriptivism’ (110). His reference to ‘Stalinization’ (111) is suggestive of central planning as much as it is of authoritarian dictate. Commenting in particular on the possibility of wealth redistribution, Wallace suggests that ‘the type of leftist vanity that informs PCE’ (113) means that ‘progressives lose the chance to frame their redistributive arguments in terms that are both realistic and realpolitikal’ (113).<sup>37</sup> In other words, only by adopting a realistic and realpolitikal ethos of ‘what works’ can the left escape an ideological narrow-mindedness that is ‘harmful to its own cause’ (111). Privatising Q’s feminist critique in the ‘Brief Interviews’ stories serves this purpose – it supplants apparently ‘wacko dogmatic position[s]’ (82) with more realistic, because supposedly non-ideological, methods.

Wallace praises Garner’s dictionary for these qualities. Garner’s style ‘kept me from asking [...] what particular agendas or ideologies were informing what he had admitted right up front were “value judgements”’ (119). His dictionary therefore seems ‘*objective*, but with a little *o*, as in “disinterested,” “reasonable”’ (119, italics in original). This is because Garner presents ‘himself as an authority not in an *autocratic* sense but in a *technocratic* sense [...] knowledgeable, reasonable, dispassionate, fair’ (122, italics in original). As argued, Wallace depicts feminist critiques of male hideousness as lacking such. Indeed, the ‘Brief Interviews’ privatise such critiques out of a conviction that technocratic approaches to the issue are more effective. However, Garner’s technocracy is especially admirable because it also comes from a distinctly personal source. Garner shows the ‘enduring passion that helps make someone a credible technocrat – we tend to like and trust experts whose expertise is born of a real love for their speciality instead of just a desire to be [an] expert’ (123). As Garner’s dictionary is indicative of an impassioned authorial persona – and not of the Descriptivist vs Prescriptivist disciplines Wallace describes in this essay – his arguments are more convincing than those of

‘some established dogmatic camp’ (72). Thus Garner’s ‘real thesis [...] is that the purposes of the expert authority and the purpose of the lay reader are identical’ (125).

The impassioned technocrat’s ability to bypass ideological positions, and to access ‘lay’ truths that said positions apparently fail to grasp, is particularly apparent at the close of ‘B.I. #46’. After objecting throughout to Q’s ‘knee jerk reaction[s] [...] taking everything I say and taking and filtering it through your own narrow view of the world’ (101), we learn that his ideas concerning the potential benefits of gang rape derive from what is most likely personal experience: ‘what if I said it happened to me?’ (105). Though deliberately vague, his mention of ‘this cane right here’ (104), and his description of ‘four guys that knee-jerked you in the balls to make you bend over’ (105), intimates that it was he who was treated ‘just [like] a hole to shove a Jack Daniel’s bottle in so far it blows out your kidneys’ (102). He therefore becomes the ‘expert’ here, affronting Q’s ‘knee-jerk politics about your ideas about victims’ (101) with the particularities of lived experience. That he uses the phrase ‘knee-jerked’ (105) to describe such assault mirrors his perception of Q’s ‘knee-jerk politics’ (101), provocatively implying that her pre-set estimations of hideous men is a form of rape – a way of conceiving him ‘as a thing’ (103) rather than a person.<sup>38</sup> The interviewee’s final remark, that ‘you don’t know shit’ (105), bears forth the notion that ‘men mostly are shit’ (‘B.I. #3’ 22) that is clear throughout the story cycle. This interviewee knows male shittiness in ways that Q cannot, his expertise working, like Garner’s, to stress the shortcomings of her disciplinary approach. His testimony, in turn, renders him an abhorrent if ‘credible technocrat’ (‘Authority’ 123) who is accordingly best suited to advance a critique of male hideousness.

As I have argued more generally, the ‘Brief Interviews’ present straight men as experts on their hideousness, reclaiming such as a form of private property against feminist critiques that Wallace equates with state ownership. This reclamation privatises such critique; in other words, it suggests that moving property rights from a public-minded feminism into

men's private hands allows for more efficient interrogations of men's sexual behaviour. Part of this process is the notion that, as a discipline, feminism has become ideologically stolid, and therefore at odds with Wallace's conviction that – as he puts it in relation to lexical and political correctness – 'the fundamental questions [...] involve[d] are ones whose answers have to be literally *worked out* instead of merely found' ('Authority' 72, italics in original). The story cycle 'works out' what Wallace suggests are feminist commonplaces about male hideousness. It does so by compelling readers, positioned as Q, to engage with realities that are not 'in the true' of feminism's current disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, the stories follow this logic to give nuance to what are ostensibly reductive feminist understandings of male hideousness. Despite their implicit focus upon efficiency and the non-politics of 'what works', then, the stories' privatisation of Q's critique proceeds by humanising her subjects, particularly and provocatively when they are at their most monstrous.

### Conclusion

An encyclopaedic ambition for discursive mastery characterises much of Wallace's fiction. Adam Kelly exemplifies a common hagiography when he describes this as 'vintage Wallace, of course: as a writer at home in virtually every discourse imaginable, he understood the specific resonances of each one' ('Novel of Ideas' 17). This omnivorous expertise is at its most brazen in relation to feminism. As I have argued, the 'Brief Interviews' not only set out to challenge feminist ideas about male sexual hideousness, but to improve its critique of such. For some scholars, such as Himmelheber and Matthew Alexander, this story cycle does offer engaging interrogations of sexism, notably in relation to rape culture. Amy Hungerford, by contrast, asks if 'one [should] believe that he has anything smart to say about the dynamics between men and women [...]?' (150), and answers firmly in the negative. Indeed, she takes the 'Brief Interviews' as being prime examples of Wallace's literary and personal misogyny.

I have suggested in previous chapters how Wallace's texts are at times sceptical of feminist politics, and my above analysis of its depiction in both *Infinite Jest* and the 'Brief Interviews' stories furthers this. My interests in this present discussion, however, have not been to assess the value or otherwise of Wallace's paranoid caricature of feminism, but with how these representations follow neoliberal logics concerning property. I have argued that Wallace depicts straight men reclaiming their sexual hideousness as a form of private property, and in the interests of privatising feminist critique.

These manoeuvres position male hideousness as part of a perceived anti-masculinist discourse. Wallace's men reverse this discourse to reclaim it, and in doing so, they bolster their authorial ownership of such in the face of an apparently stale feminist discipline. With a stronger right to control their hideousness, as well as to exclude feminist others from talking about it, these men's testimonies circulate in ways that stress individual particularity against what they suggest is Q's uniform direction. As in Chapter 3's analysis of contract, therefore, the point here is to protect and empower men against an apparent attempt to suppress their individuality. That the 'Brief Interviews' do this through recourse to examples of male sexual depravity that, though well-intentioned, critiques like Q's cannot hope to ameliorate, furthers my contention that Wallace's texts are invested in the incontestability of such hideousness. Furthermore, one should question whether the 'improvement' of feminist critique that these stories proffer is not, in fact, a means of defanging it. In other words, the privatisation at work here gestures towards the paradoxical suggestion that feminism, if it wishes to hold the 'Dark Side' ('B.I. #46' 98) of male sexuality to account, should surrender its ideological claims and assess misogyny on the basis of individual rather than structural violence. This suggestion does not give one much hope for the prospect of dismantling patriarchy.

As I suggested at the close of Chapter 3, the sense of illusory reckoning with such violence for Bachner allows certain texts to resolve the anxiety of their own implication in



perpetuating it. The tension in Wallace's output between being invested in male characters and perspectives, and the awareness that such investments risk supporting patriarchal power relations, is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the 'Brief Interviews'. By presenting male sexual hideousness as a type of private property, and by reasserting individual men's author-ity over such as a way to privatise Q's feminist critique, these stories endeavour to resolve this tension. Specifically, the process I have outlined in this chapter suggests that male sexual hideousness is best approached as a neutral economic issue: incontestable in itself, but manageable nonetheless. Further to this, although my emphasis here has been less explicitly on male sexual violence as something that defies representation, Bachner's argument on this front has still informed my own. Namely, the 'improved' feminist critique that the 'Brief Interviews' stories formulate suggests that only by acknowledging her own inability to fully comprehend the sexual hideousness her interviewees embody can Q hope to make her critique more productive. To use Foucault's terms, these men constitute a teratology that an ostensibly inadequate feminist discipline cannot account for.<sup>39</sup>

Additionally, although my references to spermatic metaphors in this chapter have been scant, the dynamics I have outlined still follow ideas of blockage and release. Indeed, testimonies such as those given by the ejaculator of 'B.I. #14' ostensibly break through the ideological blockage of Q's feminist critique, and in doing so release this discourse from its apparent tendency to reproduce pre-existing ideas. Despite this chapter's argument that the 'Brief Interviews' seek to protect men's individuality, moreover, the very sexual hideousness these stories envisage as being in need of reclamation has its genesis in an attempt to brand all men with the same *collective* mark. Put differently, these interviewees reclaim the right to speak about a collective designation as, paradoxically, a sign of their individual hideousness. This uneasy relationship between group identity and the individual in relation to sexuality will be significant in my next chapter. There I will consider the neoliberal logic of austerity,

which although it evokes a collective need to tackle debt, places responsibility for this action on individual exemplars of particular groups. To be more specific, in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* Wallace looks to the sexual hardships of little men as a means to divert attention away from the need to reform broader ideas of male sexual hideousness.

## Chapter 5

### Austerity: Sacrificing and Scapegoating Little Men

During a speech he gave in Michigan on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2000, future U.S. president George W. Bush declared that ‘I know the human being and fish can coexist peacefully’ (‘Top Ten Bushisms’). This surreal ad lib, meant to signal his commitment to not removing energy-producing dams merely because they endangered fish, was a precursor to the many semantic mistakes he would make when in office. Such blunders, and the general ridicule with which they were met in popular culture, also offer a useful entryway into considering a defining trope of Wallace’s texts during the same 2001-2008 period. Namely, this is Wallace’s emphasis on schlemiels, or little men – straight males who, in various ways, are pitifully and comically inadequate. Human-fish relations would of course preoccupy Wallace in his 2005 Kenyon College Commencement Address, in which he spun life lessons from a joke about two goldfish unaware they are in water. Associations between Wallace and this ichthyologic sermon have been hard to break, much to the annoyance of some of his critical interlocutors. Boswell, for instance, regrets the ‘unfortunate popular conception of Wallace as a [...] writer of self-help narratives designed to “save us” (‘Trickle-Down Citizenship’ 210), a conception ‘calcified by the book publication of his Kenyon graduation speech’ (210). Bracketing the speech’s content, however, and spotlighting instead the ignorance that these ‘two young [...] boys’ (*This is Water* 3) display, suggests the importance of little male ineptitude to Wallace’s later texts – whether exemplified by goldfish or a president.

*Oblivion* and *The Pale King* are in fact preoccupied with littleness. In the opening story of the former, ‘Mister Squishy’, protagonist Terry Schmidt struggles with a sense of ‘thoroughgoing *smallness*’ (31, italics in original) at his marketing job, while in the book’s closing novella, ‘The Suffering Channel’, Skip Atwater ponders how ‘the management of

insignificance' (284) is 'the single great informing conflict of the American psyche' (284). *The Pale King* displays similar concerns in relation to civic duty, and how Americans have apparently lost 'the old sense of being small parts of something larger [...] to which we have serious responsibilities' (138). Within this general concern with diminution, though, the little man as a figure of sexual ineptitude ironically looms large. In this chapter, I explore how these ineptitudes are suggestive of a logic of neoliberal austerity. The most recent imposition of austerity measures occurred in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when, broadly speaking, Western governments shifted responsibility for budget deficits from the banking sector to public spending. Reducing deficits by cutting such spending, the thinking went, would better allow societies to tackle high levels of debt. At the same time, what Rebecca Bramall calls 'austerity culture' (4) – the array of 'discourses, values, [and] ideological elements' (4) that help to legitimate austerity's shifting of responsibility – perpetuated the idea that some behaviours are more conducive to reducing the deficit than others. *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*'s depictions of little men work in a similar way. These texts legitimate austerity logic by depicting little men as virtuous avatars of sexual sacrifice on the one hand, and as sexual profligates to be scapegoated on the other.

Before exploring how a concern with budgets, deficits, and debts relates to Wallace's writing of male sexuality in these texts, it is first necessary to account for the presence of little men themselves. Though they appear elsewhere in Wallace's work – see for instance Rick Vigorous in *The Broom of the System*, or the many bumbling personas of Wallace's journalism – little men appear with striking frequency in his later output. Antipathy for Bush offers one possible reason for this. A passing snipe at his 'patrician smirk and mangled cant' ('Up Simba' 187) in Wallace's 2000 essay on John McCain had developed, by the 2007 piece 'Just Asking', into a summary of the ways Bush's government was undermining democracy (322). In a reductive but nonetheless useful estimation of this antipathy, D. T. Max suggests

the president enraged Wallace because ‘he saw in Bush all the little-man-lost-in-a-big-man’s shirt qualities he disliked in himself’ (‘God, Mary Karr, and Ronald Reagan’). As a figurative little man, Bush is a contemptible lodestar to the many images of white male ineffectuality that populate Wallace’s later texts. In a 2006 interview with Bryan A. Garner, during which he criticised Bush for being ‘out of his element’ (110), Wallace suggested that ‘we love to laugh at pathetic schlemiels, particularly [those] who are trying to look the opposite of that’ (54). Though he was speaking here about people with poor grammatical skills, ‘pathetic schlemiels’ (54) are central to *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*’s sexual austerities.

That Wallace uses a Yiddish term – schlemiel – to describe such inept men signals his tendency, as explored by Lucas Thompson, to exploit tropes from minority cultures (199n6). Wallace’s texts indeed appropriate the schlemiel from Yiddish and Jewish-American culture, but they also put the character to their own uses. In an important early theorisation of the schlemiel, Hannah Arendt suggests that he (and it is nearly always a ‘he’) is representative of Jewish experiences of social ostracism. Focusing on the poetry of Henrich Heine, she argues that this ostracism renders the schlemiel the avatar of a ‘natural freedom’ (104), by which he can take a liberatingly askew view of social relations. Later studies, however, tend to emphasise the schlemiel as a tragicomic figure, cynically hopeful in the face of his suffering. Ruth R. Wisse’s 1971 *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* is the most astute analysis in this vein. Wisse suggests that the schlemiel arose as a response to the persecution of Eastern European Jews: ‘vulnerable, ineffectual in his efforts at self-advancement and self-preservation, he emerged as the archetypal Jew, especially in his capacity of potential victim’ (4-5). Though Wallace’s little men both exemplify and modulate this tradition, more recent work by David Buchbinder (2008) and Brenton J. Malin (2005) has noted the preponderance of white male schlemiels in millennial popular culture. Hence what Stephen Wade describes as a feature that ‘goes deep into the literary conventions of Yiddish’ (4) now circulates in media that lack

any explicit focus on Jewishness. The presence of this figure in Wallace's texts accords with its mainstream use. I use the phrase 'little man' in this chapter to reflect such mainstreaming, and refer to the schlemiel, mainly in my argument's second half, when it is useful to do so.

That said, the central little man characteristic I wish to explore in these texts – sexual ineffectuality – has a strong lineage in images of Jewish-American masculinity. David Biale describes 'the Jew as sexual schlemiel' (204) as a stock figure, 'the little man with the big libido and the even bigger sexual neurosis, a character comically unable to consummate his desire' (204). Biale points specifically to Woody Allen, whose performances in films such as *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (1972) arguably epitomise the sexual schlemiel. Wallace's depiction of similar men, such as Terry Schmidt, follows this template. As I argue later on, it is precisely because these men are so neurotically oversexed that Wallace's texts punish them. Yet little men in *The Pale King* and *Oblivion* who, rather than being punished for hyper-sexuality, are valued for their sexual indifference, bear a different relationship to the precedent Biale outlines. Here Wallace retains the schlemiel's position as both isolated and pathetic, but mutes his sexuality. Two examples from popular film, themselves suggestive of the little man's millennial currency, help to illustrate this. The schlemiels that Wallace's texts punish resemble Kevin Spacey's character Lester Burnham in *American Beauty* (1999) – a man lusting after his daughter's friend, and in conflict with his resulting feelings of shame and social censure. The schlemiels these texts value for their sexual indifference, by contrast, are more like the character Milton Waddams in *Office Space* (1999) – a marginalised office worker whose grotesqueness, and general kookiness, work against any possible sexual characteristics.

Wallace can also be said to torque conventional ideas of the schlemiel through his often bleak worldview in later texts, particularly *Oblivion*. The little man's struggle in the face of various obstacles has traditionally functioned as his saving grace, offering readers and

spectators a point of conflicted but redemptive identification. Examining the character in contemporary French literature, Warren F. Motte suggests that ‘the schlemiel carnivalizes our struggles and our way of being in the world, holding a funhouse mirror up to us and daring us to recognize ourselves therein [...] He is a loser without a doubt; yet he is a beautiful loser’ (79-80). Milton in *Office Space*, or Lester in *American Beauty*, fit this mould rather well – as grotesque and pathetic as they are, both characters also solicit the audience’s empathy. Though Wallace’s little men are perhaps never completely unlikeable, he more often than not accentuates their role as losers at the direct expense of their beauty. By the same token, he also downplays what Motte suggests is the schlemiel’s carnivalesque or funhouse traits. When little men like Schmidt serve comic functions, it is reminiscent of how Wallace reads Kafka’s humour, which he notably values for its lack of ‘Pynchonian slapstick [...] Rothish priapism [...] or Woody Allen-type kvetching’ (‘Some Remarks’ 62-3). Instead of schlemiel comedy, Kafka’s humour for Wallace engages with more serious suffering – it relishes the fact that ‘the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle’ (‘Some Remarks’ 64).<sup>40</sup>

Despite these caveats, however, reading various men in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* in the tradition of the schlemiel is still appropriate. Comparable character types like the fool or the anti-hero are too broad, whereas the schlemiel, or little man, specifies the often pitiable and frustrated nature of male characters in both texts. These traits are also well-matched to how austerity discourses praise the apparent virtues of reduced expectations and necessary hardship. Having described the presence of the schlemiel in Wallace’s work, I now turn to an examination of austerity and how it functions in this context. Of chief importance here is to show how austerity’s shifting of responsibility for deficit reduction – away from reigning in financial speculation, and towards cuts to public spending – translates into images of male sexuality. It does so, I argue, through how little men’s sacrifices and sufferings in *Oblivion*

and *The Pale King* transform the problems created by hideous straight male behaviour into the problems of men who are unable to profit from such. Put differently, if austerity deflects attention from capitalism as a force systemically prone to crisis and exploitation, Wallace's sexual austerity does the same for straight male hideousness. With the former, it is the poor who must pay the price; with the latter, it is the little man.

### Austerity for Little Men

Recent studies of the economic justifications for austerity tend to focus on how the concept has developed over time. In *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (2013), Mark Blyth examines the thought of Locke, Hume, and Smith to suggest that austerity's 'condition of [...] appearance – parsimony, frugality, morality, and a pathological fear of the consequences of government debt – lie deep within economic liberalism's fossil record from its very inception' (115). Florian Schui's *Austerity: The Great Failure* (2014), meanwhile, goes back even further to trace the development of arguments for and against austerity from ancient Greece onwards. As their books' titles suggest, both commentators argue that austerity is misguided, particularly as a path to recovery in the aftermath of the financial crash and the subsequent 2010 Eurozone debt crisis. These events, as Heather Whiteside puts it, have led to austerity being '*en vogue* once again' (361, italics in original). Blyth's definition is useful in specifying what exactly is now so vogueish: austerity is 'a form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of wages, prices and public spending to restore competitiveness, which is (supposedly) best achieved by cutting the state's budget, debts and deficits' (2). Going forward, I emphasise the latter elements of Blyth's definition – cutting budgets, debts, and deficits – as being particularly important to the sexual austerity evident in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*. For these texts variously mobilize the littleness of their men to stress the apparent benefits of reducing sexual spending.



If the contemporary prevalence of austerity studies is suggestive of commentators making sense of events post-2008 – both the year of the financial crash, and of Wallace’s suicide – austerity has nonetheless figured prominently in past neoliberal periods. Whiteside suggests that ‘austerity gained prominence in the late 1970s/early 1980s as a solution to the problem of “stagflation”’ (362) – i.e. the combined phenomena of high unemployment, high inflation, and zero growth. Kim Phillips-Fein, meanwhile, has argued extensively that New York City’s 1975 fiscal crisis marks the birth of austerity politics. As she explains, then President Ford, with his advisors Donald Rumsfeld and Alan Greenspan, ‘opposed federal help for New York. They were convinced that the city had brought its problems on itself through heedless, profligate spending. Bankruptcy was thus a just punishment for its sins’ (2). The Ford administration’s response to New York’s out of control spending – immortalised by the *Daily News* headline ‘Ford to City: Drop Dead’ – prefigures the punitive nature of post-2008 austerity measures. To read sexuality in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* as being indicative of neoliberal austerity is not, therefore, to apply historical parameters they could in no way foresee. Rather, it is to suggest that they sexually articulate logics that have been internal to neoliberal theory and practice for decades.

Phillips-Fein also observes how, ‘paradoxically, the crisis is sometimes noted as a great triumph for New York [...] Everyone – labor, business, the banks, ordinary citizens – is thought to have accepted the need for austerity and chipped in’ (4). Comparing this with Democratic House leader Nancy Pelosi’s statement, in 2011, that Americans ‘must enter an era of austerity; to reduce the deficit through shared sacrifice’ (quoted in Brown, 275n21), reiterates how ideas of common hardship are prominent in austerity discourse. Indeed, for austerity’s proponents, balancing the budget so that expenditures do not exceed available resources, means that everybody needs to bear the burden of reduced spending. If austerity arises, as Lauren Berlant observes, ‘out of a sense that *something* was out of control that

required a conserving hand' ('Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness' 1, italics in original), then its measures for effecting such conservation appeal, as John Clarke and Janet Newman put it, 'to shared sacrifice and suffering, to fairness and freedom, to a sense of collective obligation' (309). Chapter 1 argued that Wallace's texts responsabilise men into more judiciously expending their individual sexual resources; to realise, as Wallace puts it at the end of 'Back in New Fire', that 'it's not just other people you have to respect' (172). In this final chapter I explore the opposite: how *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* follow an austerity logic of conserving sexual resources in the interests of collectivity. This is the notion that, to quote U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron (2010-15), when it comes to balancing the budget 'we are all in this together' (quoted in Clarke and Newman, 303).

As many commentators have pointed out, this discursive emphasis on collectivity does not translate into reality. In fact, in Whiteside's words, 'austerity has less to do with achieving economic growth (on which its track record is abysmal) than it does with shifting blame for economic conditions [...] from the wealthy to the already-precarious' (364). Austerity turns the need to reform (or, abolish) capitalism into making the most vulnerable responsible for its survival. In Marilyn Robinson's words, in the aftermath of 2008

the crisis of the private financial system has been transformed into a tale of slovenly and overweening government that perpetuates and is perpetuated by a dependent and demanding population. [...] For about ten days the crisis was interpreted as a consequence of the ineptitude of the highly paid, and then it transmogrified into a grudge against the populace at large, whose lassitude was bearing the society down to ruin (45).

Allen et al, drawing on Stuart Hall, describe this transformation as a kind of 'ideological displacement' ('Welfare Queens' 909), and it is evident in the sexual austerity Wallace

prescribes for his little men. In *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* he aligns capitalism, envisaged as the ruthless pursuit of profit, with images of hideous masculinity, implying that both share a drive to accumulate goods – whether monetary or sexual – that is unsustainable. Despite this, it is to little men that both texts look for a solution, suggesting that such figures must sacrifice sexuality, or act as scapegoats to be punished. These processes differ between *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*, but they nonetheless mirror how austerity discourse displaces responsibility for creating and reducing the deficit onto society's most vulnerable.

What does it mean, though, for sexuality to function as a shared budget? Wallace's tendency to depict male sexuality in these terms is in fact most evident in *Infinite Jest*, where James Incandenza, as well as an unnamed 'phalloneurotic New Yorker' (234), believes 'in a finite world-total of available erections [which] rendered him always either impotent or guilt-ridden' (789).<sup>41</sup> Similarly, when Hal reflects on how 'lifetime virginity is a conscious goal' (634) and 'feels like O.'s [i.e. his brother Orin] having enough acrobatic coitus for all three of them' (634), the suggestion is that his own (and Mario's) lack of expenditure works to offset Orin's satyriasis. Wallace develops this idea of a common sexual budget in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*, and in turn begs a further question: how can a shared sexual budget accrue a deficit? Or in Michael Tratner's words, 'how can one discharge more libido than one has'? (29). Discussing *Ulysses*, Tratner reframes this question to ask 'are there social practices that *increase libido*?' (29, italics in original), and answers that advertising and masturbation are 'a stimulus to consumer demand' (29). Advertising, in particular, 'loans people desires and suggests many new ways of indulging those desires' (29). A similar logic is at work in *The Pale King* and *Oblivion*. Here solicitations for sexual expenditures outside of heteronormative frameworks work as a form of credit, allowing men to spend resources they do not truly have. A deficit arises, then, on the basis that non-reproductive sexuality is a hollow form of

expenditure. Based on deferring payment, this spending-on-credit compels men to engage in activities that, for Wallace, heteronormative sexual budgets cannot cover.

In keeping with the elements of misogyny I have previously identified in Wallace's writing, *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* often align these solicitations for wasteful expenditures with women. Notably, though, they do this through little men's own subjective feelings of powerlessness before them. Though images of malevolently seductive femininity do appear in these texts, Wallace focalises the perils of sexual debt through men themselves. Thus, it is not so much that these men owe something to women, but rather that their ideas of women as bestowing male heterosexual validity has often convinced them that they do. The austerity that these texts endorse, whereby they scapegoat men for their profligacy, or induce them to sacrifice for greater goals, also works through comedic deflations of the same women being idolised. For instance, in 'Mr Squishy' the brief remarks that the woman Schmidt obsesses over has 'thick fingers' (26) and a 'great broad back' (55), undercut his outsized desires for her. However, before implying that *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* undermine the misogyny in this dynamic – recycling as it does stereotypical male fears of feminine entrapment – it is important to bear in mind that both texts still envisage debt to women as objectionable, even as they register how deluded these little men are.

Wendy Brown offers a useful theoretical framework for understanding how Wallace's sexual austerities tackle such debt. As part of the epilogue to her study *Undoing the Demos*, her thoughts on austerity are tentative, but they still offer a productive spur to thinking about sacrifice and – in her use of the work of René Girard – scapegoating. For Brown, though neoliberalism diminishes 'venues for active citizenship' (210), it 'retains and transforms the idea of citizen sacrifice' (210). During a period when 'loyal citizens must "share sacrifice" in accepting austerities' (212), the notion of 'sacrificial citizenship expands to include anything related to the requirements and imperatives of the economy' (211). However, drawing on

Moshe Halbertal, Brown suggests that the religious and moral-political nature of sacrifice is ‘premised upon a noneconomistic and non-marketized form of exchange’ (215). As such, despite the prevalence of sacrifice in austerity discourse, it remains partly outside its domain: ‘as a supplement to neoliberal reason [sacrifice] carries the potential for breaking open or betraying the limitations of that logic’ (216). Brown then outlines ‘two features of religious sacrifice’ (216) that might serve this purpose. First, substitution: if the victims of sacrifices usually function as substitutes for a sacrificer, then this encourages people to ask ‘who or what might be the object of substitution in neoliberal citizen sacrifice?’ (216). Second, restoration: if ‘religious sacrifice often aims [...] to rebalance the force of life and common existence’ (218), then accentuating this element within a neoliberal context can potentially spark interrogation of what exactly is said to be out of balance.

Brown’s idea that sacrifice offers a position external to neoliberal reason is limited, to some extent, by how it reproduces the ethos of self-interest it attempts to combat. ‘A refusal of the encomium to sacrifice’ (218) out of the knowledge that one gets nothing in return – in Brown’s words, knowing there is no ‘guarantee that the benefits of this sacrifice will redound to us’ (216) – reiterates, rather than upends, the economisation of moral-political questions into cost-benefit analyses. This snag aside, though, Brown’s discussion usefully taps into the motivations that *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* display for sexual austerity. Restoration and substitution are important to how these texts respectively value sexual indifference as a worthwhile sacrifice, and scapegoat little men who are neurotically oversexed. Following in Brown’s footsteps and drawing on Halbertal and Girard’s work, moreover, allows one to explore how Wallace’s sexual austerities use these ideas. My readings confirm the pertinence of Brown’s observations but, contrary to her intent, in ways that are internal to the logic of neoliberal austerity. Through different forms of sacrificing and scapegoating, Wallace’s little

men bear the burden of solving problems created by ‘bigger’ ideas of male sexuality, thereby functioning as prime objects for austerity’s displacement of responsibility.

‘Small *h*-heroes’ (*The Pale King* 129, italics in original): Sacrificing Sexuality

In his Editor’s Note to *The Pale King*, Michael Pietsch outlines some of the ways the novel might have been different had Wallace lived to finish it. For one, he suggests that ‘the terms “titty-pinching” and “squeezing his shoes,” [...] would probably not be repeated as often as they are’ (xi). Wallace uses the former in this novel to designate the metafictional aesthetic that its would-be writer ‘David Wallace’ wishes to avoid (69), and also, in modified form, to describe Toni Ware’s sexual assault as a young girl (65). The latter term, meanwhile, appears regularly in Chris Fogle’s account of joining the IRS, and refers in particular to the way his father would chide him for his youthful lack of direction (158). Abstracting these terms from their immediate contexts, however, and putting to one side the question of draft imprecision, both concepts are in fact suggestive of *The Pale King*’s interest in sexual austerity. Pinching and squeezing, imagined as reduced consumption in light of economic difficulty, are what this text’s little men need to do. The maternal ‘titty’ is to be rejected for the dependency that it instils, whilst the preoccupation that Fogle has with a podiatrist’s sign of a female foot – the position of which, as a university student, he uses to decide whether he should study or party – compounds the undesirability of such dependence. *Oblivion* displays similar concerns, a testament to how, as David Hering has explored, this collection to a large extent developed out of Wallace’s contemporaneous writing of *The Pale King*.<sup>42</sup> That said, my focus in this section lies with the latter, for it is in *The Pale King* that Wallace most notably suggests that sacrificing sexuality is conducive to balancing a shared spermatic budget.

Sacrifice is a motif throughout Wallace’s texts. As such, it is worth considering one of their most explicit treatments of sacrifice in relation to male sexuality before outlining how it

works in *The Pale King*. In his essay on the tennis player Michael Joyce, Wallace links sexual abstinence with achievement, for Joyce is ‘a complete man (though in a grotesquely limited way’) (‘Tennis Player’ 254) because of his ‘ascetic focus [...] a consent to live in a world that, like a child’s world, is very serious and very small’ (237). He then suggests that

athletes are in many ways our culture’s holy men: they give themselves over to a pursuit, endure great privation and pain to actualize themselves at it, and enjoy a relationship to perfection that we admire and reward [...] and love to watch even though we have no inclination to walk that road ourselves. In other words they do it “for” us, sacrifice themselves for our (we imagine) redemption (237n42).

Wallace finds Joyce both inspirational and grotesque for the sacrifices tennis demands of him, and especially in terms of sex. For as he also notes towards the essay’s end, Joyce has ‘dated some. It’s impossible to tell whether he’s a virgin. It seems staggering and impossible, but my sense is he might be. Then again, I tended to idealize and distort him’ (254).<sup>43</sup> Idealised or distorted, Wallace associates Joyce’s probable virginity with his athletic prowess. Having sacrificed sexuality for the good of his game, he allows Wallace to glimpse a ‘relationship to perfection’ (237n42) that he is otherwise barred from. Indeed, Joyce may pursue individual glory, ‘to have his name known’ (254), but his sacrifice, at least in this regard, works for the benefit of another, less disciplined man.

This sacrificing for others takes on explicitly political meanings in *The Pale King*, foregrounding issues such as resource distribution, civic duty, and the legacy of America’s founding ideals, to name but a few. Central, though, is what McGurl identifies as the novel’s ‘idealization of debt as the price we should gladly pay for community, national or otherwise’ (54). McGurl aligns *The Pale King* with the primordial debt theories David Graber elucidates

in his *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011). These theories, in McGurl's words, posit a 'metaphysical "existence = debt" equation' (51) that sidesteps the 'global political domination of the indebted' (51) by creditors. It is in the name of gladly paid debt that Wallace has little men in this novel sacrifice sexual desire. Moreover, as many scholars have noted, *The Pale King* marks Wallace's most direct critique of free market economics, and in part excavates the rise of neoliberalism in the U.S. more generally.<sup>44</sup> By showing how austerity discourses inform *The Pale King*'s depictions of sexuality, I draw connections to the novel's wider considerations of debt repayment in the context of neoliberalism. However, in doing so, I show how the novel recapitulates austerity's displacement of responsibility for budget deficits onto the vulnerable. It is little men who come to represent the virtues of sacrificing to repay debt, even when they have not themselves accrued it.

Fogle's conversion from being a 'wastoid' (172) student to being 'one of the low-level True Believers on whom the Service depended' (273n17) illustrates how sexual austerity is imbricated in *The Pale King*'s broader concerns with budgets, debts, and deficits. Fogle, 'bumbling into the wrong building's 311 right before final exams' (218), finds himself in an advanced tax accounting class, where a substitute teacher ends his lesson with an encomium to accounting's 'effacement. Sacrifice. Service. To give oneself to the care of others' money' (233). The speech signals *The Pale King*'s attachment to stereotypical understandings of 1950s rectitude, what Burn describes as the presence in the novel of 'all those old-fashioned hats and odes to fusty values of hardwork and self-control' ("A Paradigm" 152). What is most significant for my purposes, though, is Fogle's description of how the class – of which 'nearly everyone [...] was male' (*The Pale King* 219) – responds to the idea that accounting, in the substitute's words, can be 'an arena for actual heroism' (232):



It seemed then that a sudden kind of shudder went through the room, or maybe an ecstatic spasm, communicating itself from senior accounting major or graduate business student to senior accounting major or grad business student so rapidly that the whole collective seemed for an instant to heave (232-3).

As Jeffrey Severs notes, Wallace here draws on chapter 94 of *Moby-Dick* (1851), ‘A Squeeze of the Hands’, ‘echoing Melville’s homoerotic language’ (*Balancing Books* 215) to convey an ideal scene of ‘communal labor’ (215). Robert K. Martin explains how ‘A Squeeze of the Hands’ depicts a ‘scene of fellowship in which work is transformed into sexuality. The subject of the chapter is masturbation, with a play on variations on the whale’s “sperm”’ (194). If the shudder Fogle recalls has the ring of an ejaculatory epiphany, it is in the service of recruiting the class into taking ‘care of others’ money’ (233). The teacher lauds the sobriety of tax accounting as part of his encouragement that the class deny their own self-interest – i.e. for avoiding the job’s ‘sheer drudgery’ (229) – and process money envisaged as a communal, spermatic resource. To borrow the title of Michiko Kakutani’s review of *The Pale King*, the point here is ‘Maximized Revenue, Minimized Existence’: self-denial as a means to strengthen collective budgets. Accordingly, the substitute’s speech functions as a corrective to what, up until this point, had been Fogle’s ‘wastoid’ (172) drift.

Wallace inverts Melville’s scene so that, rather than being, in Martin’s words, a temporary abandonment of ‘the order of work’ (195), the substitute’s speech is vocationally inspiring. But much as Melville for Martin ‘is too much of a cynic [...] to let this vision last’ (195), Fogle’s reminiscence also slyly undercuts the teacher’s speech. For one, he cannot be ‘a hundred percent sure this [the ‘ecstatic spasm’ (232)] was real’ (233). Moreover, Fogle does not know whether the right descriptor for the speech is ‘hortation or exhortation’ (235). The former, evocative in its first syllable of ‘whore’, casts the substitute’s enthusiasm for

self-effacing sperm-handling in a more pejorative light. This ambivalence queries the idea that Fogle's newfound readiness for sacrifice is a straightforward endorsement of austerity. Furthermore, the sexual meanings that I have picked from Fogle's monologue are selective, belying the allusiveness of its ninety-eight pages (the novel's longest chapter). However, that Fogle cannot be sure if the spasm occurred only heightens its status as an ideal to aim for; namely, that of shared sacrifice in the belief that, as the novel's invocatory opening chapter has it, 'we are all of us brothers' (5). His readiness, qua Kakatuni, to 'minimize' after hearing the substitute is indicative of the sacrifice *The Pale King* values. If male sexuality forms a single (but important) strand in Fogle's conversion to such austerity, though, it plays a central role in the novel's more notable representatives of such. These are Shane Drinion, and the boy who tries to press his lips against every part of his body. The sexual austerity Wallace prescribes for these figures, moreover, defuses interrogation of the hideous male behaviours that have put shared spermatic budgets into debt in the first place.

As Fogle's decision to join the IRS compensates for his former drift, these figures' sacrifices work as restorative measures to this unbalanced budget. Their status as little men is quite often suggestively literal – whether age-wise in how the boy becomes 'newly mature' (399) through his contortionism, or interpersonally in terms of Drinion's social anonymity. Wallace also aligns such littleness with their respective positions outside of sexual desire. In this regard they resemble what David Greven calls the 'inviolable male' (*Men Beyond Desire* 1). Writing on 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature, but intimating the figure's presence in late twentieth century texts, Greven describes the inviolable male as 'sexually and emotionally unavailable [...] resolutely ungraspable, elusive, a hermetically sealed vessel of chastity and purity' (1). Drinion and the boy's gnomic peculiarity accords with Greven's description. It is by virtue of their being 'apart from both male collectivity and Woman' (28) that these characters exemplify a much needed sexual austerity. They represent what Halbertal outlines

as “sacrificing *for*” [...] Self-sacrifice for another individual, value, or collective’ (10, italics in original), rather than “sacrificing to” [which] involves [...] such questions as ritual, substitution, atonement’ (9). Brown rightly cautions that Halbertal’s distinction is unstable (*Undoing* 214), but the notion of sacrificing *for* a collective is useful to understanding how Drinion and the boy function as incitements to reducing sexual spending.

Wallace’s contortionist boy is reminiscent of Vito Acconci’s 1970 performance art piece *Trademarks*. Sitting naked on the floor, Acconci bit as much of his body as he could reach, before applying printer’s ink to the bite marks and stamping various surfaces with his body (Mahon 273). Rather than bites, though, Wallace describes the boy’s pursuit as ‘press[ing] his lips’ (396), and once with the word ‘kissed’. The appearance of this latter term subtly undercuts its libidinal implications: ‘the upper portions of his genitals were simple, and were protrusively kissed and passed over’ (399). Added to this, when he reaches his scrotum and anus ‘these areas had been touched, tagged on the four-sided chart inside his personal ledger, then washed clean of ink and forgotten’ (403). This neutral description of erogenous zones is in one sense attributable to him being ‘just a little boy’ (403); he indeed begins his self-kissing at 6, and is 11 by the account’s end. But Wallace juxtaposes the boy’s activities with those of his father, ‘an entrepreneur who sold motivational tapes’ (405), and a man who is ‘*tortured*’ (407, italics in original) by his compulsive need to have extramarital affairs. Connections between the two – for instance, the father maintains his own ledger, albeit to track his social standing (406), and ‘almost contort[s] himself’ (407) when shaving – reaffirms how they are, in a sense, mirror images. The boy’s pointedly non-libidinal pursuit works as a counter-measure to the father’s inability to control himself sexually. In this sense, the former’s self-kissing is an oblique way of sacrificing desires that the latter cannot.

Significantly, the philandering that results from what the father perceives to be his ‘normal male sexual drives’ (407) is suggestive of debt. After his first affair, in which the

father ‘longed to detach from the woman, but he didn’t want the woman to be able to detach’ (408), the number of women ‘with whom he was secretly involved and to whom he had sexual obligations steadily expanded’ (408) as he pursues ‘the relief and excitement of an attachment freely chosen’ (408). Each new sexual debt the father takes on covers his failure to break off the last. He thus continually postpones the hard work of paying off an obligation. Wallace compounds the difference from the son here through how the boy’s chiropractor ‘liked to say [there] were the two different types of payments for the spine and associated nervosa, which were *Now* and *Later*’ (398, italics in original). The father’s ‘lack of backbone’ (407) – a heavy pun, given the context – amounts to a dereliction of responsibility for his situation, enabled through a string of increasingly bad sexual debts. Commenting on the common sense appeal of austerity arguments, Blythe suggests that they can be ‘handily summed up in the phrase *you cannot cure debt with more debt*. If you have too much debt, stop spending’ (7, italics in original). The boy’s non-libidinal self-kissing follows this logic, compensating for this father’s sexual debts by being, ‘in some childish way, self-contained and –sufficient’ (403), even if ‘these [goals] were beyond his conscious awareness’ (403).

Consequently, this scene displaces responsibility for cutting a sexual deficit the father has created onto the boy. By seeking extramarital sex, the father spends on credit, artificially inflating the amount of spermatic resources available and postponing the time of ‘payment’ – envisaged as the hard work of ending these affairs, or of submitting to ‘marriage’s conjugal routines [however] tedious and stifling’ (407). By comparison, the boy’s ‘adult idea of quiet daily discipline and progress toward a long term goal’ (398) means that he shows a positive rectitude in keeping with *The Pale King*’s broader interests in self-control. Furthermore, to the extent that the scene obliquely admires the boy’s self-kissing as being demonstrative of qualities the father lacks, then it downplays the responsibility that cultural constructions of male sexuality – and behind them an entire heteronormative system that, one can assume,

forces the father to be ‘wedded at twenty’ (407) – have for his ‘secret torture’ (407). Though the narrator points to this background as the reason for the father’s torture, the implication is that, if he had more a backbone, he would be able to contain his desires to accumulate within the strictures of marriage. The boy, a literal little man in his commitment to ‘adult idea[s]’ (398), not only sacrifices sexuality so his father does not have to, but also to transmute a crisis of accumulation with systemic causes (that of male sexuality as heteronormatively constructed) into a question of personally failing to expend correctly. The boy accordingly picks up the tab and, true to austerity’s duplicitous emphasis on shared sacrifice, undergoes hardships in the name of balancing a spermatic budget he did not personally upset.

This provides an interesting contrast with the dynamics I explored in Chapter 2. There I showed how Wallace approaches male homosexuality as a risky type of debt which, once securitised in the form of the closet, allows for emotional returns between straight men. In *The Pale King* and *Oblivion*, sexual debts to women seemingly cannot serve the same aim. My second example of little male sacrifice in *The Pale King* furthers the unacceptability of such debt. This is Drinion’s conversation with Meredith Rand, a woman so attractive that she ‘has been known to produce facial tics even in gay or otherwise asexual men’ (449). As the narrator reflects, Rand ‘is a cut of pure choice prime, is the consensus, not always unspoken’ (449). Rand’s ‘galvanic’ (451) beauty renders men incapable of treating her as anything but an object to ‘buy’ like a piece of meat. Changing ‘as though they were involved in a game whose stakes have suddenly become terribly high’ (449), those who do not studiously ignore her respond to Rand by trying to one up one another: ‘some of the male examiners are, by the second round of pitchers, performing for Meredith Rand’ (449). She instigates forms of male self-inflation – even her husband, Ed, alters his car engine to make it ‘sound more powerful than normal’ (458). By spending on credit, the stretching-boy’s father uses sexual resources

he does not truly have; men around Rand artificially inflate their purchasing power, though they, unlike the father, do not succeed in ‘buying’ her attentions.<sup>45</sup>

Drinion’s lack of response to Rand – the fact that he is ‘unaffected by the presence of [this] terribly attractive woman’ (450) – registers as an admirable indifference compared to these men. His non-reaction indeed fits Grevin’s description of the inviolate male, but additionally, as a ‘nerd and dweeb’ (506) whose only interests are tax procedures, and who ‘wears an argyle sweater vest [...] and brown Wallabee knockoffs that might literally be from JC Penney’ (457), he is also suggestive of the sexless nerd. McGurl has observed that Wallace’s work is invested in ‘white nerd identity’ (44), but Sherry Turkle’s mid-1980s study of hackers and MIT students is more illuminating here. In her interviews with such men Turkle notes the ‘insistent antisensuality’ (201) of the culture they are a part of, in which devotion to computers correlates with a sanctioned and celebrated ‘denial of the body’ (183). Drinion is not a hacker, and he lacks the physical ambivalences Turkle identifies in these men. That said, his status as a little man indifferent to sexual desire is indicative of this stereotype. As the stretching boy’s non-erotic attempt to kiss himself counterweighs his father’s sexual irresponsibility, so Drinion’s nerdy inviolateness before the ‘wrist-bitingly’ (*The Pale King* 449) attractive Rand counters the lechery that she inspires in others. His sacrifice compensates for the sexual deficit created by straight men who, by performing for Rand, promise sexual expenditures that they do not have to begin with.

Building on Mary K. Holland’s description of *Infinite Jest*’s Lyle as a ‘spokesperson for positive self-forgetting’ (quoted in *Balancing Books*, 100), Severs argues that Drinion is ‘an avatar of the type of extraordinary shared value *The Pale King* urges us to contemplate’ (*Balancing Books* 234); in fact Drinion ‘is one who, by listening, is able to unite many’ (237). My reading specifies this idea, as I suggest that the shared value Drinion represents is the possibility of self-denial, by which men can commonly sacrifice sexual desire. Moreover,

the same attribute that Severs lauds in fact makes Drinion an exemplar of austerity's ideological displacement. For as with the boy's self-kissing, Drinion's inviolateness draws attention from hideous male behaviours generally, and primarily in order to highlight his exceptionality. Second only to the 'Brief Interviews' stories in its exploration of gendered power dynamics, Drinion's conversation with Rand is one of Wallace's most sustained considerations of misogyny, and Rand herself arguably one of only a handful of three-dimensional women to appear in his work. However, this scene's investment in Drinion's non-response does not register as a need to change scenarios in which men vie for Rand as they would for a good piece of meat. Rather, the implication is that men, if they follow in Drinion's footsteps, could better resist the need to figuratively open up bad lines of credit in their attempts to expend on women. Drinion's austerity therefore shifts the focus here from considering male sexual deficits as a systemic problem – and one bound up with sexist male behaviours – towards the need for men to tame their appetites.

The notion that Drinion's lack of sexual interest is a valuable sacrifice other men cannot make, however, points to a telling contradiction. Drinion and the stretching-boy may function as ideals of sexual sacrifice, but they are freakish in their inviolateness. Like Joyce, they both 'enjoy a relationship to perfection that we admire and reward [...] though we have no inclination to walk that road ourselves' ('Tennis Player' 237n42). This singularity distances them from the collectivity their sacrifices aim to interpolate – i.e. straight men as the common caretakers of a spermatic budget. If the austerity logics I have outlined shift responsibility for deficit reduction to Drinion and the stretching-boy, their exceptionality also dissuades identification with their asceticism. Indeed this compounds austerity's ideological double-movement, whereby statements like 'we're all in this together' legitimate policies that force the poor to compensate for problems created by the rich. As men of impossible emulation – Drinion, for one, also levitates – his and the boy's sacrifices solicit self-denial,

but excuse straight men from walking that same road. This contradiction means something more than how Wallace's investment in 'a sacrificial disposition' (*The Unspeakable* 194), as Hayes-Brady sees it, entails a commitment to 'process rather than product' (194). It also exceeds Emily J. Hogg's idea that 'the vagaries of subjective experience' (60) in *The Pale King* undermine its interests in 'dutiful self-renunciation' (63). It is consistent, rather, with how austerity constitutes what Blythe calls (in relation to post-2008 measures) 'the greatest bait-and-switch operation in modern history' (73). Namely, although austerity is sold as a form of collective sacrifice, the littlest must bear the heaviest burden.

Austerity in this sense can be said to revamp ideas of the deserving and undeserving poor, albeit in terms of those who are most and least ready to meet its calls to sacrifice. In Allen et al.'s words, this divide in part manifests as 'the thrifty, self-sufficient, hard-working citizen versus the feckless benefits scrounger' (908). Drinion and the stretching-boy are a testament to *The Pale King*'s investment in those on the former side of this binary, their privations working to encourage yet forestall similar thriftiness in others. As lightning conductors for the need to reduce a shared sexual deficit, the sacrifices of these little men ensure that what Wallace presents as a masculine-capitalist drive to accumulate survives. This is despite the fact that in *The Pale King* Wallace continues his preoccupation with what Holland calls 'the bestial male appropriation of the female other' ("By Hirsute Author" 7), and not just through how the stretching-boy's father, and Rand's would-be seducers, show a dangerous tendency to sexually spend on credit. For instance, Toni Ware's reflections on how her mother would allow men to '*manhandle*' (63, italics in original) her, followed by Toni's assault by a man 'manhandling [her] titty with what seemed an absent dispassion' (65), aligns male sexuality with an accumulative objectification of women. This word also appears in the first story of *Oblivion*, 'Mister Squishy', where a marketing company's 'manipulative and abusive' (18) questioning of young mothers means that they are 'manhandled, emotionally



speaking' (18). *Oblivion* indeed foregrounds a relationship between straight male chauvinism and neoliberal capitalism. As I argue in the following section, Wallace scapegoats little men for their sexual debts in order to illuminate this relationship, thereby pursuing an austerity logic in ways that – perhaps paradoxically – interrogate aspects of neoliberalism.

'Someone at once obtrusive and irrelevant' ('Oblivion' 211): Sexual Scapegoats

The men whom Wallace scapegoats in *Oblivion* fit more easily into traditional ideas of the schlemiel than the stretching-boy or Drinion do. Writing on the Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem, Ruth Wisse notes that one of 'the characteristic features of the schlemiel' (51) is that 'the traditional male virtues such as strength, courage, pride, fortitude, are prominent only in their absence' (51). This is certainly the case for my main examples in this section – Schmidt in 'Mister Squishy', Randy in 'Oblivion', and Skip in 'The Suffering Channel'. In contrast to Aleichem's early 20<sup>th</sup> century figure though, *Oblivion*'s schlemiels are indicative of how, as Sanford Pinsker outlines in relation to post-war writers like Saul Bellow, 'the schlemiel-as-victim becomes the victim of himself, the centre turns inward, and the psyche is seen as more important than the situation' (147). The situations Schmidt or Randy find themselves in are by no means benign, but Wallace dramatises their sufferings as little men in terms of their feelings of shame, ineptitude, and so on. These feelings form the basis of their suitability for scapegoating, as they arise in no small part from how they run up high sexual deficits. Furthermore, Wallace scapegoats these characters in order to reaffirm more virile men who are, themselves, creating dangerous (and sexualised) credit bubbles. He does so to shift responsibility for sexual deficits onto the vulnerable while – paradoxically – noting how 'stronger' men are simultaneously at fault for proliferating debt.

A more detailed theoretical grounding is needed to unpack how scapegoating works in this manner. Brown again proves useful here in her developments of the thought of René

Girard. She acknowledges that the aspects of Girard's work she draws on to discuss sacrifice are the same that lay the 'groundwork for his renowned notion of "scapegoating"' (*Undoing* 217). Specifically, Brown builds on Girard's suggestion that sacrifice, sharing the same dynamics as scapegoating, is a 'deliberate act of collective substitution performed at the expense of the victim and absorbing all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within the community' (*Violence and the Sacred* 8). Such tensions arise as a result of what Girard argues is the mimetic nature of desire. People desire imitatively, so 'we desire what others desire because we imitate their desires' ('Generative Scapegoating' 122). As Chris Fleming explains, this means that an object is desired not because of its intrinsic value, and not because somebody chooses it – 'it is desired because the subject (consciously or non-consciously) imitates the desire of another (an Other), real or imaginary, who functions as a model for that desire' (11). Crucially, when this model exists in the same space and time as the subject, they are liable to become a rival for the latter's desired object. For to imitate a model's desire fully would mean that the subject actually *become* that person. As a result of this impasse, conflictual mimesis arises: the subject is compelled to imitate another's desire, yet this other stands in the way of that endeavour.

In Michael Kirwan's pithy summation, 'two hands reach, not quite simultaneously, for the same object. The outcome is bitter rivalry, even outright conflict' (21). This is not due to the object's scarcity, but a consequence of the incommensurability of imitable desires. If left unabated, this competition, for Girard leads, to a Hobbesian state of all against all, in which violence begets violence, and even threatens to eradicate the differences between antagonists: they become 'monstrous double[s]' (*Violence and the Sacred* 152) of one another. However, when antagonists reach this threshold moment – what Girard dubs a 'sacrificial crisis' (*Violence and the Sacred* 46) – they redirect their violence at a scapegoat, against whom warring factions can unite in order to restore social order. The scapegoat is

accordingly ‘a substitute for all the members of the community’, and their ‘sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence’ (*Violence and the Sacred* 8). Moreover, from the perpetrators’ perspective a scapegoat cannot appear as such, lest it lose its beneficial social effects; it must simply be ‘vulnerable and close at hand’ (*Violence and the Sacred* 2). In Wallace’s texts, little men like Randy and Schmidt are vulnerable by virtue of their sexual debts compared to other, seemingly autarkic men; indeed, their scapegoating proceeds despite how these latter men also expend sexual credit.

‘Mister Squishy’, for one, is awash with forms of mimetic desire. Its protagonist, Terry Schmidt, is a market researcher coordinating an all-male focus group on a new snack-cake. Schmidt’s superiors have instructed him to divulge selected information to his group about ‘the sort of complex system of a large groups’ intragroup preferences influencing one another and building exponentially on one another [...] like a nuclear chain reaction’ (23). Alongside this explicit focus on how conflictual mimesis can lead to violence, though, Wallace presents the corporate culture that Schmidt is a part of on a similar basis. By the end of the story he shunts Schmidt from the main narrative to focus on his superiors, Scott R. Laleman and Alan Britton, the former of whom is vying for the latter’s position. Wallace presents (and parodies) this rivalry in sexual terms, so that the object of mimetic desire is as much an idea of virile masculinity as it is professional advancement. For instance, ‘on the rare occasions when he masturbated, Laleman’s fantasy involved a view of himself, shirtless and adorned with warpaint, standing with his boot on the chest of various supine men’ (64). Accordingly Laleman ‘could almost feel the texture of Mr. B’s sternum under his heel’ (65). Combined with the ‘zeppelin-sized cigars’ (62) the men smoke, this image ridicules them as participants in a mimetic pursuit of self-sufficient masculinity – a pursuit that, as Laleman’s masturbatory war imagery makes clear, contains a barely suppressed violence.

Despite this violent sexual self-sufficiency, though, Wallace suggests that Laleman also inflates himself in ways similar to how the stretching-boy's father, or Rand's seducers, spend sexual resources beyond their means. The 'lale' in Laleman is Persian for tulip, which in the context of a story that in part explores the dot.com bubble, is suggestive of the first economic bubble – the 1637 'tulip mania' in Holland. As Alastair Sooke relates, 'speculators traded the flower's bulbs for extraordinary sums of money, until, without warning, the market for them spectacularly collapsed' ('Tulip mania'). A 'tulip-man', Laleman's masculinity is in this sense based on value he does not possess.<sup>46</sup> The sexual implications of this are evident in the biographical details we receive about him. In college, Laleman accidentally inhales halon gas, and for several days 'he went around campus with a rose clamped in his teeth, and tried to tango with anyone he saw, and insisted everybody all call him *The Magnificent Enrique*' (64). Inflated, Laleman becomes a risible Don Juan, at least until 'several of his fraternity brothers finally all ganged up and knocked some sense back into him' (64) – i.e., until he is scapegoated for trying to sexually live beyond his means. That 'a lot of people thought he was still never quite the same after the halon thing' (64) implies that, coterminous with the violent self-sufficiency that has him masturbating to the fantasy of men underfoot, Laleman remains prone to dangerous forms of sexual over-valuation.<sup>47</sup>

In terms of the story's attention, though, Laleman pales in comparison with the piece's sexual little man, Schmidt. That Schmidt becomes a scapegoat – indeed, Laleman and Britton are discussing how to replace workers like him with computers – stems in no small part from his sexual indebtedness. As a man 'who did have the customary pocket-protector with three different colored pens in it' (4), he exemplifies the sexless nerd. Unlike Drinion, though, his obsession with a woman – co-worker Darlene – compels him to engage in non-reproductive sexual expenditures. For instance, he forgoes his nightly intention to phone her and instead 'masturbate[s] himself to sleep again' (33).<sup>48</sup> More than this, he has constructed a

shrine to Darlene in his bedroom (26), and fantasises about ‘moist slapping intercourse’ (16) with her while moaning ‘*Thank you, oh thank you*’ (54, italics in original). His sense of sexual debt is explicit, but Wallace also couches it within more wide-ranging debts to masculine ideals Schmidt cannot fulfil, whether in his failure ‘to act as Big Brother for a boy age 11-15 who lacked significant male mentors’ (48), or in his fantasies of saving Darlene from bullying (49-50). Schmidt’s sense of sexual ineptitude, though, is the presiding index of his lack of self-determination, particularly compared to men like Laleman. Reflecting on his compulsion to thank Darlene in his fantasies, he wonders ‘if he even had what convention called a Free Will at all, deep down’ (55). In these ways Schmidt – to borrow and invert a description of the banking system responsible for the 2008 crash – is too small to succeed.

‘Mister Squishy’ points to mimetic rivalry between men like Laleman and Britton as being responsible for Schmidt possibly losing his job, and also as being conducive to creating unsustainable forms of credit. The story sexualises these dynamics to further align predatory capitalist practices with chauvinistic men. But it is Schmidt, the little man, who suffers the most – Wallace focuses on *his* sexual debts, and particularly his sense of shame for being unable, figuratively, to pay them off. Indeed, adding to his indignities, Schmidt has ‘recently refinanced’ (9) his condominium. Austerity’s ideological displacement is at play here in that a crisis the story acknowledges as being endemic to male-male rivalry becomes, in Schmidt, a crisis of how the littlest overspend. Yet, though scapegoating Schmidt for such overspending, Wallace does leave the door open to considering how Britton and Laleman are culpable, notably through the latter’s status as an inflated tulip-man. In this sense the displacement, and the scapegoating, are powerful but not complete. Wallace encourages us to judge Schmidt harshly for his sexual debts, in other words, but he also hints at how Britton and Laleman’s cigar-waving rivalry is prone to creating credit-driven crises. This could figure as grounds for critique; exploring the psychic pains of a man who cannot meet his sexual debts could urge

questioning of the nature of these debts, and why men deemed more virile do not suffer. But the text is intent not only on stressing how Schmidt's debts *do* make him pathetic, but also, through needles and ricin, how he too displays reprehensibly 'male' attributes.

For Schmidt decides to make a 'dark difference' (32) by poisoning the cakes he is conducting research on. The means by which he does this displays a sexualised self-control that he otherwise lacks, evoking images of penetration and insemination: 'it would take nothing more than one thin-gauge hypodermic and 24 infinitesimal doses of KCN, AS<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, ricin' (30) to do it; the toxin that he settles on is '97% lethal at .00003 g' (58). Schmidt treats this toxic seed with a care missing from his own waste of sexual energies – its lethality in fact derives from its scarcity. He shows a displaced, sexualised threat comparable to that of his superior Robert Awad, who sexually harasses Darlene. Awad performs such harassment at Britton's direction, with 'instructions to behave in such a way as to test for faultlines in Field Team morale' (62). In a context where men's sexual behaviour can be weaponised in the pursuit of nefarious ends, Schmidt's poisonous seed plays a similar role. Tellingly, Darlene's request that Schmidt stop 'com[ing] up behind [her]' unawares occurs 'during the six-month period when SRD Awad really had been *coming* up stealthily behind her' (55, brackets in original, italics added), linking the two in a common spermatic predation. In these ways, the result of Schmidt's scapegoating is to compel in him the same violently mimetic desires – to be a man big enough to 'make a difference' (30) – evident in his virile superiors.

In this light, 'Mister Squishy' generally (but not completely) displaces attention from what Wallace hints is an endemic crisis of male rivalry to a crisis of individual overspending, only to *then* enlist Schmidt into the same violent male-male rivalries that scapegoat him in the first place. Thus, austerity works: once Schmidt has been sufficiently punished for his sexual debts (if only through his own intense feelings of shame for accruing them), he begins to act in accordance with its imperatives to parsimony and self-control – albeit, by toxifying

snack-cakes. Whether or not Schmidt manages, as a result of his product tampering, ‘to bring almost an entire industry down on one supplicatory knee’ (30) is beside the point. His initial scapegoating and subsequent violence legitimates the broader austerity logic. In other words, displacing the crisis onto the most vulnerable will not only ensure that a masculine-capitalist system can survive, but also that little men like Schmidt – if punished enough – will begin to abide by its dictates. To borrow Hal’s description of Hobbes and Rousseau in *Infinite Jest*’s opening scene, Schmidt is Drinion or the stretching-boy ‘in a dark mirror’ (12). Like those two little men, Wallace forecloses the opportunity to identify with Schmidt, but because of his awfulness rather than this saintliness. Similarly, as with Drinion and the boy, Schmidt acts as a pivot upon which austerity logics re-energise a system in crisis, though by punishing, rather than sanctifying, those unfortunate enough to be at the bottom of the pile.

That these austerity logics occur in a story that skewers advertising, market research, corporate downsizing, managerialism, and so on, is a notable contradiction. The famous dictum, usually attributed to Fredric Jameson, that ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’ is pertinent here. It is easier to imagine how Schmidt’s terrorism can destroy, if not the world, then at least his company, than it is to imagine alternatives to a system in which debts must be paid and men’s sexual propensity for rivalry and violence must be accommodated. Another reason for why ‘Mister Squishy’ adheres to austerity’s ideological displacements, though, and despite its attempt to interrogate neoliberalism, is the place of women in these dynamics. In the terms Wallace sets up, it is not only that allowing for deficits would validate spending on credit, but also the male violence against women which results from this. Scapegoating little men keeps the masculine-capitalist system that Wallace satirises running, then, whilst reiterating the objectionable nature of sexual debts to women on (putatively) feminist grounds. This is particularly evident in *Oblivion*’s title story,

in which protagonist Randy Napier juggles his wife Hope's accusations of chronic snoring with suppressing his desires for his stepdaughter, Audrey.

Randy's schlemiel-hood is evident in these psychosexual entanglements with the two main women in his life. References to his haplessness in the face of Audrey's 'prematurely "mature" or voluptuous' (193) peers echo *American Beauty*, while nods to David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991; 2017) similarly position Randy as a father with incestuous desires. Caught in a 'sad pantomime with pity and disgust' (194), the story scapegoats him in the service of his father-in-law, Dr Sipe, whom Wallace hints raped Hope and her sister Vivian when they were children, and is possibly grooming Audrey. As 'Mister Squishy' displaces attention onto Schmidt's vulnerability, so too does Randy's crisis take centre stage. To the extent that his desire for Audrey mirrors Sipe's, then, comparable to Schmidt poisoning cakes, Randy also takes part in the same rivalries between virile men that have scapegoated him. Moreover, Wallace undercuts Sipe's virility by stressing his lassitude as a septuagenarian, a form of over-valuation that, like Laleman in 'Mister Squishy', nonetheless takes a backseat to Randy's sexual debts, and namely to notions of masculine purpose he cannot fulfil. At one point, for instance, he even imagines himself storming Audrey's dorm – or 'her machicolated banishment's *donjon's* fortifications' (231, italics in original) – to express his desire. Wallace reserves the most pronounced example of Randy's indebtedness, however, for the story's conclusion, at which he reveals that Randy's monologue has been Hope's dream all along.

This revelation, to the extent that it reorients Randy's forgoing monologue as occurring in Hope's mind, renders his very existence as being entirely dependent on his wife. That said, the parenthetical interjections that occur throughout the story, and which become particularly violent towards its end (for instance, '("or hurt you if")' [236, italics in original]), suggest that Hope's sleeping brain articulates her past sexual abuse through her dreaming of



Randy. As Hayes-Brady puts it, Randy's 'vocabulary has infiltrated his wife's mind almost fully, causing the complete collapse of her autonomous identity' (*The Unspeakable* 146). Male sexual debt in this regard is not only objectionable for how it registers as living beyond one's means; it is also to be faulted for how it stimulates non-heteronormative desires which, in their violence, persecute women. Put differently, if men are allowed to indulge in credit spending, inflating their sexual resources beyond what they truly have, they are more liable to carry out the kind of sexual crimes Sipe gets away with and Randy is scapegoated for. Thus, Wallace mobilises a feminist position (albeit one based on the idea that women, like Avril's diddle-check girls, must be protected from male sexuality) in service of a focus on deficit reduction. The logic of male sexual austerity therefore persists, and despite these stories' critiques of neoliberalism, because of its ostensible efficacy in forestalling – or at least, in broadcasting the nature of – male violence against women.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* forgo an attachment to male violence. In fact, my final example of *Oblivion*'s little male scapegoats – Skip in 'The Suffering Channel' – compounds this attachment as being central to the male sexual austerity at work. That said, as a journalist investigating a man's ability to produce preformed poo sculptures of famous artworks from his anus, Skip is difficult to locate within the operations I have explored. Severs reads him as a liminal figure between *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*, an 'ingenious attempt to resurrect aspects of the ethos of work, especially cognitive labor [...] Skip's form of hard-won attention has broad implications for the social world' (194-196). Skip does foreshadow *The Pale King*'s focus on the beneficial aspects of little male austerity. For one, like the stretching boy he is inviolate: 'since the end of a serious involvement some years prior, [he was] all but celibate' (271). Following Severs, who praises Skip for being a forerunner of the self-denial present in *The Pale King*'s little men, one could connect such celibacy to his professional rectitude – even if it is in the service of a glossy magazine. Skip

also shares Drinion's anti-sensual dorkiness, whether in 'the whole awkward issue of his monochrome wardrobe' (298) or 'the fact that he actually carried pictures of his dogs in his wallet' (298). His sexlessness thus correlates with his being 'energetic and competent, a team player' (239), whereby sexual abstinence for Wallace can lead to achievement.

However, alongside those elements that make him a forerunner of *The Pale King's* little men, Skip also functions as a scapegoat. Like Schmidt and Randy, he is side-lined by the story's end, his project of bringing Brint and his faecal talents to the public's attention commandeered and repurposed by two of *Style's* interns. Where conflictual mimesis appears in 'The Suffering Channel', it is indeed between the female interns, whom Wallace presents as being in subtle rivalry with each other for job advancement and physical beauty. This is evident in the two women who take over Skip's story – Ellen Bactrian and an unnamed 'executive intern' (316) – who, as they use side-by-side elliptical trainers – discuss how to best exploit Brint's pain so that it involves 'bona fide suffering' (325). Crucially, though, Wallace notes that Bactrian and the executive intern's 'editorial brainstorming sounds like an argument, but it isn't – it's two or more people thinking aloud in a directed way' (317). In fact, the rivalries between women at *Style* lack the intimations of violence that are present in Laleman and Britton's conflict. Similarly, despite the various figures of maternal abuse in this novella, these women do not share Randy or Sipe's hideousness. If the executive intern is 'like a living refutation of everything Marx ever stood for' (293), it is not because she is ruthlessly capitalist, but unthinkingly so – a 'standard of excellence' (293) at *Style* in her managerial acumen. The question arises, then, as to whether or not Bactrian and the executive intern's 'argument' is a bona fide rivalry.

This is an important question as it signals how Wallace's presentation of mimetic rivalry in 'The Suffering Channel' follows an implicit sexism evident in Girard's theory, so that, if *Oblivion's* stories variously scapegoat little men for their sexual debts, this

punishment must take place within and between groups of men in order to be meaningful. As Toril Moi notes, ‘Girard himself reveals quite explicitly the fact that his mimetic desire must essentially be taken to mean “masculine” desire’ (25). So, too, must the violence directed at a scapegoat be masculine, for in Moi’s words ‘among the effects of the sacrificial crisis is the disappearance of sexual difference’ (25). If scapegoating restores individuation to groups who are otherwise at risk of becoming undifferentiated through their rivalry, then, as part of this, it also restores the apparent differences between men and women. Wallace’s interns are suggestive of the breakdown of difference – for instance, ‘no fewer than five of the interns at the working lunch on 2 July were named either Laurel or Tara’ (261). Working in the more obvious monstrous doubling of the World Trade Centers, these interns imply the failure of scapegoating when it is women, rather than men, who are the rivalrous subjects.

The suitably ironically named Mrs. Anger, the magazine’s executive editor, has ‘put *Style* in the black for the first time in its history’ (249). Wallace links *Style*’s balanced budget with its near exclusively female workforce; they achieve a budgetary rectitude that is absent in men like Schmidt and Randy. That ‘The Suffering Channel’ subtly attacks these women for their blind adherence to neoliberalism, then, compounds how *Oblivion* gears its austerity logics to male sexuality alone. For austerity’s scapegoating function to take place in these stories – so that Wallace displaces punishment for debt from ‘big’ to little men, and in turn affirms the seeming inevitability of the same masculine-capitalist system he satirises – it must occur between men. Skip’s willingness to ignore Brint’s pain and deliver him to his superiors is thus something more than a lamentable sign of how, as Olivia Banner suggests, ‘the fraternal as well [as the paternal] has slid into a zone of absence’ (“‘They’re Literally Shit’”). It is rather a welcome violence to the extent that a ‘real’ sacrificial crisis can occur, in which male-male antagonism allows for communal affirmation at the expense of a scapegoat. The sexual scapegoats in *Oblivion* may differ in the modality of their ineptness – most notably in

how Skip is closer to *The Pale King*'s dutiful workers – but as punishable little men they further legitimate austerity's hold on male sexuality in the collection.

### Conclusion

By exploring neoliberal austerity as a phenomenon concerned with cutting budget deficits and high levels of debt, this chapter has inevitably offered a partial reading of the motivations for its implementation. For instance, the fact that cuts in public spending often function as a Trojan horse for reducing the size of the state has not played a part in my analysis. To the extent that *The Pale King* presents a vision of the IRS as an institution best embodied by an array of little men, though, then comparisons can be drawn between the apparent need for a leaner state and Wallace's investment in male diminution. In a similar vein, this chapter has not considered how the impact of austerity measures are in and of themselves gendered. As Helen Davies and Claire O'Callaghan observe, in the aftermath of 2008 'a significant strand of the debates surrounding the influence of austerity upon society have been gendered, with concerns expressed that we are in a "man-cession"' (17). In this respect my readings – particularly of *Oblivion*'s investment in male violence – further an unduly androcentric cultural response to austerity. As I have shown throughout this project, though, Wallace is preoccupied with writing about male sexuality to the detriment of other desiring positions, and austerity conceived as a means of dealing with high debts is central to this in *The Pale King* and *Oblivion*. Similar to my previous readings of how neoliberal ideas of responsibility, contract, risk, and property inform sexuality in Wallace texts, this chapter has argued that austerity logics subtend their emphasis on sacrifice and scapegoating.

Chiefly, austerity's displacement of responsibility for creating and reducing budget deficits – from the powerful to the vulnerable – plays out in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* through how they charge little men with either balancing a shared sexual budget, or taking the

blame for said budget's instability. Even when these texts note how systemic forces of male rivalry are at fault for economic crises, they still predominantly focus on little men. Further, the persistence of such ideological displacement in contexts where Wallace's texts critique neoliberalism is suggestive of a reluctance to let go of the systems they satirise – i.e. capitalist procedures he aligns with masculinity. Austerity goes all the way down, whether in the sense of forming the imaginative horizons for how *The Pale King* and *Oblivion* depict sexuality, or in the sense of targeting those they present as being the weakest – little men. In this regard, these texts not only suggest that male sexual hideousness is incontestable, but also that the capitalist practices that they align with such hideousness is too. By drawing upon various elements of the two threads that have informed Chapters 1 to 4 – specifically, ideas of non-reproductivity, investment, and waste on the one hand, and violence, blockage, and release on the other – this final chapter has endeavoured to show how, to the very last, Wallace's texts suggest that male sexual hideousness cannot be changed.

## Conclusion

‘I never signed up for sperm therapy, buster’ (*Broom* 332). So says Lenore to her analyst Dr Jay, who, in accordance with the often slapstick tone of Wallace’s first novel, has removed the pull string from his sweatshirt, fixed it to his rear, and begun to emulate the motions of a swimming sperm cell. By prioritising semen in my investigation of Wallace’s texts, I risk eliciting the same scepticism Lenore shows for her analyst. However, though he is clearly ludicrous in this scene, Jay still proceeds to help Lenore understand that she no longer loves her boyfriend, Rick. To some extent my goals have mirrored Jay’s, for I too have tried to complicate a prior attachment, here to Wallace’s purported anti-neoliberalism. I have focused on the spermatic imagery in his texts to show how their depictions of male sexuality follow neoliberal logics. In doing so, I have suggested that his texts are indebted to neoliberalism, rather than just opposing it. Neoliberal logics concerning responsibility, risk, contract, property, and austerity are key to how Wallace’s texts position sexual hideousness as the basis of masculinity. By presenting the notion that men are prone to negativity and violence as a neutral economic fact, these logics dissuade one from thinking about male sexuality differently. Furthermore, his texts’ spermatic imagery, though often not as blatant as Jay’s cosplaying, helps to perpetuate the idea that such hideousness is inevitable by appealing to bodily metaphors of investment, waste, blockage, and release.

That said, Jay is also badgering Lenore into accepting faux-psychoanalytic theories that Wallace lampoons. Though I hope to have made a strong case for Wallace’s hideous neoliberal spermatics, I have avoided suggesting that this performative process provides, like Jay’s ‘membrane-theory’ (330), an analytical master key. My revisionist reading has not tried to replace the idea that Wallace’s texts are anti-neoliberal with the idea that they are, in fact, neoliberal. As I have observed throughout this thesis, there are compelling signs that Wallace attempts to critique neoliberalism. However, I have acknowledged these points of anti-

neoliberal sentiment not to dilute my argument, but rather to better show how neoliberal logics animate Wallace's texts despite themselves. The consistency with which they gravitate to such logics, moreover, is indicative of a tension in their representations of gender. This is the tension that arises from focussing near exclusively on male characters and perspectives in the knowledge that such a focus potentially shores up patriarchal power relations. In other words, by rendering male sexual hideousness an economic issue, neoliberal logics such as responsibilisation and privatisation situate it as a fact to accommodate, not a contingency to transform. Indeed, this process allows for the recognition that male sexual negativity and violence are objectionable, but it sidesteps the possibility that one can change them. In other words, when it comes to sexuality for Wallace, men will be men.

Fascinatingly, the same tension I perceive in Wallace's depictions of gender has started to appear in Wallace scholarship. In a blog post for Bloomsbury Academic, titled 'Thinking About David Foster Wallace, Misogyny and Scholarship', Hering reflects on recent considerations of misogyny in relation to Wallace. 'I'm a man who has read, re-read and written extensively on Wallace', states Hering, 'and these articles have troubled me and caused no small soul searching about my position as a reader and scholar of his work'. Wary of perpetuating the sexism that others have decried in Wallace's texts and their readers, and which he admits has given him 'pause on more than one occasion', Hering suggests that 'when misogyny is present [in Wallace's output], it is to illustrate its toxicity'. To some extent, my readings confirm this notion. Wallace's at times phobic depictions of femininity and of homosexuality are often geared toward adumbrating the toxicity of such depictions. However, in my reading this is not because his texts, in Hering's words, are 'committed to addressing [misogyny] as a major problem of contemporary culture' ('Thinking About David Foster Wallace'). Toxicity is not a problem that his texts want to solve; on the contrary, they

court it as the incontestable fact of male sexuality. Men's sexual hideousness is lamentable, Wallace implies, but it is a useful basis upon which to ground masculinity.

Severs has written at length about this desire for ground in Wallace's texts. He suggests that 'to be of interest to Wallace's narrative gaze is often to be sensitive to ground and to alienation from it' (*Balancing Books* 9). In contrast to what Brian McHale describes as 'the aspiration to weightlessness' (139) in postmodern culture during the 1990s, Wallace, in Severs' reading, sought ways of 'getting reacquainted with ground' (*Balancing Books* 18). My suggestion that Wallace grounds his depictions of masculinity in ideas of male sexual hideousness chimes with this argument, albeit less literally. In other words, whereas Severs points to specific images of grounding in Wallace's texts (such as feet, mud, and shoes), my argument has evoked this notion more abstractly. Specifically, my readings cumulatively demonstrate how sexual hideousness is the persistent and – to borrow a term central to Severs' study – axiomatic grounds of Wallace's representations of masculinity. Additionally, whereas Severs generally takes this desire for grounds as self-evident, I have tried to stress how Wallace's hideous neoliberal spermatics is a performative process. Hence, Severs may be right to state that a good subtitle for *Infinite Jest* would be 'Philosophical Groundlessness and the Unbalanced Male' (*Balancing Books* 95), but I have argued that the hideousness in which Wallace's texts ground their depictions of masculinity is something that they have to actively produce, not a pre-discursive given to get reacquainted with.

Hering and Severs have written two of the finest book length studies on Wallace's fiction to date, and I have leaned on them throughout this thesis. For both critics, though, the task has been to elucidate what Wallace intended. This goal has no doubt been valuable given the polymathic intricacies of Wallace's writing. Yet my thesis has departed from a focus on intention in order to suggest how Wallace's texts are embedded in wider contexts – chiefly, various neoliberal logics – that escape what Mark McGurl has called Wallace's 'seductively



fine mind' (48). That said, there are biographical details that support my arguments. Given my interest in male sexuality and neoliberalism, Wallace's admission to Lipsky that he had 'sensual' (127, italics in original) dreams about Margaret Thatcher is telling, as is the enthusiasm that he shows for Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* in this same interview (158). However, I believe that more is lost than is gained with approaches that prioritise what he wanted to achieve – or, conversely, what he wanted but failed to achieve. Indeed, the distance required to perform a revisionist reading of Wallace's texts entails a certain indifference to Wallace himself. Although there are no doubt instances where my thesis has pointed to what he *may* have meant, I have prioritised reading the texts, not the man.

Importantly, by downplaying questions of intent, I also hope to have offered a more nuanced estimation of Wallace's gender politics. Positions on Wallace's writing of gender tend to fall into two camps. On the one hand there are those like Hungerford and the authors of the articles which trouble Hering, who interpret Wallace and his readers as complicit chauvinists at best and simple misogynists at worse. On the other hand are scholars such as Hayes-Brady, Holland, and Hering who read Wallace's depictions of gender as signs of his well-meaning but clumsy attempts to tackle misogyny. Uniting these viewpoints, though, is the question of what Wallace intended with these problematic depictions. By giving a little more credence than Wallace himself did to the poststructuralist argument that the author is dead, I have argued that the unpalatable aspects of Wallace's gender politics are indicative of his texts' investment in male sexual hideousness. Thus, to the extent that his texts fan sexual hideousness as the incontestable grounds of masculinity, they are not interested in changing it. In fact, the virtue Wallace's texts locate in sexual negativity and violence lies precisely in their seeming affront to any specific political position. Of course, this is not to say that one should grant Wallace's hideous neoliberal spermatics the non-political incontestability that it

attempts to create. Indeed, I hope my analysis will encourage further sceptical evaluations of those aspects of his writing which seem the most self-evident.

In sum, ‘David Foster Wallace’s Hideous Neoliberal Spermatics’ makes an original contribution to the field by virtue of its revisionist argument that Wallace’s texts are indebted to neoliberal logics. Further to this, my thesis has argued that Wallace’s depictions of male sexuality are compellingly dark, even nihilistic. As Wallace Studies continues to develop – 2018 alone will see the publication of *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, as well as the inaugural issue of *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* – my attention to the complex pessimism animating Wallace’s depictions of male sexuality will hopefully spur others to look closely at the more objectionable aspects of his writing. Beyond the important political work of critiquing his texts’ misogyny and homophobia (which my project, at times, has tried to do), such scholarship can further our understanding of how and why they offer readers images that are often deliberately unconscionable. When it comes to male sexuality in particular, I have argued that their hideous neoliberal spermatics positions men, in their negativity and violence, as being irrefutably rotten. Wallace’s texts endorse this idea in order to acknowledge and yet defuse their own implication in patriarchal power relations. Future studies can perhaps relight this tension, and in doing so, push against his texts’ suggestion that men can only ever desire hideously.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> To distinguish between the collection and the short story cycle within it, I will refer to the former as *Brief Interviews* and to the latter as 'Brief Interviews'.

<sup>2</sup> Bachner notes that 'I identify a wide range of phenomena under the umbrella of "violence"' (8), and that 'my use of the term violence throughout this book is not supported by any single consistent theory' (9). Allowing the texts that she examines to guide her analysis of violence, Bachner moves between 'what we might call obvious, commonsense examples of violence, those that entail empirically verifiable injury' (9) and 'structural and symbolic violence' (9). My thesis follows her lead in this regard. Keeping this term flexible allows me to account for how Wallace's invocation of sexual violence, though undergoing modal changes from text to text, still signifies ideas of un-representability and incontestability.

<sup>3</sup> An important exception here of course are Wallace's own parodies of blank fiction writing. See, for instance, his short story 'Girl with Curious Hair'.

<sup>4</sup> I am paraphrasing and slightly simplifying Davies' point here. For in addition to evoking a general sense of neoliberal hegemony, Davies uses 'normative' to refer to how neoliberalism during this period constructs subjects in accordance with a series of apical norms.

<sup>5</sup> In their four phase account of the development of neoliberalism, Rachel Greenwald Smith and Mitchum Huehls use Wallace's texts to illustrate the third stage in this process – the '*sociocultural*' (8, italics in original). Here 'culture absorbs and diffuses neoliberalism's bottom-line values, saturating our daily lives with for-profit rationalities of commerce and consumerism, eventually shifting neoliberalism from political ideology to normative common sense' (8). This resonates with my point. Yet, Greenwald Smith and Huehls read Wallace's neoliberalism at the level of intent, and through a superficial understanding of his essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction'. I wish to show how neoliberal logics inform a variety of Wallace's texts in ways that cannot be attributed to intention.

<sup>6</sup> Murat Aydemir's *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning* (2004) offers a broad study of semen in relation to various cultural and philosophical contexts. Lisa Jean Moore's *Sperm Counts: Overcome by Man's Most Precious Fluid* (2007) is also good on this front.

<sup>7</sup> I use 'conservatism' here in its literal sense – the need to preserve something (masculinity understood as an identity rooted in a propensity for sexual hideousness) from change.

<sup>8</sup> There are differences between 'work' in the sense of purposeful activity and, in the Marxist sense I evoke here, 'labour' as an alienable commodity in a capitalist society. I retain this latter term to explore how Wallace depicts male sexuality as human capital. For theories of human capital generalise labour (from employment to all areas of life) as an *economic* idea. Taken to its extreme, human capital renders non-economic 'work' redundant.

<sup>9</sup> It is possible to orgasm over the written correspondence of a lover; the same could be said for phone sex. Yet one would be hard-pressed to argue that this is what Wallace has in mind.

His other examples of preferred sexual activity – holding hands, bodily posture, and so on – are strikingly chaste. As I will show in the next section, Wallace’s hostility to masturbation forecloses the possibility of positive auto-eroticism.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that Halberstam would endorse Wallace’s enthusiasm for HIV/AIDS.

<sup>11</sup> For more on this relationship, see Timothy Aubry (2011), Maria Bustillos (2014), and John Roache (2017). Full bibliographical details can be found in my Works Cited.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that critics should refrain from elucidating the sexism in Wallace’s texts. In some respects my thesis pursues this goal.

<sup>13</sup> Martin also draws on securitization as theorised in international relations. In Barry Buzan et al’s words, this means the ‘elevation of specific “threats” to a prepolitical immediacy’ (29), so that normal procedures are suspended to deal with danger. My focus is on the financial sense, as I wish to forefront how Wallace presents sexuality in relation to capital.

<sup>14</sup> Namely, Wallace’s generally scathing review of Updike’s *Toward the End of Time* (1997), collected as the second piece in *Consider the Lobster* (2005).

<sup>15</sup> Hayes-Brady’s reading is slightly inaccurate. It is not gender that this story suggests is incidental, but lesbianism. Julie advises that ‘lesbianism is simply one kind of response to Otherness. Say the whole point of love is to try to get your fingers through the holes in the lover’s mask [...] who cares how you do it’ (32). If ‘being involved with a woman doesn’t automatically make you a lesbian’ (32), you are still involved with a *woman*.

<sup>16</sup> Hearts are an important motif throughout Wallace’s *oeuvre*. For more on this, see David P. Rando’s ‘David Foster Wallace and Lovelessness’, and Richard Godden and Michael Szalay’s ‘The bodies in the bubble: David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*’.

<sup>17</sup> In this essay Bersani discusses the interrelationship of sex, politics, and AIDS, to conclude that sexuality’s value lies precisely in its affront to personhood. Indeed, to the extent that he is interested in sex as ‘anticoncommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, [and] antiloving’ (215), then this essay is a key forerunner to Edelman’s arguments concerning negativity.

<sup>18</sup> An assumption I feel confident in making given that the story’s intimations of same-sex desire are associated with secrecy and ignorance. By contrast, these lovers are experiencing the safest of heterosexual prerogatives – waking down the street as a couple.

<sup>19</sup> Hal has also inherited this paternal affectation – the one-hitters of marijuana he smokes are shaped ‘sort of like a long FDR-type cigarette holder’ (49).

<sup>20</sup> This is a necessarily condensed summary of a highly complex biomolecular procedure. A more sustained explanation can be found in the first chapter of Kruger’s *AIDS Narratives*.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, one should not miss the irony here. As N. Katherine Hayles notes (albeit, attributing her chosen quote to the wrong character), annular fusion ‘is like “treating cancer by giving the cancer cells themselves cancer,” Thorp explains (572), a strategy that does not give one hope there will be less cancer in the world.’ (688).

<sup>22</sup> That is, for employment contracts, which in their broadest definition necessitates that one party is subservient to another in exchange for a salary, commodities, services, etc. As Chris Fogle reflects in *The Pale King*, ‘there’s also the social contract’ (195), where an obligation to others comes into play. These types of contract are not my concern.

<sup>23</sup> My references throughout this chapter to ‘the reader’ beg the question of who this person is. To be clear, I am not trying to account for how concrete readers do respond to Wallace texts. Rather, I use this phrase (as well as ‘the spectator’) as shorthand for the projected recipient his texts constantly envisage. Essays like ‘E Unibus Pluram’ address this recipient in broad sociological terms; the passages of *Infinite Jest* that I examine towards the end of this chapter project the more immediate person holding the book.

<sup>24</sup> This is slightly different to Amy Hungerford’s suggestion that Wallace sets out to ‘fuck the reader’ (144). This might be accurate in relation to the early texts Hungerford looks at, but it misses how the agency involved in such ‘fucking’ pertains as much to the reader as it does to the text (or in her *ad hominem* attacks, to Wallace himself).

<sup>25</sup> ‘The Suffering Channel’ appears to be a natural fit in relation to my current investigation. However, as I argue in Chapter 5 this story does not figure its desired violence in relation to the gaze, but rather in relation to male-male rivalry.

<sup>26</sup> In response to this gazing, ‘Gately can see every ashtray on the table shake from the force of Joelle V.’s shudder’ (370). This information furthers the gendered nature of the gazing taking place, and registers the novel’s awareness of objections to it. However, this awareness does not undermine how the following scene solicits the male gaze. As such, this is a good example of how Wallace’s texts often acknowledge forms of feminist critique but do not carry them through. My next chapter explores this dynamic in more detail.

<sup>27</sup> I am doing a disservice here to the complexity of Lacan’s theories of sexuality and feminine *jouissance*. A good critical account of these theories is available in Malcolm Bowie’s *Lacan* (1991), while Bruce Fink’s *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (1995) offers a brilliant explanation of same. For my purposes it is enough to say that, for Lacan, *The Ecstasy of St Theresa* represents an orgasmic pleasure irreducible to a masculine signifying economy; in Bowie’s words, ‘Teresa and her fellow mystics are borne along on an uncaused, unlocalizable and ineffable pleasure-spasm’ (152-153).

<sup>28</sup> Hayes also relates that ‘in the same year Irigaray published *Speculum*, 1975, Laura Mulvey published her vastly influential essay on visual pleasure in which she explains how “the male gaze” objectifies and attempts to control those who are looked at’ (353n2).

<sup>29</sup> I use ‘property’ loosely here to suggest both a character trait and an exploitable resource. I do so to draw out the logic by which Wallace presents feminist critique as expropriating a hideousness that, ostensibly, would be best left to men. I complicate these definitions later on in this chapter in relation to the ‘Brief Interviews’ proper.

<sup>30</sup> Franzen has been most vocal about his attempts to provoke feminist critics in his *Guardian* interview with Emma Brockes, ‘There is no way to make myself not male’ (2016).

<sup>31</sup> In his marginalia to Foucault's 'What is an Author?', and specifically the essay's argument that an author's name and an ordinary proper name are not isomorphic in their functioning, Wallace has written 'Gobbledegook' ('Personal Library and Marginalia').

<sup>32</sup> Wallace groups Foucault with Derrida, de Man, and Barthes, creating a rather broad, and perhaps deliberately strawman image of post-structuralism.

<sup>33</sup> These monetary associations may seem arbitrary. However, one can also read the 'check' of diddle-check as a homonym for the U.S. spelling of cheque. Added to the already noted use of 'enclosure', the case for this scene's manipulation of capitalist imagery grows.

<sup>34</sup> I am not suggesting that the sexual exploitation of teenage girls is the same as a teenage boy's objectification of a grown woman. Wallace's juxtaposition of the two in this scene, however, presents both as existing on the same continuum of male hideousness.

<sup>35</sup> This is slightly different to Rando's suggestion that these processes lead to a 'revelation of lovelessness' (581). Rando's equation of hideousness with (a supposed) affective deadening elides how these stories forefront men as the bearers of repulsive attitudes and behaviours. Instead of being revelatory, moreover, they confirm and complicate said repulsiveness as a type of pre-set knowledge that feminists ostensibly impute to men.

<sup>36</sup> The name 'Dolores Rusk' is also telling. Sharing her forename with Nabokov's nymphet, this Dr's surname is reminiscent of the famously sexually repressed Victorian man of letters, John Ruskin. The implication is that Nabokov's character has grown up to be a man-hating therapist who works out her frigidity by subjecting male students to psychobabble. That this is in part due to her adherence to a feminism overly broad in its disciplinary application is evident as well – Rusk holds 'doctorates in both Gender and Deviance' (1039n234).

<sup>37</sup> Wallace suggests that this vanity arises from the left's ignorance of 'the obvious truth' (113) – the 'thoroughgoing *self-interest* that underlies all impulses toward economic equality' (113 italics in original). Such a bald statement of support for the notion of economic self-interest strengthens my argument that Wallace's texts follow neoliberal logics.

<sup>38</sup> Wallace's description in *Infinite Jest* of Gately's intubation – 'his throat felt somehow raped' (809) – similarly presents the inability to talk for oneself as sexual violating.

<sup>39</sup> This is not to simply equate Bachner's Lacanian invocation of the 'real' with Foucault's description of enunciations that are not 'in the true'. I merely wish to stress how both positions – in their different ways – foreground epistemological limitation.

<sup>40</sup> Wallace does go on, however, to describe Kafka's humour in terms that are very much reminiscent of the schlemiel's perseverance in the face of hostility. As Wallace's conjoining of Pynchon, Roth, (Barth) and Allen implies, this essay is not rigorous literary criticism – it is 'the text of a very quick speech' ('Some Remarks' 62n2).

<sup>41</sup> The reason why two separate characters share this affliction in *Infinite Jest* – if it is not simply an instance of authorial oversight – are mysterious.

<sup>42</sup> See the final chapter of Hering's *Fiction and Form*.

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<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, Wallace notes how ‘history’s great philosophers never married [...] The great mathematicians are nuptially split about 50/50, still way below the civilian range. No cogent explanation on record; feel free to hypothesize’ (*Everything and More* 200n2).

<sup>44</sup> See for instance Godden and Szalay (2014), Severs (2017), Shapiro (2014), Boswell (2012), Clare (2012). Full bibliographical details can be found in my Works Cited.

<sup>45</sup> Notably, Rand suggests that her attractiveness makes her a ‘monopsony’ (486). As Drinion explains, this is ‘the reverse of monopoly. There’s a single buyer and multiple sellers’ (483). Such a comparison contradicts my reading, as it positions Rand, not the men around her, as buyers of sexual attention. However, it is Ed who teaches her this comparison (483). As such, it is part of his manipulative seduction, which empowers Rand in ways that, cruelly, render her more subject to his control. Similarly, the idea of female sexual empowerment as being an insidious permutation of patriarchal control is consistent with the dynamics I explored in Chapter 4. Indeed, Rand’s double-bind – wanting to be saved by a man, but being aware of the anti-feminist implications of this same desire – means she exemplifies the kind of post-feminist woman the misogynists E and K hypothesise in ‘B.I. #28’.

<sup>46</sup> As for the use of Persian here, the tulip is indeed a flower of the East: as Mark Desh notes, ‘when exactly cultivation of these wild flowers began is a mystery, but we do know that by about the year 1050, tulips were already venerated in Persia’ (8).

<sup>47</sup> Britton, for his part, also has his own ‘way of pumping himself up’ (64).

<sup>48</sup> Wallace takes this line from *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where it refers to Pynchon’s similarly creepy statistician Pointsman: ‘here’s an erection stirring, he’ll masturbate himself to sleep again tonight. A joyless constant, an institution in his life’ (167).