"Are You Suffering?": Reading David Foster Wallace's Democratic Literature Through The Vocabularies Of Richard Rorty.

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to prove the existence of a democratic dimension in the oeuvre of the American writer David Foster Wallace. To do so, the thesis focuses on four of his works, with a chapter devoted to each. These texts are, in order of how they appear by chapter, the short story 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' (2004), the novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), the nonfiction text is *Signifying Rappers* (1990), and the posthumous and unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011).

The theoretical framework created to elucidate this democratic dimension is based on the philosophical work of the American Pragmatist Richard Rorty. Particular use is made of his concepts of Private and Public vocabularies, as developed in the books *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (1979) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (1989) and *Achieving Our Country* (1997).

By demonstrating the democratic capacity of Wallace's literature, I also aim to show the civic capacities and intent of his texts. By this, I mean that Wallace's texts aim to represent a democratic and civic belief to the reader and, at the same time, the texts themselves are attempts of civic participation aimed to influence the democratic conversation of the United States.

Table of Contents

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Author's Declaration

Except where acknowledged in the customary manner, the material presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge, original and has not been submitted in whole or part for a degree in any university.

Antonio Aguilar Vazquez

Abbreviations

Books by Wallace

(FT) *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*

(BF) *Both Flesh and Not*

(BS) *Broom of the System*

(BI) *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

(CL) *Consider the Lobster*

(C) *Conversations with David Foster Wallace,* ed Stephen J. Burn

(IJ) *Infinite Jest*

(O) *Oblivion: Stories*

(SR) *Signifying Rappers*

(PK) *The Pale King*

Books by Rorty

(AOC) *Achieving Our Country*

(CIS) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*

(PSH) *Philosophy and Social Hope*

(PMN) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

Introduction

> "All I am entitled to say is that it is a useful way,
> useful for particular purposes."
> Richard Rorty, 'A World without Substances or Essences' (1994).

This dissertation attempts to redescribe the writings of David Foster Wallace as a democratic tool. To achieve this, I will interpret a selection of Wallace's writings through Richard Rorty's philosophy, one of the prominent and more recent contributions to the American Pragmatist tradition. Although I will provide evidence of Rorty's influence on Wallace, this is not an academic investigation that aims simply to prove the presence of Rorty's thought in Wallace's work, nor to present Rorty as one of Wallace's main influences. Instead, I plan to show that placing Wallace in the frame of Pragmatist theory opens his texts to a democratic interpretation that has been either ignored or underdeveloped by his academic readers, who have mostly focused on his literary influences (John Barth,[1] Don DeLillo,[2] Thomas Pynchon[3]) and his relation to new literary movements,[4] his use of irony and sincerity,[5] and his more overt philosophical references, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida.[6]

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[1] One of the most detailed studies of the relationship between Barth and Wallace is Charles B. Harris's 'The Anxiety of Influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace Connection' (2014), which focuses on Wallace's novella 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' as a response to Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse'.

[2] D. T. Max's biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, tells how "struck up a correspondence" with DeDillo thanks to "the encouragement of Franzen" (176) and the biography often references Wallace's letters.

[3] Tore Rye Andersen's "Pay Attention! David Foster Wallace and his Real Enemies" (2014) shows the influence of various novels by Pynchon, as well as by Vladimir Nabokov, on Wallace's novels.

[4] Robert L. McLaughlin's "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." (2004) and Stephen J. Burn's *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, (2008), for instance, read Wallace's work in the light of the emergence of "post-postmodernism". Burn groups Wallace with Franzen and Richard Powers as part of a post-postmodern generation that responds to the writings of Barth, Pynchon, as well as Robert Coover and William Gaddis. These connections and movements are deftly traced and defined in the first chapter of the book: 'A Map of the Territory: American Fiction at the Millenium' (1-27).
Timothy Jacobs's 'American Touchstone: The Idea of Order in Gerald Manley Hopkins and David Foster Wallace' (2001) as one of the first readings of Wallace's aesthetic through the lesser known influence of Hopkins.
The seminal text for these readings is Marshall Boswell's book *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), specifically the first chapter, 'Cynicism and Naïveté: Modernism's Third Wave', where Boswell establishes a critical biography of Wallace, and then places Wallace's oeuvre in relation to the English literature tradition of the twentieth century and what seemed to emerge at the start of the twenty-first. (cf. 1-20)

[5] Iain Williams considers Wallace in relation to "new sincerity" in '(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's "Octet"' (2015).
In 'The Changing Face of Post-Postmodern Fiction: Irony, Sincerity, and Populism' (2017), Jon Doyle reads Wallace as the post-postmodern origin of art that tries to insert sincerity as one of the principal social values for Western society. Doyle moves beyond Wallace by considering other books and movies that expand and continue Wallace's conception of sincerity.

[6] Lance Olsen was one of the first critics to address Wittgenstein's influence, in his essay, "Termite Art" (1993), which reads *The Broom of the System* through Wittsgentein and its possible responses to postmodern art.

To establish the potency of this new philosophical approach to Wallace's work, I interpret four of his texts, devoting a chapter to each one. My chosen texts draw on Wallace's fiction and nonfiction to showcase both his literary range and his critical depth. I begin with his short story 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' (2004) because its title is the same title as Richard Rorty's first major publication, which establishes an undeniable connection between both authors, though the story itself is an amalgamation of a structure, a voice, and an ethic that Wallace took from different sources.[7] Then comes my reading of *Infinite Jest* (1996) arguably Wallace's best-known text, which earned him a great deal of public and academic attention.[8] Similar to *The Divine Comedy* or *Ulysses* for their authors, *Infinite Jest* towers over the rest of Wallace's bibliography as the work that justifies canonization. Through Rorty, I also pair the novel with the work of George Orwell and Marcel Proust, writers that are rarely mentioned in wallace studies. The third text is *Signifying Rappers* (1990), a long essay he co-wrote at the start of his career on the then nascent genre of rap music. Although mostly ignored by Wallace critics, it reveals his Pragmatist capacity[9] to understand the divisions between communities and the possibilities of communication between them. I finish with his posthumous and unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011) which, in the context of this dissertation's argument, is the culmination of the career-long interest in civics that I traced in its previous chapters. Although I do not follow the strict chronological order of Wallace's career in order to more effectively introduce his engagement with pragmatism, it is worth noting, nevertheless, that my chosen texts give a sense of Wallace's overall development as a writer, since I look at one of his first publications (*Signifying Rappers*) and at his posthumous work (*The Pale King*). This historical variety helps underline my claim that the democratic is a constant in Wallace's career.

Patrick Horn's 'Does Language Fail Us? Wallace's Struggle with Solipsism' in *Gesturing Toward Reality, David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (2014) analyzes Wallace's relationship with both the early and later Wittgenstein, proving their influence in Wallace through his use of solipsism (a constant trope in his career), and exemplifies its presence with a reading of the short story 'Good Old Neon'.

'"Then Out of the Rubble": David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction', in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"* (2014) by Bradley J. Fest analyzes the philosophical influences of Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, focusing on Wittgenstein and Derrida, as well as Paul de Man.

The aforementioned *Understanding David Foster Wallace* also establishes a strong link between Wallace's work to the philosophy of Wittgenstein. (18-9)

[7] Apart from Rorty, Wallace made use of Flannery O'Connor's short story 'Everything that Rises Must Converge' and Gordon Grices's book "The Red Hourglass: Lives of the Predators" (1999).

[8] There are at least 48 published academic articles with *Infinite Jest* in their title (cf. https://davidfosterwallaceresearch.wordpress.com/), and in 2005 it was included in *Time* magazine's Top 100 novels published since 1923: http://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/

[9] As I'll show later on, this 'Pragmatist capacity' has been noted by readers such as Clare Hayes-Brady in *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (2016), Thomas Tracey's "The Formative Years: David Foster Wallace's Philosophical Influences and *The Broom of the System*" (2014), and Lucas Thompson in *Global Wallace*. However, I don't believe they don't achieve the depth and specificity of my own reading.

Although Rorty wrote eight books in English and was the editor of three, five of the eight books mentioned are compilations made up of the articles, reviews, and lectures he wrote throughout his career (Brandom 378-392). The theoretical framework of my reading makes specific use of the remaining three books, which I also consider to be the three major books from Rorty's career: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,[10] (1979) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*,[11] (1989) and *Achieving Our Country*[12] (1997). An argumentative narrative unites them: briefly put, the first argues for the philosophical abandonment of epistemology and metaphysics; the second explains what both philosophy and literature can do after said abandonment; and the third considers the application of his arguments to a specific time and place: the U.S. at the end of the twentieth century.

Drawing from these texts, the most pertinent elements of Rorty's philosophy for my thesis are the concepts of private and public vocabularies. The construction and argumentation for both concepts constitutes the majority of the chapters in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In this text, Rorty exemplifies each vocabulary through the work of various novelists and philosophers, with Proust, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida in the field of private vocabularies, (cf. 96-137) and Nabokov,[13] Dickens, and Orwell on the side of public vocabularies (cf. 141-188). Explanations of these concepts appear throughout my dissertation, yet a good introductory description of Rorty's initial conceptualization would be that the abandonment of epistemology and metaphysics also leads to a renunciation of the belief in and the search for a universal language, one that unites and describes all of existence. What we have instead are various vocabularies that can communicate a limited number of beliefs. These limits also include a divide between the language of the self and of the community. In other words, a private vocabulary would address beliefs such as self-understanding and intimate desires, while a public vocabulary would describe something like beliefs tied to a nation or an institution. This

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[10] In *Rorty and his Critics*, Jürgen Habermas calls this text "Rorty's important book" (34).

[11] In his monograph on Rorty, Alan Malachowski calls *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* as part of "the sequence of books that earned Rorty his notoriety" (12). The other book Malachowski includes in the 'sequence' is *Consequences of Pragmatism*, (1982), a collection of essays that doesn't really say anything that isn't present in the previous two titles.. I believe the list doesn't include *Achieving Our Country* because it was written in the last stage of Rorty's career, once his 'notoriety' had been gained. Also, Malachowski only devotes one page of his book to *Achieving Our Country* (173) probably because its content strays too much from the philosophical into the political.

[12] In *Richard Rorty; Education, Philosophy, and Politics* (2001) this book is described as Rorty's "latest-and most-ambitious project in the field of political philosophy" (145).

[13] Later in this Introduction, I'll make use of Rorty's reading of Humbert Humbert to read a character by Wallace. It's worth noting that Tore Rye Andersen also makes use of Rorty's reading of *Lolita* in "Pay Attention! David Foster Wallace and his Real Enemies". However, Andersen only uses Rorty to strengthen his own reading of Nabokov at the end of his essay and he never really bridges Wallace with Rorty.

conceptual divide guides the organization of my chapters, since my examination of the first two texts ('Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' and *Infinite Jest*) is mostly established through the concept of private vocabularies, while the other two texts (*Signifying Rappers* and *The Pale King*) are read in terms of the concept of public vocabularies. However, the two concepts should not be taken as opposites, they are not separated by essences. Therefore, there is no clear distinction for where one vocabulary starts and another begins, as Rorty explains, "I have no criterion of individuation for distinct languages or vocabularies to offer, but I am not sure that we need one" (*CIS* 7). Any distinction will be made by a given use of a vocabulary by an individual or a community rather than by a neutral, permanent criteria.

Philosophy was a constant presence throughout Wallace's life and had an undeniable influence on his literary work. His father, James D. Wallace, is a professional philosopher in the Pragmatist tradition and the author of various books on ethics.[14] His son almost followed his footsteps: David Foster Wallace graduated from Amherst College with two theses, one in Philosophy and one in Creative Writing, which would become his first published novel. (Max 39) Four years later he began a PhD in Philosophy at Harvard University but he dropped out before the end of the first semester due to addiction and mental health issues[15] (132-4). This information has been used by some readers to justify or introduce the presence of philosophy in his work.[16] However, these biographical details were not commonly known while he was alive. What Wallace brought to the fore in various interviews were his philosophical and critical interests and influences rather than his own academic studies. For example, in what are arguably his most famous interview, he talks to Larry McCaffrey about at some point having "a coldly cerebral take on fiction and Austin-Wittgenstein-Derridean literary theory" (*C* 41). A similar take appears in the posthumous interview with David Lipsky, where he describes his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, as "a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida, and presence versus absence" (*C* 35). Biographies and interviews aside, Wallace's writing has various overt philosophical references that suggest his interest and training. There are overt ones, such as Leonore Beadsman, the protagonist's grandmother in *The Broom of the System*, who was "a

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[14] These are *Virtues and Vices* (1978), *Moral Relevance and Moral Conflict* (1988), *Ethical Norms, Particular Cases* (1996), and *Norms and Practices* (2008). He is also the author of several articles (https://philpapers.org/s/James%20D.%20Wallace).

[15] It seems, however, that Wallace would not have finished the PhD even if he hadn't been interned at McLean Hospital. Max tells us that, upon arrival, "the realization he'd made a mistake was nearly immediate" to Wallace. He was disillusioned with Stanley Cavell's seminar, "a philosopher who held a special place in Wallace's esteem" (132), the course books were "impossibly dense", and Wallace felt "too old to go back to school" (133).

[16] Consider Charles B. Harris's biographically charged article, "David Foster Wallace: 'That Distinctive Singular Stamp of Himself'" (2010).

student of Wittgenstein" (*BS* 63) at Cambridge and who once broke a kitchen window with a broom to exemplify Wittgenstein's philosophy.[17] (*BS* 149-50) *Infinite Jest* is ripe with philosophical references, from a bar called "The Unexamined Life", (*IJ* 476) to an addict using a copy of William James's "*Principles of Psychology and The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*" to stash Cocaine, (*IJ* 544-5) to an apocryphal Deleuze publication: "Gilles Deleuze's posthumous *Incest and the Life of Death in Capitalist Entertainment*" (*IJ* 792). These philosophical references and tropes rarely seem gratuitous but instead help build narratives, as the Lipsky quote suggests. An example of this can be found in the short story 'Oblivion', that includes a logical formulation to describe an analyst's theory of love and fear as the two main orientations in life (cf. *O* 164). The formulation isn't just an embellishment; rather it shows the reader the level of over rationalization and solipsism the character reaches when considering different "models or angels" (*O* 164) for the existential dilemma of his life.

Maybe the clearest example of the philosophical proclivity of Wallace's work is the many critical publications written on his work from a philosophical angle. The 2014 publication *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, is a 280-page book of 14 different essays on Wallace featuring a wide range of approaches: Scott Korb's 'How we Ought To Do Things with Words' is based on Wallace's 'Authority and American Usage' essay, and he uses it to argue for both the defense of prescriptive language and against the discrimination improper language use. In '*This Is Water* and Religious Self-Deception', Kevin Timpe considers Wallace's *This Is Water* speech as a warning of intellectual arrogance and religious self-deception. Andrew Bennett, in 'Inside David Foster Wallace's Head: Attention, Loneliness, Suicide, and the Other Side of Boredom', writes about boredom in *The Pale King*, using both Schopenhauer and Csikszentmihalyi to interpret the negative, self-denying capacities of boredom, as well as it's positive, self-overcoming capacities. Blakey Vermeule also uses Schopenhauer in 'The Terrible Master: David Foster Wallace and the Suffering of Consciousness (with guest Arthur Schopenhauer)', but instead of focusing on one novel he reads various texts by Wallace. 'The Lobster Considered' by Robert C Jones gives a mostly analytical approach to the moral dilemma of eating animals presented by Wallace in 'Consider the Lobster'. In 'Philosophy, Self-Help, and the Death of David Wallace', Maria Bustillos looks at the Christian self-help elements of Wallace's literature. Robert K. Bolger's 'A Less "Bullshity" Way To Live: The Pragmatic Spirituality of David Foster Wallace' mostly considers *This Is*

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[17] Wittgenstein's presence in Wallace's first novel is probably best described by Clare Hayes-Brady: "Wittgenstein's influence on Broom is pervasive, partly because it is explicit" (2010, 25).

Water as a presentation of secular spiritualism, using interjections from e-mails the author received from Wallace. In 'The Subsurface Unity of All Things, or David Foster Wallace's Free Will', Leland de la Durantaye brings together Wallace's undergrad philosophy thesis and *This Is Water* to argue that instead of trying to trace the limits of choice and freedom, it's better to give yourself fully to love and life. As explained in footnote 6, Patrick Horn, in 'Does Language Fail Us? Wallace's Struggle with Solipsism', reads Wallace's short story 'Good Old Neon' through Wittgenstein and solipsism to understand the limits of language and the relation to 'Mystery' in existence. In 'Beyond Philosophy: David Foster Wallace on Literature, Wittgenstein, and the Dangers of Theorizing', Randy Ramal brings together different sources, such as Wallace's undergrad philosophy thesis, 'Consider the Lobster', Wittgenstein, and Sartre to analyze the creation of value for the individual in Wallace. Allard den Dulk, in 'Good Faith and Sincerity: Sartrean Virtues of Self-Becoming in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', uses Sartre to read the role of sincerity in *Infinite Jest*. In 'Untrendy Problems: *The Pale King*'s Philosophical Inspirations', Jon Baskin looks at Wallace's possibilities for maturity through wisdom in the philosophical questions raised in *The Pale King*. Ryan David Mullins, in 'Theories of Everything and More: Infinity is Not the End', uses Wittgenstein and Kant, as well as different sources from the fields of physics and mathematics, to form a metaphysical reading of *Infinite Jest*. In 'The Formative Years: David Foster Wallace's Philosophical Influences and *The Broom of the System*', Thomas Tracey looks at the influence of American Pragmatism in Wallace's philosophical development. Because of this essay's relevance to my thesis, I analyze it later in this Introduction.

Gesturing Toward Reality was followed by a similar publication in 2015 titled *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*, collects six essays that orbit around Wallace's undergrad philosophy dissertation. Williams Hasker's 'David Foster Wallace and the Fallacies of "Fatalism"' praises Wallace's semantic critique of Richard Taylor's fatalism (which is the topic of Wallace's dissertation) but concludes that Wallace's ultimately fails at refuting fatalism. Similarly, M. Oreste Fiocco's 'Fatalism and the Metaphysics of Contingency' commends the quality of Wallace's dissertation but concludes that Wallace does not fully refute Taylor's fatalism. In 'Wallace, Free Choice, and Fatalism' Gila Sher praises Wallace's dissertation by noting that some of the dissertations arguments anticipate arguments that would be made years later in the academic field of Logic. For the fatalist, the future is set and cannot be altered, in 'Fatalism, Time Travel, and System J' Maureen Eckert considers the possibility of time travel in the light of Wallace's arguments against Taylor's fatalism, concluding that,

following said arguments, one cannot travel back in time to change the past. Daniel R. Kelly, in 'David Foster Wallace as American Hedgehog', quotes from various texts by Wallace to analyze the author's interest in self-consciousness and free will. As the title suggests, in 'David Foster Wallace on the Good Life' Nathan Ballantyne and Justin Tosi look at different texts by Wallace to understand his position to live a life in accordance with the various narratives that make up a self.

Although not a compilation, Allard den Dulk's *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: a Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*, published in 2015, offers a reading of Wallace based on Western philosophy. As the title suggests, den Dulk mostly uses Existentialist philosophy to read how Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Jonathan Safran Foer present problems in their contemporary society caused by excessive self-consciousness and constant irony. den Dulk then presents the solution each author offers in their fiction to both of these social problems. The fiction of John Barth and Bret Easton Ellis is used to exemplify fiction that narrates each social malaise without offering a possible solution to them. The book's theoretical framework is built with the philosophy of Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Camus, as well as that of Derrida and the late Wittgenstein. den Dulk systematically reads the fiction of each writer under the various concepts of these philosophers. With regards to Wallace, den Dulk focuses on his representations of sincerity, the possibility of choice, and the importance of paying attention. I will make use of this book in my chapter on *Infinite Jest*, since den Dulk mostly reads Wallace through that novel, making observations and arguments in the same field as mine.

In the last chapter of this dissertation, I make extensive use of Jeffrey Sever's *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books; Fictions of Value*. Although I mostly utilize his reading of *The Pale King*, it's worth noting that Severs constructs a cohesive reading of all of Wallace's fiction with a philosophical framework. His "most important philosophical guidepost" (14) for achieving this reading is axiology. He uses Wallace's words to define the term, "the study of values and value judgements," (*BF* 34-5) yet the philosophical depth of the signpost comes from Heidegger's understanding of the term "as part of his call to return to the ancient question of Being that had been abandoned by modernity" where there is a search for "a language in which ground could only be ascertained" (Severs 15). Severs quotes John Caputo's succinct explanation to understand Heidegger's reliance on the ancient Greek *axioma*: "the Greeks had no 'theory of values' in which a 'value' is something added on to a 'fact' by the representational (*vorstellend*) thought of the ego […] For the Greek a thing stands in the highest regard, not

because man has conferred a value on it, as in modern theory, but rather because it stands forth of itself" (Caputo 53). Rorty considered Heidegger "the greatest theoretical imagination of his time (outside the natural sciences)" (*CIS* 118) and his philosophy is essential for Rorty's conception of self-creation and the creation of vocabularies. Rorty critiques Heidegger's aforementioned 'call to return to' and search for "words which had, or should have had, resonance for *everybody* in modern Europe, words which were relevant not just to the fate of the people who happen to have read a lot of philosophy books but to the public fate of the West" (*CIS* 118). In other words, Heidegger searched for "elementary words" (*CIS* 119) that contained and conveyed the same meaning to others that he found in them. Sever's reading avoids this critique because it isn't searching for the axioms of Being but of value in Wallace's writing. His interpretation is therefore based on Wallace's language specifically instead of a belief in the atemporal meaning of words, and so because of this he constructs a reading that 'stands forth of itself' without the aid of an epistemological or metaphysical system. I believe that part of the affinity of my work with Severs's lies in how my dissertation also constructs its own meanings, not only in the way each chapter builds on the previous ones, but also in the way words such as *civics*, *conversation*, or *mirror* should have 'stand forth'-meanings throughout the dissertation. Rorty's philosophy is key for this construction of meaning; I will establish a dialogue between the writings of both Americans, and although this will show the relevance of Rorty's philosophy to Wallace's literature, it should also result in a clearer understanding of the civic quality of his oeuvre.

As mentioned, Wallace titled a short story after Rorty's 1979 book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. I use this signpost to read the story in a Rortyan manner that is unprecedented in academic discussions of Wallace's work. In the subsequent chapters I extend this reading to three other texts by Wallace. I've picked texts that exemplify the plurality and variety of Wallace's work, as well as the dimensions and capacity of Rorty's theory. It is mostly because of these goals that half of the texts I analyze are at the center of Wallace studies (*Infinite Jest*, *The Pale King*)[18] and the other two are at its periphery (*Signifying Rappers*, 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature'). It's a Wallacian approach to pay equal attention to both the focus of public interest and what the public gaze ignores.[19] This peripheral style may be the most evident in his

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[18] It's these two texts that, understandably, receive most of the attention in the BBC documentary *Endnotes: David Foster Wallace*, created around the time of the publication of *The Pale King* in 2011. This documentary is also proof that interest in Wallace grew after his untimely death.

[19] The relation between the center and the periphery could be related to Wallace's lifelong interest in Jacques Derrida and the philosopher's concepts of différance and deconstruction.

essays, where, for example, when writing on David Lynch and the making of *Lost Highway*, he also focused on the film crew. Another example could be that he has an essay on one of the greatest tennis players of all time (Roger Federer) and another on an unknown professional player (Michael Joyce).[20] This is also similar to the Pragmatist approach to cultural production, which does not make hierarchical differences between forms, content, or audience. Instead, it focuses on the creation of new imaginative forms that can help a community reach a better future. This does not mean that, for Rorty, cultural production should be oriented towards a single goal or interest. The division could instead be simplified between the books[21] that can aid a community and those that cannot. In Rorty's words, "to reconstr[uct] the standard moral-aesthetic division" we can "separate books which supply novel stimuli to action […] from those which simply offer relaxation" (*CIS* 143). In this sense, I consider Wallace's books to be part of the first category. The philosophical generality of Rorty's statements should dissipate as its intricacies are presented throughout the dissertation. For now, just as it is helpful to understand Rorty's philosophy by what it is *not* (i.e. anti-essentialist, anti-metaphysical) it might be helpful to state that the 'books which supply novel stimuli to action' *do not* "gear in with their readers' fantasies without suggesting that there might be something wrong with those fantasies, or with the person who has them." (*CIS* 143) In my reading, one of the 'stimuli to action' in Wallace's books is pertinent to the advancement of democratic beliefs and the civics of democratic citizens. My analysis aims to highlight and comprehend the oeuvre's 'stimuli'. It's also worth noting that this division of books "does not parallel the traditional lines between the cognitive and the noncognitive, the moral and the aesthetic, or the 'literary' and the nonliterary. Nor does it conform to any standard distinctions of form of genre." (*CIS* 143) The absolution of these distinctions explains why my reading is able to seamlessly take in Wallace's novels, short stories, and nonfiction without any kind of theoretical complications. This theoretical approach allows me state that Wallace's oeuvre promotes the Rortyan kind of action and thus each text that each chapter focuses on. At the same time, the generality of the description also allows me to specify how the four texts I analyze have different methods and objectives for their call to

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[20] 'Federer Both Flesh and Not' (*BF* 5-33), and 'Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness' (*FT* 213-55).

[21] I say 'books' not only because of the literary and philosophical focus of this dissertation. Rorty's arguments, especially those in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, revolve around published texts, mostly of literature and philosophy. On one hand, this bookish argumentation highlights the importance of literacy for democracy and emancipation. On the other hand, there is nothing that prevents a Rortyan analysis of other modes of cultural production. Therefore, his focus on books seems due to the circumstance that he was more of a bibliophile than, for example, a cinephile.

action. As Rorty states, a book's stimuli works "sometimes straightforwardly and sometimes by insinuation" and the degree of the action itself, of the change it seeks can vary "in some major or minor respect" (*CIS* 143). This is why theoretical coherence is maintained when my reading of Wallace's short story 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' presents an indirect suggestion to notice the suffering of others around us, while in the posthumous novel *The Pale King* I direct call to change the civic attitudes in the United States. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty tried to write a book that stimulated Pragmatist democratic action in his nation. In this dissertation I'll prove that a similar democratic stimulation is part of Wallace's literature.

This democratic Pragmatist approach is present in Wallace's writing style as well. I read his interest in literary innovation and his aversion to cultural elitism, which might otherwise seem contradictory, as a result of this approach. The following four chapters will detail said style, one that strove to balance complex and meaningful literary writing with the capacity to be read and understood by all. This dissertation stems from an interest in that tension, a belief that Wallace created an imaginative solution to it, and the desire to understand how it functions. To generalize it in another way, Wallace mostly wrote complex or intricate literature that, although often challenging, does not require a double major in philosophy and creative writing to understand and enjoy. The ideal instrument to understand Wallace's resolution of said tension—as I will demonstrate—is Richard Rorty's philosophy.

Rorty's American Pragmatism begins with the negation of absolute Truth as a philosophical possibility. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he presents the arguments of other philosophers, both Analytical and Continental,[22] to make his case. Only at the end of the book does he present something that we could call *his* philosophy, as if he wanted to show that he considered all arguments for Truth before arguing that epistemology "may be replaced by a pragmatist conception of knowledge which eliminates the Greek contrast between contemplation and action, between representing the world and coping with it" (11). With his argumentative base established, he develops his philosophy in his two books, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and *Achieving Our Country*, and proposes what philosophy, the humanities, and his country could aim for after dropping the search for Truth. A key element in Rorty's philosophy is the belief in a public or national conversation, one similar to and influenced by Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere.[23] Rorty considered his approach

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[22] The main names are Sellars, Quine, Davidson, Kuhn, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Dewey, and Sartre.

[23] cf. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* by Jürgen Habermas (1989). Specifically, I think that the historicized and contingent description of the public sphere

to public philosophy to be similar to Habermas',[24] with the caveat that Habermas finds no use for private vocabularies. Rorty argues this by comparing Habermas to other philosophers: "Whereas Habermas sees the line of ironist thinking which runs from Hegel through Foucault and Derrida as destructive of social hope, I see this line of thought as largely irrelevant to public life and to political questions"[25] (*CIS* 83). Another key element from Rorty's philosophy is what Cornel West calls the "future-oriented instrumentalism"[26] (5) characteristic of American Pragmatism. If one abandons the belief in an eternal structure of thought then one can accommodate the suspicion that new challenges and new imaginative ways of thinking will arise in time. Rorty's construction of a philosophy that values a democratic community and imaginative creations for better ways of being in part comes from one of his greatest influences: the American Pragmatist and Socialist John Dewey, who Rorty quoted as saying "imagination is the chief instrument of the good … art is more moral than moralities"[27] (Dewey 348). It's vital for my dissertation to highlight and keep in mind Rorty's intent that his philosophy be not merely descriptive, but be a tool to instigate and facilitate conversations between humans and

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in Europe (cf. 'Section II Social Structure of the Public Sphere' 27-56) is in line with Rorty's understanding and use of the concept.

[24] In *Rorty and his Critics*, we read a series of essays written by Rorty's critics followed by his response. The first of these is an essay by Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn' (31-55). In his response, Rorty makes statements such as "[Habermas'] *The philosophical discourse of modernity* made an enormous impression on me" (56) and "I entirely agree with Habermas when he says that the philosophical 'paradigms do not form a an arbitrary sequence but a dialectical relationship'" (63). It seems that the main point of contention is that Habermas believes that when "I make an assertion I am implicitly claiming to be able to justify it to all audiences, actual and possible" (56). Rorty sees this as a belief in ahistorical, permanent truths, free of circumstance. It's worth mentioning that this book was edited by Robert B. Brandom, a 'disciple' of Rorty, who wrote one of the essays in the book ('Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism' [156-83]) and, it turns out, was supervised by Richard Rorty as a graduate student. I consider him to be a living philosopher who has continued to work with and evolve the Rortyan concept of vocabularies (as proven by his aforementioned essay).

[25] Rorty makes an interesting case for private and public vocabularies by using Habermas as the philosopher who would agree with the concept of public vocabularies but not private ones, and Foucault as the philosopher who would agree to private vocabularies but not public ones (*CIS* 61-9). I believe Rorty would agree with Habermas' critique of the "refeudalization" and the "neomercantilism" of the public sphere (cf. Habermas 28-41), partially because in the sections cited above Rorty seems to consent to Habermas' work and quibbles only on the absence of a 'private sphere.' Rorty's use of Habermas and Foucault approach irony is explored by David L. Hall in his book *Richard Rorty; Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism* (cf. 146-160).

[26] This orientation can be seen in the conclusion of *Achieving Our Country*, describing the users of his Pragmatism as "romantic utopians trying to imagine a better future" (140). Since there is no belief in a timeless knowledge, the Rortyan project aims to open more imaginative avenues for an improvement of humanity. The links that unite this sweeping statement will be developed through each chapter of this thesis.

[27] It's worth adding a part that Rorty left out from his formulation of the quote: "the primacy of the imagination extends far beyond the scope of direct personal relationships. Except where 'ideal' is used in conventional deference or as a name for a sentimental reverie, the ideal factors in every moral outlook and human loyalty are imaginative." (Dewey 348) In this we can read the roots of Rorty's belief in the capacity of imagination to bridge vocabularies and shift culture. Moreover, it indicates how supposed ahistorical foundations and permanent obligations are not grounded on anything eternal.

communities, all with the goal of reducing human suffering. : "We should stay on the lookout for marginalized people - people whom we still instinctively think of as 'they' rather than 'us.' […] philosophy is one of the techniques for reweaving our vocabulary of moral deliberation in order to accommodate new beliefs" (*CIS* 196). I will make the case that one of the goals of Wallace's literature is to help the reader 'stay on the lookout.'

To reiterate, Rorty's work is not a vast investigation or dialectic that concludes with the negation of Truth; instead, this is his starting point. This parallels my conception of Wallace as an author, since this thesis tries to grasp the possibilities of a work of literature once we drop the notion of the writer as the wielder of Truth and the reader's quest to grasp it. This is not a novel claim, and it is one that Wallace, influenced by the postmodernist theories of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, often made. A useful conceptual template for my research appears at the end of his short story 'Octet', (*BI* 111-36) where the narrative voice asks the reader and itself what kind of writer it wishes to be. The narrator informs the reader that to "puncture the fourth wall and come onstage naked" (*BI* 133) the author of a piece of fiction will "look fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure", yet that position is better than the holier-than-thou posture, as Wallace concludes after an ellipsis:

> … more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a *Writer*, whom we imagine (at least I sure do …) to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ. (*BI* 136)

It's fair to claim that Wallace developed his views on the writer, the reader, and the relationship between the two, from Barthes and Derrida's poststructuralism. Rorty also read the poststructuralists[28] and, although I'm not concerned with investigating the precise influence of this movement on either of them, it could be taken as another reason why both thinkers coincide in their support for a more democratic conversation between author and audience. One of the factors for establishing said dialogue is that literature is no longer sent down from the 'Olympian HQ' but instead shared horizontally, communicating the vocabulary and experiences of the 'muddy trench.' However, this statement might appear as somewhat problematic when applied to Wallace's oeuvre, since his work is so vast and varied, one could easily find baroque compositions that seem far removed from the 'muddy trench.' If a clear and direct prose is the mark of a horizontal style, then Rorty is more consistent in producing accessible and straight-

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[28] I will make use of Rorty's reading of Derrida later in this Introduction.

forward texts, even when writing for professional philosophers. 'Octet' is not a conventional or simple story, and its originality makes it one of the most commented upon stories from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.[29] Zadie Smith wrote that 'Octet' will "make or break you as a reader of Wallace" since the short story asks the reader "to have faith in something he cannot possibly ever finally determine in language […] His urgency, his sincerity, his apparent desperation to 'connect' with his reader in a genuine way" (287). My reading also considers a reader willing to engage with Wallace's literature. But also, and this is no longer what Smith wrote about, that he does not offer eternal arguments or assurances in his literature. In this sense, the 'faith' lies in accepting the contingency of vocabulaires, both the reader's own and Wallace's. Moreover, another part of the 'make or break' quality of 'Octet' in my reading is its difficulty. 'Octet' is an unconventional short story, it has the form of an incomplete pop quiz that contains various narrations. This particularity 'makes' the reader willing to engage with the story's originality, while it 'breaks' the reader unwilling to do so. The four main texts I analyze in my dissertation present a similar demand from the reader. My reading of the end of 'Octet' might seem to contain a certain essentialism, betraying the idea that there is a single, perennial way of writing from 'the trench with the rest of us.' This interpretation is suggested by the dualism of Wallace's image, with the 'Olympian HQ' as a kind of realm of forms and the muddy trench as empirical reality. Yet in the reading sustained by my thesis, writing in the 'Olympian HQ' equals to writing with a metaphysical view of Literature in mind, as well as a disinterest in expanding either public or private vocabularies. To write while 'quivering in the mud' is therefore the experimental effort to create texts that can expand vocabularies and instigate or aid conversations between people. The clearest example of this effort will appear in the last chapter of this dissertation, where I argue that in *The Pale King* Wallace wrote literature that redescribes the democratic citizen in the United States. Not only that, I also argue for a redescription of how the literary text can itself participate in a democracy.

To expand my presentation of Rorty, I'll now offer critiques of his pragmatism from the book *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, (1996) an edited registry of a conference in Paris that included Rorty and Derrida. Since Rorty is given a chance to respond to the critiques of his

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[29] It's worth mentioning, as an example, that in his survey of Wallace's short stories, Chis Power chooses 'Octet' as an exemplary piece of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (2015). In 'David Foster Wallace's OCTET and the ATTHAKAVAGGA' Mary K. Holland reads the story's metafictionality through Buddist philosophy, broadening the depth of the story. In the aforementioned '(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's "Octet"', Williams critiques the story's relation to irony and sincerity as betraying a "conservative, elitist, individualistic nature" (311).

work, the discussion offers better descriptions of his theory. Rorty is the only pragmatist in the book. The motor of the debate is that other participants, including the editor, dislike Rorty's placement of Derrida and deconstruction in the field of private vocabularies, claiming that there is little direct utility for that philosophy in the public-political conversations.

Even though Rorty reads Derrida as sharing "Dewey's utopian hopes", he does not see Derrida's "work as contributing, in any clear or direct way, to the realization of these hopes" (16). He does see it as aiding with an individual's self-realization or, in other words, with the construction of their private vocabulary. The ensuing conversation revolves around the use and definition of vocabularies, which prompts this useful description by Rorty:

> I do not see how to 'theorize' the nature of the partition between the private and the public, except to say that by 'the private' I mean the part of life in which we carry our duties to ourselves, and do not worry about the effects of our actions to others. By the public I mean the part in which we do worry about such effects. (74)

This definition is clear enough for the concepts to be useful for my reading. However, Rorty is pressed for a more precise definition, yet one too close to a metaphysical or absolute reasoning, as if the concepts are read as transcendental in order to criticize them. Consider Chantal Mouffe's description of how Rorty insists "on the need to keep completely apart the private and the public realms and by envisaging politics solely in terms of pragmatic, short-term compromises" (3). It's true that Rorty sees politics as "a matter of pragmatic, short-term reforms and compromises" (17), yet this definition drains Rorty's pragmatism of its contingency, its praise of imagination, and its future-orientation by placing it in unmovable terms (eg. "completely apart"). The other philosophers repeat the same error.

Simon Critchley makes the valid observation that "Rorty's definition of liberalism is ethico/political and pays no attention to the *economic* liberalism" (23). It's true that Rorty does not discuss economics in his theory, yet I don't think he saw it as his role as a philosopher to do so. Consider his description of Marx as an example of this separation of roles: "I think that it was a misfortune for the left that Marx, a brilliant political economist, happened to have taken a degree in philosophy when he was young" (75). I believe that Critchley's critique is the result of a habit of asking philosophers for an epistemological system that surveys and judges *all* human endeavours. This doesn't mean that American Pragmatism rejects economic theory; such theories and discussions on economy in general could easily be placed in the realm of public vocabularies. However, such theories are probably a job for an economist, not a philosopher. Critchley's error is reading the contingency and openness of Rorty's concepts and vocabularies

as imprecisions, and his demands are ultimately metaphysical ones.[30] Further evidence of this are Critchley's doubts on someone being a (private) ironist and a (public) liberal at the same time: "After having given no compelling reasons as to why a liberal should also be an ironist, Rorty goes on to claim, 'There is no reason the ironist cannot be a liberal'" (25). Critchley wants what Rorty cannot give: a metaphysical reason, an ahistorical and neutral argument. This is seen in his conclusion that an ironist "cannot display the same degree of social hope as the liberal metaphysician. But isn't this just to suggest that the liberal ironist is regressive, sedentary, and hopeless" (25). Critchley demands permanent definitions from Rorty. A metaphysician can show a higher degree of hope because there is a supposed assurance in their beliefs: the end of time, the arrival at utopia, eternal heaven. Pragmatism cannot offer such assurances, however, this does not mean it is a hopeless or nihilistic project. This dissertation shows (specifically in the fourth chapter) that hope permeates Rorty's pragmatism, since hope drives the effort to create a better future when no eternal assurances can be given.

Ernesto Laclau makes valid observations while also falling into a similar error to Critchley. His useful definition of Rortyan irony notes that it alludes "to an absence of foundation which creates a gap or distance between strong belief and rational underpinning of that belief" (64). However, Laclau also feels the word irony suggests "offhandish detachment." This critique is then expanded to the concept of vocabularies, claiming that Rorty is "never entirely clear about the theoretical status of the basic distinctions which govern its categories." (64) Rorty replies that the term irony might not be "a suitable description of moral courage" but by that point in his career he was simply "stuck with it" (74). With regards to the critique of vocabularies, Rorty responds he is "unclear about the utility of the notion of 'theoretical status'" and there is no fixed separation of private and public vocabularies since he "wasn't interested in *stabilizing* anything" (74). The separation I make between texts by Wallace that have either a private or a public function does not mean that this is the only use that can be given to them. This follows Rorty's use of theory, where "as a good pragmatist, I think that theories are like tools: you only reach for them when there is a specific problem to be solved. There is no criterion of inadequacy of theorization apart from the specification or such a problem" (74). With this

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[30] For example, when Critchley states that "by restricting irony and ironists to the private sphere, Rorty might be said to refuse the possibility of a critique of liberal society that would use the strategy of public irony to uncover the violence of liberalism" (24) it is really only himself who is making this strict relegation of irony as a rhetorical device to a specific sphere of discourse. When he asks "is [Rorty] not in fact attempting to base moral obligation and political practice upon a recognition of the other's suffering?" (26) The answer is no, since Rorty never talks about obligations. Also, Critchley's question is somewhat unclear in the sense that he does not clarify if, for him, the 'moral obligation' he talks about is to notice the suffering of others or to act upon it.

simile in mind, I'll present a final point by Laclau. He sees a "danger" in Rorty's pragmatism of "parochialism - its reduction to only those strategic moves that are possible within the discursive universe of American liberalism" (67). The concern over said parochialism is valid, even for this thesis, since it revolves around two thinkers from the U.S.[31] However, maintaining Rortyan irony should be enough to minimize it; anything more could fall into a demand for a 'neutral' theory. Rorty however understands this as part of the limits of his vocabulary: "Perhaps the best Laclau and I can do is keep on reminding each other of the dangers of these two[32] forms of parochialism" (75). The non-metaphysical antidote to said parochialism is a continuous conversation.

It's worth reiterating that this dissertation doesn't aim to prove Rorty's influence on Wallace, nor to decipher Wallace's intentions. I certainly have and will continue to make use of biographical information about Wallace's engagement with Pragmatism, but these are critical footholds that clarify and promote my reading of his texts. They serve the goal of opening Wallace's work to Rorty's brand of American Pragmatism and add to the qualities that readers consider characteristic of Wallace's writings: texts that try to participate in the life of the muddy trench. I am also not suggesting or implying that this kind of reading can only be Rortyan. A less philosophical and more biographical approach is possible by studying Wallace's widely-acknowledged interest in Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* and Joseph Campbell's *Myths to Live By*:[33] the former studies art as something that exists beyond a market economy; the latter, the common role of myth in all cultures. Both texts find a unifying quality in literature for a society and the individual, and in this broad sense they parallel Rorty. All three thinkers consider the positive effects of literature on civilization without engaging with aesthetics; if a poem rhymes or not, if a novel is in first- or third-person is ultimately unimportant to their readings; their ultimate measure is the effect the text has on the reader. Both Hyde and Campbell's theories are, however, limited by their use of absolute concepts and essences (this a Rortyan critique) since

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[31] It's worth specifying that the concern is valid in the sense that one should always be on the lookout for possible parochialism during public dialogues (i.e. within a country or between countries, institutions, communities, etc.). The point being that a statement cannot be made free of historical or cultural circumstances. I'll make this point with regards to Wallace's oeuvre, specifically in the chapters on *Signifying Rappers* and *The Pale King*, interpreting the fact that Wallace so often wrote from the purview of middle class white Americans not as insularity but as a recognition of the limits of his vocabulary and always aware of the threat of said parochialism.

[32] French parochialism being the other one.

[33] Jeffrey Severs saw Wallace's copy of *The Gift* at the archive in Austin, Texas and tells us that "annotations in many different pens suggesting multiple readings of *The Gift* (common in Wallace's beloved books)." (122) He also notes that next to a blurb in his edition of *Myths to Live By* Wallace write "This is my pt," (2017: 265) which I assume means 'personal truth.' Both books are in the Wallace Archive of The Ransom Center.

their concepts of Gift and Myth, respectively, act as eternal constants in human culture. The field of Wallace's studies would benefit from further investigation of the influence of both texts on Wallace, however, for my aims, they would only serve to validate Wallace's literature. In other words, the end point of Hyde's and Campbell's concepts of Gift and Myth is to show that stories have a specific positive use in civilization, and the conclusion of a reading of Wallace with those concepts is to prove that his literature functions as Gift and/or Myth, so that it fulfils the set requirements. How is this different from stating that it's read as a Rortyan anti-essentialist literature? As mentioned in the opening paragraph, I'm interested in a redescription of Wallace, one that ultimately gives his oeuvre a broader theoretical utility. Therefore, a more robust understanding of Wallace should be the result of opening and exposing a democratic element in his work that has been either ignored or underdeveloped. That being said, contingency is an integral part of Rorty's theory and therefore part of my reading as well: I don't hold that Rortyan theory is the only theory that can elucidate said aspect of Wallace, simply that it's the most useful one I found for my aims. In this sense, I hope that the aspects of Wallace's work that I'll present through the course of this thesis become part of the greater conversation on his oeuvre. I also believe that it is with Rortyan philosophy, and not the approaches listed above, that Wallace's writing can be linked to and integrated into various social and political debates. If, over time, the role of Rorty's Pragmatism, like Wittgenstein's ladder, is cast aside, it would have still proven its usefulness.

It's now worth mentioning that although I use the term democracy throughout the dissertation, I never address its nuances as a political system. Neither Wallace nor Rorty do so either. An attempt to extract a precise democratic structure from their writings would miss the point. Rorty often addressed this intent: "Asking for pragmatism's blueprint of the future is like asking Whitman to sketch what lies at the end of that illimitable democratic vista. The vista, not the endpoint, matters" (*PSH* 28). Following that description, this dissertation offers an understanding of Wallace's vista.

The majority of Wallace's approaches to politics are tangential. In his fiction he often imagined hyperbolical futures (looking forward to the 1990s from 1987's *Broom*, or to 2009 from 1996's *Infinite Jest*), taking an element from his present to its ultimate conclusion to highlight an inherent symptom.[34] In various essays he addressed politics through the ethics and morals of topics such as linguistics, entertainment, and lobster festivals. In 2000 Wallace wrote

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[34] An example of this could be the fictional movie 'Infinite Jest' which is so addictive people watch it until they die. This could be read as an extreme sign of the United States' addiction to entertainment.

"Up, Simba", a long essay on the campaign of the then Republican presidential candidate John McCain. This could seem to be his most political text, and yet even with a clear political topic Wallace's peripheral style,[35] as exemplified above with his article on Lynch, is present: in "Up, Simba" Wallace pays a great deal of attention to the people working 'behind the scenes' of the campaign trail and to all the media surrounding the campaign.[36] However, to introduce the political in Wallace I will intead briefly analyze "Deciderization 2007", the introduction he wrote for the 2007 edition of *The Best American Essays*, from the *The Best American Series* collection, which he co-edited. Although this essay—one of the last texts Wallace wrote—does not have an extensive discussion of politics, it's concise in a way that sums-up Wallace's political interests at the end of his career. Essays like "Up, Simba" are less useful for my reading since Wallace wrote them before 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, two events that affected his politics. So "Deciderization 2007" is an amplification of "Up, Simba", not in the word-count but in its conceptual aspect.

Wallace uses his characteristic non-fiction voice in "Deciderization 2007", a mix of sincerity, clarity, metatextuality, and a bit of self-deprecation to both welcome and disarm the reader. He explains his role as guest-editor and his biases for selecting essays, opening up a discussion on the triages of freedom, even though, at first, there's a potential irony in his statements where the promises of American democracy are empty statements: "the reader has more freedom of choice, which is of course what America is all about" (299). The sentence ends with the same phrase that ends the chorus of the "Hokey Pokey," which might not suggest seriousness. However, as we read on it's apparent that there is no cynical or demeaning irony in the text. Wallace also repeats certain phrases or words throughout the text, and when we consider Wallace's vast lexicon and mastery of form this is more than a stylistic tic.

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[35] In the essay's opening "<u>OPTIONAL FOREWORD</u>" (*CL* 156) Wallace state's that the essay isn't "so much" about "the campaign of one impressive guy, but rather what McCain's candidacy and the brief weird excitement it generated might reveal about how millennial politics and all its packaging and marketing and strategy and media and spin and general sepsis actually makes us US voters feel, inside, and whether anyone running for anything can even be 'real' anymore - whether what we actually want is something real or something else." (*CL* 159)

[36] As a part of analyzing the role and importance of public media and advertising in political campaigns, Wallace includes in the essay a 'GLOSSARY OF RELEVANT CAMPAIGN TRAIL VOCAB, MOSTLY COURTESY OF JIM C. AND THE NETWORK NEWS TECHS' (cf. *CL* 167-70) The term 'VOCAB', of course, sounds very Rortyan, and its intention is, too. Appearing at the start of the essay, the glossary helps bridge the unique event that is a presidential campaign in the U.S., creating its own industry and cultural significance every time they come around. The relevant words from the 'VOCAB' not only brings the reader 'closer' to the event, it indicates what is spoken of the most: what has the most relevance in conversations during the campaign trail.

Over the length of 19 paperback-pages he uses the phrase "U.S. culture right now" three times in the first half of the text. This repetition contextualises Wallace's aesthetic and political criteria for the reader, as well as freeing them from metaphysical or atemporal uses. To continue the Rortyan concepts, Wallace presents a contingent definition of and approach to his country's culture, highlighting the circumstances that led to his country's present. The term "Total Noise" appears 4 times in the essay to name a condition of "U.S. culture right now"; "a culture and volume of info and spin and rhetoric and context that I know I'm not alone in finding too much to even absorb" (*BF* 301). It also serves to describe the setting where the selected essays come from and what they face, and which Wallace addresses and responds to at the end of the essay. His concern for the "overall roar of info and context" results in the search, study, and creation of "models and guides for how large or complex sets of facts can be sifted, culled, and arranged in meaningful ways" (312). The movement from the 'roar' to the 'arranged' is also present in the structure of the essay, which works like a paced confession. This appears in the essay's title, which is a reference to a 2006 remark by president George W. Bush in a press conference: "I'm the decider."[37] It's a comic choice that, again, eases the reader into certain topics. The Bush administration and invasion of Iraq haunt the start of the essay and we may get the impression that although referenced they will never be directly named. For example, Bush is not named when Wallace mentions the 'Decider' term for the first time (cf. 303).

Wallace's references become more overt and direct in the last pages of the essay, declaring that: "we are in a state of three-alarm emergency---'we' basically meaning America as a polity and culture" (*BF* 313). This emergency is obviously tied to specific historical and temporal circumstances that Wallace addresses directly. The reelection of Bush in 2004 impacted his criterion as editor, admitting he "would have selected more memoirs or descriptive pieces on ferns and geese" if it wasn't because said reelection "rendered me, as part of the U.S. electorate, historically complicit in his administration's policies and conduct" (313). Wallace then refers to the invasion of Iraq as an event that involves too much information, too much 'Total Noise,' for one citizen to absorb and sort through. It is this pertinent sorting that Wallace believes most of the selected essays do, therefore referring to those texts as "the service essay, with 'service' here referring to both professionalism and virtue" (315). In other words, the essays he selected try to aid the civic life of a democratic citizen. They are also "pieces that

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[37] http://edition.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/04/18/rumsfeld/

undercut reflexive dogma" and counter the citizen's temptation to "retreat to narrow arrogance" (316) when the 'Total Noise' becomes unbearable and ineluctable.

This kind of thinking, I will argue, is the result of a meditation on ethics and civics that Wallace held throughout his literary career. His concept of the 'service essay' applies also to Wallace's writing. It's fair to claim that Wallace admired the 'models and guides' he found in some of the essays he collected because he had similar goals for his writing. In this sense, when I call Wallace's writing democratic, I'm not solely referring to a prevalent theme in his work or an intellectual interest; instead, it's a belief that influences the content, form, and purpose of his literature. This dissertation will show that Wallace's literature does more than discuss democratic ideas. An understanding of his redescriptions, an engagement with the narratives and definitions he presents, is potentially accessible to all citizens of a democracy. This, however, does not mean simple texts or mere entertainments, on the contrary: the complexities of each text have a civic and ethical intent. Similar to his criterion as 'decider', Wallace's literature has the capacity to help the reader escape the 'Total Noise' of 'U.S. culture right now' through more than an argumentative or emotional appeal to the reader. In "Deciderization 2007", Wallace adds that in the selected essays he found "not templates, but models" (*BF* 317) for how to live and think in our world. Through Rorty's philosophy, this dissertation shows the civic models of Wallace's literature and their relation to either of the aforementioned public and private vocabularies. The conflation of these elements allows us to consider the texts themselves as objects of democratic participation. In other words, Wallace's texts are potential active participants in a democratic community. Rorty's hope, following Dewey, is for a culture that "is no longer dominated by the ideal of objective cognition but by that of aesthetic enhancement" (*PMN* 13). This dissertation proves how Wallace's literature can act like a democratic agent that supplements or increases civic beliefs. I read 'aesthetic enhancement' as the expansion of a public vocabulary through the Pragmatist capacity of fiction.

In Thomas Tracey's 'The Formative Years: David Foster Wallace's Philosophical Influences and *The Broom of the System*,' Tracey effectively studies the influence of American Pragmatism on Wallace. Tracey differs from my approach by making biographical information a core part of his argument. He also incorporates different American Pragmatists such as Dewey, Pierce, and James and, as the title indicates, Tracey focuses on *The Broom of the System*, a novel that receives little to no attention in this thesis. However, the key difference between our texts is his aim to "demonstrate a number of important points to enrich our understanding of the uses to which David Foster Wallace puts philosophy in the service of his fiction" (157). My reading,

on the other hand, uses philosophy to enrich our understanding of Wallace. The slight difference lies in that my main objective is to elucidate the democratic quality of Wallace's writing, which shows the use of philosophy to this end being secondary. Nonetheless, I will present some of the salient results of Tracey's research as a sort of conclusion that cements the field of Wallace and American Pragmatism.

Tracey shows a connection to Pragmatism "via Wallace's upbringing and intellectual association with his philosopher-father, James Donald, whose own ethical philosophy was firmly rooted within a vibrant American Pragmatist tradition" (175). The books that James D. Wallace published during Wallace's lifetime, draw "deeply on American Pragmatism, especially on the work of John Dewey." It's highly likely that Wallace read all of his father's publications, and we have evidence that he read[38] *Moral Relevance and Moral Conflict* (1988). This is pertinent to my project because, as mentioned, John Dewey is one of Rorty's main influences. This description of Dewey as intermediary between Rorty and Wallace Senior, and consequently his son, is grounded later in the essay when Tracey states that Rorty's historicized view of moral consciousness[39] is a "tenet" that is "much-emphasized in the work of James Donald Wallace" (168). Tracey extends the biographical information to prove that "there has always been a connection between Amherst Philosophy and American Pragmatist thought." He lists a seminar on Pragmatism that both Wallace senior and son could have attended while in Amherst. In his analysis of *Broom of the System*, Tracey reads parts of the novel through Rortyan philosophy, specifically that of the aforementioned *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. One of the results of his approach is the following: "Implicit here is the claim that the social function of fiction in a secular world is that of moral guidance and spiritual nourishment" (168). As with Tracey's study, this dissertation also works to 'uncover' said 'substratum' and that it's motivated by a belief in the 'social function of fiction in a secular world.' In analyzing *Broom of the System*, he asks the Rortyan question, "What purpose does this book serve?" concluding that:

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[38] To be precise, in the book's preface, after stating "I have benefited considerably from the comments and criticisms of students, colleges, and others" a list of names appears, in which David Foster Wallace's name is the second to last place. The list is then concluded with "all helped. I am indebted to them and others too." (1988, ix) David's name does not appear in his father's next publication, *Ethical Norms, Particular Cases*. Since it came out in 1996, it's fair to guess that David was too busy editing *Infinite Jest* to also read the proofs of his father's book.

[39] Tracey quotes *Irony, Contingency, and Solidarity* to exemplify Rorty's understanding of moral consciousness "as historically conditioned, a product as much of time and chance as of political or aesthetic consciousness." (168 [*ICS 30*])

A definite answer, set in stone, would be contrary to the spirit of the novel's own Pragmatist sensibilities, which favor re-description over a monolithic final vocabulary. The question will extend in complexity and implication when examining whether and to what extent Wallace's work employs irony in any straightforward or uncritical way--not to mention what useful artistic and social purpose he may thereby imply contemporary fiction ought to serve. (172)

I quote the entire paragraph because it could be read as a brief introduction to this thesis. I also 'examine' the 'extent' of the 'useful artistic and social purpose' of Wallace's literature. The only difference is that I don't look much at irony, which has enough attention to consider it an entire branch of Wallace's studies. In Adam Kelly's 'David Foster Wallace: the Critical Reception' (2015), he argues that the first wave of Wallace criticism was greatly shaped by the author's "challenge to prevailing artistic assumptions," one of these being "the role of irony." (47). By 2009, when the "second wave of Wallace scholarship" reached its "crest," (49) the organizers for one of the first academic conferences on Wallace stated that they hoped to leave behind "the author's own articulation of his project as a response to irony" (50). This is an interest shared with the "third wave of scholarship" however, in the move between the two "one debate that has remained vital in Wallace's critical reception relates to how irony and sincerity should be understood to function in his fiction" (52). In other words, irony has been a constant topic of interest in Wallace studies. It might however sound incorrect to say state that I don't need to engage with this 'branch' when I in fact do mention irony in my arguments. Yet, when I do so, it is used purely as a Rortyan term, whereas Tracey oscillates between Wallace's and Rorty's usage of the term. It's worth repeating, for clarity, Rorty's definition of the term, quoted in page 19 of this introduction, as a "description of moral courage."

One of the few other scholarly arguments to make a connection between Rorty and Wallace comes in one of the most recent and prominent publications in Wallace scholarship, Marshall Boswell's *The Wallace Effect, David Foster Wallace and the Contemporary Literary Imagination*[40] (2019). Boswell maps the influence of Wallace in American literature and he brings in Rorty to analyze Richard Powers's *Prisoner's Dilemma*. He connects these three thinkers by first stating that "[i]n both Wallace and Powers, the claims of poststructuralism are both honored and overcome via a pragmatic affirmation of usefulness within a larger suspicion of metaphysical certainty." (38) Boswell believes that Powers's contribution to this response has been somewhat eclipsed by Wallace's popularity, and he uses Rorty, whose "work dovetails

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[40] This book is the academic sequel to Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace*, the first book in the David Foster Wallace Studies series. I'll make extensive use of *Global Wallace* in the first chapter of my dissertation.

with that of" Powers (41), to give "Powers his due in this regard" since "Powers sounded this call in 1988, whereas Wallace finally clarified his own set of ideas five years later, in 1993" (38). Although Boswell focuses on reading *Prisoner's Dilemma* through Rorty, one of the goals of his interpretation is to demonstrate that "Power's own take on the problem both antedates and amplifies Wallace's arguments" (38). Despite Boswell's astute recognition of Wallace's Rortyan approach to theory, however, I won't make further use of this text in the dissertation since in the quoted chapter on Powers and throughout that book his interest lies in the way other writers predated or paralleled aspects of Wallace's work. There is not much else to quote or dialogue with regarding Boswell's observations of the connection between Wallace and Rorty.

The academic that's done the most extensive reading of Wallace via Rorty, however, must be Clare Hayes-Brady in her 2016 book *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*. Hinging on the eponym connection of "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature", Hayes-Brady's approach is similar to Tracey's in that she interprets in Wallace a direct response to Rorty. Also similar to Tracey, Hayes-Brady focuses on a reading of *The Broom of the System*. I believe this repetition is the result of the critical practicality dialogue formed by Wallace, Wittgenstein, and Rorty. Since Wallace read both thinkers, Rorty read Wittgenstein, and *Broom* constantly interacts with Wittgenstein, the connections between thinkers and texts seem to beg an intricate reading.

Hayes-Brady studies the concept of failure in Wallace's oeuvre "occurring in three modes: abject, structural, and generative" (4). In chapter four of her book, after a close reading of the characters and dialogues in *Broom*, she states that in the novel "Wallace both propounds and undermines the outcome of Rorty's dogma of pragmatism" (85). Hayes-Brady's argumentation for this statement seems somewhat unclear, since she does not make a critical differentiation between private and public vocabularies. She picks a passage from *Broom* as an example of Wallace 'propounding' and 'undermining' Rorty's concept of vocabularies, discussing both the possibilities of communication and also ethical and moral issues. I will show (both here and throughout the dissertation) that not only is Rorty aware of these issues, they are clearly at the center of his project. Here is Hayes-Brady's example of Wallace 'undermining' Rorty:

> If LaVache understands his fathers intention when he asks whether his son has a phone, and replies in the negative [LaVache calls it a 'lymph node'], which negative holds true in his private vocabulary, but not, as he is aware, in the social vocabulary his father is speaking, is he not intentionally deceiving his father? (83)

I believe that one does not need Rorty to consider that LaVache may be acting in bad faith, that it's all a pompous ruse to avoid speaking to his father. Access to a supposed final vocabulary does not mean that lying disappears, only that we could *always* judge with certainty if a statement is true or false. So, if LaVache's father gained access to the metavocabulary of existence, it would only serve him, in this situation, to know if his son is lying to him or not. Yet the scene can be easily explained by 'Rorty's dogma of pragmatism' without it being 'undermined'.

Considering the aforementioned prominence given to Derrida in *Broom*, it seems fitting to look at the use of Derrida in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* to explain private vocabularies and their place in Rorty's pragmatism. I think that Hayes-Brady is right in seeing the clash between father and son as an issue between private and public vocabularies (I'm not entirely sure why she uses the word 'social' but it works nonetheless). Rorty makes an example of the creative and constructive use of private vocabularies by presenting Derrida's unwillingness to engage directly with John Searle in a discussion about the work of J.L. Austin. Searle's critiques of and questions about Derrida's take on Austin were made in the vocabulary of analytic philosophy and could only be addressed within it: "Derrida systematically evaded this dilemma" (*CIS* 132). Rorty defends Derrida's response (as well as Derrida's texts written with a similar intention)[41] as a great creative, innovative, and critical private vocabulary to a philosophical tradition:

> I take it that Derrida does not want to make a single move within the language game which distinguishes between fantasy and argument, philosophy and literature, serious writing and playful writing - the language game of *la grande époque*. He is not going to play by the rules of somebody else's final vocabulary. (*CIS* 133)

This could be LaVache's stance and motivation for establishing and maintaining a private vocabulary of his own creation, even if the clash is familial instead of philosophical. However, the father/son connection in *Broom* only strengthens this reading, since Rorty, following Derrida's words, plays with the terms of a philosophical genealogy by giving the dispute parental terms:

> [Derrida] refuses not because he is "irrational," or "lost in fantasy," or too dumb to understand what Austin and Searle are up to but because he is trying to create himself

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[41] Rorty makes a distinction between the early and the late Derrida, stating that the first "was initially tempted by the transcendental project" (*CIS* 125) while the later Derrida is free from it: "Instead of pairing down, the later Derrida proliferates." (*CIS* 126, although the description is made from 122 to 126) It is the later Derrida that 'responds' to Searle.

> by creating his own language game, trying to avoid bearing another child by Socrates, being another footnote to Plato. (*CIS* 133)

In this sense, LaVache's stance could be seen as a refusal to be defined by someone else's vocabulary, be it his father's or that of an institution or tradition. As stated before, the interpretation can ultimately be based on whether the reader sees LaVache as, quickly put, a good character or a bad one in the moral sense, as an aid or a deterrent to his sister, the protagonist. Yet even if we read LaVache as acting in bad faith, it does not "undermine" Rorty's theory since we can read LaVache the same way that Rorty reads *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert: a character whose "private obsessions" make them "oblivious to the pain and humiliation [they] are causing" (*CIS* 141). I develop such a reading in the first and second chapter of this dissertation, where I also explain in detail how 'obsessed' and 'oblivious' characters relate to the concept of vocabularies and Rorty's theory as a whole. What is pertinent to this specific reading is that Rorty defends and propounds vocabularies, be it public or private, that show an "effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel" (*CIS* xiv). I believe this gives us clear Rortyan approaches to LaVache's vocabulary, be it with LaVache maintaining a sort of autonomy of vocabularies or as a Navokobian example of someone indifferent to the pain of others. Rorty's defense of vocabularies that aim for what is 'more just and less cruel' also refutes Hayes-Brady's critique of vocabularies: "Rorty allowed for no hierarchy of vocabularies, and as such, instead of rendering communication clearer in its contingency, he complicates it further by allowing it to be further malleable" (83). It's true that Rorty cannot offer a *neutral* (i.e. epistemological, metaphysical, eternal, absolute, etc.) reason to prefer one vocabulary over another but this does not mean he doesn't have a preference. The hope of most of his publications is not so much to prove he was right, rather it's to convince readers that if they adopt his way of understanding and using vocabularies a great deal of suffering might be avoided: "conversation replaces confrontation" (*PMN* 170). The separation of the private and the public is not a hierarchy based on epistemological or metaphysical evidence, but the argument and preference for a specific use of and approach to vocabularies is made by Rorty. Moreover, Rorty's call for future-oriented vocabularies that reduce human suffering and humiliation and move humanity towards a utopia can at least be considered a standard for adopting and constructing vocabularies (cf. *CIS* 189-98). The following quote from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* connects the approach to propositions with a wider ethical context:

> Shall we take "S knows that p" (or "S knows noninferentially that p," or "S believes incorrigibly that p," or "S's knowledge that p is certain") as a remark about the status of

S's reports among his peers, or shall we take it as a remark about the relation between subject and object, between nature and its mirror? The first alternative leads to a pragmatic view of truth and a therapeutic approach to ontology (in which philosophers can straighten out pointless quarrels between common sense and science, but not contribute any arguments of its own for the existence or inexistence of something.)[42] (175)

I find Rorty's prose to be clear and easy to follow considering the density of his topic and arguments. The problem with his argument and beliefs seems to be that he can't give a metaphysical or epistemological justification of his criterion but, of course, that's the whole point.[43] I argue that Hayes-Brady and other critics[44] who apply Rorty's theory to Wallace's texts get too hung up on Rorty's dismissal of Truth when this is only the starting point of his philosophical project. This may be a result of constantly reading Rorty under the shadow of Wittgenstein, specifically the first Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, since it limits the reach of Rorty's philosophical project. An example of this is present in the following statement by Hayes-Brady: "For Rorty, the most important thing is to keep the conversation going" (85). This statement isn't wrong but it doesn't tell us *why* and *how* the conversation should continue, which I consider to be the driving force of Rorty's project. By not including his concepts of hope and utopia in an exposition of his work, Rorty's philosophy appears to be a sort of postmodern nihilism. It's also curious that for a philosopher who wrote so much on literature and who gave fiction an edifying social and individual role above philosophy,[45] (does that count as hierarchical?) that his Wallacian literary readers focus on his anti-epistemological statements. (Again, these readers appear in Chapter one.)

This partial presentation of Rorty's philosophical project also appears in the first paragraph of page 84 of *Unspeakable Failures*, where part of the "inescapable problems" of the construction of language is "the nature of truth as a property of statements, not of facts." A phrase that can be considered a starting point for analytic philosophy and that could be attributed

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[42] It's worth noting, again, that Rorty is not presenting this view as his original work but as the sum of both Sellars and Quine.
[43] "There is no *neutral*, noncircular way to defend the liberal's claim that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (*CIS* 197).
[44] Apart from Clare Hayes-Brady, the clearest examples are Greg Carlisle in *Nature's Nightmare*; Paul Giles in 'All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature'. I will engage both text in the next chapter.
[45] This is why the presence of novelists and poets seems to equal or outnumber the presence of philosophers in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Consider that the only philosopher to get a chapter dedicated to their work is Derrida (Chapter 6), while Nabokov and Orwell each get their own (Chapters 7 and 8, respectively).

to an early Bertrand Russell.[46] The paragraph ends with a quote[47] by Rorty on truths being human constructions, the import of which Hayes-Brady summarizes clearly: "He argues further that language is made, not discovered, and as such, truth is a creation, not an extrinsic reality" (84). This is, however, hardly an original tenet of Rorty's philosophy. If we go to the quote's source (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*) we'll find that before the quoted statement Rorty lets us know he is being "thoroughly Wittgensteinian" in his "approach to language" (21). Rorty often presents the sum of various philosophical arguments to justify and present the starting point of his work, this is the structure of both *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. This is why the quote appears at the end of the book's first chapter, 'The Contingency of Language' (*CIS* 3-22). The attribution of said statements as Rorty's original work could be taken as proof of a symptom of literary critics, including myself, who are usually well-versed in Continental philosophy but often lost when it comes to its Analytic counterpart.

A similar connection is again made in *Unspeakable Failures* to show that, with vocabularies, Rorty advances "Wittgenstein's language games" by proposing "a paradigm he calls 'epistemological behaviorism,' which explains 'rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, instead of the latter by reference to the former'" (85 [PMN 173]). Rorty presents epistemological behaviorism in the second section (173-82) of the fourth chapter in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, which "is concerned with epistemology and with recent attempts to find 'successor subjects' to epistemology" (10). In it, Rorty presents a genealogy or history of the belief that established the concept of the human mind mirroring reality (i.e. metaphysics, epistemology) and the quest for Truth, followed by the subsequent arguments that argue the impossibility of eternal certainty. In Chapter four, Rorty 'confines' himself to "discussing two radical ways of criticizing the Kantian foundations of analytic philosophy" through the philosophy Sellars and Quine. So epistemological behaviourism is the name Rorty makes to refer to both Sellars' and Quine's critique of Russell's analytical project to find Kantian-like apodicts. (Rorty calls this the search for "privileged representations" [*PMN* 170]).

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[46] Compare to Russell's "[A]ll sound philosophy should begin with an analysis of propositions" (8) from *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (1900). Leonard Linsky's article 'Terms and Propositions in Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*' (1988) is a good source for understanding how this sentence leads to a "belief in the supreme importance of logic as an instrument for philosophical progress" (621) that informs Russell's philosophical project.

[47] "[S]ince truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence on vocabularies and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths" (p84 in Hayes-Brady's book and p21 in *CIS*).

Rorty indeed uses the term 'epistemological behaviourism', and we can consider it a key part of his philosophical project, but more as proof of the influence of Sellars and Quine than as Rorty's original creation: "Chapter four is the central chapter of the book--the one in which the ideas which led to its being written are presented. These ideas are those of Sellars and Quine" (*PMN* 10). To be clear, there's no error in attributing the term to Rorty but it seems misleading or inaccurate to present it as a Rortyan 'paradigm' when it refers to the work of others. It's clear that the philosophy of Sellars and Quine is a critical point between Wittgenstein and Rorty, and for his distance from the analytic project. Yet my objection is not spurred by a disagreement over the history of philosophy; rather, it's about establishing a concise and accurate exposition of Rorty's philosophy. As suggested above, it's possible that readings like Hayes-Brady's suffer from the self-imposed limits of only trying to prove Rorty's influence on Wallace and on suggesting when Wallace responds to the philosopher. In this sense, the eponym connection between both writers is not only an irrefutable signpost, but also a pitfall that reduces Rortyan theory to the negation of Truth.[48]

I'm in accordance with Hayes-Brady's description of a kind of communication in Wallace's literary project based on her approach via Wittgenstein and Rorty, one that aims "to create a narrative style that blurs the real/fictional divide by making the reader a co-producer of the text, in response to the text's copious narrative blanks" (139). This conclusion can stand in the same field as the reading of *The Pale King* I develop in Chapter four, where I argue that the posthumous novel promotes and engages the reader in democratic participation. I challenge descriptions such as "Rortian mistrust of received truth" (139) because they paint Rorty as a sort of postmodern nihilist. My qualm with Hayes-Brady isn't her reading of Wallace but what I consider to be an incomplete use of his Rorty's philosophy, and I refute descriptions of his work suggesting that the abandonment of metaphysics and epistemology imply a loss of morality, meaning, and communication. For some reason, the majority of critical readers that apply Rorty's theory to Wallace's texts (as mentioned in footnote 38, Hayes-Brady, Carlisle, Giles) seem to read the end of metaphysics and epistemology as a reason to mourn. Yet I've always read Rorty's work as one of constant good faith and hope. I therefore read his anti-foundationalism as a liberation instead of a catastrophe.

I'll conclude with a summary of the chapters in this dissertation. Chapter one is on the short story "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature", apart from the aforementioned eponym

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[48] I will refute more descriptions like these in my chapter on the short story "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature".

connection this story establishes between Wallace and Rorty, the relative obscurity of this story means I can closely interact with all the published close readings on it. I read the story through the concept of private vocabularies which contrasts with the anti-Truth focus of the other readings. The chapter also functions as a nuanced presentation of the concept of public vocabularies and makes use of Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace* to present the sources Wallace used to construct the story. Chapter two focuses on the discourse of two institutions in *Infinite Jest*: Enfield Tennis Academy and Ennet House. I again make use of the concept of private vocabularies to analyze the discourse of both institutions as they lead their members to an ultimate goal (professional tennis at Enfield and sobriety at Ennet). I try to make the case that Ennet's AA discourse is efficient because it maintains a pragmatist discourse of contingency, while Enfield's tries to make use of eternal and atemporal statements. The focus then shifts to the novel's protagonists, Don Gately and Hal Incandenza. Since they're closely tied to each institution, Don to Ennet and Hal to Enfield, I use their development, specially at the end of the novel, to exemplify and confirm my interpretation of said discourses.

Chapter three marks the shift from private to public vocabularies. I look at Wallace's early and ignored book *Signifying Rappers*, making use of archival resources on the editing of the book available at the New York Public Library. I first use these resources to justify not interacting with the sections written by the co-author of the book, Mark Costello. More importantly, I use the archive to show Wallace's awareness and intent of writing from one vocabulary to another; this is then linked to other critical work on rap music to exemplify the possibilities and capacities of communication between vocabularies. Chapter four is a kind of culmination of Rortyan theory in the dissertation and of my reading of Wallace. I present *The Pale King* as Wallace's successful attempt at creating a civic and democratic literature that is beyond propaganda and indoctrination. The novel represents civic acts and democratic conversations, more than that, the text itself can be seen as a civic and democratic agent participating in the democratic conversation of the United States. In this sense, the novel describes the civic capacities of literature in a democratic nation by engaging with its citizens on how they view themselves as members of said nation and on how they talk about and describe themselves as active agents within it.

Mirror Titles: Richard Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature and David Foster Wallace's 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.'

1. Introduction

In this chapter I wish to identify the existence and use of vocabularies in Wallace's work by reading his short story 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' through the philosophy of Richard Rorty. My overall critical approach to this story is to ask the concise Pragmatist question I ask all texts in this dissertation, and which Rorty poses in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: "What purposes does this book serve?" (*CIS* 142) This chapter will show this critically ignored short story can serve in the construction of private vocabularies, a theme that will continue onto the next chapter on *Infinite Jest*. I also consider the story's other literary influences and key academic work devoted to the story.

As mentioned in the introduction, a shared title is the clearest connection between the work of David Foster Wallace and that of Richard Rorty. The title in question is found in Wallace's 2004 short story collection *Oblivion*, which includes the text 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,' and in Rorty's 1979 publication *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. That Wallace took the title of Rorty's book for his own story is more than a casual allusion, it is both a specific reference and an invitation to establish a dialogue between the two texts.

This connection between philosophy and fiction is not unique in Wallace's work. His first novel, *The Broom of the System*, references and converses with the work of both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida. In the early essay "David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*", on a novel where a character inhabits the world described in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wallace shows an avid interest in 'testing out' philosophical theories in fiction. This chapter explores the possibility that 'Mirror' fictionalized (or 'tests') ideas presented in Rorty's homonymous text.

However, despite the title, the story is not overtly Rortyan and it is initially unclear how the narration engages with Rorty's Pragmatism. I believe this has led to 'Mirror' being ignored or given imprecise readings. I engage with these readings in detail later on in the chapter. For now, I will present some brief examples. The recent *Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (2018) has a chapter by David Herring on the collection *Oblivion* (cf. 97-110), yet the

only mention of 'Mirror' is the following: "[…] while in ['Mirror'] a mother and a son's lengthy ride inside a bus with a 'flesh-colored' interior prompts a series of reflections on failed litigation and personal, vengeful, unhappiness" (99). I believe these underdeveloped interpretations often result from an absence of philosophical signposting in the narration itself; the story lacks the kind of explicit philosophical play common in texts like *Broom of the System*. In this sense, the connection between both thinkers is often made but rarely expanded upon, with the subtleties of Rorty's philosophy ignored.

Critical readers of 'Mirror' often overlook the fact that the short story is a blend of three sources: apart from Rorty, Wallace makes use of the short story 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' (1965) by Flannery O'Connor, and of sections from the book *The Red Hourglass: Lives of the Predators* (1988) by Gordon Grice. Although my main interest is the story's relation to Rorty's theory, I will present the other two sources to construct a robust reading of the story.

'Mirror' is an 8-page, one-paragraph monologue in which the protagonist and narrator talks about his life while accompanying his mother on the bus. The mother has had two botched facial cosmetic surgeries, and because of it "her face was a *chronic mask of insane terror*" (*O* 182). They take the bus to visit the attorney carrying out the lawsuit against the mother's latest cosmetic surgeon. The narrator is a man of "imposing size" (189) who wears "goggles" and "specially constructed gloves" (183), and collects and breeds black widows in his home garage. He was incarcerated for negligence because a child fell through the roof of his garage, crashed on the widows' habitat, and died from their bites.

In my Rortyan reading, the narrator's obsessions are the root of his mother's sufferings yet he is unable to recognize this connection. This interpretation, which I'll develop throughout the chapter, is uncommon in Wallace studies, since most of them, as I'll show, focus more on what the protagonist describes, while the crux of my reading lies on what the character ignores and the manner in which he does it. The mother paid for her first botched operation with "a small product liability settlement" (*O* 182) from an insecticide company: "her original liability was that a worker at the assembly plant actually glued a can's nozzle on facing backward" (188). Some of the academic readings of this story acknowledge the 'liability settlement,' but none press the issue as to why she was spraying insecticide in the first place. I find that the narrator provides a clear answer: "Her fear of the phylum *arthropodae* is long-standing which is why she never ventured in the garage […] Ironically also hence her constant spraying of R - - d© despite my repeatedly advising her that these species are long-resistant to resmethrin and trans-d allethrin" (185) The mother is afraid of the spiders her son keeps and breeds so she constantly

uses insecticide in her home. She also tries to take the insecticide with her when she visits the attorney: "The phobia becomes so extreme she will carry a can in her bag of knitting until I always find it before leaving and say firmly, *No*" (186). This may sound like an exaggeration on her part, but two factors have to be taken into consideration, which the narrator will mention but not link. First, the mother is the narrator's "custodian" since he is on parole and so must be accompanied by her at all times, and he also protects her "throughout the long ride" (183) to the attorney's office. Protection is necessary for the extreme reactions other bus passengers have to her *chronic mask*. Second, the son carries a briefcase "at all times" (184) which is filled with black widows. This means that the mother is never far from the creatures she fears. Their relationship is both of codependence and of legal necessity. I will return to this later on.

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature is Rorty's philosophical starting point, where he sets the theoretical ground from which he constructs his later work. In it, he argues for dropping the search for an epistemological system that reveals absolute Truth. He states his case by diligently presenting and engaging with the various arguments and concepts of both continental and analytical philosophy regarding Truth justification and Mind-Body dualities. Despite the book's prodigious length, one gets the feeling that Rorty tries to be as succinct and clear as possible, and yet the only way to state his argument (or the way he was trained to do so, as he mentions) is to dismantle what he considers to be philosophical assumptions and 'givens.' He also creates a genealogy of the work that paved the way for his call to abandon epistemology (as mentioned in the Introduction) thus setting his book within a historical philosophical conversation.

As mentioned, Rorty calls for the abolishment of the dualities that come with metaphysical concepts (for example Truth and non-Truth), the theoretical problems they inspire, and their implied finality. This does not mean that shared beliefs or judgements cannot be established (i.e. lower case truth), rather that philosophy should no longer be concerned with creating great epistemological structures that determine what is Truth or Beauty or Just. We should therefore abandon "The notion that philosophy should provide a permanent matrix of categories into which every possible empirical discovery and cultural development can be fitted without strain." *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* argues against this "overambitious conception of philosophy" that "stem[s] from the same set of seventeenth-century images" (123-4). But Rorty does not dismantle the concept of Truth to proclaim that existence is devoid of meaning: "Our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interactions with nonhuman reality […] We shall be looking for an airtight case rather than

an unshakable foundation" (157). Wallace's short story exemplifies what happens when this 'conversation between persons' does not occur. The protagonist's 'case' is not airtight, neither the one that led to his parole nor the one full of Black Widows, yet we never see him in conversation with other people. In my reading, the protagonist is someone who considers their private vocabulary to be final, there is nothing beyond his grasp of comprehension. This absence of doubt is what stops him from understanding the suffering his obsession causes his mother. However, it's important for my reading to clarify that the narrator is comfortable in his situation. I do not read any urge in him to change his situation, to escape his existence, or his way of thinking. In other words, that his vocabulary is without metaphysical Truth does not result in an existential crisis. This interpretation already sets me at odds with other readings of the story, and I will present them along with further descriptions of my reading.

2. Critical Readings

Marshall Boswell looks at 'Mirror' in his essay '"The Constant Monologue Inside Your Head": *Oblivion* and the Nightmare of Consciousness.' Boswell's goal is to show that the stories in the book are united by more than joint publication. "To open the book at random is to encounter a visual analog for the state of consciousness Wallace depicts." He calls the short story collection a "sombre portrait of souls in isolation" and links the content of the collection to its form: "the entire volume appears on the page as a vast, unbroken wall of text" as if to represent the character's "hermetic isolation" (151). The connection between content and form is a strategy for the effect the narratives aim to create: "[e]ach story locates the reader in the protagonist's word-drunk interior and traps her there for the story's grueling duration" (152). 'Mirror' is no exception to the interior voice and to the shared style of the collection that abandons "narrative action in favor of dense description" (153). Nonetheless, I don't think that 'Mirror' fully fits into Boswell's reading of *Oblivion*. I'll begin with the observation that every protagonist is "at the mercy of their minds." Is this accurate for the narrator of 'Mirror'? Maybe not, unless we stretch the definition of that statement to include any character whose thoughts and voice are part of the narrative. The result of being under this 'mercy' is described by Wallace later on, in his speech *This is Water*, in a line that was excluded from its published version: "They shoot the terrible master" (152). Yet the narrator of 'Mirror' is not suicidal; he may be the only character who makes jokes in *Oblivion*. I don't find any textual evidence of him committing and considering self-harm or suicide, nor any sort of wish for his life to end. He indeed seems to be

beyond redemption, but can we say he yearns "for a release from the prison-house of interiority"? (165) I don't have evidence of this when I read the story, I instead understand the protagonist, who shows no empathy towards his mother or the dead child, as someone unwilling or unable to recognize the limits of their private vocabulary and to reassemble their public vocabulary. That is to say that 'Mirror' is such a dense story that, when approached with Rorty's Pragmatist questions, it reveals uses for both private and public vocabularies. I'll detail the connection between both uses later in the chapter. For now, I'll clarify the importance of my reading based on Rorty's theory. If morality is no longer a metaphysical dictum, then it is through constant conversation that we'll find a way to act that avoids or minimizes the suffering of others. Literature is critical to this conversation, and this is why Rorty praises "works of fiction which exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person." This describes the hinge of my reading, the detail that other readings ignore: not only is the protagonist indifferent to his mother's suffering, it was his 'blindness' that caused his mother's woes. With this reading, we can catalogue the story amongst texts that "show how our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing" (*CIS* 141). I'll continue with this reading later on in the chapter, for now, I detailed this point to show why Boswell's conclusive reading of *Oblivion* clashes with my reading of 'Mirror,' and, indirectly, with the whole of my project. This can be seen in his description of *Oblivion* in the final pages of his essay:

> *Oblivion* even casts doubt on Wallace's long held belief that language can bridge the gulf between us, and that fiction 'can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain' so that 'we might then also more conceive of others identifying with our own,' [...] 'Good Old Neon,' best articulates *Oblivion*'s more pessimistic vision of language as solution to our loneliness. (166)

It's not in the scope of my project to argue against Boswell's well-constructed reading of *Oblivion* as a whole, yet his reading of how the stories fail to bridge individuals through language contradicts the Rortyan notion of vocabularies. 'Mirror' does present a pessimistic vision of a loneliness that includes a great gulf between characters. However, in the case of that story, I don't find anything to suggest that gulf will never be bridged and instead read the story as an invitation to the reader to bridge said gaps 'beyond the page.' My reading of the story hinges on this contingency, since the civic capacity of Wallace's literature functions with the bridging of vocabularies, be they public or private. Moreover, the 'pessimistic vision' invites a

kind of resignation regarding the suffering of others, whereas, in the Rortyan reading, the reader does not need to identify with the mother's pain, or her son's blindness to it, so much as recognize it and understand how it could be avoided.

Clare Hayes-Brady offers a similar interpretation of a troubled protagonist in the essay 'The Book, the Broom and the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of David Foster Wallace'. Focusing on her direct comments on Rorty's work and on 'Mirror', I'll begin by disagreeing with her nihilistic description of Rorty as someone who "rejected outright the possibility of any sort of truth" (33). This interpretation limits Rorty's philosophy to bleak relativism. It also affects the interpretation of the story, for example, we're told the protagonist is uncomfortable "within the shifting boundaries of language" (32), yet this is not supported by any evidence. The protagonist is consequently deemed unable to cope with constructed vocabularies: "Where the characters are unable to manipulate language skillfully, language betrays them" (32). Yet the essay does not clarify when or how language betrays the narrator. The text does not hide the constructed quality of the narrative voice, i.e. the protagonist's vocabulary. In my reading, the narrator is in mastery of and at ease with his language because it allows him to ignore the suffering he caused to others (I'll prove this in detail in the following section of this chapter). Like Boswell's reading, Hayes-Brady's reading may be better for describing the narrative voices of other stories in *Oblivion*.

The observation that "the narrators' lack of mastery of themselves and their vocabularies allows the subtle revelation of what they seek to hide" (32) is unclear to me. What is the narrator of 'Mirror' trying to hide? In my reading, the narrator protagonist masters his constructed vocabulary; through it he seems to supervise and control his peculiar environment. He is not actively trying to hide information that is then somehow accidentally revealed to the reader. What can be considered as concealed in the narration? Maybe the deadly spiders inside the suitcase. We could also include the botched cosmetic surgery: the 'chronic mask of intense terror,' conceals the mother's actual emotions. Yet both are openly described and discussed by the narrator. The same goes for the death of the child; he openly gives us the facts of the case.

What is revealed by the narration that is not said directly? The tense relationship between mother and son, that she lives in fear of the spiders he keeps in the house, their dependency on one another. His lack of empathy for the child who died from the bites of his spiders. Are these betrayals of language? I think it is more accurate to say that he is unable to empathize with the suffering of others. Rather than noticing how language betrays what the narrator wished to keep

hidden, in my Rortyian reading we, as readers, understand the use, limits, and morals of the narrator's vocabulary.

This description of the narrator as trapped in both his situation and his language, who longs for an escape or freedom but is unable to find it is also present in Greg Carlisle's reading of 'Mirror' in *Nature's Nightmare* (2015). His book studies *Oblivion* as a whole, devoting a chapter to each short story from the book. The overall reading of the collection is chronological, for Carlisle understands it as the crucial stepping stone between *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*.

The chapter on 'Mirror' provides a detailed account of the various "narrative threads" that the protagonist presents in a "seemingly random fashion" (91). However, I disagree with Carlisle's reading that the mother's insecticide poisoning and two botched surgeries were exaggerated, if not simulated, in order for her to make and win her lawsuits. Although Carlisle is right in noting the narrator's comments on the exaggerations his mother made to boost her case, the reading nullifies other claims the narrator makes. First is the comparison of legal counselors to "parasites," who on their TV ads urge "the viewer to wait patiently for the opportunity to attack" (*O* 186), which suggests the mother and son contacted this type of legal counsel after her poisoning and her surgeries. This carries on to the fact they take the bus to see a "Van Nuys negligence specialist" to handle the second lawsuit, which causes the complications that drive the narration. Doubting that the first surgery was botched, Carlisle asks: "And are we seriously to believe a second surgery was also botched?" I find it harder to believe that the mother maintains a fake face of fear every day during long bus rides and even at home, in company of her son, where he describes her as "[s]itting at home in dark glasses as ever" (*O* 186).

Carlisle's reading assumes that the narrator "aligns his perception of reality with [his mother's], and that perception may be suspect" (95). In my reading, the narrator's vocabulary denies this claim. His syntax is an amalgam of specialised discourse (the scientific and the legal) and pop-language (movies, ads, common phrases), overall, his vocabulary does not seem to be influenced by his mother; he only quotes her once: "Mother is blackly cynical in matters of the heart referring to the entire spectrum of mating rituals as a *disaster waiting to happen*" (189). The relationship between mother and son stands on dependance, fear, and animosity. The son's report does betray a kind of resignation on the part of the mother, and suggests that, in her case, the reason why it is just the two of them living in the house is because the *disaster* has already happened. Maybe a death? The adverb seems somewhat redundant for modifying 'cynical'. Maybe, since the protagonist is obsessed with black widows, he conveys the mother's personal

history through the spiders. As far as I can see, however, there is nothing else in the story that supports this reading. At the very least, the mother's phrase reads as ominous of her future plastic surgeries.

Carlisle ends his chapter (and he'll end the book in a similar manner) by stating that if the narrator wants to escape "the oblivion of solipsistic isolation" he must follow Chris Fogle's and Lane Dean Jr.'s example, from *The Pale King*, which involves "choosing what we pay attention to […] and by risking the disaster waiting to happen" (96). However, I am not convinced by the idea that the character wants to escape his 'isolation.' The narrator does not complain about his situation. He complains about his legal charges and punishment: "the misfortune of what happened […] did not justify hysterical or trumped-up charges of any kind" (*O* 186). He complains about his surroundings but not about his situation. The exception could be his observation that "Respecting mating I have been on dates but there was insufficient chemistry" (189), followed by the mother's *disaster* comment quoted above. His clearest complaint regards the specimens lost as a result of the child's deadly accident: "they are rare and both specimens escaped in his mishap and have not been reacquired" (187). Although Boswell's and Hayes-Brady's readings are more useful and professional than Carlisle's, none give clear textual examples of the protagonist's malcontent that goes beyond his inability to find a date and the loss of rare specimens due to the child's accident (and death). With this in mind, it makes more sense to say that the protagonist doubles down on or even seeks refuge in his vocabulary or that, in Rorty's words, he is unable to see the impact his "private idiosyncrasies" (*PMN* 141) have on others.

The last two readings I'll present don't clash with my reading like the previous three. Rather, they appear incomplete in comparison, even though their approach to the text has similarities to mine. Of the two, the clearest example of this is Paul Giles' essay 'All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature', since he presents Wallace as a writer immersed in the American tradition by tracing the influence of Transcendentalism and Pragmatism in his work. Giles' reading resonates with the whole of my dissertation because it places Wallace's work in constant dialogue with Pragmatism, with 'Mirror' as part of that dialogue, and also by marking him as a writer invested in the public conversation of his country: "[Wallace] was paradoxically committed as an author to the idea of his work as expressing the concerns of a public intellectual" (4). This commitment is paradoxical, for Giles, because he was not a great public figure yet his work had 'public' ambitions. This paradox can be extended to my claims that Wallace's often complex or esoteric style and form is also democratic, in his

production of texts from the 'muddy trench', as stated in the Introduction. In the case of 'Mirror', however, the difficulty lies in that we read from within the protagonist's vocabulary, with no help from a narrator or another character or even a clear plot. In a sense, we must read our way out of the protagonist's vocabulary and notice the suffering he ignores. There is a clear difficulty in this, at the same time, it seems like an effective way to lead the reader to consider what suffering their vocabulary might ignore, since they successfully did it as readers, and redescribe their vocabulary to avoid said ignorance. It's in this way that this dissertation presents Wallace's 'concerns of a public intellectual'.

Giles reads Wallace as a public American intellectual in the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau, one that spoke from a sort of pulpit: "My notion of Wallace as at some level a moralist and a pedagogue, a propensity that can be inferred from the concern with ethical issues that runs through his fiction and journalism, as well as the author's own intense capacity for self-interrogation about what it means to be an 'American' writer at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (6). Both the 'concern with ethical issues' and the 'capacity for self-interrogation' lead Wallace to interact with Rorty's role for literature in the creation and use of public and private vocabularies. With this in mind, the reading of 'Mirror' becomes more than a fictional-response or -refutation of Rorty's concepts and theory. Rather, it enacts the dangers of a vocabulary gone awry. Wallace is a moralist by repeating the Rortyian warning of not recognizing the suffering of others, to be an American writer in this sense means to present this warning to the public. Yet Giles does not apply these readings to 'Mirror's narrator, he instead focuses on the mother, whom he considers the "central character" of this story. This reading gives little importance to the fact that the mother is presented to us through the vocabulary of her son, which diminishes the importance of his perception of her. Giles is interested in the impact American culture has on both characters:

> [H]er legal case […] is no less beholden to a world of rhetorical manipulation and melodramatic affect than the compulsion that drove her to get her face fixed in the first place. Deprived of any correspondence theory of truth, Wallace's characters find themselves cast adrift in a fallen world of false appearances and 'special effects' (186), with the comic references in this story to films such as *Bride of Frankenstein* (182) emphasizing how the author conceives of America's corporate marketplace as a theatre of gothic masquerade. (14)

This reading seems incomplete because the influence of the corporate marketplace does not seem a constant, inescapable presence in the story. It seems more present in other stories from *Oblivion*, such as 'Mister Squishy.' In 'Mirror', the corporate marketplace seems secondary to

the representation of a vocabulary immune to the suffering of others. False appearances indeed have a prominent role in the story, yet there is little falsity about the child's death. In other words, there is also certainty in the world of 'Mirror', even if it's that of taxonomy and venom. The mother's 'mask' can indeed be seen as a representation, and the result, of 'rhetorical manipulation' and the 'corporate marketplace', since her decision to use the money from the first litigation can be seen as a desire that represents the ideology of the American 'theatre of gothic masquerade.' However, by focusing only on the botched surgeries their origin is ignored, and with it the fear the mother lives in, her codependent relationship with her son, and his framing of her life. Reading that it was 'compulsion that drove her to get her face fixed' forsakes larger narrative questions.

Thompson's reading of 'Mirror' does not clash with mine because we have different approaches and interests. Nonetheless, I include his reading because it's the most complete in describing and interpreting the narrator's vocabulary and the mother-son relationship. It appears in his book *Global Wallace* where he diligently presents all of Wallace's literary influences using clear archival and textual evidence. Since Rorty doesn't count as a literary influence, Thompson's reading doesn't focus much on his effect on the story. This does not mean Thompson ignores Rorty's influence; he quotes from Giles, Hayes-Brady, and Boswell's texts to highlight the "explicit conversation" with Rorty. Yet it's clear that Thompson is more interested in 'Mirror's other sources, O'Connor's short story and Grice's book.

Thompson contrasts the scientific worldview of Grice's text with the Catholic elements in O'Connor's story to highlight the absence of religion and God in Wallace's re-telling. In this sense, he approaches the anti-foundational world described in 'Mirror': "[…] a godless universe in which vanity drives the commerce of cosmetic surgery and an inquisitive child dies a painful, meaningless death, becomes clear" (189). By focusing on the 'godless' instead of on the 'truthless', Thompson's reading is better equipped to interact with Rorty's philosophy since it avoids Hayes-Brady's 'relativist' simplification. This stance, and his close-reading approach to literary influence, led him to best articulate the role of solipsism and voice in 'Mirror' that the previous articles also tried to word:

> ['Mirror'] is populated with characters who are unable to communicate sincerely with others, let alone seek religious solace, because of their disabling levels of self-awareness. The narrator's speech is full of irritating verbal tics, mobilizes a dizzying array of linguistic discourses, and uses frequent italicized insertions as a way of scare-quoting external perspectives. His narration is also maddeningly digressive, circling around and around the occluded details of the hapless child's death at the story's core. (190)

It's possible that Thompson's analysis benefits from not having to bring Rorty into the equation; his close reading best describes the complexity of the narrator's voice without trying to justify concepts of non-Truth or lack of meaning. He places the circumstances of the mother's accident, "the can's nozzle [glued] on facing backwards" (*O* 188), as "another synecdoche for the debilitating self-awareness that plagues Wallace's characters" (190). Thompson does not comment much more on the "story's second lacunae" (190), the mother's accident with insecticide, which I also place 'at the story's core', if not as more pertinent than the child's death. This divergence in our readings is mostly the result of a difference in interests and goals. I'll comment on the significance of the story's three sources in the following section. I believe I've shown enough to prove that previous readings of 'Mirror' limit themselves by simplifying Rorty's Pragmatism. For those critics who acknowledge Rorty's relevance, this often results in reading the story's bleakness as a representation of an assumed negativity or nihilism in Rorty's philosophy. Part of the error might lie in thinking that the story's bleakness is either a critique of Rorty or a representation of the dangers in his philosophy. Consider the following statement in Paul Giles' article: "in Wallace's story of the same name such an erasure of stable signifiers comes to carry a more sinister valence" (14). I, however, see the represented suffering as an enactment of Rorty's Pragmatism; 'Mirror' responds to the Rortyan question that follows the initial one about a book's purpose: "What sorts of things about what sorts of people do I need to notice?" (*CIS* 143) In the case of 'Mirror', it's noticing how the pursuit of our aforementioned 'private obsessions' can blind us to the pain of others.

3. Sources

In the copyright page for *Oblivion* (2004), Wallace wrote: "One or two tiny parts of 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' make uncited use of Gordon Grice's *The Red Hourglass: Lives of the Predators*". This is an understatement: the influence of Grice's book on 'Mirror' goes beyond the "tiny parts" to provide a great deal of the characteristics, syntax, and vocabulary of the narrator. *The Red Hourglass* collects the author's anecdotal experience with seven different predators, with a chapter devoted to each one. Wallace's story is mostly informed by the opening chapter on the black widow, and it also makes use of the chapters on the mantid and on the

recluse spider. The two "tiny parts" are italicized by Wallace in the style of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, as Carlisle notes.[49]

Reflecting on the death of the child who fell through the garage's roof, the narrator states: "Granted widow bites are a bad way to go because of the potent neurotoxin involved prompting one physician all the way in 1935 to comment, *I do not recall having seen more abject pain manifested in any other medical or surgical condition*" (*O* 185). In italics, the character uses the following quote from Grice's book: "Forney later commented, 'I do not recall having seen more abject pain manifested in any other medical or surgical condition'" (52). The minor difference is that Forney participated in a series of experiments on the black widow's venom in 1933, not 1935. The second quote is used by the narrator to describe his mother: "Sitting at home in dark glasses as ever knitting while monitoring my activities her *mouth parts working idly*" (*O* 188). Apart from a hyphen, the quote is again identical to Grice's text: "She watches him, and her mouth-parts work idly" (Grice 74). This isn't a description of a black widow, but of a female mantid watching an approaching male.

Those are the "tiny parts" Wallace mentions, yet the story is littered with phrases that seem constructed with the vocabulary of *The Red Hourglass*. Compare this phrase from the story: "[...] as I looked down to check the status I saw accidentally protruding from one of the ventilation holes at the case's corner the slender tip of a black jointed foreleg [...]" (*O* 189), with the following by Grice: "A minute's investigation reveals [...] an almost invisible web, at the corner of which the clawed tips of a black widow's sleek legs protrude from some crevice" (2). One gets the impression that Wallace reassembles sentences from Grice's text to fit his short story's setting.

It's clear the narrator mimics the voice of Grice's clear, well-informed amateur: "No one has ever offered a sufficient explanation for the dangerous venom. It provides no clear evolutionary advantage: all of the widow's prey items would find lesser toxins fatal, and there is no unambiguous benefit in killing and harming larger animals" (Grice 58). When rephrasing this information, the narrator forms the long sentences characteristic of *Oblivion*'s style: "Objectively no one even knows how the widow's neurotoxin works to produce such abject pain and suffering in larger animals, science is baffled as to evolutionarily what advantage there is

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[49] Consider the following quote as an example of Rorty's italicized style: "Descartes was substituting 'clear and distinct perception' [...] for 'indubitability' as a mark of eternal truths. *This left indubitability free to serve as a criterion of the mental*. For although the thought that I am in pain does not count as a clear and distinct perception, it can no more be successfully doubted than the thought I exist" (*PMN* 58).

for a venom well in excess of required for this unique but common specimen to subdue its prey" (*O* 187). The narrator's amalgamate speech accentuates the Rortyan belief that language is a contingent tool, showing that the narrator's "'conscience' and 'taste'" are no more than "bundles of idiosyncratic beliefs and desires" (*CIS* 142), despite the possibility that the narrator's knowledge and his way of presenting it seem to suggest universal certainty. If the narrator's vocabulary is clearly constructed with other vocabularies then it's hard to argue that his language stems from a fixed and absolute foundation. It's worth noting that this is the quote presented in the aforementioned *Global Wallace* to show the use of Grice to represent the godless world the story is set in.

Lucas Thompson also recognises the strong connection between *The Red Hourglass* and 'Mirror' and he discusses it more than he does Rorty. Yet his main focus is on O'Connor's influence; Thompson informs us that, in a letter to Michael Pietsch, Wallace described the story as "a complicated parody/homage to [Flannery] O'Connor's 'Everything That Rises Must Converge'" and that most of the story's plot and setting come from O'Connor's story: "Both stories are focalized through middle-aged sons who chaperone their mothers into town, with much of the narrative taking place in public buses." He contrasts the scientific worldview of Grice's text with the Catholic elements in O'Connor's story to highlight their absence in Wallace's re-telling: "the linguistically obscured fact of the child's death has no meaning beyond its legal implications for the narrator, while his characterization of the mother is similarly deconsecrated, stripped of all theological meaning" (189). I don't read this absence of god as an indictment of Rorty's theory or secular culture; instead, it's a way of pointing out that we cannot expect justice or morality to be declared and executed by a metaphysical source. Instead, it is up to individuals to discuss and decide what can and can't be done.

It's important for my reading to show the delicate amalgamation of these three sources because it also highlights the Rortyan stance on language. In this sense, it is a clear representation of Rortyan vocabularies since it doesn't pretend to be unique or neutral but rather circumstantial and constructed. It's fair to claim that the readings I've presented distrust the protagonist's vocabulary, in the sense that his way of speaking is 'false' or 'fake'. When Boswell describes the inability of the story's language to bridge gaps or when Hayes-Brady claims a betraying language, they seem to suggest the possibility of a correct or better way of speaking. I agree with Giles that the plot and the vocabulary of 'Mirror' offer a critique of American consumer culture, yet this doesn't make his vocabulary less true than any other. It's obvious that the protagonist's voice is a vital part of his construction as a character; in my reading, it's

important to notice how the language of the protagonist uses various sources to highlight that vocabularies are built or put together rather than given or found. When the protagonist describes his briefcase as a "*sematic accessory*" (*O* 184) and later describes himself in relation to his mother as a "sematic accessory" (*O* 189), I don't read it as attempts at an imaginative metaphor. Rather, I read it as the words of someone who believes their vocabulary is commensurate to existence, that nothing in reality is beyond the set of words they know. What is the danger of this? In a Rortyan sense, if someone believes their vocabulary is set and all-encompassing, then they'll have no need to consider their contingencies, that there is something they're mis-naming or not noticing. In my reading of 'Mirror', Wallace tries to point this out to the reader. It is, however, done in a subtle manner since there is nothing like a third voice that can point this out to us. In other words, since we are offered no view that is beyond the narrator's vocabulary, the blindspots of his false totality are not obvious since we as readers are also 'stuck' within the narrator's description of the world.

4. Conclusion

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty critiques the notion of the human mind as a mirror of nature. In other words, the title names what the book critiques. My reading finds the same connection between Wallace's short story and its title. 'Mirror' doesn't try to critique the dangers of Rorty's pragmatism, rather, it reveals the perils of considering one's vocabulary as absolute, and, of not dropping the metaphor of the mind as a mirror of reality. It's a reading that stays in line with Giles' description of Wallace as a 'a moralist and a pedagogue' in some aspects of his work.

The earlier interpretations of 'Mirror' seem unable to break away from a True-False duality; their reaction to Rorty's critique is to conclude there is only No-Truth, which still works within the same language of absolutes. By placing the story in a No-Truth setting, the narrator's descriptions are also emptied of meaning, casting doubt on the suffering portrayed (this error is most clear in Carlisle's reading). The widow's venom, the mother's fear, the child's death, should these be disregarded because we cannot depend on Absolute Truth?

We abolish the absolute and dualist readings by asking the Pragmatist question: "What purposes does this book serve?" (*CIS* 142) 'Mirror' presents a character that is not ignorant but indifferent to the suffering he causes to others. In this sense, Wallace creates fiction that Rorty will describe and prescribe in a book that continues the argument of *Philosophy and the Mirror*

of Nature, this is *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In it he analyzes "works of fiction which exhibit the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person" (*CIS* 141). The narrator's 'blindness' is such that he laments the loss of 'rare specimens' that escaped during the accident over the child's death, nor does he notice the torment the spiders cause his mother.

To better answer the Pragmatist question we can look at the classifications Rorty makes for books "deployed to ask the question 'What sorts of things about what sorts of people do I need to notice?'" (143) This question, in tandem with 'What purposes does this book serve,' provides what I believe is the most robust foundation for reading Wallace's short story and its indolent narrator. It also highlights Wallace's capacity to write books that could lead us to consent and establish communal and individual values, for "such books show how our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing" (141). I previously mentioned that 'Mirror' responds to matters for both public and private vocabularies, addressing the point where both concepts overlap. Rorty addresses this convergence in the chapter 'Private Irony and Liberal Hope' in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (73-95), where he defines what a 'liberal ironist' is through three concurrent conditions: someone who doubts the vocabularies they use, they know arguments constructed with their vocabulary "can neither dissolve or underwrite these doubts", and they know that their vocabulary is not "closer to reality than others" nor is it "in touch with a power not herself" (73). Here, I'll only make use of the first one, since it's the most apt for my argument, and because without it the other two conditions cannot be met. The Rortyan 'ironist' "has radical doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered" (73). This means that the person knows their vocabulary is limited and contingent, it is not all-encompassing, nor is it near a true or eternal language. The protagonist of 'Mirror' does not meet this condition, in this sense, the short story can be seen as a sort of snapshot of a vocabulary devoid of any of Rortyan 'radical doubts' about its capacity. In other words, it's the description of someone who believes their private vocabulary is a 'mirror of nature.' His taxonomic vocabulary reflects this: all is named and catalogued, a new species might be discovered, and there are unknown factors (e.g. an evolutionary reason as to why the widow's venom is so potent) but there are no 'radical doubts' that challenge this vocabulary. The key issue here is not that taxonomy is useless, rather, that as a tool, the protagonist's taxonomic vocabulary is useful for certain tasks and inadequate for other tasks, such as self-

creation and empathy. The mother's suffering deepens the story by showing the consequences this lack of doubt can have on others; this is where private and the public overlap. I'll take the roundabout way to describe this overlap.

If one has 'radical doubts' about their vocabulary and understands that the self-description resulting from said vocabulary is not the 'True' one but simply one among many, then an experimental attitude of re-description is adopted to either expand one's vocabulary or adopt a new one: "We ironists hope, by this continual redescription, to make the best selves for ourselves that we can." This means that ironists are interested in "enlarging our acquaintance" and the "easiest way of doing that is to read books" (*CIS* 80). This is why Rorty values literature and literary criticism so much: they're a great tool for encountering re-descriptions, for grasping other vocabularies. They also help us know if a person is suffering in a way that cannot be described by our vocabulary. If we depart from the belief that "pain is nonlinguistic" (94) then we only know someone is suffering if it's communicated to us. If someone expresses their suffering in a manner beyond our vocabulary then it's very likely that we won't recognize it. When one accepts the limits of their vocabulary, a possible consequence will be to redirect the efforts once used for discovering Truth into "making sure that she *notices* suffering when it occurs" since it's possible for others to suffer in a way one cannot understand or recognize. The non-metaphysical approach to this recognition and for the motivation to prevent or stop said pain (i.e. without thinking one has a neutral, infallible framework for knowing if suffering is occurring or not) is through "imaginative identification" in place of "a specifically moral motivation" (93). In other words, a re-description allows for the creation of an empathy that allows us to understand the contingent causes for another person's suffering, rather than responding with Kantian-like imperatives that don't require much human conversation to resolve a moral dilemma, or how to respond to a cry for help. In my reading of the protagonist as a metaphysician, he is with those that "tell us that unless there is some cruel sort of common ur-vocabulary, we have no 'reason' not to be cruel to those whose final vocabularies are very unlike ours" (88). Since the protagonist never doubts his vocabulary, he cannot comprehend his mother's aforementioned "long-standing" fear "of the phylum *arthropodae*." He knows that this is why "she never ventured in the garage" (*O* 185) yet he does nothing to comfort her or assuage the situation. This absence of empathy results from a lack of 'imaginative identification,' an inability to see beyond his 'private obsessions' and understand his mother's fear and suffering. In this sense, he doesn't accompany his mother on the bus out of sympathy or love but out of legal obligations and co-dependence. Describing himself as her 'sematic accessory' maintains

an emotional distance from her. When looking at the relationship between suffering and vocabularies, Rorty's states that "[r]edescription often humiliates" (*CIS* 90). The protagonist redescribes his mother's fear and suffering in a way that allows him to distance himself from her and avoid any responsibility that results in a shift in his vocabulary, his self-image and actions. This is also his reaction to the child's death. 'Mirror' steps into the field of public vocabularies when discussing the attention we give to the pain of others: "What matters for the liberal ironist is not finding such a reason but making sure that she *notices* suffering when it occurs" (*CIS* 93). Notice, however, that by referring to a 'liberal ironist' Rorty describes someone who understands both the differences and the overlaps between their public and private vocabularies. Despite its brevity, 'Mirror' shows us both the depth of Rorty's philosophy and how its application to Wallace's literature results in robust and detailed readings.

What are the broader implications of Rorty's anti-essentialism with regards to noticing the pain of others? Why and how should the protagonist care for his mother's suffering if there is no metaphysical reason to do so? In Rorty's view, there is no "essential humanity" that unites all human beings. Instead, Rorty posits that "feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us a salient, and that such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary" (*CIS* 192). His historical example for this that if you were a Jew "in the period when the trains were running to Auschwitz" you had a greater chance of being helped by your neighbours in Denmark and in Italy, and a lower chance in Belgium. Rorty argues that in the places were more likely to risk helping others there was greater notion of community, "for example, that this particular Jew was a fellow Milanese, or a fellow Jutlander, or a fellow member of the same union or profession" (*CIS* 190), a sentiment that was less common in places like Belgium. He also argues that the sentiment isn't devalued by a lack of ahistorical or objective justifications, and go so far as to call this a "fundamental premise" of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, asserting that "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance" (189). In this sense, to return to Wallace's story, the protagonist's failure to notice the suffering he causes his mother is not the failure of noticing his mother's 'human essence', rather, it's his inability to place himself as an 'us' with another person. To put it in another way, consider that, for Rorty, someone unwilling to help a Jew running from the Nazis would think, for example, "She is a Jewess" instead of "She is, like me, a mother of small children" (*CIS* 191). In this sense, the protagonist of 'Mirror' is incapable of thinking, with regards to the child's death, something like: "The child died in an accident related

to the deadly spiders I keep. I was once a child and I also know the pain the widow's venom causes. Maybe this could have been avoided if I didn't collect deadly spiders." It's an awkward phrase but I believe it makes my point, especially when the protagonist's lament related to the accident is that rare "specimens escaped in his mishap and have not been reacquired" (*O* 187). There is also an absence of an empathic 'we' or 'us' towards his mother. Despite their constant dependency and interaction, he cannot formulate a thought such as "She is my mother and she lives in constant fear of the spiders I keep." Like with the boy, the protagonist is more concerned and involved with his collection than with his mother. Wallace's short story therefore exemplifies the kind of suffering that occurs in the absence of Rortyan solidarity. As explained, this is not the ability to recognize "a core self […] in all human beings" rather it's the capacity to notice the suffering of others. Rorty argues that this can replace the need for "rationality and obligation - specifically, *moral* obligation", which attempts to be neutral and permanent. He argues for this replacement by showing how this attention towards another being's suffering is a better guide than said moral obligation, and it defines Rorty's concept of solidarity: "the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared to similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (*O* 192). With this in mind, the moral critique of the protagonist of 'Mirror' doesn't have much to do with a failure of his obligations towards his mother. Rather, it's his incapacity to establish an 'us' between his mother and himself, or any other human and himself.

It's worth mentioning that a critique of Rorty is built around his example of communities' attitudes towards jews during the time of their persecution by the Third Reich. In *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*; *The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty* (1995), Normas Geras argues for the concept of human nature against Rorty's anti-essentialism, and in the first chapter of the book, 'Richard Rorty and the Righteous Among the Nations' (7-46), he specifically addresses Rorty's interpretation of aid given to persecuted people during WWII. He does this by referring to the explanations rescuers gave for helping other people. His argument is that these people do not speak like Rorty's explanations, in other words, they explain themselves using universal terms like humanity and justice. An Austrian woman who helped Russian soldiers on the run explained that she "was obligated as a Christian" to help, and, in her words, did so "[o]nly because they were human beings" (8). There are various other examples of people speaking this way, so Geras builds the argument that "many of the rescuers who gave help to people close to them tell universalizing stories about what they did and who

they are, as well as or sometimes rather than citing friendship and the like, on what basis can it be claimed that their universalizing stories vouchsafe us nothing of what 'really' impelled them?" It seems to me that these accounts can still be given Pragmatist explanations, since the Christian woman's vocabulary allowed for a very broad understanding of an 'us' that included every being that had a soul. The 'universalizing stories' are proof of a certain way of speaking that people had to explain their actions. In each case presented by Geras, it seems one could still say that the intention of a rescuer was to prevent another being from experiencing more suffering and humiliation. There is an example of a Polish boy admitting that there is "no difference" between them and a Jewish boy when it's pointed out to him that "[h]e's a boy just like you. Look at his hands, his face. There's no difference" (34). Isn't this rather an example of someone expanding the limits of their 'us'? At the very least, the appeal is based on physical similarities rather than an intrinsic humanity. In this sense, any appeal to a supposed intrinsic human nature functions in the same manner as an appeal to an 'us' intention would, i.e. by communicating similarities, suffering, and/or humiliation. Barring, of course, a metaphysical revelation or delivery of justice, which I believe is what occurs at the end of O'Connor's 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' where, after his mother goes into shock, the protagonist goes in search for aid: "'Help, help!' he shouted, but his voice was thin, scarcely a thread of sound. […] The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow" (10). It's clear in this ending that the narrator defines the morality of the character's act, something that never occurs in 'Mirror'. This narrative distance or lack of moral involvement is not a sign of nihilism. Rather, it's a rejection of moral puritanism. Overall, one is hard pressed to find moral purity in Wallace's oeuvre. In the case of 'Mirror', the importance of morality not coming from the narrative (from an 'Olympic HQ') is conversational, allowing the reader to weigh the actions described. To highlight the importance of this I would like to return to Zadie Smith's essay on Wallace, where she seems to be describing this specific story:

> There are times when reading Wallace feels unbearable, and the weight of things stacked against the reader insurmountable: missing context, rhetorical complication, awful people, grotesque or absurd subject matter, language that is–at the same time!–childishly scatological and annoyingly obscure. And if one is used to the consolation of "character," well then Wallace is truly a dead end. His stories simply don't investigate character; they don't intend to. Instead they're turned outward, toward us. It's *our* character that's being investigated. (273)

In the case of 'Mirror', the story is turned towards us readers by having to read through the 'stacked things' that the protagonist gives us. By noticing in the narrative the suffering of others ignored by the protagonist, we both 'exhibit the blindness' (to use Rorty's words) of the protagonist towards the pain of others and we also enact noticing the suffering of others. In this sense, the investigation of our character is our own attention to other beings. Moreover, it leads us to consider if, just like the protagonist, our own private obsessions lead us to hurt others. Wallace's 'Mirror' has a similar objective to the comparison of the Jewish boy to the Polish boy: it aims to expand our notions of who we include in our 'us' descriptions. Wallace does not attempt to reflect reality and capture its essence, its truth. Instead, the texts mirrors back the reader's attitudes towards their own reality, instigating reflection on their own vocabularies.

In *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Stendhal included the formula: "Un roman: c'est un miroir qu'on promène le long du chemin", first as an epigram (72) and later attributed to the narrator (342). The limits of the novel are present: one can reflect the azure sky and quagmires of the road. The narrator states that any accusation of immortality should be addressed to the world, not the mirror, yet the reflection itself and its precision is not questioned, nor what leads the mirror to point one way, then another. We can also remember Henry James's monadic view of the novelist as a specific window of the "house of fiction." This image highlights the inherent subjectivity in the art of fiction and already suggests a notion similar to the limits of vocabularies: "Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has been conscious." The shape of the glass determines what will be reflected along the way. Finally in this genealogy, James Joyce's "cracked looking-glass of a servant" (7) in *Ulysses* considers surface of the mirror itself, bringing attention to the given notion of the mirror's reflection as precise representation. In this chapter and through the rest of this dissertation, I present Wallace as a writer who discards a glassy essence and takes up vocabularies as his style and method of representation.

Despite Wallace's various non-fiction and short story publications, he is read as a novelist. As mentioned in the Introduction, criticism places *Infinite Jest* at the center of his oeuvre. If in this reading I developed a dense interpretation from a brief narration, in the following chapter I will make use of the extended development of character and vocabulary allowed by the lengthy novel *Infinite Jest*. If the Pragmatist question I asked 'Mirror' was 'What purpose does this book serve?', in the following chapter I'll ask "Why do you talk that way?" (*CIS* 51)

Hermeneutical and Epistemological discourse in *Infinite Jest*

1. Introduction

This chapter takes a chronological step backwards in regards to the work of David Foster Wallace. 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' was written around 1998[50] and published six years later in *Oblivion*; here, I will focus on the earlier *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996. To interpret Wallace's short story, I bridged the contents of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) to those of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, published ten years later. The former aimed to take part, and alter, the general professional philosophical dialogue, hoping to shift the method of inquiry and focus from epistemology to hermeneutics; the latter, although still a philosophical book, is less interested in creating philosophical space for its argument (since the previous book already established this) and utilizes literary and philosophical sources to exemplify and explain the concept of vocabularies. This concept is central to my dissertation, yet to take it as a valid concept one must first accept Rorty's critique of epistemology and the validation of hermeneutics. Because of this requirement, this chapter will solidify the presence and preference of the hermeneutical approach over the epistemological one (i.e. anti-essentialism over essentialism) in the novel *Infinite Jest*.

This novel is the central text in the Wallace canon, both in terms of popular readership and critical attention. For a complex book that surpasses the thousand-page mark, a dissertation chapter is inadequate for unfolding and interpreting its many elements, therefore I will concentrate on the discourses of the novel's two main fictional institutions, the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House [*sic*] and the Enfield Tennis Academy, as representing of the opposition between hermeneutics and epistemology. The majority of characters in the novel are connected to one of these institutions, and the two protagonists, Don Gately and Hal Incandenza, pervade the life and discourse of Ennet and Enfield, respectively. By discourse, I mean the commandments of Alcoholics Anonymous around Ennet, which are geared at keeping people away from addictions; and the tennis training programme at Enfield, which is developed to create professional players. My interpretation focuses on the two protagonists as examples of said ideologies occurring in practice and their reaction to events beyond the main purposes of

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[50] The story was first published under the title "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VIII)" in the first volume of the quarterly publication *McSweeney's* (Autumn 1998), edited by Dave Eggers.

their discourse. Briefly stated, in the vocabulary of AA, Ennet, and Don I find contingency, an acceptance of incommensurability, an openness towards other vocabularies, and a future-oriented goal. In the vocabulary of tennis training, Enfield, and Hal, I find a vocabulary that tries to remain fixed, enclosed, and that believes that it has found epistemological parameters from which to navigate existence. At the end of this chapter I move away from the two protagonists to focus on the final passages of the novel and analyse how they represent the vocabularies of each institution. My reading of those passages is based on Rorty's reading of George Orwell's *1984* from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

This is not an allegorical reading where the institutions recreate the dichotomy between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, it is an interpretation that elucidates the complexity of Wallace's writing. In other words, Ennet and Enfield are not the fictional representations of each concept, nor is there a clash between both institutions and an attempt at effacement and replacement as there is in Rorty's proposition between absolute and anti-absolute concepts. Unlike the concept of vocabularies and its relation to literature, the differences between hermeneutics and epistemology are less clear when taken out of a philosophical context. Because of this, something like an act of translation will occur when reading a novel through professional philosophy; some of the subtleties of Rorty's theory are lost in this translation, yet enough remains to carry out my goals of elucidation.

As mentioned in the Introduction, *Infinite Jest* is Walllace's most acclaimed literary achievement. It's the text that galvanized critical attention for his oeuvre and made Wallace stand out over other writers of his generation.[51] It's also the reason why we consider Wallace a novelist, despite having only written three novels, one of them unfinished. This issue is addressed by Marshall Boswell in the preface to *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*, (2014), a collection of essays on his novels. "The obvious explanation" for Boswell is that *Infinite Jest* is "the bulwark atop which his reputation rests" (vi). In her essay in the *Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, (2018) Mary K. Holland calls *Infinite Jest* "the most accomplished single product of Wallace's career, and one of the most influential works of fiction in the past 50 years" (127). I say this not to critique or defend this centrality but to present the critical field around the novel. Holland also describes how readers of Wallace (such as Marshall Boswell, who I discuss in the following paragraph) see *Infinite Jest* as the pivotal text where he

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[51] Which is not to say that the novel received unanimous praise. A 1996 review by Dale Peck for the London Review of Books wrote that "Wallace out-Pynchons Pynchon, and his third book, *Infinite Jest*, may well be the first novel to out-*Gravity's Rainbow Gravity's Rainbow*." He did not mean this as a compliment in any way.

"turned postmodernism's primary dangers - irony, image, language, and self-reflexivity - into tools for generating empathy and sincerity" (127). In the 23 years since the novel's publication, the amount of critical work published on it is too vast for a direct engagement like the one performed in the previous chapter. In reader's guides alone, there are three different publications,[52] not including online publications and essays from compilations such as the aforementioned *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*, where we find 'Representing Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*' by Philip Sayers, which not only presents the role of entertainment in the narration, but on the structure and form of the novel as well. We also find David Letzler's 'Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: *Infinite Jest*'s Endnotes', which I'll make use of in my following chapter, where Letzler proves that the novel's endnotes are not inconsequential and superfluous but rather contain vital information for the novel's plot.

Marshall Boswell begins his 2003 publication *Understanding David Foster Wallace* by calling Wallace a "nervous member" of the "third wave of modernism" (1) in English literature. Boswell wrote a chapter each for two of Wallace's previous books: *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*. Yet, for Boswell's chronological reading, it's with *Infinite Jest* that Boswell can describe Wallace as fulfilling "the immense promise he had hinted at in his previous work" with a novel that "established him as perhaps the foremost writer of a remarkable generation of ambitious new novelists" (117). Boswell makes use of Lacan and Kierkegaard to read the themes of the novel, while also focusing on its complex structure, plot, and myriad of characters. In Boswell's eclectic reading of *Infinite Jest*, his attention to the way AA functions is a precursor to my reading of AA as a contingent vocabulary. Bringing in Kierkegaard and Wallace Stevens, Boswell affirms that "Wallace's 'AA God,' the primary God in *Infinite Jest* […] is not any one thing but rather a fluid concept that is more a 'necessary fiction,' in Stevens's sense, than an, if not the, transcendental signified." (146) I also read the 'AA God' as a 'necessary fiction' in the sense that it's a necessary part of the vocabulary created to help people overcome addiction. The 'AA God' is therefore not seen as an eternal foundation but more a 'what works' concept for AA. Boswell, however, mostly reads the 'AA God' in relation to Wallace's response to postmodernism, finding in it part of Wallace's departure from the literature of exhaustion (cf. 147), while I read it in relation to Rorty's Pragmatism. Allard den Dulk, in his 2005 publication *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A*

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[52] *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (2012) by Stephen J. Burn, *A Reader's Companion to Infinite Jest* (2005) by William Dowling and Robert Bell, and *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (2007) by Greg Carlisle

Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature, which I mentioned in my Introduction, also offers a philosophical reading of AA. Similar to my reading, den Dulk's analysis focuses on "the two main protagonists" (9), and, more importantly, he also reads in AA the importance of community and the recognition of suffering. Near the end of his book, den Dulk uses Camus to read the characters fighting addiction as rebels, finding in them "a rebellion that in many ways is a fight against the emptiness and loneliness of their absurd existence" (252). This rebellion, however, does not remain inward but instead becomes a sign of shared existence, and therefore community. In AA, the "solipsistic illusion" is broken by noticing that all members are equal in their suffering, which in turn creates solidarity: "despair is shared by all that breeds hope" den Dulk turns this experience towards the creation of literature: "Through this experience of communal suffering, AA seems to do something that Wallace also regards as one of the main purposes of 'serious fiction', namely: 'giv[ing]access to other selves'" (252). In the previous chapter, I mentioned the importance for Rorty of literature that helps us expand our vocabularies by noticing the suffering of others. Den Dulk creates a similar structure by highlighting the formation of a community in AA through the narration of one's suffering, as well as the capacity of Wallace's novel to create a similar rapport with the reader.

A similar approach to the reading of AA can be found in Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace* (2016). Thompson traces Wallace's many influences from world literature and he shows how Wallace incorporated or responded to these influences in his writing. As a result, Thompson argues that Wallace "perceived specific cultural content as a mere surface-level dissimilarity that should not distract from a text's instantiation of universal truths and themes" (197). This mention of universality would seem to clash with my Pragmatist reading, however, Thompson continues that sentence by stating that "Wallace's emphasis is on a literary work's resonance for American audiences" (197). In this sense, rather than a search for neutral truths, Thompson's reading shows Wallace incorporating from world literature whatever he found pertinent for his own writing. Or, translated into the style of my thesis, he expanded his vocabulary with useful redescriptions he found in other vocabularies. Thompson argues that Wallace developed this approach as a result of his interaction with AA: "this reading style is analogous to the Alcoholics Anonymous injunction to 'listen for similarities' ([*IJ*] 347) in other alcoholics' testimonies, focusing on the common elements within all addiction cycles and seeing oneself as intimately connected to other addicts" (69). In a way, my reading inverts or extends Thompson's reading, since I argue that those elements that Wallace took from AA (attention to the stories of others, willingness to incorporate redescriptions from other vocabularies to one's

own, the creation of solidarity through narrations of suffering) are then offered to the reader of *Infinite Jest* in two ways. On one hand, they are offered by describing the effects of their presence in the sphere of AA, Ennet, and Don; and then this offering is reinforced as the reader notes their absence in the world of tennis training, Enfield, and Hal. My reading, through the Pragmatism of Rorty, will show how these narrative clusters can function as, and be understood through, the concept of vocabularies. The can also exemplify the differentiation that Rorty makes between hermeneutics and epistemology as modes of interpretation.

2. Interpretation

I will begin with the Rortyan differentiation between hermeneutics and epistemology, presenting a few key concepts for accepting the hermeneutic turn, followed by the discourses of both AA and ETA. These will contain contradictions, the clearest being AA's use of absolute and universal tenets: I will resolve them in the second part of this section, making use of a collection of Rorty's lectures published in 1993. In them, Rorty is not presenting anything beyond the claims made in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, it's their style that sets them apart from the content of that book. They're a re-telling of Rorty's anti-epistemological proposal in a less 'professional' manner: "[t]hey offer a fairly simple, albeit sketchy, outline of my own version of pragmatism" (xiii). This sketchy outline offers another way to read Wallace and bridge both writers.

The first two parts of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (around 75% of the book) explain and refute the arguments and consequences caused by Western philosophy's dependence on the image of the mind as the mirror of nature and on finding a neutral framework for knowledge. The third section deals with the clash of hermeneutics and philosophy, and with his proposal for a "Philosophy Without Mirrors". It is a delicate presentation; Rorty describes his philosophy as anti-essentialist or anti-foundationalist, since the tradition of epistemology is so pervasive and dominant that its renouncement becomes the main quality of a philosophy that breaks away from its history and vocabulary. It is also important to observe that Rorty's hope is not for hermeneutics to replace epistemology, he is not putting it forward as a better method for revealing essences, for unveiling Truth. Because of this, we could say that Rorty is less interested in the reader taking up a specific way of thinking and more invested in our abandonment of "[t]he notion that there is a permanent neutral framework whose 'structure' philosophy can display" which assumes that "all contributions to a given discourse are

commensurable" (315-6). Following the genealogy of Plato, Descartes, and Kant, the search for this eternal matrix has been the quest of Western philosophy, the one Rorty hopes we eliminate. If we don't take hermeneutics as the new discipline for unveiling foundations, then it will ultimately be "seen as another way of coping" (356) with existential dread and the incommensurability of reality.

What follows once we discard the notion "that our chief task is to mirror accurately"? For the purposes of my analysis, the consequences to follow are those established by the dissolution of the "classic picture of human beings," (*PMN* 357), abandoning the notion that humans have a permanent and universal essence, something unique and unalterable. What remains, free from Dualism and Transcendentalism, is the "romantic notion of man as self-creative" (358); Rorty develops the conclusion of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* on this notion, and it will constitute the majority of my hermeneutical interpretation of AA-discourse and of Don Gately. Rorty uses the term "edifying philosophy" to describe the hermeneutic act of self-creation, the "project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking" (360). Here we notice the future-oriented characteristic of pragmatism: once the belief in and the search for a "permanent neutral matrix for all inquiry or history" (179) is abandoned, then we should be less concerned over what is True and beyond doubt, and more interested in finding what is useful to us, new ways of speaking, and "a new and more interesting way of expressing ourselves, and thus of coping with the world." This leads Rorty to the concepts of normal and abnormal discourse; we are inevitably and necessarily culturized to a way of describing the world, educated into a set of norms and customs that pretend to have an unwavering foundation. This is normal discourse, a kind of necessary starting point, it is only "one way of being in the world" (365). In contrast, abnormal discourse constitutes edifying philosophy, being parasitic on and rebellious to normal discourse, since it involves new ways of speaking, of description, that cannot find consensus with the learned normal discourse. At this point Rorty brings in the existentialist view of the adoption of an abnormal discourse and the act of self-description as an exercise in freedom, while to remain in one's normal discourse is a renouncement of freedom and of one's human condition. Seen in a more Pragmatist approach, since reality is incommensurable, all discourse will at some point be lacking when dealing with some aspect of reality. One would be well served to pick up an abnormal discourse that is apt for dealing with the new problem and discarding the limited, normal one. This is similar to exchanging a broken or useless tool for an effective and useful one.

I'll soon explain how these philosophical approaches can be applied to fiction, but I'll briefly set them aside to present the narrative locations of the Enfield Tennis Academy and the Ennet Half-Way House. The two places are linked in both form and content: the novel's narrative voice breaks and jumps from one storyline to another, and often these shifts create a back and forth between ETA and Ennet, sometimes specifically focused on the protagonists that seem to almost embody what those institutions represent, Hal and Don. There are various links in the story between the institutions: the two sites are in walking distance of each other (ETA is on a cropped hilltop overlooking Ennet), some of the inhabitants of Ennet work at the Academy as part of their recovery, and near the end of the novel Hal visits Ennet, seeking help to overcome his own addiction. Since Don is hospitalized at the time of this visit, the two never meet in a scene dramatized in the novel, although it is twice suggested they do during the unwritten events that occur between the last and first sections of the novel.[53] The narrative relationship between both protagonists is similar to the narrative relationship between the two sites in that there is no direct, plot-heavy interaction between the two, yet, as I hope to show later on, their connection to the novel's many story-lines creates a tension Wallace deliberately does not resolve. The similarities in description and presentation between the two buildings strengthens this tension; both buildings host a multitude of characters we come to know in both general and specific terms, with sections that focus only on one character or on the many characters in one area (like the boy's lockers and showers at ETA or the living room at Ennet), we learn their customs, idioms, and rules, and the endnotes build up the characterization of both places (e.g. the way kids pick up tennis balls on court, the house's punishment-system). Their connection via plot is indirect, yet there is no lack of parallels; both institutions work to help their inhabitants reach one goal, professional tennis or freedom from addiction. My Rortyan analysis focuses on the vocabulary and beliefs implemented to attain these goals and how they also affect other aspects of the characters' lives, with a note on how the anti-foundational vocabulary has a more positive effect on characters' lives than the foundational one.

I'll begin with the ideology of ETA, to which we are introduced by Gerhardt Schtitt, the German Head Coach and Athletic Director at the academy: "at near what must be seventy, mellowed to the sort of elder-statesman point where he's become mostly a dispenser of abstractions rather than discipline, a philosopher instead of a king. His presence is here mostly verbal" (*IJ* 79). These verbal abstractions are the closest we get to a philosophical definition of

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[53] pp 17; 934.

ETA's understanding of tennis. In a presentation characteristic of Wallace's style, Schtitt's oral command of English as a second language prevents a precise definition of his tennis-beliefs, although the narrative voice gives us a hand: "Schtitt approached competitive tennis more like a pure mathematician than a technician" (81). This approach is mostly concerned with the possibilities of what can occur within the limits of the tennis court "*in*foliating, *contained*, this diagnate infinity of infinities of choice and execution, mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*, bounded by the talent and imagination of self as opponent" (82). We can see Schtitt as the voice of ETA's ideology not only for his role as head instructor, but because the founder of ETA and physicist James O. Incandenza hired Schtitt for their shared views on tennis. Schtitt's mathematical beliefs quickly leave the court to form a type of communal ethics; he is presented as an authoritarian figure, almost comically fascist, wielding a weather pointer and sporting leather boots, his ethics are a stoic enterprise in which individuals give themselves to a group and to a set of rules, "[t]he well-disciplined boy begins assembling the more abstract, gratification-delaying skills necessary for being a 'team player' in a larger arena" however, this 'arena' is inadequate for this transition, since in the novel's North American landscape the "State is not a team or a code but a sort of sloppy intersection of desires and fears" (83). The muddle that results from Schtittian ethics and the 'sloppy intersection' can be read a few pages later, through the interactions that take place in the male locker room after an arduous training session. The Academy's ranking system and the struggle to climb those rankings and become a professional player seem to contradict, or at least complicate, Schtitt's beliefs; the students are "'here because they want the Show when they get out,' Ingersoll sniffs and says. The Show meaning the A.T.P. Tour, travel and cash prizes and endorsements and appearance fees, match-highlights in video mags, action photos in glossy print-mags." Hal grounds this desire by letting us know how difficult it is to reach the professional circuit, even for members of a tennis academy: "But they know and we know that one very top junior in twenty even gets all the way to the Show. Much less survives there long. The rest slog around on the satellite tours or regional tours or get soft as club pros. Or become lawyers or academics like everyone else" (111). Why would players give themselves up to a group when, unlike maybe a team sport, the group will not reach the goal together? When the group is divided by rankings and inner competition? For Hal, it is that shared experience that binds the group: "We're all in each other's food chain. All of us. It's an individual sport. Welcome to the meaning of *individual*. We're each deeply alone here. It's what we all have in common, this aloneness" (112). There are various moments in the novel when this camaraderie is evident, be it around a tennis tournament or in the academy's

food hall, however, it seems to fail Hal as he goes through the effects of marijuana withdrawal at the end of the novel. I will detail Hal's final scenes in the novel later on in this analysis, suffice it to say for now that, as he suffers from withdrawal, he finds neither support nor solace in tennis or ETA's community.

It seems clear that members of ETA have a specific understanding of tennis and the endpoint of their preparation. In these confines, it is successful in creating high-level tennis players. However, complications arise when non-tennis issues are faced via Schtittian ethics and the rankings-mentality. Despite their high academic levels, the inhabitants of ETA seem unable to break away from the metaphor of tennis, of options contained within a set field. As I will show, this approach fails the characters as the novel advances; Schtitt's and Incandenza's abstraction of the tennis court and its rankings has a similar effect to the image of the mind as a mirror of nature: reality must conform to this image.

An example of this is the story of the junior tennis player Eric Clipperton, who attended national tournaments sporting a handgun and would aim it at his head during games, holding his tennis racquet in the other hand, threatening to kill himself if he lost the match. Understandably, his competitors would forfeit the match and, in this way, Clipperton amassed "meaningless victor[ies]" (407-10). Clipperton would later on actually shoot himself in an ETA classroom, with the founder James O. Incandenza and his son Mario Incandenza as witnesses. The story is told as a sort of cautionary or morality tale by the Academy members, on the dangers, and emptiness, of pursuing victory and the top of the rankings by any means necessary. The narrator offers an interpretation tied to ETA pedagogy: "But the whole Clipperton saga highlights the way there are certain very talented players who just cannot keep the lip stiff and fires stoked if they ever finally do achieve a top ranking or win some important event" (436). The issue always relates to the context of competitive tennis and the Academy's programme. It is maybe no surprise that "Schtitt holds a special key" to the room where the suicide took place and is offered as a gruesome meditation room where students can try and think of an alternative to "hard daily slogging toward a distant goal you can then maybe, if you get there, live with" (434).

When the story of Clipperton reappears in the novel, it is again discussed with regard to the preparation of junior players for the success of reaching the professional tennis circuit.[54] As

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[54] This conversation is held in Parisian French and Quebecois, between O.N.A.N-O.U.S. secret agent Steeply, who is posing as a female journalist doing a soft-profile article on Orin Incandenza, and Quebecois ETA prorector Thierry Poutrincourt, who may be an agent for the terrorist cell A.F.R., with the chimings of another ETA prorector, Aubrey F. deLint, who tries to control and constrain the conversation as a way of protecting the alumni from unnecessary media attention. Schtitt's broken English might make us doubt the clarity with which he

the previous Schtitt quote suggests, a new complication arises when the tennis player reaches the goal of the professional circuit: "You must keep winning to keep the existence of love and endorsements and the shiny magazines wanting your profile." A pressure is created in which winning is expected, a pressure which, until then, the player has not experienced, "[h]ence the suicides. The burn-out. The drugs, the self-indulging, the spoilage" (677). The professional player faces two types of "doom" if they "cannot find some way to transcend the experience of having that goal be your entire existence." The first is that you "realize the shocking realization that attaining the goal does not complete or redeem you," which carries an allusion to Clipperton's case, killing himself even though he found a way to guarantee victory. The second is akin to drowning in celebrity-culture, in fame, attention, and parties, it ends their career "because you cannot both celebrate and suffer, and play is always suffering" (680-1). These are views held by both Schtitt and the "academic Founder," and although the importance of steering through a "goal-based culture of pursuit" and transcending tennis is present in the Academy's discourse, the institution still focuses on making players that attain and maintain a level of professional success, and not so much the life that lies beyond it. In this way, the Show-oriented system of ETA can be read as an epistemological system, in that it's approach to tennis and a tennis-career provide a justification of beliefs and a consequential way-of-being. It's worth remembering that, for Rorty, the consequences of taking up Hermeneutics and dropping Epistemology go beyond professional philosophy. This is why his work ultimately turns towards hopeful attempts at reducing human suffering. I read ETA's training system as the epistemological system of the academy's inhabitants because of its rigidity and all-encompassing pretension. It succeeds at saving them from a Clipperton-like destiny, but it also fails at addressing a life beyond the Show by applying Schtittian ethics of infinite variety within constraints (i.e. the possibility of commensurability) to existence.

I return to Hal and Schtitt for the clearest examples of this. Halfway through the novel we read about an ETA outdoor training session that takes place on the 9th of November, in preparation for matches over Thanksgiving. It is cold in Massachusetts, snow fell the day before; the Academy covers the courts with 'The Lung' when it gets too cold to play outdoor tennis, however, Schtitt refuses to take it out yet. Student LaMont Chu complains about the weather

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is able to express his ideas; the agendas of the three characters complicate gauging the honesty and intention in that conversation.

being too cold to play in,[55] Schtitt instructs him to take refuge in the tennis court: "This second world inside the lines […] Not 'adjust to conditions.' Make this second world inside the world: here there *are* no conditions" (*IJ* 459). This world, the court, offers the students shelter from the other, larger world, and they must make an effort to gain access (or "citizenship") to this world, which is ultimately on a mental plane, the end to Schtitt's stoicism: "Use a head […] Where is where you apply for citizenship in second world Mr. consciousness of ankle Incandenza, our revenant?" In the general scope of the novel, Hal is the ideal player to ask, maybe fatally so; he replies: "Head, sir" (461). The first chapter of *Infinite Jest* is chronologically the last scene of the plot, in which, trapped in his head, telling the reader "I am in here" (3), Hal seems unable to renounce his mind-citizenship; he follows the Schtitt-ETA ideology to its final consequence, overachieving in the second-world court but beyond the realm of play. The indoctrination of a commensurable existence leads to the search for higher planes of existence and solipsism from which one is capable of measuring said existence, but these metaphysical planes do not exist and one is left with a doctrine that rejects life.

One could argue that the rules and regulations at Ennet House are stricter than those at ETA and that the cult-like environment of AA is guided by an epistemological system that provides an answer for any query, stopping further inquiry. A rhyme carved by knife on a plastic seat exemplifies this: "Do not ask WHY/ If you dont want to DIE/ Do like your TOLD/ If you want to get OLD" (*IJ* 375; [*Sic.*, as endnote n.143 tells us]). Here we can point out a first link to ETA and Schtitt's ethics, in that AA's axioms are "almost classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist" (374). However, there is a leniency to AA that edges it closer to hermeneutics than to a concept of neutral truths.

I'll begin by reiterating that the argument for abandoning epistemology for hermeneutics was constructed in the context of a discussion between relatively secure professional philosophers in the West. Neither Ennet House nor Boston's AA groups inhabit an academic setting; just as the main goal of ETA is to create junior tennis players, AA's objective is to keep people away from their addictions, and its rules are more like communally-agreed contingent guidelines. You are welcome to choose your own method and variations, the argument against doing so is that following your decisions lead you to the 'bottom' of your addiction: "There are,

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[55] It's worth noting that some pages beforehand we're privy to 11 year-old Chu's shameful and fearful confession that "he *wants* the hype" (388) of success in professional tennis. The desire for fame, like that for playing comfortably, is frowned upon in ETA. Chu can be seen as an example of unfinished indoctrination by showing signs of future failure in the Academy's system.

by ratified tradition, no 'musts' in Boston AA. No doctrine or dogma or rules. They can't kick you out. You don't have to do what they say. Do exactly as you please — if you still trust what seems to please you" (356). The ideology of AA is contingent without straying too far into the abstract. One of the causes for its contingency and other hermeneutical qualities is that AA is not actually geared to renounce your addiction but rather to keep it at bay. As the Ennet House residents' stories show, only a certain amount of will-power is required to renounce your addiction for a few days, the problem is staying off the substance for a month, a year, a lifetime.[56] Contingency and routine become the key characteristics of a method that must adapt to the near infinite variety of the recovering addict's experience.

We can see this in the belief system that AA offers to the recovering addict, composed of a series of platitudes and the worship of an ambiguous god. There is no logical explanation as to why these beliefs are necessary to AA's goals, yet they are essential to keeping addiction away: "the old guys say it doesn't yet matter what you believe or don't believe, Just Do It they say" (350). The option of going through the motions without acquiring belief or accepting a set of arguments moves AA away from the epistemological ambition of presenting a neutral matrix that overrides all other human disciplines. In this sense, AA is not even interested in its members understanding the system they are adopting: "Gately still feels he has no access to the Big spiritual Picture." Nor what interpretation they give to said system: "It's supposed to be one of AA's major selling points that you can choose your own God" (349). What matters is that you do the daily required praying. In this sense, AA does not offer any kind of explanations, certainly not metaphysical, not even about its own methods: "Gately couldn't for the life of him figure out how just sitting on hemorrhoid-hostile folding chairs every night looking at nose-pores and listening to clichés could work. Nobody's been able to figure AA out, is another binding commonality" (349). This unexplainable system of thought is a far cry from the search for total commensurability, and it should lead us to interpret the apparent metaphysical content of its claims and the discipline with which they must be followed as a collection of contingencies, not as a claim of Truth but as the necessary and best-known re-description for surviving an addiction: "It's all optional; do it or die" (357).

This can also explain why the AA tenants are unable to resist critical examination, and with it why it "is statistically easier for low-IQ people to kick an addiction than it is for high-IQ people" (*IJ* 203). AA is a terrible epistemological system, it fails as a method for carrying out

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[56] "He had tried to stop smoking marijuana maybe 70 or 80 times before" (18).

inquiry and establishing what is True, what belief accords with Reality. This is best exemplified in the discussions between Don Gately and Geoffrey Day, a "red-wine-and-Quaalude man" (272) and an ex-college professor. Endnote 90 (1000-3) is a conversation between the two, Day attempts an intellectual critique of AA's axioms to which Don can only reply with slogans and clichés or by admitting he's having a hard time following Day's arguments. Day rhetorically outmanoeuvres Don throughout the conversation, yet Don knows that once addiction's call returns "Gately'll get to tell Day the thing is that the clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually do. To try and live by instead of just say" (273). Seven days later we find Day talking to Kate Gompert in Ennet House's living room, telling her about the time he came close to jumping out of his dorm window. He explains how he avoided suicide thanks to the company of a stranger:

> Some boy I hardly knew in the room below mine heard me staggering around whimpering at the top of my lungs. He came up and sat up with me until it went away. It took most of the night. We didn't converse; he didn't try to comfort me. He spoke very little, just sat up with me. We didn't become friends. By graduation I'd forgotten his name and major. But on that night he seemed to be the piece of string by which I hung suspended over hell itself. (651)

The character who asks for a detailed justification of a method has once already experienced the possibilities of a solace that does not answer to a metaphysical system. I interpret his remembrance as an acceptance of the AA approach to combating addiction, relinquishing, in a way, the epistemological need for certainty. It's also worth noting that Day's progressions come via conversation and/or a witness. At AA meetings you stand in front of a crowd and speak your mind. Many characters tell a gruesome memory of suffering and abuse they had hoped to escape through addictive substances. The act of remembering and retelling, of sharing one's story is present in all members of Ennet House and A.A., I find a parallel between said act and Rorty's understanding of self-reliance and his reading of Proust as an ironist novelist.[57] Despite A.A.'s mention of a higher power, there is no need or demand to give each story a metaphysical redescription. In other words, the A.A. stories are not framed under by that higher power, not by discovering it or coming into touch with it: their suffering or recovery is not tied to a grand narrative. They're Proustian for narrating "a network of small, interanimating contingencies"

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[57] It's worth remembering that by ironist Rorty means someone with 'moral courage' who argues dialectically, and who understands that their "vocabulary is closer to reality than others" (*ICS* 73).

that "are not interested in incommensurability".[58] In the case of Geoffrey Day, he no longer looks for irrefutable theoretical justifications of A.A. and instead tells of a moment of salvation through chance and empathy. It's important that his memory isn't given directly by a narrative voice, instead we read him telling the story to Kate in Ennet, which I read as him dropping the objective intellectual act and 'surrendering' (to use the vocabulary of A.A.) to his addictive past. In it he finds an act and a sign of hope that seems so similar to the process and meetings of A.A., it also makes his character less cynical and more humane. This shift in Day's character is in line with Rorty's belief that "[p]rivate autonomy can be gained by redescribing one's past in a way that had not occurred to the past" (*CIS* 100-1). We won't find the complexity and originality of Proust in Day, and so it might seem excessive to say that there is an innovation in telling his story which 'had not occurred in the past.' However, it's enough for the redescription to not have occurred in Day's past, since there is 'no interest in incommensurability' or in establishing a connection to History as a totality. In other words, the redescription does not have to be unique in the history of humanity, it's enough for it to be a new redescription in a person's life. This is what A.A. offers to its members. This connection between redescription of one's past and autonomy, and the act of communicating the redescription to others, is present in the story of the novel's protagonists.

The importance of sharing an oral testimony is central to my comparison of Hal and Don, but I must first explain their situations near the end of the novel. Despite the structural distance I've already mentioned between the two protagonists, we can find both textually present on page 902, where Hal's section ends and Gately's begins. Their narrations remain separated but we can notice important similarities: both characters are horizontal, Don lays on a hospital bed, Hal is laying on his "back on the carpet of Viewing Room 5", both characters are engrossed in their minds, rediscovering lost memories and trying to understand their present situation; both are battling to stay away from their drug of choice, marijuana for Hal and Demerol for Don. The differences that occur within these parallels mark the differences that set ETA as epistemological and AA as hermeneutical. Before listing these differences, I'll contextualize their situations. Don is in a hospital bed after he was shot in the shoulder, he refuses to take potent pain-killers because he would consider a break from his sobriety, even

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[58] Dave Eggers mentions Proust in the foreword he wrote for the 10th anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest*, commenting that "There is the same sort of obsessiveness, the same incredible precision and focus, and the same sense that the writer wanted (and arguably succeeds at) nailing the consciousness of an age)" (xiii). He does not elaborate beyond this. I do not know of other readings pairing wallace with Proust.

though other AA members have told him it wouldn't be the case. Ennet House and AA members visit Gately and confide in him even though he can't talk back; he's having fever dreams while also recounting his life and revisiting lost memories. He's also visited by what could be the ghost of James O. Incandenza. Hal is suffering marijuana withdrawal; he's stopped smoking because he must pass a doping test before a big tournament. However, this seems to be an excuse for a choice he's taken, since his mother is ETA's dean and would not kick him out of the academy. He played a tennis match against someone ranked below him and almost lost; he doesn't feel like playing tennis for the time being. Hal wants to be alone; he watches his deceased father's films and revisits memories of his father.

At that point in the story, one of the key differences between both protagonists is their experience of present time. Before laying down on the carpet floor, Hal has a panic attack which, somewhat like Don's pain-killer-free pain, sharpens his senses. Hal knows how to manage this fear on the tennis court but not outside of it: "Lyle's counsel had been to turn the perception and attention on the fear itself, but he'd shown us how to do this only on-court, in play" (*IJ* 896). Unrestrained by the court's limits, this perception spreads out into the world: "What didn't seem fresh and unfamiliar seemed suddenly old as stone." And so the repetitions of the past and the future are accounted for in Hal's present time: "The familiarity of Academy routine took on a crushing cumulative aspect […] I reexperienced the years' total number of steps, movements, the breaths and pulses involved" (896-7). Hal also imagines the amount of food he'll consume and the excrement he'll exude. The training of ETA fails, even betrays, Hal: he's unable make use of his skills beyond the court, his accumulative view of the past is reminiscent of the ranking system that determines your present skill on the summary of your previous games. His view of the future as an enumerated set of actions speaks of a worldview based on the predetermined and the commensurable.

Gately endures his present and his pain differently. Although he suffers from the gunshot wound in his shoulder, the pain is less than what he endured during the first two weeks of not taking Demerol: "but the hurt was nothing like the Bird's hurt was." He faces the pain of the wound with the same technique he used when he went cold turkey: "Living in the Present between pulses […] living completely In The Moment". Gately considers the possibility that this is how the veterans of AA think he should live, present in-between each heartbeat. It is certainly the way he faces the pain in his shoulder, and by doing so his reaction is the opposite to Hal's; the junior tennis player considers the measurable quantities in his past and future, Don turns away from this type of thinking and chooses to remain in-between heartbeats: "Here was

a second right here: he endured it. What was undealable-with was the thought of all the instants all lined up and stretching ahead, glittering" (*IJ* 860). Don is basically describing Hal's panic attack while avoiding it, and, like Hal, Don is also going through a kind of withdrawal. Both AA veterans and the hospital's medical staff strongly approved and recommend pain-killers to Don, yet he refuses them because he craves the drug for more than the relief it offers:

> No single second was past standing. Memories of good old Demerol rose up, clamoring to be Entertained. The thing in Boston AA is they try to teach you to accept occasional cravings, the sudden thoughts of the Substance […] It's a lifelong Disease: you can't keep the thoughts from popping in there. (890)

It's fair to claim that Gately is suffering both from extreme pain and from withdrawal, that he's in a more dire situation than Hal, and that he deals better with his situation. Another difference between the two protagonists is their willingness to communicate with others. As Hal lies horizontal, various characters almost cartoonish pop their heads through the door and try to talk to him, getting no reply: "Some more heads came and awaited response and left" (*IJ* 906). Pemulis gets some conversation out of Hal, but not much: he is turned away. We last see Hal on the floor of his room, remembering his childhood and his father, finally conjuring an image of his mother copulating with ETA's top ranked player John Wayne.

Gately becomes (unwillingly) the receptor of the AA confessionals when paralyzed in bed: "It seems like Don G.'s gotten way more popular as somebody to talk to since he's become effectively paralyzed and mute" (*IJ* 828). Various characters visit Don and open up to him, not only Ennet House residents but also characters like the ghost of Hal's dad, James, who battled with an alcohol addiction. Because of his ailment, Gately can barely talk back at the visitors, yet he does pay attention and try to get his point across, even attempting to write his questions. He communicates with the wraith of James because they talk from one mind to another. The purpose of this comparison is to show that, when placed under pressure or constraints, the ideology of AA functions better than that of ETA, mostly because while the former trains one in a sort of outward movement that attempts to establish conversations, the latter invites you to establish limits and reside within your own mind. I will give other examples of this dichotomy at the end of this chapter that do not include Hal or Gately.

This judgement is not only based on Rorty's anti-essentialism and his critique of the mind as the mirror of nature; I believe it is also validated by the novel itself. While hospitalized, Gately remembers his mom's alcoholic boyfriend; he also remembers the how the ex-boyfriend would constantly beat and abuse his mother. The three of them lived together in a trailer, and

during this time Don started drinking. As memories of this time return to him, Gately wonders if he should "fend off uninvited memories of his own grim conversations" with the ex-boyfriend. Since James, the wraith, is privy to Don's thoughts, he replies to him: "*No! Any* conversation or interchange is better than none at all, to trust him on this, that the worst kind of gut-wrenching intergenerational interchange is better than withdrawal or hiddenness on either side" (*IJ* 839). Throughout the novel it is suggested that James Incandenza's last film, *Infinite Jest*, was an attempt to communicate with Hal. A few paragraphs before the previous quote, the Wraith tells Don that the

> […] spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*. To concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau […] Games hadn't done it, professionals hadn't done it, impersonation of professionals hadn't done it. His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. (839)

This passage could describe Hal's mental confinement in the opening chapter of the novel. The "impersonation of professionals" seems to be a reference to a scene at the start of the novel where James wears a shoddy mask to interact with Hal. That James failed at various different attempts to converse with his son (and possibly save him from the mind-trap of the opening chapter) could convince us that one should not desire to become a 'citizen' in the second world of our minds, since it can become our only 'citizenship.' It might be no coincidence that Hal, during the aforementioned locker-room discussion on the Academy's pedagogy, explains: "In a nutshell, what we're talking about here is loneliness" (113). A phrase that is reminiscent of Prince Hamlet's remark: "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space".[59] A line that sounds like an all too accurate description of the direction Hal is heading towards.

In my reading, Hal was trained to find, act, and become within set parameters; his reaction cannot simply be ascribed to withdrawal symptoms since, as Gately's case shows, the effects vary. Like the motions of tennis, internalized through repetition, Hal's reaction during his withdrawal and panic attack is to establish parameters within which he can establish control and protection. This action aligns with Rorty's explanation of the desire behind the creation of an epistemology:

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[59] Marshall Boswell looks at the connections between *Hamlet* and *Infinite Jest* in his book *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (cf.165-7, 169).

> [t]he desire for a theory of knowledge is a desire for constraint—a desire to find "foundations" to which one might cling, frameworks beyond which one must not stray, objects which impose themselves, representations which cannot be gainsaid. (*PMN* 315)

While Gately fights off these impositions, Hal tries to set limits attempting to stabilize his life. This can be further evidenced by returning to Rorty's reading of Proust. Rorty describes Proust's project as wanting "to free himself from the descriptions of himself offered by the people he had met" (*CIS* 102). In the case of Gately, this includes his own negative view of his past and himself, as well as the interpretation forced on him by his addiction, with the drug Demerol as an object wanting to 'impose' itself on him. "[W]ithout claiming to know a truth which was hidden from the authority figures of his earlier years," he is able to resist addiction, to listen to others, and to face the hidden pains of his past. Although Gately does not write a 7-volume novel, I do think he is able to master "contingency by recognizing it" by facing the circumstances of each moment, one by one, without trying to establish a Foundation or find a connection to an omnipotent authority. Be it his mother, addicts or felons from his past, fellow A.A. members, and even possible wraiths, Don Gately "turned other people from his judges into his fellow sufferers, and thus succeeded in creating the taste by which he judged himself," (*CIS* 103), with 'taste' here being his adoption of A.A.

I've focused on Hal given his importance to the story and his parallel relation to Don Gately, yet a similar interpretation can be extended to other members of ETA. For example, there is a scene at the start of the novel where an infant Hal goes to his mother who is gardening on their previous home's front lawn and tells her that he ate a kind of mould he holds in his hand, the mother panics and shouts for help while "[h]olding the speckled patch aloft in a pincer of fingers, running around and around the garden's rectangle while O. gaped at his first real sight of adult hysteria" (*IJ* 11). It is a short scene in which Avril is unable to step over the limits of the space she works in, even to call for help, to communicate with someone else. A similar event occurs with Michael Pemulis, Hal's friend who at one point comforts a 14-year-old student suffering a panic attack by inviting him to "trust math," because math will "[n]ever fail you […] You can fall back and regroup around math" (1071). The same Michael Pemulis who gets mad when players of his beloved game Eschaton cannot differentiate between the map and the territory and stop following rules.

At this point, one might criticize my interpretation by stating that to claim Gately is better suited to face withdrawal than Hal sounds as obvious as saying that Hal is better suited to play tennis than Gately. However, to think that the protagonists are only experiencing

withdrawal is a simplification: both are also faced with the elements and situations that pushed them towards addiction, they are therefore also required to choose how to face what bubbled up from withdrawal. If we trust the wraith of James O. Incandenza, then Hal was on the path towards a mind-trap for some time now, and ETA did not do much to assuage it.

3. Conclusion

For this conclusion, I will set the supine protagonists aside to make a Rortyan reading of the last passages of *Infinite Jest*, where both discourses are represented in various passages free from Hal and Don. The end of *Infinite Jest* is not a standard narrative conclusion to the described action. It is therefore more useful to use Stephen Burn's description of Wallace as a "narrative architect" whose "fiction's layered designed is often underpinned by a logic of juxtaposition that drives it forward" (150). This better describes the last pages of the novel, where the juxtaposition of several passages advances or enhances the plot and even a sense of an ending without historical finality. My Rortyan interpretation tries to read as much as possible from these layers to give this chapter a broader conclusion. To continue with Burn's description, although the final passages may not seem directly connected to the vocabularies of AA and ETA, it's important to note that "Wallace's fiction is built less around cause-and-effect plotting, than it is around the construction of rich metaphoric nodes where multiple meanings accumulate" (150). These final passages are "nodes" that I will interpret to show the validity and depth of my reading, as well as the novel's complex structure.

In the second to last passage in the novel, Hal Incandenza's older brother Orin is tortured by the terrorist cell AFR by being placed in a glass cage where cockroaches are released. (cf. 971-2). It is an inversion of his method for killing cockroaches at the start of the novel: trapping them under a glass. This torture suggests that Orin was under close surveillance for some time, while it also provides another example of the novel's elegant structure since, for example, the inversion recalls the first narrations of Orin at the start of the novel (cf. 44-5), while also offering another image of containment in the novel (consider the aforementioned Hal trapped in his head and Don at the hospital). What matters most to my reading is that, as the torture begins, Orin screams "Do it to her! *Do it to her!*" (972) It is unclear whether he refers to the female spy who captured him or to his mother, with whom he has a complicated relationship, to say the least. The scene and exclamation are reminiscent of one of the final scenes in Orwell's *1984*, where

Winston Smith is tortured at the hands of O'Brien.[60] Instead of cockroaches, O'Brien uses rats, and Winston shouts: "Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her!" (297) This connection is elemental to my reading because Rorty devotes one of the last sections of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* to the torture scene in *1984* and its significance in the novel as a whole.

Rorty shows that various readers and defenders of Orwell consider the torture scene a mistake, almost bad taste. (cf. *CIS* 171, 175, 180-2). Rorty, not surprisingly, thinks those readings are still concerned with Historical Truths and Neutral Essences, and the reason for some critics' distaste is that the torture scene does not align with their reading of the novel as Truth against tyranny, they read Orwell "as a realist philosopher, a defender of common sense against its cultured, ironist despisers" (172). For Rorty, Orwell was neither "transparent nor simple" (174), and through the torturer O'Brien and the world of *1984* he showed a possible future of "endless torture," (182), in other words, in a contingent future that goes in "the *wrong* direction" where "the same developments that made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible" (175). In other words, Orwell was not defending an absolute concept but exemplifying a contingent future, which is similar to the use of a dystopian future in *Infinite Jest*.

Rorty focuses on the torture scene because its methods and objectives can be given an anti-foundational reading. O'Brien's torture methods attempt (and succeed) in destroying Winston's vocabulary and so his sense of self. It's worth remembering the quote I used at the end of the previous chapter: "Redescription often humiliates" (*CIS 90*). The tipping point in Winston's case was saying he would rather Julia, the woman he loved, be tortured than himself: "Temporary irrationality is something around which one can weave a story around. But the belief that he once wanted them to *do it to Julia* is not one he can weave a story around" (178). In this sense, the torture is not aimed at damaging Winston's 'human essence' or 'innate nature' but rather at destroying what O'Brien and the Party know Winston constructed around himself for his newfound freedom. "O'Brien wants to cause Winston as much pain as possible, and for this purpose what matters is that Winston be forced to realize that he has become incoherent, realize that he is no longer able to use a language or be a self" (179). In Orin's case, the description of his torture is too brief to know how it ends and how it changes him, yet it's clearly

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[60] I'm indebted to James Baxter (University of Reading) for pointing out the link between both novels during the 2018 David Foster Wallace Research Group Symposium. I have not yet found an academic publication that makes the same connection.

a torture method designed specifically for Orin which could therefore lead to irreversible damage. The basis of both torture methods is not 'what causes the most suffering to humans' but 'what causes the most suffering to this individual,' they are based on the victim's experiences. We get more information on Winston's torture than on Orin's, we know how Winston is captured, what happens before and after, whereas with Orin we only read the breaking point. We can *assume* he is tortured for information but we never really see it, the link we're given between the novels is the result of a vocabulary-oriented torture motivated by sadism: "The Inner Party is not torturing Winston because it is afraid of a revolution […] It is torturing Winston for the sake of causing Winston pain, and thereby increasing the pleasure of its members, particularly O'Brien" (179). The efficacy and horror of Rorty's reading shows that torture in *1984* is not a kind of battle between Truth and Oligarchy but the kind of thing an intellectual in a dystopia would do for fun. One could also make the case that Orin's torture is unnecessary in the sense that the AFR already know where the master copy of "Infinite Jest" is, and therefore have no information or confession to extract from Orin. The NFL player is not shouting a confession; Orin is a Don Juan-like character who seduces without regard for humiliation it may cause and this may be his hellish punishment. The female spy watching his torture let herself be 'seduced' by Orin in an undercover ploy to get close to the Incandenzas, and a reader could assume she is enjoying Orin's pain after experiencing his seducer's persona. Orin trained for professional tennis at ETA, but at college he found his vocation as a punter, and, at the time of his capture, he plays for the NFL's Arizona Cardinals. In my reading, Orin is, then, another representative of ETA ideology. However, now that I've established this link, my interest is not to explore the connection between *1984* and *Infinite Jest* but, as a way to cement my reading, to show Wallace's novel contains the opposite possibility to O'Brien's torture method.

Although Orin's torture is horrific, it pales in comparison to the suffering and humiliation recounted in *Infinite Jest*'s various AA stories. These are narratives in the first- or third-person scattered throughout the novel that tell us about the life of AA members. They are mostly harrowing experiences that lead them to an addiction or about 'touching bottom' and as a consequence joining AA. They are stories of violence, that often include abuse, rape, and death, and they are amongst the darkest passages on the novel. Some stories have a comical tone but the humour is often at the expense of a person's pain. Because of the amount of suffering described, the stories might be likened to Smith's torture: so much suffering leads them to have nothing to hold onto. However, I will make the case for the opposite reading; given their context,

the AA stories show that the recovering addicts have something to hold on to, since most of the stories are to be read as spoken to an audience at an AA meeting, or as part of a conversation, such as Geoffrey Day's, detailed above.

Near the end of the novel (958-960) there is a brief story told by Mikey, a recovering addict, at an AA meeting. He presents himself as "an alcoholic and an addict and a sick fuck" (958) who wanted to take his son bowling on his free day. His son lives with Mikey's mother and sister, who tells him he needs the judge's approval to see the kid, making Mikey very mad. He insults his sister and later, remembering the AA precept, tries to apologize for it. He wonders with his audience why he carries such uncontrollable anger within him and ends with "I just wanted to get some of that shit out" (960). Mikey's story has no bearing with the novel's main plots or protagonists, or with the other final passages of the novel. It is the first and only time we read about that character, so we could see the passage as inconsequential or minor. I read it as another node with accumulated meaning that, amongst passages where the protagonist's narratives reaching tense events, we are meant to remember the stories of the many recovering addicts that are trying to survive day by day, and that those stories are a sign of hope.

I'll now focus on an AA story that deals with hope instead of humiliation. Near the middle of the novel, a recovering addict "whose last initial is E." tells a simple and brief story at an AA meeting, with Gately in attendance, about "his first solid bowel movement in adult life". At the toilet, he believed he dropped his wallet into the toilet but discovers he's successfully taken a solid shit or, as he calls it in a strong Irish accent, "a *rail tard*" (*IJ* 351). This is a sign of hope; his addiction damaged his body to the degree he became un-accustomed to taking solid shits. Now, thanks to his recovery, his body is performing normal functions again. Apart from his personal health, what matters in the context of AA is that he voices this and that it's heard by other recovering addicts: "the lightless eyes of certain palsied back-row newcomers widen with a very private Identification and possible hope, hardly daring to imagine" (352). The sharing of these stories and the identification caused in the audience seems to be the main purpose for centring the description of the meetings around them. With their appeal and effectiveness coming from the subjectivity of the stories of survival, and the communicative connection they cause, rather than an appeal to metaphysical reasons.

To highlight the importance of this story, I must briefly return to Rorty's interpretation of O'Brien's torture methods. Thanks to the torture scene, Rorty reads in *1984* that there is "nothing to people except what has been socialized into them—their ability to use language, and thereby exchange beliefs and desires with other people" (*CIS* 177). With this belief as a starting

point, O'Brien's technique is to "tear down" this socialized 'inside': "[Humans] can be given a specific type of pain: They can be humiliated by the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of language and belief in which they were socialized" (177). The victim's suffering lasts after the torture since they lose the means to understand themselves as individuals and navigate the world. In this reading, the resistance to Big Brother's famous *2+2=5* equation is not so much about objective vs. subjective, "the need to insist that two plus two equals four not as Orwell's view about how to keep the O'Briens at bay but, rather, as a description of how to keep ourselves going when things get tight" (185). *2+2=4* becomes a foothold on a vocabulary that facilitates survival, with it a person can establish a narrative for themselves and their experiences. O'Brien specifically looks to destroy said footholds with his torture and leave nothing for Winston to reconstitute himself afterwards: "Winston had to watch himself go to pieces and simultaneously know that he could never pick those pieces up again" (178). Afterwards, he has no choice but to become whatever Big Brother wants him to be. My reading of AA's vocabulary in the novel, set in a different dystopian future, makes it the opposite (or at least have the opposite effect) of O'Brien's torture methods, for if his goal is to tear apart those existential footholds, then AA *gives* its members footholds. Such is the value and role of the clichés and routines; they are the recovering addict's *2+2=4*. Their capacity for hope can be forgotten among the many AA stories of suffering and humiliation, yet we must remember the context they are spoken in and shared. In the end, they are on a path to becoming like the shit story and establishing a more solid ground. It is an act of 'putting together' instead of 'tearing apart.' Mikey's story at the end of the novel, despite its drama, is a reminder of this hope and it stands as a counter-node to Orin's torture.

With this reading in mind, a continued interpretation can be given to the two passages between Mikey's story and Orin's suffering. The first involves an attorney who once was out to get revenge on Gately since one of his break-ins drove the attorney's wife mad. He speaks with Pat Montesian, the director of Ennet House, outside of Gatley's hospital room and we learn he is an AA member now, looking to make peace with Gately. The following scene involves two Catholic brothers making a bet or "experimental challenge" about human compassion, where the younger brother, Barry, stands on the sidewalk near a subway stop asking people to touch him, i.e. asking people to extend "basic human warmth and contact" (*IJ* 969), and so proving his older brother's misanthropic beliefs wrong. He starts making money as a beggar but still no one touches him until Orin and Hal's younger brother, Mario, appears and extends a hand. In his aforementioned book, den Dulk reads the scene as symbolic of "Mario's role in the novel:

he demonstrates intuitively that the connection with others is indispensable for a meaningful existence" (243). A statement that coexists with AA's audience and the Pragmatist recognition of the suffering of others. Barry Loach would afterwards get a permanent position at ETA. Mikey's AA story and the attorney's visit make two AA passages that are followed by two ETA passages, Mario touching Barry and Orin's torture. The pairing of these worlds at the end of the novel seem to be nodes in themselves, with a focus on how characters react to the pain of others. It's fair to claim there is a lot more empathy and compassion in the AA sections. Mario's scene may sound like the exception to my reading of ETA but we must instead see that Mario is the exception at ETA, he is very much part of the academy's life yet his disability keeps him away from ETA indoctrination and becoming a high-level athlete like his brothers.

The overall aim of this chapter wasn't just to prove Rorty's influence on *Infinite Jest* but to create a reading of the novel similar to the ones Rorty makes of Proust and Orwell in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. When Rorty judges that "(d)etailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation […] were the modern intellectual's principal contribution to moral progress" (192). it seems clear to me that *Infinite Jest* is a book that can contribute to moral progress. In my reading, it is the people who can make use of AA's vocabulary who better respond to the descriptions of pain. I've tried to describe that vocabulary as a contingent tool, so that, despite its use of words like *God*, its members could agree to Rorty's claim that "We try *not* to want something which stands beyond history and institutions" (189). From the way AA is represented in the novel, a recovering addict's call to a *higher power* works more like a coping mechanism to get through the day than a metaphysical assertion. In other words, the goal of their metaphysical terms is not to prove or even to argue for an eternal, neutral structure but to ward off addiction for another day. As I detailed previously in the chapter, there are many doubts about the content of AA's methodology but not about its results. As we read Gately successfully following AA's programme but also continuously expressing his doubts at AA meetings, in conversations, or to himself, we might be reminded of Rorty's description of the person who understands the anti-foundational contingency of their private vocabulary: "The ironist - the person who has doubts about his own final vocabulary, his own moral identity, and perhaps his own sanity - desperately needs to *talk* to other people" (186). With these descriptions, we can read the characters of *Infinite Jest* through Rorty's Pragmatism, focused on the ability to recognize the suffering of others and the desire to communicate, paired against the apathy and cruelty of other characters, as well as their inability to speak (often literally) to others.

In the following chapter these characteristics will be highlighted in what I consider to be Wallace's most ignored book, *Signifying Rappers*, a nonfiction text on the seminal musical genre of hip-hop. In it we find the young Wallace grappling with a vocabularies both akin and foreign from his own. It's main relevance for my dissertation is the evidence of Wallace's interest and investment in the public conversation of his country, showing a pluralist and nonessential view of the cultures, classes, and history of the U.S. The Pragmatist questions, 'What purpose does this book serve?' and 'Why do you talk that way?', will continue to guide my critical readings, and I'll also include a question Wallace makes in *Signifying Rappers* that has a critical function similar to Rorty's: "What would *you* do, or sing about?" (*SR* 143)

Signifying Rappers and Public Vocabularies

1. Introduction

In April 1989 David Foster Wallace went to Boston. He was set to start a PhD in Philosophy at Harvard University in the Fall and he found an apartment to rent with his friend Mark Costello. By then, *The Broom of the System* had already been published and, as Mark Costello recalls, Wallace "had come through gory legal edits on his great story collection *Girl with Curious Hair*" (*SR* xi). The collection would be published in the Fall of that year, but during that time Wallace had no literary project to work on. He put off his commissioned review on *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and attempted to start a project that "gyrated between fiction and nonfiction" (Max 124). This would turn into "a long essay on the making and the watching of pornographic movies" (Costello *SR* xi). Yet it was a period when "Wallace no longer felt he was writing well" (Max 123) and nothing would immediately come out of that project.[61] "This was writing as compulsion, not as pleasure" (Costello *SR* xii) his roommate observed. Although he could not make it cohere, his interests and energies took on a new direction when, in June, Wallace defended the then emerging hip-hop music genre during an author panel in New York. Ecco Press editor Lee Smith was "intrigued by Dave's defense of the form" (Costello *SR* xii) and suggested that Wallace write an essay on rap's qualities. Wallace's energies went into this project and the result was *Signifying Rappers*, a text he co-authored with Mark Costello, published by Ecco Press in October of 1990. This chapter aims to understand how Wallace engaged with rap music, the approach and strategy he took, and argues that his defense of rap music is as rich and insightful as the texts commonly cited to present the early Wallace, such as "Westward" and "E Unibus Pluram." My reading of *Signifying Rappers* posits that Wallace's analysis of rap is driven by the interaction between vocabularies, for vocabularies represent communities, and *Signifying Rappers* aims to bridge the white American community to the African American community.

The role of Rorty's Pragmatism in this chapter is to conceptualize Wallace's placement and interaction with hip-hop music and its culture. Wallace's approach to rap is not epistemological: he doesn't pretend to judge the genre using a neutral theoretical framework.

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[61] Wallace would later write an essay on the pornography industry in "Big Red Son" (1998) and it could be argued that this interest in pornography was the first step in the project of *The Pale King* (Max 257).

I'll demonstrate that Wallace doesn't subsume hip-hop into his worldview or give a totalizing interpretation of rap, he instead constructs a redescription of hip-hop for the white middle-class vocabulary he knows. Wallace wrote in a time when rap music was considered a felony and considered a social threat, as will be shown later in this chapter. His aim wasn't to influence, for example, the rapper's understanding of rap, but to change the ruling class' attitudes towards rap music and, consequently, African American culture. In this gesture we can better understand the democratic gesture of Wallace's writing. To highlight this approach, I also make use of theory unrelated to either Wallace or Rorty, that deals directly with hip-hop and African American culture, to prove that *Signifying Rappers* can participate in critical conversations on rap music. This chapter also includes the lengthiest close reading of my thesis. I do this, firstly, because my overall argument is strengthened by an understanding of how Wallace approaches and develops his redescription of rap. Second, as I'll detail shortly, I have access to primary sources that no other scholar has used, and which reveal Wallace's involvement in the project. Regardless of its small readership and brief recognition, I'll show that Wallace was invested in *Signifying Rappers* not only for the cultural but also the political conversation of his country.

Despite being co-authored, I will only look at Wallace's sections in the book. This approach is not troubled by the need to sort out who wrote what because *Signifying Rappers* is not a homogeneous text, in fact "*Signifying Rappers* presents a relatively straightforward intellectual partnership" (Morrisey and Thompson 80). Wallace authored some chapters, Costello authored others, and to make the separation clearer, the chapters authored by the former have a "D." in their heading, those authored by the latter have an "M." instead. I will elaborate on this structure later on. For now, it suffices to understand that an analysis that disregards Costello's writing isn't lacking in a significant way. Therefore, unless I am explicitly discussing the details of the co-authorship, when I mention *Signifying Rappers* in this chapter, I am referring to Wallace's sections in the book.

The book's publisher, Ecco Press, was founded in 1971 and acquired by HarperCollins in 1999. When Ecco Press was bought, its records were acquired by the New York Public Library and stored in their Manuscripts and Archives Division. I obtained photocopies of the two folders that make up the *Signifying Rappers* records in the Ecco Press Archives. One contains letters, memos, and drafts regarding the book's editing process, the other is one of the book's final galley copies before its first printing. To my knowledge, this source material has not been published or analysed in any form. Throughout the chapter, I will present quotes from these folders that will either clarify or solidify the text's characteristics.

In *Signifying Rappers* Wallace looks at a new musical genre that is both a commodity and an act of rebellion, both entertainment and the development of a cultural tradition, both a mode with its language use for initiates and an address to a nation. This chapter uses Wallace's interest in these dichotomies, as well as his interest in understanding how art can reach a wide audience and participate in society without creating something whose only purpose is mass appeal. My reading of *Signifying Rappers* will show a writer who engaged with a vocabulary and a community that were not directly his own, yet he was connected to it as a fan of the music it produced, and also historically, geographically, and politically, as a fellow citizen and as a speaker of English. It might seem contradictory, if not counter-democratic, that Wallace analyses black culture but does not address a black audience, for the intended audience of his text is middle class white America. In the context of hip-hop, this white audience represent, on the one hand, the antagonists of the rapper. And, on the other, white America represents the largest market for potential consumers of rap music. Nonetheless, it's the black audience that is addressed by the rap's lyrics, not the white market. Hip-hop's conversation occurs between the rapper and their black community; Wallace addresses his own white middle-class community, despite writing about rap music, since his goal is to change the white vocabulary's descriptions (and, therefore, its attitudes) of hip-hop and, as a result, their relation to the black community.

In this chapter, I'll explain how we can understand the redescription of rap music for the white vocabulary as a Rortyan overlap of the private and the public vocabularies, and of the black and the white vocabularies, as well as the public discourse and conversation of the United States as a democracy. *Signifying Rappers* is not only a work of aesthetic inquiry, there are strong democratic intentions in it that recognize the subjective conditions of American society; Wallace makes a clear effort to validate rap as an art form, yet his endgame is to bring the white reader's attention to the conditions of poverty and violence in black communities.

It is fair to claim that this co-authored publication is the most ignored work from the Wallace canon, not only in terms of academia, but also his popular readership, publishers, and even Wallace himself.[62] The only essay to emerge from the field of Wallace studies that focuses on *Signifying Rappers*, Tara Morrissey and Lucas Thompson's "'The Rare White at the Window': A Reappraisal of Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace's *Signifying Rappers*," begins by demonstrating and lamenting that the book "has received a surprisingly small amount

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[62] However, there has been a belated surge of interest in the topic of race in Wallace studies. Consider Jorge Araya's 'Why the Whiteness?: Race in *The Pale King*' (2015), Samuel Cohen's 'The Whiteness of David Foster Wallace' (2015), and Ed Jackson & Joel Roberts 'White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest*'s New Sincerity' (2017).

of academic and cultural attention" (77). What qualities of *Signifying Rappers* might have led to its relegation as a minor piece in the Wallace oeuvre? To start with, it didn't help that "Wallace rarely, if ever, mentioned *Signifying Rappers* in other contexts" (Morrissey and Thompson 81). The work is mentioned and commented upon in the famous McCaffrey interview (*C* 47) but this is closer to being a unique commentary rather than a recurring topic in the scope of his interviews. This may be because the content of *Signifying Rappers* is an exception in his writings, since Wallace "never again returned in his writing either to music criticism in general or to hip-hop in particular" (81), and notably as well he "never again wrote directly on racial issues" (Morrisey and Thompson 89). Yet it seems hard to believe that subject matter alone dissuaded a readership when one considers the multifarious nonfiction Wallace produced throughout his career. Morrisey and Thompson also point to the complications of differentiation in a co-authored volume as cause for critics to avoid a text.

D.T. Max's biography on Wallace does not mention much of *Signifying Rappers*, but the working relationship between both authors is described: "[Wallace] began to leave the portions he'd drafted for Costello to comment on when he got home. Soon the roommates were alternating writing sections of the essay, Wallace by day, Costello by night. ("Chess by mail" is how Costello describes the collaboration.) Wallace's gesture to include his roommate was at once generous—he knew Costello still held literary aspirations—and defensive, even desperate" (123). One could interpret the influence on each other's chapters as more editorial than creative, and that Wallace worked with Costello for reasons beyond the development of a commentary on rap music. To reiterate, a consideration of Wallace's chapters in *Signifying Rappers* as not dependent upon Costello's chapters is neither a misreading nor dismissive. The archival sources suggest that Wallace's efforts were what kept the text's style steady throughout the editing process, this includes Mark Costello's sections as well. The following is an extract from a letter dated 21st May 1990:

> Bonnie informs me Mark hasn't been able to do his galleys. Let's go with my set. I've fixed all typos; I didn't mess with his sections much. I'll clear it with him. Let's move forward. He's having a hard time at the DA's job and I don't think will be able to do his set in time. (58)[63]

This is not to suggest that Wallace did some ghost-writing for Costello, just that it was Wallace that steered the stylistic ship of *Signifying Rappers*. This simplifies the who-wrote-what problem

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[63]   The archive was sent to me as a pdf document. The numbers given in this section refer to the page number in the pdf.

of co-authored works, and allows Morrissey and Thompson to pay little attention to Costello's sections: "it is not difficult to relegate Costello's role to the 'Sancho Panza' or 'Alice-Tolkas-esque' DJ position" (Morrisey and Thompson 80).[64]

Is *Signifying Rappers* to be discarded as pre-*Infinite Jest* juvenilia? As mentioned, both *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair* were published before it, and both texts have received a considerable amount of critical attention. It is possible that there is a greater interest in Wallace the fiction writer, yet even his undergraduate philosophy dissertation, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2011), "a forbiddingly dense academic paper with limited general-audience appeal" (Morrissey and Thompson 78), was reprinted before *Signifying Rappers*, and in a time when rap music is ubiquitous. There must have been, ironically, some copyright issues since, as mentioned, HarperCollins bought Ecco Press yet their competition, Penguin, published the new edition of *Signifying Rappers*. Morrissey and Thompson don't mention a cause for this but they do state in a footnote that their version of *Both Flesh and Not*, published in 2012 by Penguin, does not include *Signifying Rappers* in the catalogue of works by Wallace.

Signifying Rappers merits further examination because, as Morrissey and Thompson argue, "the book offers a revealing glimpse into [Wallace's] development as both a fiction writer and an essayist" (78). Unlike topics such as grammar, tennis, or philosophy, rap music had no place in the Wallace household, and the world described by rappers is alien to Wallace's white, middle-class Midwestern and university life. In *Signifying Rappers* we have the opportunity to read how Wallace's mind unravels, analyses, and finally understands a new musical genre that became another branch of commercial pop music yet maintained aspects of its countercultural, underground, and rebellious origins, and was deemed ignominious by the ruling majority; an interpretation that may be considered analogous to his approach to literature and writing. These are some of the "virtues that save it from being a mere period piece, of only historical interest" (82). *Signifying Rappers* presents a pre-Harvard, pre-breakdown, pre-*Infinite Jest* Wallace wrestling with an ethical, intellectual, and specifically American challenge, "For outsiders, rap's easy to move to, hard to dissect" (*SR* 24). This book, I contend, is a necessary piece in the creation of a genealogical perspective on Wallace's writings. Not just because "a close interrogation of *Signifying Rappers* enriches our understanding of Wallace's work, revealing an

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[64] It's worth noting that a similar observation appears in one of the first reviews written on *Signifying Rappers*. Writing for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Spring 1991), Steven Moore describes the book as "informative, provocative, funny, and--especially in the sections by Wallace--brilliantly written" (340).

oblique vision of Wallace striving to articulate a personal artistic agenda in response to the postmodern literary tradition" (Morrissey and Thompson 78). My 'interrogation' of this text will also hopefully expand on our understanding of Wallace and bring the 'oblique vision' that reveals the democratic qualities of his oeuvre.

To reiterate, Richard Rorty posits that there are no absolutes or universalities to be found or created. A main consequence of this stance is renouncing the belief in and the search for an absolute language, i.e., a language that can describe and communicate the totality of existence. Instead, we must work to reshape the tools that are vocabularies. Rorty makes a distinction between public and private vocabularies, neither are set, both are contingent and experimental. Vocabularies are limited by the impossibility of totality, i.e. becoming a neutral, ahistorical structure that grasps and judges all of reality. Rorty differentiates public vocabularies from private ones by noting that the former are ways of speaking that are effective for creating solidarity between people and for reducing the suffering of others, while the latter are useful for self-creation and self-realization.[65] It's important to once again note that there is no vocabulary that can do both, there is no vocabulary that is both public *and* private. These distinctions, however, are not based on essentialism or idealism; as the previous chapters have shown, vocabularies overlap and affect one another. This chapter studies the vocabulary of the rapper as presented in *Signifying Rappers*, as well as the community the rapper comes from and addresses. To understand how the contingent vocabularies of communities function and interact, we must return to the initial proposal of giving up the search for universalities and absolutes. This not only means that the aims or results won't be presented in universal terms, it also means that the words and concepts associated with such a mindset are ineffective: "[T]he distinctions between absolutism and relativism, between rationality and irrationality, and between morality and expediency are obsolete and clumsy tools—remnants of a vocabulary we should try to replace" (*CIS* 44). Rorty calls for this change because the 'tools' of unalterable foundations on which humans can build upon to reach a utopian height no longer work, they must be substituted: "[T]he institutions and culture of liberal society would be better served by a vocabulary of moral and political reflection which avoids the distinctions I have listed than by a vocabulary which preserves them" (*CIS* 44). One of the interesting qualities of Rorty's proposition is that he doesn't call for a total overhaul of the institutions and cultures, or for a great revolution, since

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[65] Rorty argues that certain vocabularies that offered new ways of speaking were capable of reducing suffering. That is why "we cannot mention Marxism, Christianity, utilitarianism without respect. For there was a time when each served human liberty" (*CIS* 89).

the very vocabulary of his proposal categorizes those calls as replacing one foundation with another instead of effecting their erasure.[66]

Richard Rorty divides the books that "help us become less cruel" into two types: "(1) books which help us see the effects of social practices and institutions on others and (2) those which help us see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others" (*CIS* 141). *Signifying Rappers* touches on both 'types': the marginalization of the black community both historically in the U.S. and specifically by the Reagan administration; the white community's unwillingness to interact with rap except as stereotype. By following the attitudes of the white mainstream and the words of the rapper, Wallace reveals "the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person" (141). As mentioned, *Signifying Rappers* hopes to achieve this by asking its own variation of the quintessential Rortyan question, "Are you suffering?", one framed by the context of hip-hop: "What would *you* do, or sing about?" (*SR* 143)

Signifying Rappers finds 'moral and political reflection' by focusing on language. We can understand Wallace's analysis of rap in American culture as the representation of the interaction between two vocabularies, that of the black community and of the white community. The centrality of this interaction is justified by what I consider to be the first academic mention of the book. In "Rap Music's Doubled-Voiced Discourse: A Crossroads for Interracial Communication" (1991), Gregory Stephens describes the text as a "study of how non-blacks respond to rap's pro-black/anti-white rhetoric" (82). The other mentions of *Signifying Rappers* in the article are of how hip-hop samples guitar riffs from rock music, a genre from the white community, which come from the riffs of blues guitar, a genre created by the black community (cf. 82). Stephens follows by quoting the conclusion from one of Wallace's sections: "a self-consciously 'closed' music's obsessive use of samples that must by nature be open" (*SR* 98). Although the use of *Signifying Rappers* is brief, Stephens clearly uses it to describe what he calls the "[o]ngoing interchange at the rap crossroads" (83). To continue the image, *Signifying*

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[66] Which is not to say that his political stance was lax or indefinite. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty clearly presents himself as a non-Marxist, Reformist Leftist. His critique of Right-wing politics in the United States is as relevant and accurate as ever: "The Right thinks that our country already has a moral identity, and hopes to keep that identity intact. It fears economic and political change, and therefore easily becomes the pawn of the rich and powerful--the people whose selfish interests are served by forestalling such change" (*AOC* 31). I don't think it's hard to translate this stance to Rorty's more philosophical vocabulary; the fixed moral identity is a belief in an absolute concept, the fear of change is a rejection of contingency, and the selfish interests are an indifference towards the suffering of others. Rorty's rejection of Marxism seems mostly grounded on absolute concepts that claim to know "what was bound to happen" (*AOC* 23), moreover, "Marxism encouraged us to look for such a purity" of "people who made no mistakes" (*AOC* 45). Because of this, Rorty would have preferred if Marx was only "honored as a brilliant political economist" (*AOC* 42) but whose absolute philosophical vocabulary was dropped.

Rappers describes said crossroads from the viewpoint of the white vocabulary, not so much to highlight the role of the white vocabulary but to demonstrate the capacity of rap for creating an innovative voice for an impoverished community, as well as establishing the groundwork for dialogue between vocabularies. My close reading in this chapter will demonstrate how Wallace achieves this by recognizing from the start of the text that he'll never fully grasp rap music except at a distance. At the same time, Wallace approaches the rap itself, the rapper's words with utmost critical seriousness, despite the playful and oral tone of the text. This approach will lead him to see the rapper's message as one the white community should approach with empathy and attention. This is not to say that Wallace keeps a comfortable distance from within his vocabulary, there is a clear effort to expand his own vocabulary by understanding the history and tradition of hip-hop, trying to contact record labels, rappers, and academics, even attending a rap concert. The efficacy of Wallace's efforts of reaching out and defending rap music might be proven by the description of *Signifying Rappers* in "Musicology as Political Act" a text that argues for rap as "a voice for the empowerment and resistance for African-Americans mired in poverty." (Bohlman 412) This should not be understood as a kind of transcription of the rapper's words, instead, it is a kind of translation that tries to enlarge the vocabulary of the white community and so make it more receptive to those words. As the previous quote suggests, the aim of this effort is not to instigate an aesthetic shift in the dominant culture. As this chapter will show, Wallace's text aims at the possibility of reducing the suffering of a community that is oppressed in the same democracy he participates in. We can read *Signifying Rappers* as a clear effort to construct a text that has civic, political, and cultural implications in the United States. That Wallace carried out this project in the early stages of his career should instigate serious critical revaluation of the text, as well as its resonance throughout the oeuvre. Through the use of archival material and rap criticism, this chapter will show that *Signifying Rappers* is undeserving of the obscurity it was subjected to for over a decade. But, maybe more importantly than that for my dissertation, I'll show the deep civic and democratic intentions of this text and its archival sources through Rorty's American Pragmatism.

2. 'E Unibus Pluram'

'E Unibus Pluram' is the closest Wallace came to a literary manifesto; it is fair to say it does not call for the replacement of one foundation with another, nor does it defend its stances through absolute concepts. By considering the creation of a literature that can avoid its own banalization

and commodification, Wallace posits the option to "risk the yawn," i.e. to write with a purpose beyond entertainment; this is a contingent proposal based on the reasoning that "[r]eal rebels […] risk disapproval" and the only risk to run in the entertainment laden early '90's is to "eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue" (81). To "risk the yawn" is not presented as an inherent quality of literature, it is a possible avenue of continuity for a U.S. fiction that seems to have exhausted itself. One would be hard-pressed to present rap as a genre that 'risks the yawn' for rap music seems to thrive in the environment that suffocates American fiction, yet parallels can be established between both texts. Morrisey and Thompson found that "Wallace's concerns with hip-hop's overriding cynicism and lack of a positive program" can be read as "a refracted version of his later critique of 'postmodern lit.'" By placing 'E Unibus Pluram' in this way, Wallace's thoughts on rap are but a developmental stepping stone; "an attentive reading of *Signifying Rappers* allows us to observe the ways in which Wallace was rehearsing, in an indirect and veiled manner, the artistic agenda he would shortly set forth" (87). This reading downplays the complex social positionality of *Signifying Rappers* that is present in a lesser form in 'E Unibus Pluram.' This chapter will show that Wallace was neither directly concerned with rap's 'overriding cynicism' nor its 'lack of a positive program.'

The full title of the essay is 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' and when Wallace writes about those two topics he can do so from within his own vocabulary, he is writing from the inside, so to speak; he can be glued to the tube and spend hours zapping through channels. This is not the case with rap music, towards which he is the unaddressed fan, the white male outsider. When I compare 'E Unibus Pluram' to *Signifying Rappers*, I am interested in connecting the overlapping observations between both texts. These overlaps reveal the shared conditions of both communities, revealing angsts and possibilities that appear as characteristic of the democracy Wallace lived in.

A difficulty that comes from pairing 'E Unibus Pluram' with *Signifying Rappers* is that the statements of the former might efface the subtleties of the latter. Rap music "mirrors" its core performative audience, America's black community. I will detail later in the chapter how the 'mirroring' relation partakes in the study of rap, for now, I present a concept from 'E Unibus Pluram' called Image-Fiction: it's the name Wallace gives to prose literature that aims to describe a society defined by T.V.-watching. But Image-Fiction is less a reaction to a cultural malaise than a symptom, and this is why Wallace notes that the "fictional response to television is less a novel than a piece of witty, erudite, extremely high-quality prose television." (80) It would appear logical and simple to apply the same judgements to hip-hop, yet Wallace

denounces this approach in *Signifying Rappers*. It is erroneous and dismissive to state that rappers only enact with what T.V. culture feeds them, it is an oversimplification used to discredit hip-hop: "Thus the rapper isn't artistically legit, doesn't 'create;' he merely regurgitates the popular artefacts his world has taken, or had imposed on it, as that part of the Self it can see" (*SR* 98). *Signifying Rappers* is more than "a refracted version" of 'E Unibus Pluram,' more than a practice draft for his later commentaries on U.S. culture, it is a text with a social and ethical complexity that is unique in the Wallace canon.

Morrissey and Thompson found that "[t]he problem with *Signifying Rappers*, from contemporary whiteness-studies perspective, lies not in its positionality or methodology per se but rather in the inconsistency of its aims" (95). This chapter disagrees with this statement, maybe because it does not approach the text from a "contemporary whiteness-studies perspective" but from Rorty's Pragmatist theory of vocabularies. Wallace's aim, I contend, is to aid his white community in understanding hip-hop music as an art form and its role in American culture. He hopes to create empathy for the black community through the expansion of the white community's vocabulary by having them comprehend the rapper's story.

Leaving behind Morrisey and that article but staying with Thompson, I'll present the prominent reading he gives *Signifying Rappers* in the aforementioned book *Global Wallace*. It's no coincidence that *Signifying Rappers* is the last text by Wallace he reads before presenting his conclusion. It's worth remembering that, as presented in the previous chapter, Thompson argues that Wallace "perceived specific cultural content as a mere surface-level dissimilarity" (197) when reading world literature. Thompson then argues that Wallace worked similarly to rap's samplers when he incorporated qualities from international literature into his writing: "Part of what attracted Wallace to late-80s hip-hop was its emphasis on intertextuality" (232). Thompson therefore places *Signifying Rappers* at a prominent place of the Wallace canon, turning it into "one final metaphor with which to understand Wallace's commitment to intertextuality", the metaphor being "Wallace as the literary equivalent [of] a hip-hop sampler" (234). In my reading, however, Wallace is more the equivalent of hip-hop's rapper, since, as I'll show, it's the rapper who both addresses and represents the black community, and in the case of Wallace he addresses his own white middle-class community, hoping to expand their vocabulary through a redescription of rap.

3. Close reading

Signifying Rappers is written in a style that looks to evoke the voice of an '80s' fan of rap music; its form tries to appear more improvised than planned, coupling extensive sections with brief ones. Before looking at each of Wallace's sections, I will present archival evidence showing that from the first draft he had a clear notion of what kind of book he wanted to write, and that his heavy involvement in the editorial process kept *Signifying Rappers* in a consistent stylistic direction. The following is a section of the letter Wallace wrote to Lee Smith, an associate editor at Ecco Press, to present the first draft of *Signifying Rappers*:

> Enclosed is a long, hopefully pretty exhaustive piece on the rap/hip-hop scene in the U.S. late-80's as such might be perceived by white people -- my roommate and I have been working on it for 2 months. (2)

It is interesting to note that, apart from the obvious "rap/hip-hop" theme, he picks the book's temporal and social setting as the main elements that define it; "late-80's" and "perceived by white people". This contingency will guide the editing process up to its publication. Compare Wallace's own description of *Signifying Rappers* with the following one by Ecco Press in a later stage of the publishing process. The first is from a Spring 1990 publication list: "An essay investigating rap's music's relationship with politics, violence, racism, its place in the continuum of African-American culture, and its integrity as artistic expression" (31). The second is an excerpt from the book's original back-cover: "The authors, white, educated, middle-class, occupy a peculiar position, at once marginal and crucial to rap's Us and Them equations" (120). The former focuses on the characteristics of rap music and its validity as art; the latter, basically quoting from the book, focuses on the writer's (racial) relation to their topic, similar to Wallace's description. Although both describe the content of the book, for my reading the difference between the two re-enacts the editorial shift from an attempt at an objective description of rap to Wallace's subjective description.

The book's style and syntax are also tied to this temporal positionality, as any reader that has listened to rap after the '90's will notice. It's obvious that Wallace had no way to predict what direction hip-hop would take, much less its slang; there is a tied-to-the-whale risk in his effort to take in and absorb the hip-hop culture of his time by employing its slang and syntax while never pretending to be part of the movement itself. The importance this choice had for Wallace, and the confusion it caused his editors, can be seen in a two-page letter from 1989 he sent to Ecco Press in which he lists that apparent style errors, idiosyncrasies, and incongruities are 'INTENTIONAL.' The list contains 15 points in total, the best example may be: "6-Any

neologisms or deviations from standard English usage are INTENTIONAL and will be stetted" (113). These style choices were present from the project's start and they indicate how Wallace approached, interacted with, and wrote about rap. Another one of the book's characteristics that was planned from the start was its division into three titled sections: "section titles -- ENTITLEMENT, IMPEDIMENT, ACQUISITION --" (11). It seems that from the start of the project, Wallace saw white, middle-class men writing about rap as an issue to be presented and resolved. I read this as more than social tact; Wallace is delineating the two vocabularies he'll attempt to bridge in the text.

The archive testifies to Wallace's active and dedicated role in the book's copy-editing process. In one of his responses to an edited draft sent by Ecco Press, he began by stating his praise of whoever did the work: "I do some copyediting myself and am sincerely awash in admiration" (37). Wallace's involvement can be seen in his observation of how a crossed-out word should be crossed-out: "p. 97 line 3 word 11 needs a heavy, acutely angled line through the word's heart [the word is 'theme'; p. 112 line 4 word 2 in my edition.] (this is hard-to-set way poststructuralists like to represent words under 'erasure.') I attached a page of explanation to p.97" (37). Sadly, the page-long explanation is not in the archive folders I received. Nonetheless, the fact that he wrote an explanation to justify an editorial choice speaks to both the depth behind Wallace's writing and to the relation he kept with the staff at Ecco Press, a sort of conversational editing process. This often included stets in the proofs Wallace received, similar to and despite his list of 'INTENTIONALs.' Wallace made an effort to keep his text away from standardization as if it would ruin the inner-logic and purpose of his text: "Several l/n's were stetted, like 'essay-wise' on p.23, 'drive-by' on p.31, trickle-down (as noun) on p.122; despite Webster 9, no hyphen here results in a lot of reading difficulty" (37). That Wallace wishes to avoid 'a lot of reading difficulty' is pertinent to my research; in these examples we notice Wallace placing *Signifying Rappers* in a prose style that is neither that of standardized English and the essay-form nor a convoluted one that will complicate its reading.

Wallace's sections in the book, all labelled with a **D.**, do not seem to explain rap to the reader so much as to bring her along on his effort to understand rap. In the first section, labelled (1B), Wallace presents the co-authors as "*not* yuppies" and "two white Boston males" (21-2) and then presents their situation "at this hour" (22). Wallace begins his essay by establishing the context and time of his writing, as well as an "ethnic distance" (22) to the genre. His overall style is unworthy of an encyclopaedic definition, neither objective nor distanced; he presents himself as an outsider to the genre and he will maintain this distance throughout the text.

Wallace then explains how and why the co-authors will be able to write about rap and he also asks for permission to do so: "grant us at least secondary authority" (28). As if, once presented as outsiders, they wouldn't be able to write anything worth reading, lacking any insight but also aware that writing on rap as a white man already implies a cultural conflict.

It is mostly because of the awareness of this cultural conflict that Wallace's approach and relation to rap can be understood through the Rortyan concept of vocabularies. *Signifying Rappers* informs the reader that within the United States there is a black culture, to which rap belongs, that was forced to the fringes of American society by the white culture in power, to which Wallace belongs. These two cultures have different vocabularies, and rap music, where the lyrics are central, is developed within the vocabulary of the black community. Its mass appeal comes from rap's adherence to said black vocabulary, "rap [appeals to the white market] by keeping the music *closed*, prepositionally black" (36). Wallace's main concern, then, is how to approach a vocabulary, a way of speaking, that is not his.

For Wallace, "rap *presents* itself as synecdochic" (40) of the black community, and therefore of its vocabulary. "Synecdoche's potency in art depends on a community as backdrop and context, audience, and referent: a definable world for the powerful, dual-functioning Part both to belong to and to transcend" (41). Wallace can discern the relation between rap and its white audience as parallel to the relations between black and white cultures in America, noticing an evident lack of communication and understanding. The Rortyan goal of solidarity is non-existent between the two American vocabularies. For example, Wallace accuses "Us, the bland masses […] the media-We"[67] (41), i.e. the white community, of reducing the black community to stereotype ("a false synecdoche" [40]) and of ignoring the violence that occurs within it "like We haven't noticed it's been going on this way 10+ years" (41). The response of understanding through stereotype and selective shock as the response is equal to the reaction that the white community had towards rap music:

> The rest gather themselves under headlines about the connection between rap and gangs, rap and rape, rap and crack, rap and 'lost generations' We'd never 'found' to begin with. An Entitlement thesis of this whole sampler is simply that critics and writers so far have done a shitty job of countenancing the decade's most important and influential pop movement as anything more than a slide under the socio-penology's inverted 'scope. (42)

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[67] Notice here and in other quotes Wallace's use of capitalized pronouns to refer to either the white or black communities.

A lack of attention and empathy towards rap as a true genre, as synecdoche of a vocabulary, leads to framing it within the same views and/or prejudices of the culture that pushed the black community as a whole to the margins of society and kept it there. Wallace at one point held this prejudiced view. He went to a rap concert expecting the lazy image to fit reality, and found that only other white people held the same notions and expectations: "Evidently the cops had read the same stuff about rap that we had. They and we were suffering a kind of delicious enforced paranoia" (44). The cops and the white college kids are within the same vocabulary, and so they share the same limitation: working with the stereotype and not the synecdoche. Wallace's shift towards synecdoche begins by realizing that rap music is not addressed to him, that it is not immediately comprehensible to him, if at all. This is not the case for the black audience that operates within the same vocabulary as the rappers: "For the only mediating image between them and the rap Scene was the one the Scene itself projected. They were born inside it, bought in by right, needed no lens or text to see past the 'distance' and 'perspective' administrators and police and sample staff needed to bring to bear" (45). There is no effort from the white listeners of rap to understand the genre as an expression of a vocabulary that is not their own, as a representation of a life they do not grasp because they haven't experienced it. The lazy reaction is to see rap from the white perspective, to bring it into the white vocabulary, where it loses meaning. "And you can feel this false 'perspective,' these lambent, tourist-bring-your-own-water attitudes in the established rock critics who determine all pop's seriousness, worth, implication - post-hip white staffers […] Often a fatherly condescension about the 'formal novelty' of a genre 'with plenty of energy but not one original sound'" (45). Wallace's strategy for getting the permission he asked from the reader is to prove the awareness of his condition as an outside listener and critic; he shows what he wishes to avoid by listing the shortcomings of other white critics of rap: in a racially charged context, to barge into the rap scene in a near colonialist-attitude; the use of a privileged position to interpret and explain to another community their own creations; to explain rap to rappers.

The archive proves that the concept of synecdoche was present in the text from its first draft. However, the archive also suggests that the section on synecdoche may have grown and gained importance as the text was re-drafted. The following is an excerpt from the commentary by the first editor, Lee Smith, on the first draft of *Signifying Rappers*:

> David, p.17, your long foot note: this seems too important to be a footnote. Why isn't it a part of your argument above, especially when much of it relies on the notion of the rapper speaking <u>to</u> and <u>for</u> his audience? rapper [*sic*] as Everyblackman, as Legba, as troubador [*sic*] ...In fact, the more I think about it the more I'm convinced of the central

importance of synecdoche to the rest of the entire essay [...] My only point here is that your footnote on synecdoche should not be a footnote. Is it something you're afraid you haven't worked out enough? Or are you afraid it seems too academic? (8)

A reader of Wallace knows that he had no problem including a very "long foot note" in his work, yet I doubt that the first-draft footnote was the 4 pages (*SR* 38-41) that comprise the final version's introduction and explanation of synecdoche. Since this footnote no longer exists and there is a section on synecdoche in the main text, Smith presumably convinced Wallace, and this suggestion also led Wallace to expand the role of synecdoche in the text. That being said, I don't think Wallace was oblivious to the "central importance of synecdoche" for his argument even if he placed it in a footnote. The article "Encyclopaedic Novels and The Cruft of Fiction" (2012) by David Letzler shows that Wallace was fine with placing vital information outside of a text's main body. It seems, however, that the definition and use of synecdoche became too large, even for Wallace, for a footnote.

Wallace ends the chapter with a series of questions: he first asks if the rappers are "just *reflecting* their audience, holding up the mirror their world can see itself as world in?" (47) This question brings together the possibilities Wallace has been reaching throughout the chapter: the rapper is not interested in addressing the white audience (which doesn't mean they are not wanted as customers, but that will come later); the rapper is not promoting or proposing violence but describing his surroundings; the rapper's music is best understood by the members of his community. The sum of these observations causes a certain fear in the white audience; although they form part of the dominant majority, the rap genre cannot be fully grasped by them, it doesn't even address them. "We suspect here's the root and hidden white mainstream fear: what if cutting-edge rap really *is* a closed music? Not even pretending it's promulgating anything controversial or even unfamiliar to its young mass audience? What if rap scares us because it's really just preaching to the converted?" (47) But what causes the 'scare'? That the white community ignores the violence that plagues the black community or that the 'converted' have no interest in relating to the white community? Either way, Wallace's observations give evidence of the lack of communication and empathy between both vocabularies.

In this first chapter, Wallace presents an image that he will use throughout to exemplify the disconnection between both vocabularies, between the rapper and the white spectator: "Interested whites, in fortunate or unavoidable moments, can only stare through a window whose bulletproof glass reveals what makes us glad the glass is there" (43). This image is more than an adaptation of the outside-looking-in phrase, it is the synecdoche of his critical situation

towards rap music.[68] Variations of this image will be presented throughout the text to exemplify various relations between communities. I believe that the depth of this image can also represent the Rortyan notion of vocabularies, and it's worth noting that Wallace's closing sentence offers a final variation on it (cf. 145). Wallace will not let the reader, or himself, forget his condition as an outsider to the community rap speaks to. Wallace begins by dating his writing "Circa of composition here is July '89" (48). The temporal placement of his text fits the Rortyan interpretation: he is not constructing a definition of Rap but attempting to understand the cultural event around him, thus highlighting the contingent setting of his analysis and of the nascent rap movement.

In the next section, **D.** (1C), Wallace explains why two white males should be allowed to study rap music. It is a brief chapter where Wallace explains why the co-authors are interested in rap music, why it is worth writing about and examining beyond the usual white audience response of shock and fear. In the book's interpretation, by 1989 all pop music is a rehash of a sellable product, every known artist has basically 'sold-out', "rap is pretty much what there is to like" if one is searching for meaning in music beyond a "jingle." Wallace is not interested in rap as exotic venture; he considers it the only musical scene worth paying attention to in his time. It is a genre that reveals a telling aspect of the milieu: "Serious rap is important, both as art-for-own-sake and as a kind of metaphor-with-larynx for a subbed-culture unique in its distillation of the energy and horror of the urban American present." The mimetic quality of rap that Wallace mentioned in the first section seems unique since no other mainstream genre mirrors its surroundings. This quality, once recognized, should move the listener from the stereotypical comprehension of rap to 'synecdochal' appreciation, for it is in this mirroring that Wallace begins to reveal the possibility of a message that can move across vocabularies. This is why he finds rap to be "important in different ways explainable by parallax--both *to* and *for* a young white American mainstream dammed up by the very bed it's made itself to flow in" (49). Like synecdoche and the glass image, the concept of parallax is another part of Wallace's approach to rap. It opens up the possibility that, although not directly mirrored, the white audience can find something in rap besides the immediate Other-shock it offers.

Chapter **D.** (1C) ends with Wallace placing the essay within a "rap-esque rationale": it will be written and published because it gives them pleasure to do so and it is a sellable product. But these virtues are not privy to the rap scene, for Wallace they are part of the mainstream

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[68] The title of Morrisey and Thompson's essay comes from this image, although they do not address it directly in their text.

culture, "The headlong pursuit of present-tense pleasure, after all, has risen to chief among American rights; no?" (50) *Signifying Rappers* opens with a discussion of 'Entitlement' because it plans to engage in a conversation that divides participants by their race. The co-authors are racially placed in the oppressive group, therefore their interaction with the cultural production of the oppressed group can be interpreted as another mode of domination. This format suggests that the co-authors were not only interested in constructing their argument, they were interested in how to best present their argument for use in the national debate of rap in the '80's. Beyond the form and content of the book, the archive gives evidence of the co-author's desire and anticipation for the book's role in the public sphere.

In a letter from Wallace to Cathy Jewell, the third editor of *Signifying Rappers*, he discusses how the book can better take part in the public debate on rap. Yet he begins by stating: "My co-author is worried about my bio-line for him; he's working as a narcotics prosecutor and doesn't want his office exposed to any controversy about race" (85) Beyond a copyright debacle, it seems the co-authors worried about a possible backlash at their head-on engagement with hip-hop culture, the discussion of 'Entitlement' therefore seems necessary.

The next section, entitled "Impediment", opens with a chapter by Wallace, (2A), where he returns to the position held in the first section: "Whatever musical or sociopolitical importances there are in rap/hip-hop are pretty obviously there to be drawn out by and for black people." (53) The message of rap music is not for a white audience, so Wallace approaches both the rap's lyrics and its community, the vocabulary of rap, "*thru the window of pop/media stereotype.*" (56) Wallace looks at the dissonance between both vocabularies in order to reach a possible definition of his subject. This is a definition by parallax, giving the white audience a way to appreciate the same rap the black audience listens to, but in a way different to that of the black community. Wallace then gives a good example of the clash between vocabularies when he shows that rap doesn't fit into the *O.E.D.*'s definition of music: "[rap's] values and foci are different, its precedents un-Anglo" (57). Wallace defends it as music: he follows with a paragraph of praise, a near-poetic listing of the various qualities of rap, qualities unnoticed or ignored or misunderstood by a white audience. This listing becomes the closing statement of the chapter as Wallace leaves behind the question of how to approach rap and presents defence of rap music: "It's the contrapuntal tension between the music's celebration of freedom-in-Space (dance) and the rap's tightly rhymed and metered rhetoric of imprisonment-in-Time, of a poverty of 'set' and self that allows only status and power as value and only neighborhood as audience… it's this tension that gives rap's 'talk-on records' their special and poignantly post-

Reagan edge" (58). Wallace broadens the definition into a 'shared' presidency, one that negates common experience, for he already mentioned that the Reagan administration's War on Drugs program affected, or rather targeted, the black community in a way that the white community cannot relate to. Rap is the next step in the genealogy that has pushed musical innovation in America throughout the 20th century (blues, jazz, rock), and it is also a genre created within political, social, and economic constraints, and so it only addresses the people living within those same constraints. By now the reader should be asking along with Wallace: how can someone outside the rap community enjoy and appreciate rap as more than superficial pop-jingle, a fear-ride consumption? Wallace's answer in the next chapter takes a foothold on the idea of the 'post-Reagan edge.'

Although he must again begin by pointing out the difficulties of grasping rap, in the following chapter (2C), he answers that question with the lengthiest version of the glass image. This time, the glass belongs to the windows of a suburban train passing by an impoverished area; the white commuters inside, the black ghetto outside. The commuters get "all quiet and intense" as the train goes through the hood, and the "easy analysis" and analogy is that white listeners of rap, like the commuters, enjoy the short voyeuristic thrill of watching the violence of American society, like a TV image, which also has a glass in between (or, used to), because to be a distant viewer "assuages, makes us think that what's inside that torn-down world refers to us in no way, abides there decayed because Meant To, the pain of the snarling faces the raps exit no more relevant or real than the cathode guts of Our own biggest window" (76). The simple image, the stereotype of rap in the white vocabulary, is of similar value to that of TV entertainment: it gives the audience a thrill before letting them return to business as usual.

Wallace invites the commuter to step out of the train, "even for just a moment." Those that accept the invitation find "the gutted landscape of rap itself" (76), the place where rap originated is not "static" but "a ruined totem to *total* presence […] exploding outward" (77). He then lists the varieties of rap, "this Scene's hydralike"; rap moves horizontally through active sub-genres and vertically from underground status to pop success. How, then, to pin down this genre? How can one be sure that the sample taken as synecdoche has not turned outdated, lacking any accurate representation of the scene?

This quandary was present in the book's editing. *Signifying Rappers* had three different editors during its publication, the first two left Ecco Press before the text was ready. It seems that all three editors were concerned with the text's temporal position. This concern is best exemplified in Lee Smith's reaction to the first draft Wallace sent:

> One of the more frightening things about it, from a publisher's standpoint anyway, is that, as you're quick to point out, rap changes very quickly. Cf., PE's [Public Enemy] recent reconciliation. So, rather than trying to update the manuscript every two weeks, it will be best if you try to avoid the urge to be timely and aim instead to be a bit more comprehensive, anticipate certain objections. Please don't misunderstand! I am NOT talking about a 'History of Rap' here. (7)

The extreme he wishes to avoid, the Encyclopaedia-Entry style for a 'History of Rap,' would basically annul the text's syntax and form, yet it seems hard to curb the 'publishers' fear' he mentions, for how could any of the author's 'anticipate certain objections,' especially to a movement they are watching from the side-lines? If we return to Wallace's first description of the text, the project rests on *not* being comprehensive, on being unable to anticipate.

The book went through galleys under the supervision of a different editor, and the desire to give the text an undated and comprehensive approach was still present. During the Spring and Summer of 1990 Wallace received a galley-proof with notes suggesting changes; the Ecco Press archive contains these notes as well as Wallace's pencilled responses. The first note reads: "P.15-l.15 OK to change to "June '87"? Book is generally edited to read like it's from a 1990s point of view…." To which Wallace replied: "Yes." The second note reads: "Ok to cut "current," to avoid dating manuscript (in line with editorial changes throughout)?" To which Wallace replied: "Yes." The third note reads: "p. 129 - ll 2-3 Do you want to cut reference that would date book (even though we're just pages away from the "Summer '89" signoff)?" To which Wallace replied: "Let's stet ok" (72, 75-6).

Even after a change in editor, we can notice that the effort to present the book as being written from rap's bleeding edge remained, even though it would also contain dated chronicles and a "Summer '89'" signoff. In the end, the book is dated instead of falsely atemporal. It's possible that this editorial desire led to Mark Costello's brief chapter (2D), in which he wonders if rap's escalation of violence will lead to a snuff rap record (*SR* 81). Wallace seems to have valued the text's temporality, as he did when he first presented it to the initial editor, and part of the success of Wallace's sections rely on the acceptance and celebration of this temporality: "If you're reading this in print it's already dated." Part of rap's appeal for Wallace was its nascent quality, its developing and unsettled reaction to the end of the '80's culture that Wallace was also trying to understand and respond to.

Wallace compares the rap scene to that of the "late-'60s protest rock" and finds that the "Establishment" rock protested against is "benign" in comparison to the one rap battles against. The mention of protest in the '60s should remind us of 'E Unibus Pluram,' where Wallace states

that authentic civic protest (i.e. feminism, anti-war, civil rights movements) was subsumed by the market via ironic advertising. Although *Signifying Rappers* was published 3 years before 'E Unibus Pluram,' it shows that Wallace already had a historical notion of a post-'60s America, and the rap scene and the rapper appear as results and reactions of that new social landscape. Viewing hip-hop music as a struggle against the establishment that extinguished the social protests of the late '60s (and had decades to settle in, one assumes) is an empathic approach towards the vocabulary of rap, and so the black community.

The similarities to 'E Unibus Pluram' carry on into the next chapter, (2E). Consider his summary of rap's world vision: "a kind of dystopian present from which no imaginative future can even emerge. Long-honoured musical 'messages' […] have been here relegated to the status of an oh-come-on cliché, instant ridicule---cf. The implications of those damned involuntary quotations marks around 'messages'" (*SR* 82). This vision is reminiscent of the ironic attitude described in 'E Unibus Pluram' that 'banalizes,' and therefore annuls, honest conversations or statements regarding pertinent topics. I consider the 'banalizing'-stance described in 'E Unibus Pluram' to be part of the middle-class white vocabulary, in other words, a consumer class that can choose between protest and shopping. The stance does overlap with some of the rapper's vocabulary, but the rapper developed the outlook from the marginal environment of violence and poverty, so he places the discussions of social change and progress within the dystopian vision: "A roll of jaded streetwise eyes at one's naiveté effectively disses even the politest requests to hear about rap music's 'vision of the future' or 'program for change'---in the Scene such ideas are mutely regarded as either superannuated civil rights windmill tilting or the glad-handing bullshit of the white politicians who, after all, built what rap lives in" (82-3). In a broad sense, both reactions have the same result: a civic or social discussion is cancelled, and so the possible change they might bring about does not come. In Wallace's view, the difference is that the banalizing reaction is caused, bluntly explained, by an over-exposure to advertising,[69] whereas the rapper's dismissal is induced by his environment, of living where hope is rare. No wonder that throughout the essay Wallace refers to the rapper's world as hell.

The bulk of this chapter is spent explaining how the rapper's lyrics work, the formal constraints and freedoms it has, its comparison to the use of euphemisms in rock n' roll, and

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[69]   It's worth recalling Rorty's reading of Nabokov's Humbert presented in the Introduction. Humbert's "private obsessions" blind him to the "pain and humiliation" (*CIS* 141) he causes. I believe that the vocabulary of banality fuelled by advertising is in a similar position to Humbert's vocabulary, in that the obsessions and desires sold by advertising, as well as its ironic disengagement of solidarity towards others, blinds, in this context, the American middle class of the suffering of others.

even rap's 'pre-Greek' qualities. The characteristics of rap lead always to the self-referring personae who 'spits' the lyrics. Wallace finds that "The roots of this identity are traceable in just about any direction you like, from Jungian archetypology to *The Golden Bough* to Aesop;" yet the personae of the rapper seems to have its strongest root in the ancestry of the black community itself: "the wily trickster's an especially beloved character in the folk tales of those West African nations [he] finds an almost direct late-'80s descendant" in various rap songs. This modern trickster[70] finds that in rap's format of drum-machine rhythms and looping samples the ideal space to "perform its best-rooted and probably strongest function: storytelling" (86). Wallace's main interpretation of the rapper is as a storyteller; one whose tradition and audience is outside of the white vocabulary and community. Hip-hop's storyteller has many masks, they change according to message and audience, giving the rapper the ability to "say pretty much whatever he likes to whomever he wishes, and do it with impunity" (87). This mutability problematizes the definition of rap and the rapper, of assigning a single mask to the storyteller: "the quintessential rap group is unquintessential, chameleonesque […] more likely it's just a good old venerable synecdoche of the rap's Genre itself, one that's now moving so fast it can't quite fix on its own identity … much less hold still for anything like cool critical classification or assessment, from outside" (90). I think this mercurial quality appealed to Wallace and that a broader understanding of his country and culture at the end of the 20th century could be gained by tracing the rapper and his words.

The next chapter by Wallace, (3A), opens the last section of the essay, titled *Impediment*. In it, Wallace lists the characteristics of the "musical/antimusical form" of the exploding rap scene, a list he considers an "outside sampler's inevitable simplification" (93). It has an a)-to-f) form that fits Wallace's tentative and paced approach for arriving at some understanding of the rap genre and scene.

Wallace looks at the accusations against rap as an unoriginal, if not plagiarised and lazy, style of music. A claim that may sound valid when the sampling is carried out by a successful rapper who has access to all the studio production and recording resources he could want. "Many critics […] direct at rappers the same distant pith that helped critics crush 'sample-heavy' literature - post-Beat and modern - back in the '70s" (*SG* 98). One gets the impression that Rorty is describing the white community's reaction to rap music when he wrote: "The popularity of the new ways of speaking will be viewed as a matter of 'fashion' or 'the need to rebel' or

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[70] Which is one of the allusions of the title, the other being the book *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates, of which I'll talk about later in the chapter.

'decadence.' The question of why people speak this way will be treated as beneath the level of conversation - a matter to be turned over to psychologists or, if necessary, the police" (*CIS* 48). The white community's reaction seems to be proof of the totality of rap as an actual vocabulary, as something beyond their accorded modes of speaking.

Wallace defends the originality of rap in the next chapter (3D): "What are *indisputably* original, besides the (re-)arrangement of recorded sounds a rap band's digital hands help shape and create, are of course the cut's lyrics, the rap's *rap*." What matters is what the rapper is rhyming *about*, what he is saying. Wallace cuts the discussion on the originality of sampling, cut-ups, and fixed beats by relegating them to the service of the rapper's lyrics. That "sound carpet" is designed "to focus listeners' creative attention on the complex and human lyrics themselves." This is rap's originality and revolution in the late '80s: "The pop tradition by which rhythm and lyric became melody's supporting cast is here inverted" (109). This presentation of rap's formal originality works with Western and academic standards and appreciation of innovation and invention. In this sense, it's the kind of critical observation that validates and legitimizes rap in the vocabulary of the white community.

The chapter ends with an approach to rap: "So a thesis: the theme, energy, wit, and formal ingenuity of the rap are where any meanly dressed, unMarginal spectator outside the window will and must look for aesthetic access to a music self-defined as not for him. That is, the outside listener must not only take the rap 'on authority': he must *read* that rap as *story*" (111). Wallace's great critical turn in this text may be to not hold the rapper as a violent or disenfranchised Other but as a storyteller. Neither patronizing nor belittling, it is this view of the rapper that allows the possibility, in Rorty's sense, for a creation of empathy.

It is worth noting that Wallace's definition of rap would not work well as an excerpt. In other words, terms like 'unMarginal,' 'the window,' and 'outside listener' have a rich meaning created across *Signifying Rappers*. Those terms all relate to Wallace's understanding of himself as outside the rap vocabulary. Wallace does not find a way 'into' rap, a key to revealing it, or of transcending his condition as excluded; his observations explain to the fellow outsider how to comprehend and appreciate rap beyond the stereotypical grasp. Wallace is therefore addressing those within his vocabulary; he is clearly not trying to explain rap to the black community. This does not mean that Wallace shunned any communication with the black community; as will be shown later on, during the editing process of the book there was an effort to create a dialogue with various rappers and black intellectuals.

It is somewhat comic to see the legal and conceptual issues of sampling and remixing that *Signifying Rappers* describes re-enacted in the editing process of the text. The editors at Ecco Press wanted copyright consent for all the lyrics included in the book, yet Wallace did not share their urgency: he believed that samplers couldn't and wouldn't complain about sampling. In a letter from the beginning of the editorial process, Wallace wrote to Lee Smith: "We will check with Eric B. and Rakim's agency to make sure they don't object to something they can't possibly object to" (15). The song in question is "Paid in Full" which gets specific attention over other quoted songs because Wallace planned to include a full musical transcription of it, plus lyrics, at the end of the book; his comment about rappers not being able to 'object' probably stems from the fact that the song contains three different sampled sources.

The result of Wallace's 'will check' is found in a letter he wrote to the second editor of *Signifying Rappers*, Lee Ann Chearneyi: "I'm hoping you got my letter about permissions. A subsequent phone conversation with a Mr. Dutka in the Rights Dept. of Island Records has solidified my conviction that no one has anything to worry about" (44). He apparently did call to ask, and he even adds a hyperbole to drive the point home: "We have spoken by phone to several people in the rap industry (and I spoke today to someone in the legal department of Island Records about the transcription of Eric B. and Rakim's "Paid in Full"), and are justifiably confident that there is no problem with using even the longer quotations [...] the rights/legal people we've spoken to have basically wondered why we've wasted our phone bill and their time bothering with this" (44). It's worth noting that in the archive Wallace only discusses the song "Paid in Full" and Island Records' permission, even though the book cites many other songs that are owned by different record companies. That Wallace seemed untroubled by this issue is best exemplified at the end of the letter when he tries to let the legal blame fall on the co-authors:

> For your own piece of mind, I'll again make clear that any payments due to any performers, record companies, or music publishers upon publication of the book are payments Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace need to make, do not represent in any way obligations of Ecco Press. Further, any legal issues are between Mark and me and artists and do not involve Ecco. I believe this is called "indemnifying" ourselves. (46)

This stance does not imply a total disregard for legal limits. On page 106 of *Signifying Rappers*, Wallace refers to the non-existent "Ocean Records Company," a play on the actual *Island Records*, as a money laundering front. It is another example of the Wallacean trope of presenting fiction as fact, one which the proof-readers at Ecco Press were not familiar with and therefore

thought Wallace was calling out a drug dealer's scam in print. One of the copy-editing notes reads "Whoever these Ocean Records people are it may be preferable to not [in pencil, Wallace indicates a reversal should be made, resulting in 'not to' and draws a happy face] refer to them in print as the front company of a Jamaican drug kingpin." To this note, editor Cathy Jewell added: "This is questionable legally!" To which Wallace responded: "FALSE NAME - IT'S OK" (77) This shows that Wallace's attitudes towards quoting rap lyrics without legalized, printed permission is not a pedantic position but, rather, proof of his understanding of rap culture's exchange ethics. In the end, the transcription of "Paid in Full" did appear as an Appendix to the 1990 Ecco Press edition of *Signifying Rappers* and the archive indicates that Wallace paid for the transcript. The book's copyright page states that the song is "Used by Permission." The transcript does not appear in Penguin's 2013 reedition, maybe because copyright problems reappeared. This transcript, however, is the cause of *Signifying Rapper*'s second mention in an academic publication, albeit in a foot note: in "'Don't Have to DJ no More': Sampling and the 'Autonomous' Creator" (1992), David Sanjek calls the transcript a "striking illustration of how rich and complex mixing can be". A statement that justifies Wallace's obstinance in including the transcript in the book. It's part of Wallace's redescription of rap music for a white middle-class audience since, and I believe I'm justified in stating this in vague terms, complexity is often taken as proof of sophistication.

The next chapter, (3E), continues the analysis of rap's lyrics, and puts aside the self-conscious justifications of an outsider to focus on the poetical validation of rap: "not only is a serious rap serious poetry […] it's quite possibly the most important stuff happening in America today" (*SR* 114). Wallace's aim goes beyond getting his reader to break from the stereotypical view of rap, he wants to make them aware of the 'rebellion-against' element of rap. He tries to do this via analogy; rock n' roll, which is comfortably assimilated into the white vocabulary, once rebelled against certain authority figures and social norms, rap does the same, but in it "the objects of rebellion alter, spread, grow in urgency." In Wallace's analogy, rock n' roll's 'objects of rebellion' appear as mere teen angst next to the violence and social oppression that rap denounces. It is worth quoting these objects in full since it names the suffering the rapper experiences, the suffering which he raps about to his community, and which he reflects from and to his audience:

> [T]he urban '80s' police, violent death, homelessness, the lure of ecstatic drugs that dehumanize, weaponry, fatherlessness, the animal emptiness of sex w/o love, the almost Trilaterally sinister white establishment ('THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSIBLE THE GOVERNMENT'S…'), *Everyone Else*: life as a series of interruptions from an

> angry slumber about what the electric voices say you must have and what the human voices say you may not, about the betrayal of the past, of the promises exacted by Carmichael, X, and the now formal martyrdom of King. (116)

All this Wallace gathers from listening to the rapper's story. Yet the rap-act, the Scene and genre, is not just a continued outcry of social rebellion. The rapper's persona forms a dichotomy with the protest content of the song: "every against engages in miscegenation with a for" (129). Wallace calls this an additional artistic challenge that rock stars or magazine poets do not face, "Viz., as before, the hip-hop artist must present himself and his rap to a tough audience as at once *for* and *of* that audience." The rapper is seen as another member of his community, but also as the one who deserves to be on that stage. For those within the same vocabulary "the rapper must literally be the homeboy next door… except now a neighbor who's up on stage, rich and famous, via his *entitlement* to speak to, of, and for his community" (130). To illustrate this double-mask of the rapper, Wallace uses an archetypal definition: "The historical figures in whom these two crucial rapper identities best unite are, yes, the Blue Trickster of West African myth, but also the *actual* storytelling minstrel/troubadour of the European Dark Ages, the traveling rogue who performed for king and cooper both, singing (especially in Provençal) ever of himself" (131). The rapper is a new historical and mythical figure that can represent (be a synecdoche for) his community (what Wallace calls the "Everyvoice," or "Everybrother" to highlight its place in the black vocabulary) as well as the victorious individual that overcomes and succeeds in America (mostly in the financial sense). Wallace recognizes the democratic possibilities of the "Everyvoice" and looks to engage with it, instead of presenting it with an anthropological or historical distance. This rich characteristic of rap is lost on the white community when they only interpret rap through their own vocabulary. It is again a 'window' issue, the original and important side of rap is ignored: "Instead it seems like the mainstream pop-critical bulk looks at, not through, the window's flawed bubbled glass, listens to a music not-for-them just attentively enough to make out the blender-whining aural surface of a threatening Alien World" (132). This advice seems to catch its own reflection on that aural surface, that sound mirror.

Within an emerging American setting where "younger U.S. whites have begun to regard open, wet-mouthed acquisitiveness as fashionable, to see consumption as value and not just value's crude measure, to speak openly about American Dream as financial fantasy" (*SR* 134), the rap scene seems to uncover, or rather not hide "the national environment in which such shallow, dubiously tasteful obsessions can rise with sufficient public force to yield an Art's

theme and subject, context, even 'value'" (134). This is the result of the rapper's mimesis and synecdoche. The aim of his cursing isn't cursing to merely challenge the puritan tics that survive in a white community that, again, the rapper does not address, rappers are talking to and from a place where "people say 'motherfucker' and 'cocksucker' in lieu of 'kiddo' and 'big fella'". The rapper's synecdoche can bring into pop culture an underrepresented and oppressed part of the United States, this is why Wallace states that "for us, its most affecting quality is that it's the first pop genre to countenance a peculiarly modern American despair" (136). By 'us' he means Costello and himself, but it could also be the 'Us' of the white community. But how can said community listen to rap the way Costello and Wallace do? The question again arises: if there is a barrier between vocabularies, how can the black community, and specifically rap, create a representation of a 'despair' that speaks to the white vocabulary? Similar to how both communities exist under the same government, they both subsist and suffer under the same economic structure. The chapter ends with this link: "Serious rap's the first music to begin creative work on the new, (post-) postmodern face the threat of economic inequality to American ideals is wearing" (137). Wallace dedicates his next and last chapter, (3H), to describing the countenance or force of said 'despair' and 'inequality', and he does so without the tentative, asking-for-permission attitude that marks the previous chapters. Wallace's defence of rap is also an indictment of the late '80s' American culture. For it, Wallace reuses an image: "rap is, in the best and worst ways, just a mirror" (144). As mentioned, the black community is reflected, but they are reflecting a malaise that is pertinent to the whole of American culture, which is "largely a matter of TV virtues" (139) which teach that "Greed is good. Power is good. Power is freedom [...] Because cars, hardware, jewellery, trendy clothes, are the uniforms of those who exist on the electronic landscape to be regarded at all" (140-1). Wallace, in another move reminiscent of 'E Unibus Pluram,' drives the point home by quoting from actual ads: "And *you too* must 'Have It All,' must 'Succeed, Not Just Survive'" (141) .Yet this fear of existential invisibility is presented in a distilled form by a community at the margins, in places where consumer culture is linked to actual life or death situations. The black community lacks a considerable middle class to form the social situation described in 'E Unibus Pluram'. From his vantage point, Wallace observes that the rap vocabulary is a unique presentation of what became the American belief and way of life at the end of the Cold War, and at the same time, it is that belief's compressed and honest presentation: "The rapper's world is one that seems to embrace completely the Reagan carrots of Entitlement and Power, a deregulated *prenez-faire* where freedom is isomorphic with class, and face is a stat-function of one's capital and consumption"

(141). What is the point of rap's rebellious side if it is so well adapted to Reaganomics? The black community did not choose said belief, rather it was force-fed through poverty; part of hip-hop culture's depth can be found in the embrace of its contradictions.

In the America of 'E Unibus Pluram', the rapper's synecdoche is not a sign of his comfort in society but rather its relegation to the margin; it is in conflict with the centre that, for reasons of survival, it tries to reach: "In rap we have the Voice of a community of whom it's just plain unreasonable to expect trust in white Systems, but for whom the rewards of the System's stress on image, power, status, and greed are broadcast too frequently and too forcefully to be unreal. What would *you* do, or sing about?" (*SR* 143) Greater than rap's formal constraints of rhythm and rhyme are the social constraints of power and survival; Wallace strategically addresses his (white) reader after describing rap's context. Such a direct question looks to create empathy, it describes a situation and then places the reader in it.

Wallace ends 'E Unibus Pluram' with a sort of literary prescription for the social malaise he diagnoses. In contrast, Wallace ends his last chapter of *Signifying Rappers* with another version of the window trope (cf. 145). There are no solutions or suggestions to conclude because the text is limited by his empathic approach to the topic. Any type of prescription for the black community might relegate his work to the dynamics of power and race (White telling Black what to do). Instead, Wallace's stylistic and critical approach is exemplary and prescriptive in itself. Briefly said, Wallace's literary efforts are aimed at understanding the rapper's message: "he's saying he exists" (138).

4. The Nihilism of gangster rap

Nick de Genova carries out a similar process to Wallace but from a different vocabulary, from within the Black community. In the article "Gangster Rap and Nihilism in Black America: Some Questions of Life and Death" (1995), Genova reaches similar conclusions about rap's place in American culture as Wallace does in *Signifying Rappers*, so a conversation via comparison can be made as if each text spoke from each side of Wallace's 'window.' The pairing with Genova also shows that Wallace's method of approaching the rapper's words opens the possibility of comprehension and solidarity between vocabularies.[71]

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[71] While Wallace wrote about rap in general, Genova focuses on the genre of gangsta rap. I don't find a critical dissonance in pairing their interpretations since Genova's genre-specificity makes up for the historical difference between both texts (*Signifying Rappers* was published in 1990, Genova's essay in 1995). Genova writes at a time when rap music was gaining worldwide success (shortly before the publication of his article, the song "Gangsta's

Genova explains that gangster rap can be considered the most violent expression of hip-hop music and is a sort of distillation of the rapper's act. He finds that its main characteristic is a particular nihilism present within the black community, specifically by people that live in ghettos. This is an observation also made by Cornel West.[72] The difference between their stances is that West believes this nihilism is the cause of the evils in black communities, what keeps them in conditions of poverty and violence. Genova instead believes that this nihilism, if looked at closely, presents the black community with a possibility of social and political action. I will develop Genova's understanding of this nihilism and then pair it with Wallace's analysis of rap music.

Wallace's opening statements from *Signifying Rappers* exemplify his understanding of the relations between the white and black communities in the U.S.: "America's great *Alien Within*, the carcinomoid Other, inside Us, one whose desperate contemporary condition and response to it--i.e., their daily lives--we Concerned Citizens decry and deplore and target in 'Wars On.'" (36-7) Wallace understands race relations as an antagonistic, and often violent, atmosphere in which the dominant white 'Us' declares and maintains 'Wars' on a black 'Them' perceived as a sort of cancer. It is within this community under siege that gangster rap and its specific type of nihilism, the focus of Genova's article, develops and exists. Wallace's awareness of these social and racial relations provides a shared foothold to compare the approach both writers have to a similar subject.

For Genova, the nihilism of gangster rap "stakes the possibilities for freedom--and for life itself--upon a remorseless rejection and subversion of moral conventions and upon an impulse for destruction, which frequently could be resolved only in self-destruction." (89) Here we find also the contradictions of rap highlighted by Wallace, the same that are used by the white critic to judge rap as a minor genre. Like Wallace, Genova finds in gangster rap "a creative form of African American cultural production and cultural politics" (89). When hip-hop is branded as a creation without artistic value, there is an implied dismissal of the culture and life it is representing.

Yet, when starting his analysis, Genova is quick to state hip-hop's political limitations: "In its various forms, hip-hop has sustained a prominent and lively arena of ideological

Paradise" was released and became a number one hit in over 15 countries), his focus on gangsta rap means he addresses the less commercial elements of violence and oppression, which Wallace finds throughout rap when the genre rose to pop prominence.

[72] See the first chapter of *Race Matters*: "Nihilism in Black America" (1994).

articulation. Still, it is obvious that gangster rap as such in no way defends any rigorous political system" (89). This statement buffers both the critic and the reader against over-interpretation, Genova also sets up his response to West, who does demand something like a rigorous political project from hip-hop. Wallace perceives both this 'articulation' that rap has for instigating conversations as well as the lack of a systematized program proposed by rap. This view brings Wallace closer to Genova than to Cornel West. West disapproves of rap's nihilism, he does not see it as a symptom or a reaction of the black communities socio-political situation, instead he sees it as its main cause, as a sort of wayward mode in black culture; he would prefer it if gangster rap was no longer produced for it sustains a social malaise: "black musicians play such an important role in African American life […] to present beautiful music which both sustains and motivates black people and provides visions of what black people should aspire to" (Quoted in Genova 90). To this, Genova is quick to note: "The problems of knowing what might be 'beautiful music' and understanding 'what black people should aspire to' remain implicit, at best" (90). In a Rortyan sense, West seems to produce the type of Foundational discourses that Rorty criticizes. In his view, the problems facing his community are solved through an ideal that music would express and black people would 'aspire to.' If hip-hop does not fit into this aspiring ideal, then it should be discarded. Genova disagrees with this posture and, this will be clear, so would Wallace.

Genova's approach seems more contingent: "There is little merit in criticizing a complex heterogeneous cultural field for its political inconsistencies in light of some ideal political agenda to which it has absolutely no conscious relationship [...] the challenge [...] is to explore the radical political apertures which emerge from the creative work itself" (90). One must approach rap like Wallace does, looking at the rapper's act and considering the message of his words. By interpreting rap with rap's own rules and tropes, one opens the signifying act that cannot reveal itself through the lens of other traditions or vocabularies. In this sense both Wallace and Genova invite us to take in rap's vocabulary, a figurative 'leave whiteness at the door.' Both of their critical projects notice that the majority of descriptions and criticisms of hip-hop are hegemonic extensions of the establishment that rap rallies against. In other words, the ideology and institutions that created the precarious conditions were rap grew are the same that criticize rap as un-musical, unoriginal, plagiarizing: "the discourses of and about gangster rap are inextricable from the much wider ideological terrain where racist hegemony in the United States is continuously reelaborated [*sic*] and sometimes contested" (90). Hip-hop 'contests' the racist hegemony of the U.S. not only with lyrics of protest, but also by bringing

to the pop forefront the realities poor communities in the United States, and even, through its musical style and form, pushing back against the musical standards of power. In Rortyan terms, the innovation of rap creates a redescription of what music is in the hegemonic (white) vocabulary of the United States. It's in this expansion of vocabulary where Genova finds that gangsta rap has the capacity to create a discursive space for 'radical political apertures.'

With this contingent approach understood, Genova's presents his project as a search "to explore some of the meaningful human complexities as well as emphasize the radical politics lambent in the so-called nihilism of gangster rap" (90). *Signifying Rappers* highlights these 'meaningful human complexities' to a white audience that dismisses the genre (while consuming it, as Genova discusses later on). It is useful to highlight the differences between Genova's text and *Signifying Rappers*, for though their works intersect, both write from within different parameters. Whereas *Signifying Rappers* is written by a white author presenting the black vocabulary to a white audience, Genova writes from the black community in the academic format, in dialogue with a black philosopher, although it is written in a neutral or external format, the discussion itself is referenced to or stays within the black community. Nonetheless, by listening to the rapper's narrative they both understand that "there is no way to disentangle life from the constitutive violence of a social order founded upon racial subordination and effected in outright terror. Where terror is a way of life, "life" itself entails a complicity with that terror [...] a series of compromises which reduce life in some sense to a protracted way of death" (Genova 91). The belief that rappers choose and create their environment should be replaced by an understanding that opens the complexities of hip-hop and acknowledges that rappers react to and with their contingent environment, then the listener and audience could understand their "need to give that violence significance" (91). Once more, Wallace's question for his white readership is relevant: "What would *you* do, or sing about?" This subjective positionality is applied by Genova to the rapper's understanding of his environment through nihilism "Like the violence which confines us to our death while it defines our way of life, this dialectic is ruthless… and relentless. It drives us forward recklessly into the furious nihilism that would sooner destroy everything than reconcile us to the cunning violence which engulfs us" (92). The rapper's act is a motion of nonconformity, not trying to carve a space for the self within the confines of oppression but willing to break them, burn them and oneself with it. It is this reaction that West cannot either understand or accept. "Although [Cornel West] plainly identifies U.S. capitalism and white supremacy as the ultimate causes of this nihilism in Black America, West reduces the majority of African Americans to a subhuman condition in which

their own 'disease of the soul' is a greater threat to their well-being and survival than any objective structures of exploitation or oppression" (92). In this view, the fault lies on the individual alone, and so the violent life that the gangster rapper represents is a choice, the choice of destruction over that of inspiration, of lifting the spirit of a community. "The violence of everyday life, for West, looms as a 'result.' Although he refers in passing to 'a market culture' [...] these things are understood to have merely eroded a way of life and its institutions, generating a kind of collective infirmity" (93). Genova presents West as believing that the black community is, in a manner of speaking, inside a hole it dug itself in, which is deaf to the rapper's words that "denounce all the ways that we are already beaten--and proclaim that our way of life is a way of death" (94). Genova cannot use West's view to comprehend the complexities of rap and present them to his readers; he discards the philosopher because "West begins to sound like the classic example of a colonized elite" (95) West's opinion is on par with the white community's critiques of rap.

Genova's counterbalance to Cornel West is the writer Richard Wright, whose observations on the black community describe and validate hip-hop culture. Through Wright's work, Genova interprets "nihilism as a tremendous resource for African American cultural production" (95). This shift in interpretation reveals humanity in gangster rap, which is what West either does not look for or cannot find, and what Wallace ultimately wishes to show to his readership. Genova links *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas with the figure of the gangster rapper: "it is imperative to consider that what made Bigger Thomas incorrigibly inclined to estrangement, violence, and even self-destruction was, under the dehumanizing conditions of racist oppression, what was finally irreducible about his humanity" (98). In a violent environment, the rapper strives to remain an individual. This is reminiscent of Wallace's awareness of rap's birth within formal, technological, and economic confinements; Genova's reading of Wright suggests that the rapper's persona is created within confinements as a way to break from them. It further explains why successful rappers remain within certain limits, even after the economical limitations have evaporated, and that to the rapper, the only way to actually 'sell-out' is by taking West's stance towards the oppressor. Here is the rapper: "The most basic example of this personality is that of the alienated individual who maintains a sense of his own dignity through a ruthless nihilism" (98). The outsider's reaction to this nihilism may be to dismiss rap or at least to keep it at bay (Genova discusses the white audience's reactions to rap further on). Wallace and Genova defend the depth of rap, the contradictions that, when not reflected on, lead to dismissal. "This elemental quest for dignity, which is here expressed as a crude masculinist

will to dominate others, should not be too quickly disregarded" (98). This dismissal also includes the rapper's black audience, the mirrored converted, for they too experience this nihilism, it is the struggle for the survival of their humanity that is represented by the rapper and that the outsider fails to grasp: "Although he acts very much alone and tests fate as an individual, his nihilistic posture is a source of deep pride for the other Black people who bear witness [...] This same nihilism is nonetheless a structure of thought, sentiment, and action which stands against the onslaught of racist terror and is thus profoundly (and inevitably) located within both African American cultural life and Black experience" (100-1). This interpretation of nihilism reveals the motor behind rap music, and it also ties it to a wider cultural creation of black America, one that is in itself a road of survival for the individual. The expression of this survival is what takes rap outside of the ironic cycle of image-fiction. The truth that rap offers is neither romanticized nor ironic, it's not asking for pity or comfort, a characteristic that Genova highlights by bringing in another production of that same nihilism: "The violent truth of *Beloved*'s love ethic should leave us without the consolation of tears" (97).

Genova turns towards the relation between the white, secondary audience, and the rapper. Wallace's white-at-the-window image is seen from the 'other side', revealing how violence also permeates the window-image:

> As a self-styled product of "the ghetto," gangster rap musically and lyrically reproduces the hyperboles of the ghetto and thus stands as the fantastical reproduction of destruction, a production of irrepressible and bombastic "Blackness," the self-styled product of, and symbolic reproduction of, "niggers" and their destruction. Gangster rap is the expression of an urban American "culture of terror" and "space of death." (106)

The consumption of gangster rap reveals and clarifies the oppressive relations between vocabularies. The 'joy ride' consumption of rap reveals the absence of conversations between communities, instead of listening to the rapper's descriptions and hoping to reduce the suffering told, gangsta rap, despite its uniqueness and innovation as a new musical genre, was easily and immediately fitted into pre-existing modes of subjugation. In Rortyan terms, the white vocabulary resisted the redescription and expansion offered by rap and instead understood the genre with the pre-existing vocabulary of segregation and oppression, not synecdochic but stereotypical. It's this kind of conservatism that makes it fitting for Genova to use 'colonizers' in his descriptions: "Colonizers conjure for themselves a vivid mythology which they come to believe and which justifies for them the real savagery that they perpetrate against the colonized population" (106). This conjuration reminds us of Wallace's Safari-like image of the urban train

passing through the ghetto. It also fits West's stance on gangster rap: it represents the savagery the colonized 'chose.' Hip-hop problematizes race relations by forcing the white audience to reveal itself to the rapper's act. In other words, the consumption and dismissal of rap by the white community is more telling of the ideology behind race relations and oppressions than about taste or musical preferences. Genova highlights this subtle complexity by stating that gangster rap "exposes the multivalence and equivocation of racial essentialism; it evokes all of the conflicted meanings and opposed values which congeal simultaneously around a shared set of socially charged signifiers that comprise a single racial nomenclature" (107). In a Rortyan reading, 'essentialism' is the word to highlight, since there can be no conscious acceptance of redescriptions if vocabularies are guarded by foundational beliefs. Wallace instead notices one of the overlaps between vocabularies in the Horatio-Alger-type of character the rappers represent, further pushing them as a sort of cowboy-entrepreneur archetype, while simultaneously taking the place of the nightmarish Other in the white vocabulary. Once again, the complexity of rap is shown as a closed act related to general U.S. culture: "hip-hop is a living and lively cultural form, inextricable from wider social contexts of meaning and political conflict, while also intrinsically entangled--discursively, ideologically, politically--with its own diverse and contradictory configurations" (110). The rapper as the American dream and the American Other; it is with this dichotomy in mind that Genova approaches the critique of sexism in rap. Genova does not deny that there is a female objectification in hip-hop culture, yet he is interested in highlighting that "an almost exclusive focus on this aspect of gangster rap (in scholarly writing as well as the mass media) has effectively precluded any careful attention to other dimensions of the complicated politics of the genre" (110). The critique of sexism in rap functions more as another dismissal than as an interest in solving an issue. Wallace mentions rap's sexism in *Signifying Rappers* but he doesn't delve into the subject. In my reading, Wallace doesn't criticize sexism in hip-hop for two reasons. First, because it would immediately create a 'white telling black what to do' relationship. But also, maybe most importantly, because, in the context of his text, it would characterize sexism as an essential part of hip-hop when it's another overlap, like that of the capitalist entrepreneur. Genova argues that rap's sexism, integrated into a wider political conflict, forms part of hip-hop's attraction for young suburban white-males, it adds to "the seduction of the dangerous" and it plays out in an oppressor/oppressed dynamic in which men have an indirect contest: "the safe distance secured through this kind of commodified danger is often (and conveniently) further removed--displaced onto women's bodies [...] Women are reduced to the property of men, the control of which will

apparently be sorted out in the contest" (110). Genova sees the overlaps between vocabularies not as points of unison, as the commonalities that could lead to understanding and integration, but as points of heightened conflict. As if an overlap between vocabularies, which reveal a fallible essentialism, should be repressed and destroyed instead of celebrated.

Genova and Wallace also coincide on the importance of rap and the rapper for the black community. Once more, their arguments are not identical but are representative of parallax view. Genova's description comes from within the black vocabulary: "For its African American audiences (not at all exclusively male or adolescent), but particularly for poor and working-class Black male youth, there is a form of transcendence made possible by gangster rap, in particular, as well as by much of hip-hop in general" (112). Wallace's description of this effect reads more distanced even though it makes the same observation: "[i]t's the flip-flopped mix that's so riveting about the rap Scene's special elitist/Everyman aesthetic" (131). It's curious that the stylistic difference between the two is that Genova writes in the neutral style of academia while Wallace's tries to recreate the urban and oral. Both point at how the appreciation of rap's transcendence-aesthetic is readily available to the Black listener. Wallace noticed and accepted that the rapper did not address him. This acceptance requires grasping the present and historic conditions of the African American community, not doing so leads to the error of judging it through an alien vocabulary. Such is Genova's critique of West's view of rap, where there is "nostalgia for a time when there were purportedly other (and implicitly, better) forms of transcendence available." This view negates rap's inheritance from a tradition of music and a resistance against oppression, placing it as a pessimistic turn rather than as an organic reaction to the latest circumstances in a history of oppression. The subtleties of this cannot be overstated, yet, for Genova they are simplified in West's interpretation: "It appears that [the rapper's] history is far more defined by welfare and drugs than by themselves; indeed, theirs appears to be a 'culture of poverty'" (112). One must instead understand hip-hop as "a potentially oppositional consciousness" that sprouted "in a rich legacy of postbellum Black folklore" (Genova 113). This definition then allows for a robust definition of rap:

> A merely formal analogy between Black folktales and mass-mediated, commodified rap music can appear to invoke a transhistorical identity of the two. But the historicity of this continuity of African American oral and performative traditions resides precisely in their transformations across different regimes of representation. Mass-mediated hip-hop is saturated in commodification, and it is articulated by the historic dislocations and disjunctures which shape its multiple social contexts. (Genova 113-4)

Rap's ability to transform and adapt is part of the heritage and vocabulary from its tradition and community. By conversing with its community, rap describes the conditions of an oppressed group, the one excluded to a periphery. This condition requires a centre, one outlined by that same exclusion. Rap culture is a critique of the environment that births it, a critique of the oppressive system that keeps it 'outside.' This centre is the post-'60s American society at the end of the Cold War, the same culture of Image-Fiction. One of the few times Wallace references black and white communities as a group is as consumers: "No one's a yuppie because *everyone's* a yuppie, a consummate consumer, for U.S. purposes, today" (21). The borders between the centre and the periphery are not just permeable to violence but for commerce as well, the clear overlaps in late 20th century United States.

Signifying Rappers registers and addresses white America's description of hip-hop and the community rap represents. These descriptions can be separated into a passive dismissal, "[rap is] the most street-level view yet of a subcommunity we tend to think we favor by ignoring," and an active and violent reaction, turning the ghetto communities into "a culture we're at 'War-On' with" (*SR* 50). The accuracy in denouncing these stances is proven by Genova's depiction of the black community's pushback: "The potency of gangster rap for poor and working-class Black listeners may well be partly attributed to its capacity to inspire white fear and repulsion, especially through the depiction of the gangster's unrepentant opposition to all social order and control" (116). Gangsta rap is more than protest music, it is both adaptation and rebellion, a way out and a move against, and the ties between Wallace's and Genova's texts validate the approach of taking rap as a story. It seems that once these qualities of rap are delineated and understood Genova can open gangster rap to its political possibilities: "It is possible to discern multiple linkages between gangster rap and the political vision that aspires for a radical transformation of the street gangs, a project which inspired earlier generations of black nationalists and continues to do so" (121). Could this political assessment of rap music have fitted in the analysis of *Signifying Rappers*? From the start, Wallace places the 'we' of Costello and him within the 'We' of the white community in America, and, no matter how much auditory attention and rhetorical breakdown is done, their interaction with the rapper's vocabulary is limited. Again, Genova's study once again justifies Wallace's position: "Nihilism is not a romantic revolutionary ideal. It is blunt and brutal [...] [it] could not be rejected; rather, it had to be approached with utter seriousness and urgency, and thoroughly inhabited" (126). *Signifying Rappers* is both serious and urgent (which does not require solemnity), it does not put forth 'radical transformations' of hip-hop and gangster rap into an organized political front,

by now it should be clear that Wallace never had intentions of that kind. He was, however, interested in the recognition of the shared struggles present in rap's narrations, and in transforming the white attitudes towards the black community. Both establish and defend rap as a form of human expression with the potential to reduce a kind of suffering in the future. This can be specified by the conclusion in Genova's essay:

> However, we also confront the social realities in which the most tenuous modicum of human dignity is possible only through pure negation. And instead of a politics which begs for more police to kick in our doors and murder our children, we can discern the beginnings of a new cultural politics of uncompromising and indefatigable resistance. (127)

Signifying Rappers stands as a counterpart to this conclusion. It does not place or propose a political project for rap and rappers because it is not its place to do so, but it does recognize the 'complex lyrical space' of rap and concludes that no doors should be kicked down. Does it notice the 'beginnings of a new cultural politics'? It certainly recognizes the circumstances (institutionalized oppression; a lively tradition; access to new, cheap music technology) that lead to a new musical genre. The text's call to listen is a demand for empathy which in turn can become political when a listener understands the constrained space in which rap performs, i.e., a space of systemic violence. The 'Us' to which Wallace belongs can hear the rapper's message and lift the constraints it has placed around 'Them.' This may allow the growth and development of the portion of freedom and humanity within the rapper's nihilism.

The first edition of *Signifying Rappers* had a painting by Jean Michel Basquiat in its cover which, to my eyes, remixes certain elements from Picasso's *Guernica*: a man shouting, his hands in the air; an animal with its mouth open, showing teeth; a simple flower in the middle; a circle of light overhead. Picasso's painting uses only black, white, and shades of grey. Basquiat's image uses various colours, the man's face is black. The *Guernica* is an artistic response to the bombing of a Spanish town of the same name by Nazi and Italian planes before WWII; it depicts suffering endured by beings. Given the context, Basquiat's painting depicts the ghetto's *Guernica*: the suffering endured by the black community. It is a fitting choice, for, just like those two paintings, *Signifying Rappers* wanted to bring attention to the suffering of humans.

6.Conclusion

Wallace's empathic approach may be better understood and appreciated when compared to texts that lack it. *Write in Tune* (2014) looks at the use of music in the work of writers from Wallace's generation such as Jonathan Franzen, Jennifer Egan, and Bret Easton Ellis. Wallace goes unmentioned; the essays analyse works of fiction, so *Signifying Rappers* is automatically ignored, nonetheless the comparison can still be made with the compilation's interests. In the introduction of *Write in Tune*, the editors, leaning on Walter Benjamin, present what was lost and gained with the decline of high art and the rise of pop music: "If something was lost in not experiencing the "original" artwork, something was gained by democratizing art so that its reception was not limited by one's social class" (2). Rap music and the black community can certainly fit into the scope of the Marxist superstructure, but it seems that the cultural movement traced in the introduction is from a specific view of Western culture and civilization, i.e. the white vocabulary. This becomes clearer as they develop their view and analysis:

> How do you define your identity in terms of the musical commodities you consume? How do you embrace what's popular in order to merge with the crowd, or resist it to stand out? Popular music easily becomes a contested cultural space, in which hating the right music is as important as liking the right music. (4)

Rap music can fit into this description, but it is closer to describing the situation of rap's white audience than the audience the rapper 'mirrors.' Because the analysis places consumers at a level playing (or buying) field, where they are free to pick between commodities as a form of social expression. This stance glosses over the details examined in *Signifying Rappers*; the social, economic, and political constraints the black community faced in Reagan's America, as well as the narrative of a musical tradition that changes to become an appealing commodity does not fully account for the survival and existence of rap's African lineage. Hip-hop offers option for the black community to create an identity that offers more than a past defined by oppression from the white community. It seems like only in rap music does the 'contested cultural space' of American culture becomes a matter of life or death, a possible escape route from a life of poverty and violence.

The introduction to *Write in Tune* plays with the premise that identity can be defined and understood through the consumption of musical commodities. Wallace turns this premise around in *E Unibus Pluram*:

> Commercials targeted at the '80s' upscale Boomers, for example, are notorious for using processed versions of tunes from the rock culture of the '60s' and '70s' both to elicit the

yearning that accompanies nostalgia and to yoke purchase of products with what for yuppies is a lost era of genuine conviction. (*FT* 54)

In other words, it can be reduced to revolve around "the new old" challenge of "how to get you to buy" (*SR* 50). Rap openly takes up this challenge but is not limited by it; in *Signifying Rappers* Wallace finds that rap is the only interesting genre on the pop landscape because it speaks with a different vocabulary. Wallace definition of realism fits both his experience as a rap listener and the Rortyan function of narratives:

> For one of realistic fiction's big jobs used to be to afford easements across borders, to help readers lean over the walls of the self and locate and show us unseen or undreamed-of people and cultures and ways to be. (*FT* 51)

It seems Wallace found this when he listened to rap music, and in *Signifying Rappers* he shows the reader how to find it too. Despite its anxious, apologetic style, *Signifying Rappers* does face and engage with a racially and historically charged issue. This included an effort to engage in direct conversation with members of the black community. Wallace asks his editor at Ecco Press, Cathy Jewell, to send advance copies of the book to "Prof. Philippe Bourgois in Anthropology at San Francisco State" and "Dr. Gates of English at Duke University" Because "[b]oth these guys are scholars/critics who are carving out a niche in race and rap and culture; if nothing else at least they'll be interesting parts of the debate" (85). *Signifying Rappers*, 'at least,' wanted to create debate; the text's process accepts its social-cultural constraints to then address a white American audience, but it is clear that Wallace also wanted his text to be read and commented upon by black readers.

The archive also reveals that the co-authors tried to get hip-hop artists like Afrika Bambaataa and Public Enemy's Flavor Flav to write the book's introduction (9, 15). *Signifying Rappers* therefore wished to interact with both black and white communities and to have as much public participation as possible. Wallace's concern with the book's place and function is also seen in the same letter to his editor:

> It'd probably be good to send Bonnie ten advance copies earmarked for her to distribute to her friends in the rap music industry -- it was these connections that helped us get the lyric-permissions so smoothly. With the 2 Live Crew obscenity thing [archive includes related newspaper clippings], there is going to be a lot of debate about rap, race and obscenity in the next few months, and even if people in the industry disagree with some of the book's theses, it seems transparent that it's in our/your interest to have the book become part of the debate's language. (85)

The "2 Live Crew obscenity thing" was, according to the clippings Wallace sent along with the letter, a legal case in which the song "As Nasty as They Wanna Be" was declared "obscene in three counties" in Florida, "making it the first recording to be declared obscene by a Federal court" (88). A record-store owner was arrested for selling the album, and two of the band members also were arrested for performing the song "before an adults-only audience" (88). Both professor Philippe Bourgois and Dr. Henry Louis Gates are quoted in the article, the former "rap is about making something of yourself - it's the American dream" and the latter "the rappers take the white Western culture's worst fear about black men and make a game out of it" (88). As I've shown, *Signifying Rappers*, addresses these issues extensively, so one can understand why Wallace believes that his text can and should participate in such discussions and why he wanted both men to read it.

One could argue that in the letter Wallace is making a case of 'free publicity,' but this is more in the 'your interest' side of the proposal, a motivation for the publisher to hand out the book. For Wallace, 'our interest' is the book's circulation amongst people in the 'rap music industry.' It seems that a main objective was 'to have the book become part of the debate's language,' which is a Rortyan Pragmatist goal for it wants to participate in a public democratic conversation, ultimately hoping to change the descriptions and attitudes of one community towards another.

Wallace's creation of empathy through comprehension leads him to a historical understanding of rap music. By going beyond the circumstances of the '80's and establishing a sort of genealogy linking rap and African myths, Wallace establishes a Rortyan evolution of a concept instead of a progression in which rap was the cusp to reach. This is better explained in a long and pertinent quote from Rorty from the essay 'Holism and historicism', collected in the fourth volume of his *Philosophical Papers*:

> Hegel taught us how to think of a concept on the model of a person--as the kind of thing that is understood only when one understands its history. The best answer to a question about who a person really is is a story about her past that provides a context in which to place her recent conduct. Analogously, the most useful response to questions about a concept is to tell a story about the ways in which the uses of certain words have changed in the past, leading up to a description of the different ways in which these words are being used now. The clarity that is achieved when these different ways are distinguished from one another, and when each is rendered intelligible by being placed within a narrative of past usage, is analogous to the increased sympathy we bring to the situation of a person whose life history we have learned. (182-3)

Signifying Rappers carries out this person-like model by looking at the origins of rap through black American music in the 20th century, creating a genealogy that reaches the traditions and myths of Africa. Wallace does not quote sources on African myths and Afro American culture but it seems likely that Wallace read the work of Henry Louis Gates, specifically *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). In it, Gates traces the movement of "the act of signifying and of black mythology's archetypal signifier, the Signifying Monkey" and the "trickster figures" in various myths, the 'mask' that Wallace found most suitable for the rapper. In the essay 'The Blackness of Blackness: A critique on the Sign and the Signifying Monkey', Gates' definition of 'the act of Signifying' serves to prove its use in the work of modern Afro-American novelists. This 'act' also fits the rapper's work and, for my purposes, helps shape Wallace's definition into a more academic style. Gates begins by placing the act of signifying outside the Western tradition; after listing tropes mentioned by various Western thinkers he writes:

> […] we might think of these as the master's tropes and of signifying as the slave's tropes […] Signifying is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole and litotes, and metalepsis (Bloom's supplement to Burke). To this list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catachresis, all of which are used in the ritual of signifying.
> Signifying, it is clear, in black discourse means modes of figuration itself. (988)

He is essentially carrying out a differentiation of vocabularies reminiscent of Wallace's list of rap's characteristics. The robust meaning of rap is lost when it is only judged by Western tropes, for the rapper's work belongs to the tradition of signifying; the placing and understanding of the rapper in the right tradition provides a richer understanding of the rap's lyrics. It also takes into account, as Wallace does, the image of the rapper, both the self-description in the rap and the visual image. The reciprocity of the text to rap brings *Signifying Rappers* close to signifying: packing as many elements of it as possible into the text, its style adding to the message as much as to the content. Compare Wallace's understanding of the rapper figure with Gates' description of the trickster figure from the *Esu* myth: "*Esu* is guardian of the crossroads, master of style and the stylus, phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of the mystical barrier that separates the divine from the profane worlds" (988). We can update (i.e. remix) the notions of the divine and the profane with the two socio-economic choices that Wallace finds available to the black community: poverty and riches. The rapper carries both choices in his image, successfully rich *and* a representative of the ghetto. Wallace's success in *Signifying Rappers* lies in unfolding the

complexity of rap to a reader that is neither part of the tradition, culture, or audience of rap but certainly a customer. In the end, the reader must grasp what the signifying rapper synthesises: "The Monkey, in short, is not only a master of technique, as Abrahams concludes; he is technique, or style, or the literariness of literary language; he is the great Signifier. In this sense one does not signify something, one signifies in some way" (Gates 990). The reader of *Signifying Rappers* should understand what the rapper's 'way' is, how it can work, and how to approach it. I consider Wallace's redescription of rap as successful, whether it was socially accepted and incorporated is a different matter. It's also not a redescription on the scale of Copernicus' or Hegel's, yet it nonetheless follows Rorty's definition of cultural shifts:

> The kind of understanding that narratives of this sort [cultural evolution] gives us is not the sort that we get from seeing many disparate things as manifestations of the same underlying processes, but rather the sort that comes from expanding our imagination by comparing the social practices of our day with those of past times and possible future times. (74)

The narrative Wallace offers his readers is to see hip-hop as the latest evolution in a tradition that stems back to African mythology, instead of another symptom of urban crime. In the Rortyan vocabulary the phrase 'expanding our imagination' is synonymous with 'expanding our vocabularies,' 'redescription,' and 'paradigm shift.' Wallace's expansion works by showing a white middle-class community their past and present attitudes towards African American culture, and proposes a rich 'possible future' to be gained by adopting a new social practice of engaging with the rapper's rap instead of fearing it. It's an attempt to begin a new conversation, one that is enriched by incorporating critical work like that of Genova and Gates. With this redescription in mind, it's undeniable that *Signifying Rappers* has political intentions: its thesis could be reduced to an aesthetic, i.e. rap as poetry, yet his reading is incomplete without a critique of the Reagan administration and the history of racial segregation and violence of the United States. Consequently, the acceptance of Wallace's redescription of hip-hop as a musical genre must include new social practices. I hope to have shown that *Signifying Rappers* is a work with undeniable political and social intentions, written by a young Wallace looking to expand the public vocabulary of the United States. This ambition reappears with greater intensity in *The Pale King*, his unfinished posthumous novel. In the next and final chapter, I'll present *The Pale King* as a great imaginative effort by Wallace that not only describes 'possible future times' for American Democracy, the text also attempts to become an agent that enacts those new 'social practices.'

The Pale King and the Creation of Hope

1. Introduction

This chapter will focus on David Foster Wallace's third novel, *The Pale King*, a posthumous and unfinished text. Despite these two factors, this novel is an imaginative effort to expand the civic vocabulary of the United States. It attempts to redescribe the way Americans understand, describe, and speak of themselves as citizens of a democracy, with an emphasis on democratic participation. I read this effort as the culmination of the Pragmatist elements I've shown to exist in his oeuvre; the representation and recognition of the suffering of others, contingent vocabularies, and the effort to both redescribe private vocabularies and bridge public ones. Wallace published sections of the novel as short fiction and even as poetry in various magazines,[73] and a 250-page draft was found after Wallace's untimely death, which he considered sending to his publishers for an advance. It was his longtime editor Michael Pietsch who went through "hundreds and hundreds of pages […] designated with the title 'The Pale King'" (vi) to create the novel that was published in 2011. Under these circumstances, how do we read a text like *The Pale King*? Although my reading is not directly concerned with the novel's classification as an unfinished text, that classification is part of the ongoing conversation about Wallace as well as a starting point for talking about the novel.

One of the spurs for this conversation was the opening of the Wallace archive in Austin, Texas, which contains, among other things, the "hundreds of pages" Pietsch read, including those he left out.[74] An example of an article focused on the novel's composition is Tim Groenland's 'A King of Shreds and Patches: Assembling Wallace's Final Novel' (2015) which, in the end, can only conclude with the question "to what extent does the fragmentary, incomplete form of *The Pale King* reflect the conscious intention of its author, and to what extent is it a function of the work's unfinished condition?" Groenland thinks the "question may not be definitely answerable" yet is also "unavoidable" (234) for critical readers of the novel. He also considers an open electronic archive where the many manuscripts and fragments will be available to Wallace's readers[75] (235). While an open and freely accessible archive may be ideal,

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[73] *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *The Lifted Brow*. Publication in magazines with national circulation suggests an interest in reaching the widest possible audience

[74] "Work in Progress: A Genesis for *The Pale King*" (2014) by Toon Staes is the seminal article for this reading.

[75] Groenland also mentions that the University of Texas' Harry Ransom Center has experimented with this idea (235).

I think it's just as important to abandon the temptation to imagine the novel's 'true' form. The perils of this conversation are detailed in the essay "What is an Unfinished Work?" by James Wallen, where he criticizes the "intellectual poverty of the unfinished label" since it doesn't allow readings to move away from a "rhetoric of failure" (137) that claims that if the text is incomplete, then so will be any reading of it. Wallen also points out that the failure of the unfinished implies an "ideal of perfection" that the author couldn't reach. A Rortyan approach eschews absolute concepts like perfection and is therefore unconcerned with the novel's relation to an ideal. In this sense, it bypasses the perfection-based readings Wallen warns us of. This reading also avoids what Wallen calls the "rhetoric of transgression" because it readily accepts the "irredeemably blurry line between editor and co-author" (131). In other words, it does not reject or minimize Pietsch's co-authorial role in *The Pale King* since his labour is not seen as a barrier between the reader and Wallace's text. The reading also considers the novel's implications 'beyond-the-page,' and the role it can have on a democratic readership.[76] This is another reason to set aside matters concerning the "unfinished label," since I'm interested in the text that reaches readers, that is 'out there' as a publication. Suffice it for now to conclude that although I'm aware of *The Pale King*'s editing difficulties, I won't grapple with these issues (even though I'll continue to reference them) and will treat the published text as a finished novel.

Pietsch also wrote a preface to the novel, which means he had a considerable influence on the initial readings of the text. Marshall Boswell's essay "Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*." accurately notes Pietsch's role in this initial reaction to *The Pale King*, since in his preface we're told the novel is about "boredom and sadness" yet "[n]owhere in his introduction does he touch upon the novel's political concerns." Boswell registers this influence, noting that "[m]ost of the book's initial reviewers described the book as, primarily, an IRS novel about boredom" (210). These concerns are not minor. My reading starts from the same critical point as Boswell's: "*The Pale King* wrestles directly with matters of real world politics and […] civics" (209) which is not to say that boredom is not a main topic

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[76] I don't mean to imply that the novel only offers a redescription to citizens of the United States. However, similar to how *Signifying Rappers* addresses a white middle class, the redescription established in my reading of *The Pale King* is addressed to the middle class of the United States. This can be seen, like in the previous chapter, as Wallace speaking to those within his own vocabulary. Rorty describes "[t]op-down leftist initiatives" that "come from people who have enough security, money, and power themselves, but nevertheless worry about the fate of people who have less." With examples such as "Upton Sinclair on immigrant workers in the Chicago Slaughterhouses, Noam Chomsky on the State Department's lies" (*AOC* 53), this chapter tries to redescribe *The Pale King* as part of these initiatives, those that try to "convince the voters" that something must be done to stop the suffering of others. "Bottom-up leftist initiatives" would be acts like the "the General Motors sit-down strike of 1936, the Montgomery bus boycott" (*AOC* 53), which Wallace never participated in.

of the novel, or that it is secondary to that of civics and politics. To explain the relationship between boredom and politics, Boswell makes use of Wallace's notes on his novel (included at the end of the book) to brand the two main arcs of the story under each concept. My reading is a kind of heir to Boswell's effort to validate the 'political arc' and the belief that Wallace's "hopes for the book were not just aesthetic but, in a very real sense of the term, political" (224). I plan to unpack this "real sense" by focusing on what I consider to be the novel's most political sections. Rorty's philosophy will be essential for this task since the political features infuse the narrative. Boswell recognizes the novel's strategies when he states that "complexity is absolutely essential to the governing ethics of *The Pale King*" (215). My reading interprets the democratic and civics parts of this 'complexity' that I believe have received insufficient or underdeveloped attention. By placing my interpretation in the context of this dissertation, I hope to continue Boswell's effort to bring attention to the novel's political arc.

Given its scope and content, *The Pale King* arguably offers the best receptacle for my reading of Wallace's work, since it engages with many of the same issues that Richard Rorty's American Pragmatist project tried to name and resolve, with both often voicing similar concerns and opinions. Apart from the extensive scholarship on *The Pale King*, in this chapter I will make constant use of Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* (1998), a book I do not reference in the previous chapters. In it, we find a Rorty that has progressed from the anti-epistemological debate to matters of American politics and civics. By engaging with *The Pale King* via Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* I aim to show aspects of Wallace's novel that look to not only describe but influence civic practices in the United States. I plan to demonstrate that *The Pale King* is not only an anti-foundationalist novel that uses both private and public vocabularies —like the works discussed in previous chapters— but also a work of social hope, one that is "likely to be of much use in building a cooperative commonwealth" (140). This could be called a democratic novel, not only through representation but with the intent to participate in the democratic sphere.

I will also, once again, make use of "E Unibus Pluram" although in a manner different from my previous chapter. Here, I focus on its interpretation of the history and culture of the United States, particularly in the second half of the 20th century. By connecting the essay to *The Pale King*, I plan to prove Wallace's career-long interest in civics and democracy. The essay's astute observations warrant attention, yet it seems that part of the essay's success within Wallace studies comes from offering a theoretical framework into Wallace's own fiction, and for the same reasons it became, first, "established orthodoxy" (Kelly 2010) and by now an interpretative

commonplace that I wish to avoid. In the recent *Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell writes:

> Wallace critics have tended to regard the one-two punch of "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. fiction" and the 1993 *Contemporary Fiction* interview with Larry McCaffrey as David Foster Wallace's attempt both to situate himself firmly in the tradition of American postmodern fiction […] while also carving out a new direction for postmodernism. (19)

My use of "E Unibus Pluram" will instead be genealogical, linking its arguments to various concepts in *The Pale King*, and through that connection argue for both their importance in the oeuvre and their development over time.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to present a total reading of a novel as intricate, complex, and problematic as *The Pale King*. I will therefore use Wallace's synecdochic approach from *Signifying Rappers* by establishing a detailed reading of two sections of the novel (19 and 25) that both justify and exemplify my reading of the novel's civic and democratic intent. To introduce and unfold my reading of both sections, I'll make use of the Jeffrey Severs's book mentioned in the Introduction, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books*, for his reading of the novel offers an interpretation that is similar to mine even though it is created with a different critical apparatus.

2. Richard Rorty's American hope

Is national pride appropriate? This is a question the political reader of *The Pale King* will find herself asking, and to which Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* answers an emphatic *yes*. Similar to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty presents both philosophy and literature as the driving forces of his argument, also drawing on the history of the American Left, to forge a stance regarding the political future of the United States. In this section I plan to describe that stance, focusing on the arguments that lead up to it, and leaving its finer points for the analysis of *The Pale King*.

It should come as no surprise that an anti-foundationalist philosopher does not see political struggle as clashes between a False system and a True system, instead "[c]ompetition for political leadership is in part a competition between different stories about a nation's self-identity, and between differing symbols of its greatness" (4). In this sense, Rorty offers his narrative for identity, history, and politics in the United States, a narrative that (in a move

reminiscent of his reading of Proust and Nietzsche with regards to private vocabularies) interprets the nation's past in a manner that benefits its future.

Because of this, Rorty writes against a "[r]esigned pessimism" (10) that sees the evils and sins in his nation's history as too great to support the nation's progress, let alone develop a sense of pride for that nation. This pessimism is more or less unique to the American Left, conservatives by definition do not strive for change (for their struggle seeks to maintain the status quo);[77] it is members of the American Left who seek progress but are repelled by their country's past. Rorty places writers and thinkers like Fredric Jameson, Leslie Silko, and William Gibson in the camp of resignation, he also establishes a genealogy for this pessimism, with Henry Adams as the historical example of the person who abandoned the political struggle of the Left.

The other camp in the American Left is characterized by William James's sentiment that "disgust with American hypocrisy and self-deception was pointless unless accompanied by an effort to give America reason to be proud of itself in the future" (9). Rorty is not making a case for censorship: there should be conversations and remembrance of America's acts of war, genocide, and oppression but he sees no point to such discussions if they do not lead to political involvement, or if their memory causes an exodus from the political Left instead of its growth. In Rorty's contingent, future-oriented view, these conversations should serve to "raise questions about our individual or national identity as part of the process of deciding what we will do next, what we will try to become" (11). That 'process' is the framework for examining *The Pale King* in the latter part of this chapter, for now I will focus on detailing Rorty's stance and the arguments behind his 'hope'.

Rorty's Leftist politics reject Marxist philosophy, which he believes is partially responsible for the Left's 'resigned pessimism'. He suggests the Left take up a different student of Hegel, John Dewey: while Marxist philosophy tries to create a predictive reading of history, "Dewey's philosophy is an attempt to temporalize everything, to leave nothing fixed" (20). Foundations are dissolved, a nation's future is not headed towards an inevitable endpoint, be it utopia or cataclysm, nor is there a 'true' way of interpreting its past; "[t]he price of temporalization is contingency" (23). This could also be a practicality on Rorty's part: he grew

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[77] Rorty may seem to be ignoring the alterations to government and culture the right has carried out but, from the viewpoint of vocabularies, conservatives don't seek to expand their own, instead, they strive to cement their ideology, even if this results in the humiliation and suffering of others.

up with Trotskyite parents and understood the inner turmoil of communist movements, (cf. *PSH* 6) as well as the negative connotations Marxism has in post-Cold War American culture.

At this point of the dissertation, the following claim by Rorty should sound somewhat repetitive: "objectivity is a matter of intersubjective consensus among human beings, not of accurate representations of something nonhuman" (35). Yet it's worth repeating because the negation of the 'consensus' leads to quests for Truth and to a belief in epistemological and historical certainties. In the context of this chapter, it implies the enforcement of a 'True' political system and the belief that history is a fixed process that can be deciphered and predicted. This stance gives the aforementioned 'resigned pessimist' the excuse to abandon connections to the intersubjective consensus, and therefore any type of political democratic conversations. For Rorty, said stance highlights "[t]he contrast between agents and spectators" (35). 'Agents' being those who promote Leftist politics with the decent and civilized society as an objective, while the 'spectators' can afford a lack of political involvement since, to them, the search for objectivity does not require a consensus but only the finding of the Absolute. Again, in Rortyan terms, this distinction should not be understood as one between right and wrong, True and False, instead, the distinction describes a "preference of knowledge over hope" (37).

But what exactly is Rorty 'hoping' for? Between his critiques of both the Right and Left he does not seem to leave much space for another option. Rorty traces the history of an American "reformist Left" (44) that existed and participated in the United States without the need of Marxist philosophy and its call for a historical and moral "purity" (45). Yet it is not necessary to engage with that history to get a sense of what Rorty considered "[a] functioning political Left," (*AOC* 107). We can instead look at his readings of the aforementioned John Dewey and of Walt Whitman, which make up both the beliefs and the vocabulary of his hopes for his country. In the former he finds the description of "a *decent* society, defined as one in which *institutions* do not humiliate," and in the latter the description of "a *civilized* society, defined as one in which *individuals* do not humiliate." These descriptions are the only viable proposals for a future-oriented democratic project that does not claim an epistemological or historic foundation as its justification. Its implementation cannot come from a call to arms or a divine right, nor can its maintenance be enforced in an unethical manner. In a pluralistic democracy, it is the aforementioned "intersubjective consensus"[78] which will resolve contingencies in a manner that achieves a *decent* and *civilized* society: "[t]he resolution can only be political: one

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[78] It's worth remembering the concept of the public sphere by Jurgen Habermas presented in the Introduction.

must use democratic institutions and procedures to conciliate these various needs, and thereby widen the range of consensus about how things are" (35).

It's worth remembering the readings of Wallace's "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature", such as Clare Hayes-Brady's, that saw Rorty's anti-epistemology as a philosophical nihilism, a casting of the world into absolute uncertainty and despair. *Achieving Our Country* is the best text to refute accusations that Rorty's philosophy relativises communication and commitment. The text argues for the freedom and opportunities that can appear with the abandonment of absolute systems and beliefs[79] and invites the reader to adopt, instead of nihilism, a Deweyan hope driven by the belief "that the only point of society is to construct subjects capable of ever more novel, ever richer, forms of human happiness" (31). I will argue for *The Pale King* to be considered in the camp of political hope and pride, a textual agent rather than a spectator; one that looks to participate in the "intersubjective consensus" of the United States. However, I won't argue that Wallace read *Achieving Our Country* or that it directly influenced *The Pale King*, since I have only circumstantial evidence to sustain such claims. *Achieving Our Country* will instead be a tool to categorize *The Pale King* and highlight the democratic reading the novel offers.

3. Reader's experience

In his book, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books; Fictions of Value*, Jeffrey Severs analyses Wallace's fiction in chronological order. *The Pale King* appears as the furthest development of a group of concepts and themes that Severs reads throughout Wallace's career. These could be summarized as an investigation into, and representation of, the grounding and balancing of value. Severs's use of the term 'value' is as flexible as the word allows, and its representations range from the numismatic to the ethical, exploring and attempting to execute art's role in communication, the construction of the human self, and the organization of communities.

Although Severs does not mention or reference Richard Rorty in *Balancing Books*, it is easy to notice the overlap between both approaches: the preference for immanent values over transcendental ones, the role of mutual agreement in the establishment of values, and the

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[79] Rorty's anti-foundational ethics appear in line to Michel Onfray's inversion of the famous Karamazov aphorism: "Because God exists, everything is permitted." ("Parce que Dieu existe, alors tout est permis" 73) If there is no Divine Justice or Law to balance morality in the afterlife with reward or punishment, then we are compelled to make the best of humanity without adhering to infinity.

edifying role of literature. For my reading of *The Pale King*, I will focus on some sections (which I will present later on) to exemplify the novel's connection to *Achieving Our Country* and "E Unibus Pluram," adding Severs's commentary on the novel to an anti-foundational reading of Wallace's fiction. I will first present the novel with Severs's reading, starting with the series of 'aligned objectives' he finds in *The Pale King*: "Attending to the foundations of value in monetary, moral, and civic senses and devising idiosyncratic rituals through which a shared sense of these values might be restored" (198). The mention of foundations should send anti-epistemological alarms ringing, but reading on we find that, unlike Rorty, Severs is not interested in using a language free from the epistemological vocabulary; nonetheless, his reading does not find or rely on absolute concepts. This is clear when he discusses the novel's establishment of values again: "[Wallace] wants both the country's and the tax agency's foundational values to remain untranslated, alien, and in a process of making" (225). These 'foundations' sound closer to the belief in contingency rather than to an eternal epistemological foundation. In other words, these values serve the purpose of future-orientation, like Rorty's utopia, in guiding actions, beliefs, and vocabularies. To read these foundations in flux rather than fixed implies a culture of contingent politics rather than one geared to keep an identity intact (this is reminiscent of Rorty's critique of right-wing politics presented in footnote 69 from this dissertation). A democracy of unfixed values is one that can continuously adapt to new ways to reduce human suffering. Severs reaches this conclusion by arguing for Wallace's planned misuse of Latin. For this he turns to the title of the famous essay, "E Unibus Pluram," observing that the "title has received little commentary amid much on the essay itself" and that Wallace, instead of choosing the grammatically correct alteration to the title ("*Ex Uno Plures*"), picks a title that "mangles the Latin", a decision that suggests "the aged formula's failure to 'translate' logically to postmodernity" (224). The issue of translating and interpreting mottos in Latin, mangled or not, is discussed explicitly by IRS examiners, including both *E pluribus unum* as well as the IRS's fictional motto: *Alicui tamen faciendum est*, which appears on an also fictional IRS seal. (*TPK* 102). The examiners notice that the motto is paraphrased in a presentation video, instead of a close or literal translation of the Latin phrases, and the novel later offers another interpretation of the motto and seal. Severs links these different readings to *Moby-Dick*'s "The Doubloon" chapter, and the motto's openness towards interpretation is reminiscent of the novel's epigraph from Frank Bidart, "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed" (1), and of the IRS examination building where most of the novel takes place, with its facade recreating a blank IRS form, waiting to be filled.

Severs argues that issues of translation and interpretation are prevalent in Wallace's work, and they are never more accessible in his fiction than in *The Pale King*, where the reader is asked to 'fill' the novel, a request that can go beyond an assertion of subjectivity and turn into an act of democratic and civic participation: "*The Pale King* has to be Wallace's most social novel yet, in which themes of commonwealth and shared values that I have often had to extract from hiding places in earlier work had become manifest" (238). Severs's recognition of this social aspect is the main reason why I find his critical reading akin to mine.

A similar chord is struck in Jon Doyle's recent article, "The Changing Face of Post-Postmodern Fiction: Irony, Sincerity, and Populism", which begins by stating that "David Foster Wallace aims for an optimistic post-postmodernism, where empathy and sincerity counter what he considers an increasingly otiose postmodern movement" (259). Both his concerns and 'optimism' connect his reading to Severs's reading, as well as to Rorty's hopes for "a *decent* and *civilized* society". I believe my reading also grapples with the challenges that, according to Doyle, contemporary fiction faces in the world: "intolerant, potentially extremist forms of sincerity" (259).

As shown in my introduction, where I discussed Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace* and Adam Kelly's 'David Foster Wallace: The Critical Reception', Wallace's oeuvre established a division, which his critical readers took up and developed, between postmodern irony and post-postmodern sincerity. Doyle, however, believes that contemporary literature needs *both* irony and sincerity as critical tools to respond to our contemporary complexity. The novels of, for example, Jonathan Franzen, Colson Whitehead, and George Saunders, he argues, embrace sincerity and move away from the characteristic irony of the early novels of Pynchon and DeLillo. However, that same move also helps to "inadvertently create conditions conducive for a rejuvenation of extremism and conspiracism […] it stands to reason that a post-ironic society will be one divided by partisan populism where harmful views are expressed freely" (260). Doyle's concern implies beliefs similar to those from my reading: that literature is not only descriptive, that it interacts with the cultural and political issues of its time, however, I think that the Rortyan concept of hope provides a clearer structure to understand and respond to such harmful views. After a bleak survey of his present literary landscape, Doyle concludes that fiction's "struggle" against the "rejuvenation of extremism" demands "sincerity in order to question and challenge irony, while requiring irony to illuminate the exact nature of sincerity and its ethical, ideological, and sociological transformations" (268). This duality is similar to Rorty's placement of irony in what he called private vocabularies, and

sincerity in public vocabularies, each informed by literature and geared towards promoting a continuous conversation between humans. Yet while Doyle considers recent novels like Nathan Hill's *The Nix* (2016) as texts that balance irony and sincerity, I argue that we can find that balance earlier in Wallace's writing, specifically in *The Pale King*. The IRS is neither idealized nor romanticized in the novel and even its employees treat its role in society with irony. At the same time, its political stance and proposals are sincere, they are not reactionary but tied to a larger democratic program.

The presence of this balance functions as a conversation with the public sphere of the United States, where the novel depicts the sphere's vocabulary, while it also attempts to critique and expand it. In this sense, the manifest and the social are linked in *The Pale King*. As I will demonstrate, the reader is invited to engage with the novel like the workers engage with the motto. This is not to suggest that the novel falls into simple didactics or prescriptions, for the reader is required to make an effort similar to the one exerted by the workers. Here we can notice the shift in my position from that of Severs. His focus on the textual presence of value is not greatly concerned with the concept's possibilities 'beyond the page' (although there is mention of it). Also, Severs's critical reading revolves around his developed concepts of value, currencies, pulleys, and the work of Heidegger, Freud, Derrida, and Cavell, whereas mine is obviously based on Rorty's branch of American Pragmatism. For my reading, the best example of the manifest-social effort is section 25. This section is presented in two columns and it's the only section in the novel, and Wallace's oeuvre, with that format. In general terms, the section describes work inside the REC building with a focus on the examiners' labour. We are told that each examiner "turns a page", a phrase that is repeated more than 90 times in four pages (310-313). The four opening sentences of the section are: "'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page" (310). There are variations to the repetitive description, such as "Jay Landauer and Ann Williams turn a page almost precisely in sync although they are in different rows and cannot see each other." There are also some descriptions of work organization: "Six wigglers per Chalk, four Chalks per Team, six Teams per group" (311). It's fair to assume that after a certain number of repetitions a reader will find the section tedious if not boring, which might also lead them to skim or abandon the section. However, there are two phrases in the latter part of the section that break with the monotony of the style: "Devils are actually angels" and "Every love story is a ghost story" (312).

Their presence in section 25 is the crux of my argument.[80] Their aphoristic content calls for a more open or varied reading than the realist and repetitive descriptions of rote labour. My interpretation, however, does not hinge so much on a reading of their content as of their formal effect in the section. It's important to note that nothing announces the appearance of these two phrases in the section: only the diligent reader will find them. Section 25 offers both a synecdochic reading of *The Pale King*, and a theoretical approach to how the novel can participate in a democratic vocabulary. I will expand upon these points. Section 25 is one of the novel's many mirrors, Jeffrey Severs notes this: "this section holds a mirror up to its reader, who also repeatedly 'turns a page'" (Severs 209). Like the accountants, the reader not only turns pages but also makes careful (and maybe tedious) effort to find value on each page. It's possible that the reader's approach to the novel will be changed, as Bidart's epigraph suggests, by this section. That Wallace considered opening the novel with Section 25 (idem) strengthens the interpretation of the section as containing a reading-ethics or -theory for *The Pale King*, since its 'mirror' role would have worked as an overture for the rest of the novel. If we accept this, we can also understand the beyond-the-page implications of the novel in private vocabularies and democratic practices. This mirror is not epistemological, it's not trying to capture True, objective reality. It's a hermeneutical mirror that presents a redescribed image, in this case of the reader. This appeared in the previous chapter; when the rapper 'mirrored' his black community he didn't so much offer precision as tradition, identity, and hope, while the mirror for the white community emphasized a suffering they either caused or ignored.

The mirror can therefore highlight what was previously ignored or taken for granted. It's clear that the protagonist of "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" pays a great deal of attention to black widows. Would he sympathize with his mother if he payed a similar amount of attention to her suffering? In that short story we read about someone making a self-centered use of attention. In section 25, attention is turned towards an unselfish task that can benefit a vast community, with brief and discrete rewards. The reader can understand this through the formal experience offered by the section. How does this translate into civics and democracy? A citizen has certain duties to fulfill in a democracy. Paying taxes and filling out forms is one of them, understanding the policies of candidates before voting for them is another. This convergence

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[80] There is a case to be made for a third phrase on the same page: "Two clocks, two ghosts, one square acre of hidden mirror." It's a clear break from the turn-a-page phrasing and the un-attentive reader will miss out on its magical-realist and mysterious information. However, I consider this to be another descriptive phrase since part of it refers to objects in the workspace. The mention of ghosts is also descriptive: in the following section, 26, we are told that "there are two actual, non-hallucinatory ghosts haunting Post 047's wiggle room" (315).

between the two arcs mentioned by Boswell, boredom and civics, are proven to be deeply connected in the essay "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in *The Pale King*" by Ralph Clare. Clare shows that the novel contains "a historically informed understanding of boredom" (195) as well as the political ideology around tax cuts and the IRS in the '70's. For people living in the neoliberal United States[81] "[w]hat has meaning and what is a distraction is a true dilemma" (203) during the age of information, and the complications of this dilemma resulted in making boredom "a symptom of […] an entire generation's attitude towards the world" (198). Clare's reading of boredom is similar to Genova's reading of nihilism in gangsta rap, since they both find an element of social disengagement in boredom and nihilism, respectively. At the same time, they both find political potential in both attitudes. For Genova, that nihilism is fertile ground for a communal political movement. For Clare, boredom in *The Pale King* can "lead to something positive, perhaps even constructive" (200). With this in mind, he calls section 25 an "instructive readerly allegory" for understanding both the form and concept of the novel's "aesthetic of boredom." Clare's notion of a 'reward' is similar to my reading; section 25 is an exercise or a "test" for the reader's attention, coupled with the rest of the novel, the reader can link the lesson of the "test" to civics. I agree with Clare that the lesson could lead the reader to "paying active attention to economic and political policy, not being easily distracted by the latest consumer trends and entertainment", since its call for attention, including a civic one, reveals that "withdrawing from the world is a choice to cede one's opportunity and freedom to change that world" (204). Clare also considers that a completed novel might have presented Wallace's "theory of attentiveness" and his article tries to grasp the direction of the theory through the novel's aesthetic, hence his reading of section 25. This is not to say, however, that Clare considers the novel as incomplete in the sense that it requires other sources to complete an interpretation of it. Instead, Clare defends the civic message[82] of the novel, concluding that if it's a boring one "so much the better" (204).

Coupled with my arguments, Sever's reading of grounded values and Clare's instructive aesthetic show that *The Pale King* is a novel that diagnoses a social and cultural issue (which I place under Rorty's pessimism) but also, and this is part of the novel's genius, that it tries to grapple with that issue. However, the novel does more than diagnose and interpret the civic

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[81] Given the novel's setting and the arguments in "E Unibus Pluram", these arguments can refer to the mainstream culture of the United States after the sixties. However, to be specific, *The Pale King* hoped to address the readers from the start of the 21st century and address the culture of that time.

[82] "*The Pale King* reminds us that it takes work to pay attention, to recognize responsibilities that go beyond the immediate self, and to parse social, political, and cultural narratives for relevance and meaning" (Clare 204).

vocabulary of the U.S., it tries to grapple and redescribe it. To exemplify this point, I would say that Fredric Jameson's essay "Postmodernism, of the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" provides an original and broad interpretation of American culture, yet his analysis does not end in a new proposal, instead he calls for someone to develop a "new political art" (92). I believe this chapter shows that *The Pale King* not only critiques a malaise of American culture. Through its narrative, the novel itself, as a text with an American readership, hopes to counteract the malaise with a sort of textual agency that goes beyond critical argumentation. In other words, it not only describes, it also leads the reader to enact, when reading the novel, the civics it wishes to promote and disseminate.

The connection between the manifest and the social in the novel is made by the act of reading. Section 25 implicitly compares the labour of the reader to that of the examiner; the effort and concentration of the accountants must be equalled by the work the reader puts into the text. Severs expands this call for reader-work with the disagreement between Wallace and Jonathan Franzen[83] over the novel *JR* by William Gaddis:

> Franzen prefers "Contract" books that "sustain a sense of connectedness" and reader "pleasure," whereas "Status" works like Gaddis's, sure of their "art-historical importance," do not worry about the "average reader." Wallace argues the inverse, disdaining Contract models of reading. (220)

Wallace sides with Gaddis and refutes Franzen in section 9 of *The Pale King*, subtitled "AUTHOR'S FOREWORD", where the novel's fictional author, named David Wallace, discussed the legalities of publishing autobiographies and focuses on the relationship between text and author, which, as we'll see, functions with a code that eschews Franzen's contract. It may sound contradictory that a novel about accountants and fiscal labour refutes the concept of a contract, yet Severs finds that Wallace aimed for something more complex and flexible than a contract:

> [T]he author-reader relationship is too enigmatic to be reduced to a business contract. At his most ambitious, in the ecstatic, quasi-religious mystery with which he treats civic bonds, Wallace sought a path from the articulated philosophy of social contract to something like the unspoken code of democracy. (222)

This code is explicitly discussed in section 19, the section that best exemplifies my reading of this novel. I'll start by mentioning the possibility that this chapter is an unfinished draft, albeit

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[83] It's worth noting that Aine Mahon, in 'Achieving Their Country: Richard Rorty and Jonathan Franzen', a reading is made of Franzen's *The Corrections* and *Freedom* as successfully fulfilling the call of Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*.

a highly developed one. Although the chapter revolves around many recurring characters, we also have the presence of a character named simply "X", who is never again mentioned and could be taken as an unnamed character or an unfilled role for one of the various examiners in the novel. One could argue that is IRS examiner Shane Drinion, because in section 46 we're told that his co-workers gave him the nickname "'Mr. X,' short for 'Mr. Excitement'" (448). However, I would point out that the taciturn Drinion, who is capable of concentrating so much he levitates, is a very different character from the nagging and obtuse one in section 19, whose interjections are found so irritating by some characters that he is threatened with getting thrown on top of the elevator. Recalling Wallace's regret about using Rorty's book title as the title for his own story, it's probably advantageous for my reading that the section did not go through a final edit that might have dimmed the clear use of political terms and references.

In this section, a group of IRS workers have been stuck inside an elevator for more than three hours. The narration almost exclusively registers their dialogue, and it begins *in medias res* as the characters discuss American civics and politics. Their direct engagement with these topics is what makes it ideal for its pairing with *Achieving Our Country*. It is vital to once again keep in mind the distance between philosophy and literature since there is a risk of forgetting it when characters are discussing various theoretical concepts. But if section 19 is the bureaucratic equivalent of a Platonic Dialogue, it is one where the speakers are overworked and fatigued, and probably cramped and dehydrated, if not with the strong desire to visit a toilet; they can't walk away from the conversation, and their IRS rankings might influence their sincerity. Yet there is no Socrates-like character to dominate the dialogue or treat others as audience. We instead get the positive qualities of a conversation, the unstructured debate and the un-hierarchical participation. Although the dialogue itself is not difficult to understand, the reader is not given many bearings to understand the scene; more often than not, we are not told who it is that is speaking, with only the register and content for guidance and the elevator itself is only mentioned six pages into section 19 (135). Only the reader willing to do the work the narration demands will find the "themes of commonwealth and shared values" Severs spoke of. To clarify, I'm not arguing that a narrative that requires work is unique to this novel, most of Wallace's text require a certain effort from the reader. My reading of "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" exemplifies this, relying on subtle details to enlighten the text. One could look at how many of the literary techniques that Wallace developed over his literary career are present in *The Pale King* and understand said difficulty as part of a career-long development. My argument (and I believe Severs's as well) will be that never before in his career was the result of this effort

supposed to have as great a beyond-the-text effect as with his posthumous novel. However, I differ from Severs in the interpretation of this ambition, since I read it as an attempt to expand a public vocabulary in the United States. It's worth restating Rorty's belief in an "intersubjective consensus" (35), as my reading describes *The Pale King* as a tool for creating said democratic consensus, hopeful for the future a democratic public sphere can achieve.

DeWitt Glendenning opens the chapter, stating: "There's something very interesting about civics and selfishness, and we get to ride the crest of it" (130). A historicism of civics and selfishness in American culture should remind a Wallace scholar of "E Unibus Pluram," and, as I hope to show, section 19 rephrases, continues, or expands on many of the essay's arguments. This matters to my reading for two reasons: first, it clarifies Wallace's interest in the democratic citizen's civic identity; second, it historicizes Wallace's analysis and steers it away from absolute concepts or statements. Contingent proposals seek to converse, not dictate. "E Unibus Pluram" moves from its cultural analysis to a possible solution with regards to how American fiction can react to the 'crest' of selfishness; section 19 keeps its focus on American civics and culture.

Glendenning restates the argument in "E Unibus Pluram" that links the commercialization of the 60s social movements to a decline in American civics. One of the other accountants in the elevator, Stuart A. Nichols Jr., effectively summarizes this point: "The fulcrum was the moment in the sixties when rebellion against conformity became fashionable" (144). Compare this to the essay's "[student protesters] may have hated the war, but they also wanted to be seen protesting the war" (34). The essay supports the accountants' description of this shift as the "decline into decadence and selfish individualism", the disappearance of civics from the public sphere. This is why for Glendenning fashionable protesting opened the door to, "[t]he end of the democratic experiment" (132). The novel, the essay, and Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* try to find solutions to the civic-less culture.

The subtitle of "E Unibus Pluram" is "Television and U.S. Fiction," which marks the limits of the essay. Wallace's cultural critique is based around the influence television has on his nation and his interest in understanding that influence is to figure out how literature can respond to it, or even exist in it. These, of course, are not the interests of the trapped accountants but it seems obvious that Wallace returned to the same critical apparatus to construct the elevator conversation. Wallace sets the critical stage for his essay with a general duality: "U.S. pop culture is just like U.S. serious culture in that its central tension has always set the nobility of individualism against the warmth of belonging" (54). This tension is present in *The Pale King*

around the payment of taxes and the importance of civics. In "E Unibus Pluram," the tension is clearly unbalanced. In U.S. culture, TV became the "ultimate arbiter of human worth," (56) and even though it produces "mass" culture, "[t]he well-trained viewer becomes even more allergic to people. Lonelier" (63). The responsibility for this is shared not only by T.V.'s programming but also by its ads. Maybe the crux of Wallace's argument is the use of irony and the relation between literature and marketing. The early postmodernists used irony as a tool for critique and rebellion, it was "downright socially useful" (66). However, irony was taken up by marketing to give the viewer a "permission slip" to take "a pose of passive reception to comfort, escape, reassurance" when feeling "confused and guilty" (41). It is with irony that ads and shows can 'wink' at the viewer, let them know that they are self-conscious enough to not be part of the mass and they can enjoy themselves, or that they can be rebels, part of the counterculture, if they consume a specific kind of product. Enter Nichols' quote from the previous paragraph about fashionable rebellion, the accountant's conversation accepts and revolves around many of "E Unibus Pluram"'s arguments. Another observation by Nichols could easily be inserted into "E Unibus Pluram": "[y]ou make *buying* a certain brand […] into a gesture of the same level of ideological significance as wearing a beard or protesting the war" (145). Obviously, the trapped accountants don't have the same critical interest as Wallace's essay but they operate with a similar historicized view of U.S. culture. In the essay, the language of ads and consumer entertainment has subsumed culture. In the conversation, DeWitt notes that Stuart's argument is "tracing the move from the production-model of American democracy to something like a consumption-model […] a consumer is a solo venture" (146). So we read a similar analysis of a shift in culture, but where the essay stays with the image of passive citizens, the accountants discuss the effect a corporation-minded citizenship has on democracy: "[t]he whole dark genius of corporations is that they allow for individual reward without individual obligation […] It's like a fugue of evaded responsibility" (136). In the essay, responsibility is mostly allotted to writers and literature's role in society. The conversation instead focuses on the individual's abandonment of responsibilities: "corporations and marketing and PR and the creation of desire […] seduce the individual […] enabling the delusion that the individual is the center of the universe, the most important thing" (144). Placing the self at the center of existence is an ontological requirement for a consumer-mind. Politics, public debate, and civics are, at best, relegated to the vocabulary of advertisement, brand competition, and consumer satisfaction. The accountants notice this from the vantage point the IRS gives them:

> We've changed the way we think of ourselves as citizens. We don't think of ourselves as citizens in the old sense of being small parts of something larger and infinitely more important to which we have serious responsibilities. We do think of ourselves as citizens in the sense of being beneficiaries -- we're actually conscious of our rights as Americans citizens and the nation's responsibilities to us and ensuring we get our share of the American pie. We think of ourselves now as eaters of the pie instead of makers of the pie.[84] (136)

Although the conversation has no single argument or definite conclusion, I believe this is one of the main points reached by the conversation. The democratic government is seen as a provider, a kind of customer service, and not an institution on which citizens can participate in, contribute towards, and control.[85] Much less an instrument of social cohesion to which they owe certain duties or responsibilities.

To extend the tracing of images (and complete the "essay-interview nexus"), I will also point out an image that appears in section 22 with a root in Wallace's 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery. Throughout the conversation, different accountants make their point about the situation of civics in the U.S. by comparing citizens to minors: "We infantilize ourselves" (130), "I don't think the American nation today is infantile so much as adolescent" (147). They also compare the government and the IRS as the parents of said minors: "We're the government […] the stern parent" (134), "In loco parentis" (135), "It's like they expect the government to be the parent that takes away the dangerous toy" (138), "The government will be the parent" (146), "Rest assured that Daddy's in control" (147), as well as a comparison to the police: "We'll be the cops they call when the party gets out of hand" (148). This image of parents and their kids and an unsupervised partying is repeated at the end of the McCaffery interview with regards to the postmodern literary tradition. It's a section that is often quoted to understand Wallace's relation to the literary climate in which he developed as a writer. In this case, it will show a connection to the previous excerpts of *The Pale King*:

> The last few years of the postmodern era have seemed a bit like the way you feel when you're in high school and your parents go on a trip, and you throw a party […] you gradually start wishing your parents would come back and restore some fucking order in the house […] The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans […] We're kind of wishing some parents would come back […] we

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[84] The 'pie' metaphor is also used by another accountant (233) in Section 22, which I mention later on. Another image that is repeated in Section 19 and 22 and voices by different accountants is that of civic-less citizens being like leaves in the wind: "Now I choose to blow this way; this is my decision" (142). "Now I think I'll blow this way, now I think I'll blow that way" (154). In Section 19, it's based on the Tocquevillian image of a citizen as a leaf that is part of a tree (141), which by the '70's shifted to the citizen believing "that *he* is the tree, that his first responsibility is to his own happiness" (144).

[85] "I think the syndrome is more the not-voting one" (*TPK* 139).

start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever coming back — which means *we're* going to have to be the parents. (52)

The similarity of the images and of their argumentation makes the same point as the "E Unibus Pluram" connection: that Wallace developed his approach to pertinent cultural problematics early in his career, expanding and maturing his response in later works. This specific connection between the early interview and the posthumous novel expands the mirroring qualities of *The Pale King*, with the accountants not only mirroring the reader, but authors as well. By this I mean that authors have a similar civic duty as citizens. Chronologically, these comparisons indicate that Wallace first developed critical observations on the writer's role in a democracy, and from there moved to a more civic theory. The critique in section 19 of a civic-less culture is a critique of a widespread "passive reception" and its effect on politics. One could say that the main difference between both texts, apart from the obvious formal one, is that the essay wonders how literature can engage with consumer culture, while the fiction asks how can civics engage with it.

In *The Pale King*, the disappearance of civics results in the individual's disengagement from their democratic government. In "E Unibus Pluram," its disappearance results in the eye-rolling banality that annuls sincere conversation. For Rorty, it's the pessimism that renounces any optimism for the country's future, the hope of *Achieving Our Country* "regards self-loathing as a luxury which agents—either individuals or nations—cannot afford" (33). Section 19 is an imaginative effort to move from political pessimism to civic hope, both in terms of the characters' arguments and Wallace's writing. There is a similar effort in "E Unibus Pluram" but its diagnosis of the cultural malaise takes up most of the essay, and its hopeful proposal is focused on literary creation. Glendenning's speech on his country's origins would not seem out of place in Rorty's book: "I think the Constitution and the *Federalist Papers* of this country were an incredible moral and imaginative achievement" (133). It is necessary for Rortyan hope to find achievements that inspire a belief in reaching a cooperative commonwealth.[86]

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[86] To expand on this statement, consider the following quote by Rorty: "If there is a connection between artistic freedom and creativity and the spirit of democracy, it is that the former provide examples of the kind of courageous self-transformation of which we hope democratic societies will become increasingly capable---transformation which is conscious and willed, rather than semiconsciously endured". Glendenning's description of the Constitution and the *Federalist Papers* as an incredible achievement turns them into examples of 'courageous self-transformation', works that inspire and provide hope, aiming to "make the future different from the past" (*AOC* 122). Glendenning's praise of the political and moral creativity of both works is therefore not a conservative statement nor a desire for a fixed identity but rather the recognition of tools that can provide hope and inspiration for the growth of democracy.

Glendenning aims to counterbalance the post-'60's nihilism by praising the founding fathers' "sense of civics": he is not looking to idealize the past but to create hope for the future.

Rorty argues delicately that his theory does not look to justify or ignore the crimes and suffering committed by the American government. Wallace presents these complications through the voice of another accountant "It's certainly an imaginative and ingenious rationalization of racism and male chauvinism"[87] (134). Glendenning knows these replies, though he does not try to hide or negate them but remains hopeful by continuing the conversation. By including interjections like this in the conversation, Wallace is not censoring any voices; instead he also exemplifies Rorty's point that no contingent proposals can come from only focusing on America's tragedies. Rorty's description of James Baldwin's stance on his country's terrors is axiomatic for his own approach: finding America unforgivable, yet also achievable (cf. *AOC* 12).

Severs reads the setting itself, the "stalled elevator", "as a failed act of weight lifting by pulleys" where a group of individuals are engaged in the "difficult collective venture" of knowing "how to rise" (238). I think that, to keep with his images of grounding, a successful elevator for Severs should have gone to the ground floor. More importantly, it seems he is too quick to call their effort a failure. The scene has no ending, as readers we are tempted to continue reading and find a conclusion later in the novel. I read the scene as a reflection of Rorty's description of American politics in the late '90's, where once can "ridicule anything but can hope for nothing, can explain everything but can idolize nothing" (*AOC 127*). A stalled political situation between a Right that does not believe America's values need to change and a Left too disillusioned with their nation's history to participate in it. It is also not far from American literature's entrapment described in "E Unibus Pluram", where rebellion equals conformity.

Section 19 ends without a clear resolution, the elevator does not budge, the doors do not open, the trapped accountants don't reach an agreement. There are some shifts in the narration, half-way through the section, Glendenning, possibly falling ill, stops leading the conversation[88] with Nichols taking his place as main speaker. The study of civics turns from historicism to a kind of consumer existentialism, "Everything is on fire, slow fire" (143), which also meets some resistance "Christ, the death thing again" (149). Considering that the section appears in the first

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[87] A similar note appears on "E Unibus Pluram": "postmodern fiction—authored almost exclusively by young white overeducated males" (65).

[88] This shift seems evident on page 141 but it's on page 145 that two characters say: "Is Mr. Glendenning even awake?" / "He looks awful pale".

half of the book, the open end is an invitation to continue turning the page. Pietsch deserves credit for recognizing the depth of the section as well as the impact it could have setting specific political themes and tones for the novel.

Whether or not it is a finished draft, Section 19 indicates that Wallace still thought about the social circumstances and dilemmas he analyzed in "E Unibus Pluram", the importance of which cannot be ignored since the period in between the two almost spans his whole career. Severs's reading of Section 19, like his reading of the novel, is positive: "There is definitely hope for a democratic, humane bureaucracy pulling the levers of society in *The Pale King*" (239).

I hope to have shown that both sections 19 and 25 contain the democratic and civic guidelines and capabilities the novel. They also offer creative representations of public and private vocabularies, which in turn become redescriptions for a specific period of American democracy. Here, it's worth remembering my reading of "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," where I focused on the son's inability to notice his mother's suffering, caught up in his interests and obsessions. If that short story narrates the damage caused when one is unaware of the suffering of others, then section 25 shows the value of attention, becoming a sort of counterpart to the short story. However, we don't notice anyone suffering in section 25, except maybe the reader from tedium or impatience. As mentioned, my understanding of one section depends on the other. In the second part of section 19, Stuart J Nicols Jr observes that "Americans now vote with their wallets" (147), indicating where contemporary civic participation takes place. *The Pale King* can be read as an attempt to shift this participation on to a political and democratic stage. Consider how taxes and the IRS work as theme and setting for the novel; Wallace takes a disliked, if not demonized, government institution that is often scapegoated as an 'enemy' by political candidates and redescribes it as the institution that exemplifies civic duty and participation, as an institution of great democratic capacity, in other words, as an institution that does not humiliate. A comprehension and incorporation of such a redescription requires the probity necessary to also read section 25. In this sense, and to continue with the images of consumerism, a shift in a vocabulary is not mere rebranding. An American citizen would benefit from incorporating the careful reading required by section 25 into their vocabulary. One of the descriptions of Rorty's 'ironist', one aware of private vocabularies, is that "insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself" (73). Wallace, in 'philosophising his situation,' does not look for a vocabulary that is 'closer to reality' rather he is aware of the

impact that a cultural vocabulary determined by TV and advertising has, and tries to provide one more apt for a sincere communication between individuals. The approach of section 25 is tuned to the "adolescent" consumerist culture of Wallace's America since it counters the ad-trained habit that a message must be entertaining to receive attention. This clash is present in Section 19, when an accountant complains about the dullness of the conversation: "This whole conversation is dull". To which another accountant replies: "Sometimes what's important is dull. Sometimes it's work" (138). The message of this argument can also be found in "E Unibus Pluram," which describes attention as "our chief commodity, our social capital, and we are loath to fritter it" (64). However, it seems more poignant in *The Pale King* because of narratives like section 25: the argument goes beyond the manifesto or critical proposition and turns to an aesthetic with both ethical and political implications.

The pragmatic openness of Rorty's philosophy allows my reading to interact with the rest of the novel as well as other readings of *The Pale King*. Consider the ease with which, as exemplified throughout this dissertation, Rorty is able to use descriptions and concepts created by other thinkers. This quality is recreated in my interpretations of sections 19 and 25 as the reading guides or distilled examples of the novel's political and democratic qualities. Briefly put, the elevator scene presents the issues pertinent to the sincere conversation U.S. democracy should have, while section 25 gives a practical example of how the ethics of a complex reading function, rewarding the patient examiner. These interpretations open the sections to further discussion, and with them the whole of the novel, since each other section can be weighed in relation to 19 and/or 25. The role of civic and democratic themes in other key passages of the novel can be found in Mark West's study of Chris Fogle's section in "'Observation of these Articles': Surveillance and the 1970s in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*" (2018). Section 22 is the longest in the novel and many argue the most accomplished. West ties Fogle's narrative from 'wastoid' to IRS examiner to the history of "the state of civic-mindedness between the 1960s and the first decade of the twenty-first century" (224). West shows that Wallace plays with the prejudice that the '70's were a decade when 'nothing happened' by representing its historical importance: "foregrounding concerns with notions of privatism and civic commitment, Fogle's story reflects key ideological debates that took place in the 1970s"(232). While Fogle makes choices in the '70's that will determine his life in the following decade, the United States began its conversion to a neoliberal model, determining its future up to the 21st century.

It's interesting that both West and the aforementioned Jon Doyle critique the simplicity of nostalgic representations of the past. Doyle critiques contemporary novels like George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* "for reacting to a fractured present with patriotic mythologies" since the "mythological reduction of ethics and morality to symptoms of geography and nation does nothing to challenge the ideology of populist nationalism" (264). Although Wallace set his novel in the past, there is no desire to romanticise the '70's or to lament the passing of an era. It seems that he instead tried to find a possible origin for contemporary issues. West's research reveals that Fogle's conversion from a personal commitment to a "*public* commitment, or a commitment *to* the public" actually runs against conversions of "others in the 1970s, which were propelled by a revelation that personal growth was more important than social transformation" (232). Fogle's narrative not only casts aside the mythologies and symbols of power, it also fulfills Doyle's call for a management of irony and sincerity in fiction. In my reading, it presents the interaction between the public and private vocabularies, to quote again from West: "Fogle's conversion […] involves both the inward or personal and the outward or national components […] and rejects the 1970s focus on the individual self"[89] (232). In more Rortyan terms, we read a self-realization or a redescription of a private vocabulary and an expansion of a public democratic vocabulary. These two overlap where the self-realization involves a commitment to public service, which is defined by the public vocabulary of democracy. Once adopted, this vocabulary in turn redescribes the civic beliefs and commitments of the individual. We see this overlap between sections 25 and 19, where the former looks to redescribe the attitudes of attention and boredom one can have towards civic duties and democratic processes, while the latter offers a hopeful redescription of a public democratic vocabulary. If this redescription from section 19 is successful, then one would have good reason to accept the private redescription offered in section 25.

Despite the possible usefulness and intricacy of my reading, it would be fair to say that sections 19 and 25 do not add much to the novel's various plots and narratives; the clever fiasco is not mentioned again in the novel nor does any character seem to be changed by it; descriptions of accountancy labour are a constant in the novel and the turning of pages is not the only description of the examiner's job. Although at the start of the chapter I mentioned the absence of a political stance in Pietsch's introduction to the novel, it was thanks to his choice that these two sections appeared in the published novel. It is possible that he found them publishable on

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[89] It's worth noting that Fogle's conversion narrative contains a direct reference to the start of James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "fearful Jesuit" (*TPK* 215; page 1 in *Ulysses*).

the merit of the sections formal or aesthetic peculiarities (no other section with 2 columns, other dialogue heavy chapters are not as long). Nonetheless, both sections are a testament to Wallace's experimental interest in using unconventional narrative forms to represent and face the world he lived in. Such is the impetus behind "E Unibus Pluram" as well, which is condensed in the question "What responses to television's commercialization of the modes of literary protest seem possible, then, today?" (69) However, while the essay takes most of its time to construct its question, *The Pale King* is mostly the construction of an answer. In other words, its answer to how a novel can protest and participate in a democratic setting. Despite its 'unfinished' label, I believe the novel's attempt is successful, something that is often overlooked in other readings. Through Rorty's philosophy, one should understand the significance of Wallace's achievement.

This chapter attempts to redescribe *The Pale King* as a tool for civic and democratic participation, however, the novel is too oblivious to its limited representation of women and minorities. For example, the accountants stuck inside the elevator are all males, at least those who participate in the discussion. Following a similar line of criticism, I find that Wallace's analysis of the narcissistic turn of the '60's downplays or overlooks the importance and achievements of the civil rights and anti-war movements. Why, then, grant this novel democratic value? My arguments contain a reading similar to the one I made for *Signifying Rappers*, as well as the belief that the novel promotes the Rortyan concept of hope. Wallace is not trying to speak for the disenfranchised groups of a democracy but instead from and to the white middle class he belonged to. This can be noticed in the novel's setting, Philo, Illinois instead of a major American city, and in its characters, some may have impoverished backgrounds (cf. Toni Ware's violent trailer park upbringing) but as IRS employees they represent the spectrum of the middle class, lacking individuals at the top of the economic hierarchy. We are told that the IRS itself is headed by a triumvirate instead of a single leader (108). Like section 19, the novel is not an individual's speech but a conversation, and if section 25 mirrors the reader's act then the novel offers an eloquent mirror to the male white middle-class, where they might see themselves as part of a vast democratic society, as citizens instead of consumers, as beholden to utilize their privilege and over-representation with civic responsibility, which in turn would dissolve said privilege in the effort to prevent humiliation. I am not trying to limit the message or audience of *The Pale King*, since its content is both pluralistic and democratic. But similar to how *Signifying Rappers* did not try to speak for rappers, *The Pale King* does not try to speak for all American citizens. It does try to start and participate in a conversation about civics, redescribing the payment of taxes as a communal act that annuls the anti-democratic impulses of consumer

individualism. The novel as a whole, even as an unfinished text, constitutes a work of democratic literature that hoped to participate, like a voter at a booth, in the ethical and political conversation of its country.

Conclusion

"Have you read *Infinite Jest*? […] We are living in the 'Year of the Perdue Chicken.' We're looking at our phones until we literally lose consciousness. If our leaders don't learn to communicate in an engaging manner, our entertainers will become politicians. That's what we have now."
-Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, youngest woman elected to the U.S. Congress, in an interview for Vogue Magazine, November 2018.

During the writing of this dissertation, allegations of sexual harassment were made against David Foster Wallace as part of the #MeToo movement.[90] Although the core arguments of this dissertation are not based on biographical information, it is concerned with the suffering of others. After Wallace's untimely death a sort of cult grew around his image, partly fueled by the free access to a live recording of the speech *This is Water*, that culminated with the term 'Saint Dave.'[91] Yet there is nothing saintly about sexual harassment, nor is there a justice that can reach the deceased. It should be part of our public vocabulary to express solidarity with victims of sexual harassment, and it's the responsibility of Wallace studies to not allow these accusations to shamefully fade away. It's likely that the cusp of Wallace's popularity is behind us. I doubt that the 2015 biopic,[92] the 'Saint Dave' cultural event, or the attempts to catalog Wallace as a Christian author would have appeared if the allegations were made during his lifetime or soon after his death. The direct relevance of these events to the field of literary criticism, where this dissertation belongs, is the destruction of the pedestal under the writer's image.

In this conclusion, I analyze a brief text by Wallace that summarizes the capabilities and intentions of the democratic vein I find in his work. Before doing so, I will consider the allegations through a more critical stance. Again, although my work isn't biographical, it investigates literature's capacity for reducing the pain of others. How can the writings of someone who allegedly caused physical and emotional abuse on another human serve this purpose? Not surprisingly, I'll make use of Rorty to approach this issue, specifically an essay from 1990 called "On Heidegger's Nazism" (*PSH* 190-7). As the title suggests, Rorty explains his extensive use of Heidegger's philosophy despite his membership to the Nazi party and his post-war silence on the Holocaust.

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[90]https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/
[91] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/18/farther-away-jonathan-franzen
[92] *The End of the Tour* (2015).

With a strategy similar to Virginia Woolf's creation of a fictional sister for Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*, Rorty builds his argument on a fictional Jewish woman Heidegger falls in love with and marries before the war. This leads him to renounce Nazism and leave Germany. In that world, Heidegger would "have his nose rubbed in the torment of the Jews until he finally *noticed* what was going on, until his sense of pity and his sense of shame were finally awakened." However, Rorty doesn't stray far from the actual philosopher that stayed in Germany: "In our actual world Heidegger was a Nazi, a cowardly hypocrite, and the greatest European thinker of our time" (*PSH* 196). Rorty's argument is that the philosophical books Heidegger wrote in that fictional world are "[a]lmost exactly the same ones as he wrote in the actual one" (*PSH* 195). In this sense, Heidegger's "denial" and "silence" on his Nazism and the holocaust "do not tell us much about the books he wrote, nor conversely" (*PSH* 196). As an anti-essentialist, Rorty doesn't read Heidegger's nazism permeating all his writings. To clarify his reading of Heidegger's philosophy, he describes it as a "toolbox" where "Heidegger deposited the tools that he invented at various times to accomplish one or another project" (*PSH* 191). This 'toolbox' interpretation should not surprise a reader of this thesis. Conceptually, it is similar to Rorty's approach to his country's history: not ignoring the bad and making use of the good. Not surprisingly, this is my current suggestion and position with regards to the work of David Foster Wallace. This thesis proves my conviction in the usefulness of a democratic tool in Wallace's 'literary toolbox.' The same way I'm convinced by Rorty's philosophical belief that "there is no such thing as the essential Heidegger," I believe it is critically valid to claim there is no 'essential Wallace.' I also believe that, in time, future readers of Wallace will also find, like Rorty reading Heidegger, "a toolbox containing some splendid things lying next to a lot of outdated junk" (*PSH* 192). It's possible that Wallace's democratic tool will prove useful for the development of a civic literature. This doesn't mean that a better one can't be made or that it won't become outdated at some point. Of course, I'm not trying to say that Wallace was a card-carrying member of the Nazi party. Rather, that we should not let an image of Wallace, be it as the saint or the harasser, dictate readings of this text.

My contingent argument is built on my readings and so it is limited. As far as my readings let me see, if we decide not to read Wallace as a result of the alleged suffering he caused to others in life then it makes sense to apply this approach to, at the very least, all humanist creators, since I can't think of a reason for why this criteria and response would only apply to Wallace. Caravaggio the murderer, Dostoevsky the rapist, Pound the fascist, slavery in Ancient Greece are some of the first examples that come to mind. It may be that the laborious

task of discarding the work of humans that caused them is necessary for establishing a culture that diminishes said harm. I find Rorty's approach, exemplified in his essay on Heidegger, as more useful and effective, making good use of whatever helps us reduce human suffering. Allegations aside, this stance also rejects the aforementioned Saint Dave image that places Wallace, to put it in a way that recalls my reading of 'Octet', in an 'Olympian HQ'. This stance, for example, has hijacked the *This Is Water* speech, which is only published in an edition that Zadie Smith described as "repackaged as a *Chicken Soup for the Soul*-style toilet book (sentences artificially separated from one another and left, like Zen koans, alone on the page) to be sold next to the cash register" (265). It also results in books like Adam S. Miller's *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace*, which reduces Wallace's literature to a self-help or advice approach were we read his 'take' on different topics such as "Clichés" and "Silence".

It should be expected that after a continuous use of Rortyian philosophy I won't conclude by declaring Wallace's oeuvre (or even *The Pale King*, for that matter) as the absolute, ideal, or essential work of democratic American literature. I do believe that this dissertation proves that there is a robust democratic dimension to Wallace's literature and that Rorty's theory shows there is much to be gained by adding this dimension to conversations on Wallace's work, both academic and non-academic ones.

The last complete text Wallace published in his lifetime is a brief article titled "Just Asking". It appeared in the November, 2007 issue of *The Atlantic*, along with the work of other public figures invited to consider the future of the 'American idea'.[93] The essay analyzed in my Introduction, "Deciderization 2007", appeared in January 2007, and it is safe to guess that Wallace wrote it at least a year before "Just Asking". I mention this because it adds weight to the idea that Wallace paid consistent attention to his contemporary American Democracy, at least during the 'late period' of his career. "Just Asking" is brief, under 500 words long, divided into four paragraphs, the first and the last one each start with a capitalized Q and a colon in the anthologized version. The argument of the text is driven by a kind of maieutic method, where one open question leads to another one. The opening pair sets the unanswered focal point of the text: "Are some things worth dying for? Is the American idea one such thing?" In a footnote to the second question, Wallace gives his definition of the 'American idea':

> Given the Gramm-Rudmanesque space limit here, let's just all agree that we generally
> know what this term connotes--open society, consent of the governed, enumerated

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[93] This includes texts by people such as American Pragmatist Cornel West, Joyce Carol Oates, and even a comic by Stan Lee.

powers, *Federalist* 10, pluralism, due process, transparency…the whole messy democratic roil. (*BF* 321)

Wallace's hasty declaration of consensus is somewhat comical considering that the main argument of the first paragraph is the question: "Why now can we not have a serious national conversation?" This desire is tied to the American idea listed in the footnote above. The 'now' of the question is the second term of the Bush administration, the War on Terror, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The 'now' is also set in contrast to a different historical period: "Is monstrousness why no serious public figure now will speak of the delusory trade-off of liberty for safety that Ben Franklin warned of more than 200 years ago?" (*BF* 322) I don't read this question as a fall into idealistic nostalgia. Like Rorty, Wallace aligns his argument and himself with the American tradition of democratic hope: the belief that upholding the American idea defined above can lead to a better future. His argument gains historical validation with that question, as well as a grounding in the actual creation of the United States. The paraphrased quote comes from a letter Franklin, on behalf of the Pennsylvania Assembly, wrote to the Governor of Pennsylvania in 1755 (Franklin 238-43) and it reads: "Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety" (Franklin 242). Wallace observed that the national response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 was to cede 'essential liberty' in exchange for safety. But the trade-off was partially an avoidance of democratic civic responsibilities. Considering both Wallace's and Rorty's argument about citizenry that absconded participation, it follows that the liberty/security trade-off was no surprise. In my reading, Wallace's great democratic lament is voiced in the first quote of this paragraph: the absence of a 'serious national conversation.' In the last paragraph of the text Wallace lists some of the results of that absence:

> What are the effects on the American idea of Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, PATRIOT Acts I and II, warrantless surveillance, Executive Order 13233, corporate contractors performing military functions, the Military Commissions Act, NSPD 51, etc., etc.? (*BF* 322)

On one level, this list testifies to Wallace's attention to the politics of his country. On another, it appears as an all-too-real example of the point made in *The Pale King*: in a culture of entertainment and instant gratification, the controversial aspects of government can be hidden in plain sight through boredom and bureaucracy. In the months following 9/11, whose attention was caught by the name 'Executive Order 13233'? Who called for a national debate to decide if such a legislation, that runs counter to the concepts of 'open society' and 'transparency',

should be enacted? Where was the 'consent of the governed'? For Wallace, there wasn't even a debate to give up said liberty. Consider how quickly the *Patriot Act* was passed after the attacks of 9/11. The name Guantánamo (still open to this day) and the images out of Abu Ghraib are probably the elements of that list that received the most media attention. Are "warrantless surveillance" and "corporate contractors performing military functions" acceptable and viable in American democracy even if one assumes "for the moment that some of these really have helped make our persons and property safer"? Wallace's question is as pertinent as when first published, and the obscurity and political taboo around the events listed still stands as proof of the absence of a 'serious national conversation' around them.

A month before the publication of "Just Asking" the U.S. war in Afghanistan passed its 6th year mark and was halfway through its 4th year in Iraq. Despite Wallace's critique of the movement against the Vietnam War, one can still claim that the national debate around that war's justification, along with the opposition to it, increased during its 19 years of conflict. For Rorty, not only did it increase but it was said movement that ended the war. There he again reveals his Pragmatism for, despite his critique of the pessimist Left, he attributes the end of the Vietnam War to the conviction and resistance of those without hope in an American future. This is why he offers an olive branch half-way through *Achieving Our Country*:

> I want to suggest that such a reconciliation could be started by agreeing that the New Left accomplished something enormously important, something of which the reformist Left would probably have been incapable. It ended the Vietnam War. It may have saved our country from becoming a garrison state. (67)

I hope this quote stands as a testament to the possibility of reconciliation when one disavows absolutes, and upholds conversation, mutability, and hope. But also, without falling into a socio-historical analysis, to posit a pair of open questions: To whom could Wallace have offered reconciliation in the absence of an open debate? Is his list of events proofs that his country took a step forward to becoming the once-avoided garrison state?

The last two questions of "Just Asking" are: "Have we become so selfish and frightened that we don't even want to think about whether some things trump safety? What kind of future does that augur?" (*BF* 323) *Infinite Jest* alone can stand as proof that Wallace thought about the future of his country as much as Rorty, and that he also understood how thinking about our future can guide the actions of our present.[94] Earlier in "Just Asking", Wallace wonders if it's

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[94] It's worth mentioning that Wallace's undergraduate thesis (republished in 2010 as *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay of Free Will*) is an attack on Fatalism.

worth "sacrificing" aspects of the "democratic idea" (*BF* 322), such as due process, transparency, and an open society, for safety. Would it be worth it even if said safety was guaranteed? Trying to guess Wallace's answer to these questions would be missing the point. The text instead shows that these pertinent questions were never asked and debated. If in 2007, Wallace's vantage point showed him that the absence of these questions led to events such as, for example, the Torture memos and Abu Ghraib, our vantage point in 2019 says that the damage caused by the absence of dialogue only increased, and that, in general terms, said public debate is still absent. The current state of politics and culture in the US could serve as an answer to the final question on the augured future. Maybe that's why, in today's context, it seems almost obvious that a culture of selfishness and fear leads to nationalism and discrimination, to travel bans and border walls, troop worship and jingoism.

It's important to highlight that there is no demand for a moral or political purity in Wallace's work. Rortyan hermeneutics is useful for capturing the democratic vistas of Wallace's oeuvre because he avoided writing on and with prescriptive totalities and absolute dogmas in a positive light. My chapter on *Infinite Jest* showed this; Wallace's vocabulary and narratives contain absolute and metaphysical terms which do not equal an endorsement, the same way that a representation of violence can be a critique and not a defense of violence. The vocabulary of metaphysical absolutes and the belief in systems that claim absolute knowledge is as alive and pertinent during the writing of this dissertation as it is in the fictional future of *Infinite Jest*. The critique of these systems in Wallace is not as clear and direct as is, for example, the critique of totalitarian states in George Orwell's *1984*. Nonetheless, I have tried to show that said critique is present and pertinent in Wallace's novel. To expand on that reasoning, this dissertation celebrates the limits of Wallace's literature as proof of the need for public debate and conversation. It follows that with accepting the impossibility of a metaphysical lookout or an epistemological absolute, we also accept that no single voice can encompass all representation. There is an anecdote in D.T. Max's biography of Wallace that illustrates said position with regards to his literary work, it appears as an endnote:

> At a panel discussion on ethnicity and literature in 1998 held in Seattle, Wallace indicated that he knew his privileged status. When the moderator announced that the authors--the others were Sherman Alexie, Cristina García, and Gish Jen--would discuss their experience as members of marginalized minorities, Wallace picked up his chair and with comic exaggeration moved it to the side of the stage. (319)

The key detail of this image is that Wallace neither abandons the stage nor hogs the microphone, he instead 'pointed' at those capable of giving a more accurate description to the audience. This is what he did at the start of his career *Signifying Rappers*: gesture to those whose vocabulary should be payed attention to because it can enlarge the listener's vocabulary, as well as a community's own vocabulary. I assume his reaction at the panel would've been different if the topic was closer to his vocabulary (e.g. the Midwest, tennis, Wittgenstein), the exaggerated stepping-away movement seems almost performative of the distance set by vocabularies, but also of the possibility of communication, the value of staying onstage instead of departing. By conceding the floor to those who might better understand a kind of suffering he appears to avoid the moral solipsism of the narrator and protagonist from "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature". If someone believed they possess epistemological certainty, conversations would have a minimal role in the 'discovery' of knowledge, since their epistemological structure would let them know what is true and what isn't without the need of a second opinion. The collector of Black Widows is certain he understands his mother's suffering, so why confirm it with her? Wallace's movement implies a choice to listen to the vocabulary of others, it's an instigation to converse.

To return to, and conclude, the interpretation of "Just Asking", in the context of my reading, such a text is undoubtedly an effort to instigate a national conversation on the American institutions and individuals who humiliate and hurt other beings. This is ultimately the objective of the democratic elements in Wallace's oeuvre, it comes from a "conviction that the vast inequalities within American society could be corrected by using the institutions of a constitutional democracy" (*AOC* 54). If each moral and political action betrays a utopia, since they're based on your best imaginable hope, then "Just Asking" posits that Wallace believed the 'American idea' could be saved by asking the right questions and sustaining the conversations they would engender, despite how uncomfortable or boring they may become.

We can also understand the democratic quality of Wallace's writing through what Rorty called 'inspirational value.' These are works of literature, philosophy, and critical theory that are able to "recontextualize most of what you previously thought you knew" (*AOC* 133). It's another way of naming and understanding the Rortyan redescription discussed throughout the dissertation. Whatever ideas and notions a reader might have of themselves as members of a democracy, Wallace's writings will alter it in some way. The main candidate for this recontextualization is *The Pale King*, and I believe I've done enough in this dissertation to show that his posthumous novel is a culmination rather than an exception in the oeuvre, and that

Wallace's democratic vista is developed and present throughout his career. Like Francisco de Quevedo wrote on 'learned books', the democratic redescriptions in Wallace will either 'amend or enrich' the reader's civics.

In general philosophical terms, this dissertation is a pushback against "[t]he Platonist subordination of time to eternity, and of hope and inspiration to knowledge" (*AOC* 137) since it defends Wallace's literature as a useful humanist tool for our present time. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty defends Harold Bloom's canon from accusations of and conversations on absolute knowledge by explaining that its function is "to offer suggestions to the young about where they might find excitement and hope" (136-7). Similarly, this dissertation offers a suggestion for reconsidering the writings of David Foster Wallace, with a possible contagion of the hope his work might offer. I'll add, however, the amendment that said hope is available to all and not just the 'young', and the notice that, since this argument is made by someone who finds *The Pale King* to be invigorating and electrifying, your understanding of 'excitement' might require some Pragmatist re-definition.

I believe that, in the end, Rorty's hope is a defense of imagination, love, and possibility, it is a concept free of a bad faith towards existence and life that wishes to negate reality and desire a world beyond, a metaphysics. Wallace's literature, despite its darkness, is driven by this hope, it succeeds in "taking the world by the throat and insisting that there is more to life than we have ever imagined" (*AOC* 138). Following both thinkers, the way for communities and individuals to achieve said 'more to life' in our time is through an engaged democratic conversation between the various vocabularies of society. Hopefully, Wallace's fellow Americans won't need to get stuck in an elevator for 3 hours for that conversation to begin.

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