

THE ONLY CRUCIAL CLOCKS:
SECULAR TIME IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

Scott Dill: *The Only Crucial Clocks: Secular Time in the Contemporary American Novel*
(Under the direction of Florence Dore and Gregory Flaxman)

In recent years, academic research has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the causes and effects of secularization. What makes a society secular? Who gets to define what is secular about secular values? While questions like these are being debated across the social sciences and humanities, the critical literature has yet to register how formal innovations in the contemporary novel think about secular values. How is the novel, one of secular modernity's most enduring cultural forms, addressing the experience of secular culture today?

This dissertation argues that novels by Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and Zadie Smith use the form and structure of the novel to explore the ethical values implied by a specifically secular concept of time. In their work, secular time is measured by the irreducible singularity of human experience, thus imbuing both figures of time and human experience with intrinsic cultural value. Neither magically enchanted nor rationally disenchanted, secular time is unique to the novel genre's ability to tell stories about people, especially long stories. Indeed, secular time in the contemporary novel is no shorter or longer than the time it takes to read a novel. Through its interminable plot structures and its ironic characterization, through its slow descriptions and narrative suspense, the contemporary novel construes its own unique portrayal of human experience as secular culture's only crucial clock.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Secularization's Novel Time

Time is not what it is but how it is felt.
~Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*

1. The only crucial clocks

In Don DeLillo's 1997 epoch-spanning tome *Underworld*, the aging chess teacher Albert Bronzini reflects on the error of his momentary desire to stop time and attempt to relive his life, to "do it all over again" (234). The mistake is to assume that a human life is nothing more than a pawn in the cruel game of time. He rejects the commonplace notion that people are helplessly subjected to time when he realizes that time itself is in fact subjected to people. He muses,

And anyway we don't depend on time finally. There is a balance, a kind of standoff between the time continuum and the human entity, our frail bundle of soma and psyche. We eventually succumb to time, it's true, but time depends on us. We carry it in our muscles and genes, pass it on to the next set of time-factoring creatures, our brown-eyed daughters and jug-eared sons, or how would the world keep going. Never mind the time theorists, the cesium devices that measure the life and death of the smallest silvery trillionth of a second. He thought that we were the only crucial clocks, our minds and bodies, way stations for the distribution of time. (235)

Albert thinks that "we were the only crucial clocks" because time as we understand it is an entirely human concept, one that depends on human culture for its expression. People are "time-factoring creatures" not merely because they age, but because they use the concept of time to understand themselves and their world. It is a form of knowledge passed on from generation to generation in the very meat of their muscles. Even if people cannot turn back the clock and do their lives all over again, their "minds and bodies" create the clock's meaning.

This dissertation argues that versions of Albert's vision of the intrinsic significance of human experience preoccupy the contemporary American novel. Countering what they perceive as the dehumanizing effects of a rationally organized secular culture and its devotion to the movements of capital, the works of celebrated novelists from Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon to David Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith, bestow sacred value on the vagaries of temporal experience. Meaningful time passes through people and these novelists' render that passage as the irreducible foundation of their secular values. Whereas the American society these novelists' depict often threatens individual experience with a loss of meaning and agency, their novels' narrative modes offer up an alternative cultural clock—the contingent singularity of a particular person's experience of time.

Such a temporality depends on the body, but is not necessarily measured by the durations of perceptual experience. As I will argue, durational time has become increasingly important for DeLillo since *Underworld*, but that is only one aspect of how these novels think about secular time. They also imagine timescales based on personal relationships, the experience of uncertainty, and moral growth. Yet even as much as these novelists' work hallows the indeterminable elasticity of personal experience, they make no attempt to exhaustively portray its emotional or psychological depths. They do not reveal the meaning of time through the machinations of memory. Nor are the politics of empathy particularly salient for their views of characterization. Often, they are more interested in exploring the social construction of such experiences, as David Foster Wallace does with the effects of evangelical Christian institutions in *The Pale King*. Instead, the novel's possible role in creating such experiences motivates their work. Each of these novelists probes how the novel might shape a more fully human experience of time.

But what would a more fully human time look like? Is it necessarily different than dog time or geological time or the purely human creation of rationalized clock time? Rather than attempt to specify such a timescale these novelists assert the power of the novel itself for making the time of

human experience sacred. They do not appeal for justification of that value outside of their own internal narrative logic. Human time is the time it takes to tell a good story. Novels, like human experiences, unfold within the constraints of variable timescales. At whatever rate the time of experience might unfold, it cannot be bypassed any more than a novel can be read by skipping pages. To do so devalues both a novel and a person.

In pointing toward human experiences as “the only crucial clocks” the contemporary American novel simultaneously asserts its own cultural value and transformative purpose. If human time is the completely arbitrary and indeterminate time it takes to tell a meaningful story, Pynchon, DeLillo, Wallace, and Smith maintain that the novel form cannot be rationalized into any other form than its own modes of experience. They frame their storytelling as a check against other forces of abstraction at work in the culture—whether the “Subsidized Time” of Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* in which corporations vie to sponsor different calendar years, or the Dutch clock’s almost vengeful “BONGGGbing! sort of effect” (122) in Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, or the infinitesimal changes on Eric Parker’s stock-tracing computer screens in DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*. In contrast with their depictions of digital computers, news media, bureaucracy, and even academic arguments, these novelists proclaim the unrepeatable singularity of human experience as the ultimate source of cultural value. They view the form in which they work as uniquely able to disclose that irreducibility. Time in the novels this dissertation considers does not stop, nor is it retrieved or immortalized. Instead, time takes on a wholly human unit of measurement. Pynchon makes the point explicit when two clocks famously strike up a conversation in *Mason & Dixon*.

This dissertation will look at four different examples of the contemporary novel’s response to the problem of secular time. Whether Oedipa Maas’s inability to differentiate between the endless days of her suburban routines in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), or what one of DeLillo’s characters calls the micromanaged time of “News and Traffic” in *Point Omega* (2010), or the bored IRS employees of

David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011), or Howard Belsey's plea for more time in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), time often represents a crisis of meaning in contemporary fiction. The reigning social constructions of time overwhelm these characters with a sense of their own futility. That is largely because such scenarios conjure up the "rationalization of social relations" that the early twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber first associated with secularization. This secularized time organizes the instrumentality of economic and bureaucratic processes that leave the characters in these novels confused and adrift. They look and hope for other, more meaningful forms of temporal experience.

The antidote each of these four novels offer to the perception of a reigning impersonal, secularized time is what they see as the novel genre's own special version of secular time. Secularization is not the problem, but in fact holds the answer. Even though they suggest that rationalized time tends to end in painful alienation, they do not abandon the secular in order to re-enchant a disenchanted world. Rather, the American novel from the postwar period to the present has been making use of a religious cultural logic latent within the novel's narrative secularity.¹ The contemporary novel's secular time is deeply embedded in an awareness of the secular's ambivalence toward its religious roots. Reformulating the stakes of that ambivalence from within the novel's narrative form is a strategic concern of Pynchon, DeLillo, Wallace, and Smith's work.

Nevertheless, why these novelists? First, the transmutations of religion in contemporary secular society are defining themes of their work. Pynchon, DeLillo, Wallace, and Smith are all curious about what makes secular society secular. Second, their stylistic affinities represent a formidable development within the contemporary novel. I will turn to defining those affinities

¹ Are novels written over fifty years ago really contemporary? If only out respect for Thomas Pynchon, with whose 1966 novel my study begins and who is still writing, the answer is a whole-hearted, Yes! It would not only be premature to relegate Pynchon's work to the past, but the force of his influence continues to be felt in young novelists as well. Zadie Smith and David Foster Wallace have cited the importance of his example for their work and the concern with secularization and temporal experience evinced in his work continues in theirs.

shortly, but for now let me point out that they have shaped much of what counts as “ambitious” fiction today and their legacies are evident in the recent critical celebration of the connections spun together in Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) to Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010)—a novel explicitly about the novel genre’s formal relationship to time—to Donna Tart’s several chaotic but ultimately poetic plotlines in *The Goldfinch* (2014). Beyond a literary trend, however, their talent and critical stature, their influence on other writers, and the prominence of changing social relations in their novels make them prime case studies for thinking through how the contemporary novel understands its relationship to secularization.

Smith may seem an odd inclusion for a dissertation on the American novel. Her novels, except for *On Beauty*, are primarily set in England and she is, after all, British. Yet she lives in New York City for much of the year, teaches at Columbia University, and *On Beauty* is primarily about an American university. More important than ticking off checkmarks like this for either including or excluding her work, however, is the simple fact that her transatlantic hybridity is a vital aspect of the contemporary American novel. I mentioned Colum McCann’s work, an Irish born novelist living in the U.S. who has by some accounts written the great 9/11 novel. Joseph O’Neill, another Irish born novelist, has been heralded as writing the next *Great Gatsby* in his 2008 *Netherland*. Together with the recent critical success of Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (it was the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award winner) these novels reveal a growing trend of the most critically successful “American” novels being written by novelists born in other countries. Smith’s work is at the forefront of this development and consequently addresses the diverse national as well as religious experiences informing the contemporary American novel.

My reason for picking these specific novels—*The Crying of Lot 49*, *The Pale King*, *Point Omega*, *On Beauty*—of all that these accomplished novelists’ have written is not because I deem them their best work or even their most popular. Rather, they are the novels where their ongoing

preoccupation with time is most clear or most relevant to formal questions. Time presents a pressing thematic concern for each of them, on that the novels' structure adequately mirrors.

The problem of which novelists and which novels aside, my assertion that novels use religious ideas in order to reimagine the meaning of secular experience may sound like an outright contradiction in terms. Are not the sacred and secular opposed by definition? Not necessarily. An explosion of recent work on the subject of secularization, spawning across the social sciences and humanities, has helped retrieve the cultural history of the concept as well as reveal its many different cultural manifestations. This work has drastically revised Weber's influential but no longer persuasive account of secularization in modern, liberal democratic societies. No single theory of secularization has emerged to incorporate the same reach as Weber's, yet they all agree that the simple causal relationships assumed in his accounts of rationalization as well as the subsequently developed "secularization thesis" are no longer tenable. Furthermore, much of this work agrees on a point most associated with Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*—that opposing the sacred to the secular misunderstands the various theological, historical, political, and social contexts of secularization.²

In the contemporary novel the secular is a social and political ideal, but it is also a way of conceiving the meaning of temporal experience. The term as we usually use it today originated in the fourth century as *saeculum*, the word Augustine of Hippo chose to translate the Greek New Testament's concept of the present age or *aion*, the suspended but indefinite period of waiting in

² Beyond the field defining studies of sociologists, major theoretical works by Talal Asad, Bill Connelly, Simon During, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, Gianni Vattimo, and Michael Gillespie have returned to the intertwining of secularization with the West's religious history in order to better understand contemporary culture. Olivier Roy, however, is perhaps closest to my own views about why and how secular values appear in the midst of the most religious fundamentalism and religious values continue to animate secularism. In fact, Roy contends that secularism has *enabled* religion's worldwide twenty-first century revival. According to Roy, "secularization has worked: what we are witnessing today is the militant reformulation of religion in a secularized space that has given religion its autonomy and therefore the conditions for its expansion" (2). The secular is still completely secular, but it has succeeded because of its ability to detach religion from culture. We have discovered that the end goal of secularism was not to eradicate religion (the working assumption of that suspicious triumvirate: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud), but simply to make it secular. The irony here, of course, is that the more such secularism defines contemporary culture, the more religious belief seems to grow in numbers.

which Christians must make use of pagan resources while they wait for Christ to return.³ Though we tend to think of the secular in the spatial terms of a shared, peaceable public sphere, it began as a temporal horizon that was by definition indecipherable. Since Christians made no claims to knowing when Christ would return—the Gospels say Christ himself does not know the hour—Augustine encouraged them not to retreat from the social life of pagan culture, but to make their peace with it, even to make use of it. Thus a temporary historical condition, the *saeculum*, eventually registered as the spatial ideal of the secular sphere's shared cultural milieu.

The contemporary novel's approach to secularization is best understood with this origin in mind. Histories of the novel tend to emphasize the novel's relationship to the rise of a "secular" rationality in modernity, but the novels I study explore their secularity in how they value embodied experience, not the rational mind of the modern subject.⁴ While it is wary of rational time on the one hand, it is at the same time wary of religious exclusivity on the other. The key is that it is a provisional, suspended time in which culture can flourish. This conception has less to do with the history of natural rights or current day arguments about religious legislation than it does with imagining the cultural conditions for genuinely peaceful social relations to flourish. Pynchon's ethical imagination in *The Crying of Lot 49*, DeLillo's waiting in *Point Omega*, Wallace's disciplines in *The Pale King*, and Smith's morality in *On Beauty*, all believe that such cultural vitality depends on understanding the sacred value of temporal experiences—and on the novel that describes them.

³ Despite current usage of "secularism" to refer to the removal of religious faith and practice from the public sphere, Robert Markus points out the term's neutrality in Augustine's thought: "Secular does not have such connotations of radical opposition to the sacred; it is more neutral, capable of being accepted or adapted [...] It will be the shared overlap between insider and outsider groups, the sphere in which they can have a common interest and which—from the Christian point of view—need not be excluded or repudiated" (6). See Markus's final treatment of the question of Augustine and secularism, his lifelong object of study, in *Christianity and the Secular*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006.

⁴ Ian Watt's famous *Rise of the Novel* is perhaps the most influential account in which the novel synthesizes modern philosophy's materialistic approach and provides that epistemology with an ideology. Whether or not his account is correct, the contemporary American novel's secularity is not as confident in the subject's capacity to comprehend its world.

Though these novels include the secular's theological underside, they do so in order to prove how stories provide their own rationality.⁵ That rationality is neither rationalistic nor theologically sound, but uses the purely secular structure of the novel. Narrative time in the novel is structured in several ways, from its order and frequency to its duration or suspense. It can even switch between different temporal modes within a simple sentence. Accordingly, a single novel is capable of portraying a variety of temporal experiences. It can intensify the passage of time through increasing the speed of narration or slowing it down, and it can just as abruptly erase whole swaths of time all together.

The novels I consider use narrative time's variations as a means to measure time in relation to descriptions of human experience, though precisely what that might mean is left open. In the ethical time of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa decides that "bringing something of herself—even if that something was just her presence" (72) is more important than the causal explanations she seeks to unearth. In the disciplinary time of *The Pale King*, human experience does not come naturally but is only attained through learning to pay attention. In the embodied time of *Point Omega* it is simply waiting and in the moral time of *On Beauty* it is aging. The temporality of human experience has no essential standard in these novels despite the fact that they are all invested in securing its sacred status.

The absence of any specific standard may help explain why critics tend to ignore the temporality of these novelists' work and instead point toward their new political formations, bizarre connections, underdeveloped characters, or multiple plots. A prominent example would be Lawrence Buell's recent summarization of the contemporary novel's "improbable communities" as

⁵ Christian theology, in the wake of arguments for and against foundationalism in Anglo-American analytic philosophy, came to develop its own version of how stories ground truth. Narrative theology developed throughout the Eighties and Nineties as a way for Christianity to make sense of its own truth claims without recourse to relativism or foundationalism. It is evidence for the fact, as I will point out throughout this dissertation, that it is a mistake to assume the novel is a kind of secularized version of religious morality. The case can be made that religion has used the secular novel to understand itself.

characterized by Pynchon, DeLillo, and Wallace's work.⁶ There is no doubt that the politics of these novels are deeply invested in creating more inclusive forms of community and envisioning a substantial secular ethic without recourse to the rational ground of rights. Furthermore, the political liberalism portrayed in their work is not simply exclusive but fundamentally unjust in its distribution of power and wealth. Their improbable communities, whether the people using *The Crying of Lot 49*'s underground mail system or *Infinite Jest*'s Ennet House, give probable shape to better forms of association. Yet critics have not written about how the temporal structure of these novelists' work often portrays another form of political subjectivity. Like the improbable communities they often represent, the very form of these novels turns toward the unrepeatable singularity of personal experience for an ethical ideal. I argue that it is only in their formal relation to secular time that the full implications of their secular politics emerge.

2. Making the secular sacred

While critical studies of contemporary fiction have been interested in the postmodern (McHale and Hutcheon), or the postmodern's relation to capitalism (Jameson and McClune), recent work has begun to establish the importance of that fiction's religious contexts (McClure, Tate, and Hungerford). This turn toward religion has had its thoughtful dissidents, such as the interdisciplinary essay collections *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, *The Joys of Secularism*, and *Rethinking Secularism*, but no critical study has addressed what this religious turn might mean for how we theorize the contemporary novel's relationship to contemporary changes in the processes of secularization. My dissertation's attention to the sacred value of temporal experience in the contemporary novel hopes to fill this gap in the critical literature. Yet it should be clear at this point that I have no intension of pitting secularism against religion, as if the task of literary criticism were to determine whether

⁶ Buell titles the final chapter of his recent study, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, after such "improbable communities."

religion or secularism will someday obliterate the other's cultural presence. Rather, I want to show how the contemporary novel has set about making the secular ideal of human experience sacred without relying on rationalistic criteria; I show how novels value "the only crucial clocks" without recourse to any cultural authority other than the meaning-making strategies of narrative.

Accordingly, I make generous use of the classic building blocks of the novel—how Pynchon's penchant for digressions interrupts the causal relations of his plot, how and why Wallace uses prosaic descriptions, the durational effects of DeLillo's narrative style, and Smith's theory of characterization—in order to demonstrate the secular ideal of these novels' temporalities.⁷ In addition to my focus on secular time, this formalist approach differentiates my dissertation from two exemplary studies of religion and literature by Amy Hungerford and John McClure. McClure's *Partial Faiths* argues that the contemporary novel demonstrates "postsecular projects" that re-enchant the modern world with new forms of love and community. McClure's study is concerned solely with the representational content novels portray, which is a key difference between his and my own methodology. Yet his use of the "postsecular" as a critical plumb line severely hampers his understanding of both secularization and the novel. Cultural ideals like the secular do not develop in the simple linear progressions implied by the prefix "post." I take a very different route, arguing that the novel is not simply reacting against secularization but mining its own way of thinking about the secular.

My view is inspired by a very different definition of the secular in contemporary fiction than McClure's. I concur with Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwarpen, and Craig Calhoun's argument against such monological versions of cultural theory, that in "order to believe that we are post-

⁷ Three formalist traditions dominate studies in the American novel. First, one stemming from Henry James's writings on the novel and point-of-view but reaching its efflorescence in the work of Wayne Booth. The second, a much more continental tradition, is the taxonomical aspirations of narratology inaugurated by Gerard Genette. Finally, the third, Russian Formalism, is the most reflexively "formal" in its analyses of narrative tropes. This dissertation uses each at different turns, even adds to them Garrett Stewart's recent work on narratography, but it does not attempt to develop any one of these traditions as much as make use of them for understanding innovations in the contemporary novel.

secular, one must have a narrow and inadequate conception of what it means to be secular” (*Varieties of Secularism* 22). The contemporary American novel is not so narrow and neither is it post-secular; instead, I argue, it makes the secular sacred. It does not justify the secular against religion or ground it in an adequate understanding of an individual’s natural rights, but places it within a system of value that asserts the special quality of personal experience and thus sets it apart as sacred.

Though it is not limited to the novel genre, Amy Hungerford’s *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* better understands this evolving dynamic within secular culture. For Hungerford literature renews religious belief and practice in altered form, since “literary beliefs are ultimately best understood as a species of religious thought, and their literary practice as a species of religious practice.” (xvi). While my dissertation hopes to supplement Hungerford’s in further illustrating how crucial religious contexts are for understanding the contemporary novel, it diverges from her wide-ranging study in two crucial ways. First, I focus on the contemporary novel’s formal exploration of time and how it renders the time of an individual’s temporal experience sacred. While I touch on matters of belief in Pynchon and Smith, the bulk of my dissertation is devoted to exploring how and why temporal experience is such a central concern and so sacrosanct in novels that, for many readers, are marked by a dearth of human feeling. James Wood, most famously, has complained that they represent the contradiction of “inhuman stories,” and Hungerford concurs with this conclusion. I will address this criticism shortly, but for now let it suffice to point out that Hungerford argues for a literary “belief in meaninglessness” that I suggest is better understood within the context of how the contemporary novel constructs human experience as a secular value.

Second, in her attempt to balance several different cultural forms Hungerford’s study puts forth the notion that secularization in the novel is coterminous with disappearing religious practice—that even if “literary beliefs are a species of religious thought,” the institutional lifelines of

that religious thought teeter on the verge of extinction.⁸ She argues that sustaining DeLillo's "mystical belief" in language requires "rejecting, or suspending judgments on, the religious institutions and practices that formerly supported it" (*Postmodern Belief* 54). I argue to the contrary in my chapter on DeLillo's notion of secular time in the novel, showing how an Augustinian theology underwrites the slow time of his recent prose. Furthermore, David Foster Wallace looks to the resurgence of American evangelicalism for ways to rethink what he perceives as the contemporary novel's threatened vitality. The novel does not achieve its cultural authority because religious belief and practice has been declining, if indeed it has, but because of how it imagines the value of human experience. In fact, as I argue in my chapter on Wallace, there is good reason to believe that novels and religious institutions have a mutually constitutive relationship in contemporary culture.

The very same writers that I single out as illustrative of the contemporary American novel's exploration of human experience are the ones the prominent critic James Wood has notoriously accused of lacking a palpably human sensibility. In a 2000 review titled "Human, All Too Inhuman," Wood warned that recent novels by Pynchon, DeLillo, Wallace, and Smith were threatening the art of the realist novel with the paradox of *inhuman stories*.⁹ He called the genre he saw hardening at the beginning of the new millennium "hysterical realism" and his argument is instructive for understanding why narrative structure has come to have such significance for how it portrays human experience.

Wood argues that beyond their size, encyclopedic doorstopper novels like Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, DeLillo's *Underworld*, Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and Smith's *White Teeth* share several things in

⁸ This is also James Wood's argument in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*.

⁹ The review originally appeared in *The New Republic* on July 24, 2000. To reiterate a point I raised earlier, it may surprise that a dissertation on the contemporary American novel would with one English writer (Wood) panning another (Zadie Smith, whose debut *White Teeth* Wood was reviewing). Yet Wood's position at Harvard and the *New Yorker* and Smith's at Columbia and her regular essays in the *New York Review of Books*, make them two of the most important critical voices in contemporary American literary criticism. For an example of an argument about this changing field see Elizabeth Abele, "Green-Card American Fiction: Naturalizing Novels by Visiting Authors."

common: a dogmatic conviction that everything is connected, a manic energy for invention, and underdeveloped characters.¹⁰ With Dickens as its distant progenitor, Wood claims that the contemporary “big, ambitious novel” has become “a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity.” It is therefore too showy, too enamored of its own serendipitous insights, too insecure in its cultural relevance. Wood writes:

This is not magical realism but what might be called hysterical realism. Storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels; it is how they structure and drive themselves on. The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, overworked. (“Inhuman” 179)

This hysterical exhaustion is manifest in the ways that they use the very conventions developed by realism to create implausible scenarios. An unsettled evasiveness seems to motivate their comic set pieces, producing fiction that lacks the reality of “tragedy or anguish” (180). Thus, however entertaining they may be, hysterical realist novels “are full of *inhuman stories*” (180). For Wood, hysterical realism pushes too hard on the conventional coincidences that move plots forward with the result that the pathos of the human has been passed over in a swell of yarn-spinning enthusiasm. The emotive birthright of the realist novel has been sold for a pot of porridge. While the “forms of these novels *tell* us that we are all connected—by the bomb [...] or by our natural multiracial multiplicity,” Wood writes that “it is a formal lesson rather than an actual enactment” (182). His complaint is that the complacent serendipities of hysterical realism lack the tragic truths of human experience—if they tell us we are all connected, the admonition cannot make up for the fact that the reader never *feels* connected to these characters.

Wood’s assessment is helpful, but the accusation that these novels offer showman-like entertainment without empathetic characters is not entirely justified. It is questionable because

¹⁰ Both essays are merged into one, simply titled “Hysterical Realism,” in *The Irresponsible Self: on Laughter and the Novel*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004. I should add that Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* was included in Wood’s list. That novel is not a part of this dissertation and is therefore omitted from my treatment of the review.

Mason & Dixon is in fact a tender portrayal of a free and easy form of male friendship missing from much of contemporary fiction. The moving graveside scene near the novel's end could have been lifted from one of Dickens's most sentimental moments. *Infinite Jest*, on the other hand, is an intensely personal novel about the emotional struggles of addiction and depression; its most passionate readers—there are *many* and they are *devoted*—have long cherished its representational accuracy over its postmodern pyrotechnics. An undeniable mark of distinction for the hardening genre that Wood identifies, however, is that these novels seem to cherish the art of storytelling more than psychological interiority or emotional affect. While these seemingly evacuated characters could be the effect of any number of aspirations or influences, for instance that of noir on the dialogue and narrative reticence of their novels, I want to suggest that it is largely because the special value of human experience in their work does not arise from anything essential to the individual or the individual's identity.

Mark Greif has tried to put this shift in its historical context. He argues that the formal traits of these “inhuman” stories originate with the decidedly humanistic novels *Invisible Man* (1952) and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). In the wake of Cold War politics, critics increasingly celebrated the American novel for its ability to celebrate the individual as an inherently complex figure.¹¹ According to Greif, the “postwar ‘big, ambitious novel’ began when critics, and then novelists, had to negotiate what sort of literature could count after high modernism, and after the dramatic break of the Second World War, when a figure of ‘the human’ or ‘man,’ still dear today to critics like Wood as the chief object of novelistic attention, came into question and required defense” (27). Complicated, innovative novels were seen as illustrating fundamental truths about human nature and the free world—that man is free to redefine and recreate himself—while also proving that the novel, too, continues to recreate itself.

¹¹ See Greif, 11-30. Of course, one could go further back to John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-1936), or even further back to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), as Lawrence Buell does in *The Dream of the Great American Novel*.

For several critics at midcentury, the continued health of the novel seemed to depend on its capacity to invigorate the politics of liberal individualism.¹² Lionel Trilling's work is perhaps the most famous instance of this view. For him, the novel's preeminent cultural task is to give voice to both the complexities of social life as well as the individual's capacity for willed self-determination in the midst of social stratifications. In *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling writes that the "novel at its greatest is the record of the will acting under the direction of an idea, often an idea of the will itself" (266). For Trilling, if the health of the novel is in question (yes, its health was in fact hotly debated in the Forties even as it is today), it is due to the fact that the novel's celebration of free will had been eclipsed by other concerns. *The Liberal Imagination* sought to return its values to the will and the full complexity of human social experience. As its preface's famous closing line states, "literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty" (xxi).

Greif is right to identify the lineage stretching from Pynchon to Smith with Cold War attempts to characterize the "variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty" of social life. Yet it is precisely their representational reach and innovative complexity (in Wood's assessment) that makes them "inhuman stories." In his treatment of the genre's history Greif admits befuddlement at the fact that the same genre could so radically shift its ideology, asking, "How did a form of the novel whose birth came in answer to a demand for the "restoration of the will of man" [...] ultimately metamorphose into that form of fiction most associated with an antihumanism?" (29). This surprising ideological bifurcation of a genre otherwise formally consistent can be traced back to a gap at the center of both Greif and Wood's treatment of the genre—the importance of religion in these novels and the Gothic tropes they employ to represent it.

¹² Studies by Lawrence H. Schwartz and Morris Dickstein are good guides to midcentury liberalism's role in literary criticism. See Schwartz 73-98 and chapters five and six of Dickstein's *Double Agent: the Critic and Society*.

In the novel Gothic tropes often trouble the assumptions of secular knowledge, and these novels are no exception. The “inhuman” or antihumanist aspects of these novels are largely due to their innovative fusion of the Gothic into more forthrightly secular narratives. Jerrold Hogle maintains that the two tropes that unite Gothic novels from the eighteenth century through the present are 1) the characters encounter a “seemingly antiquated space,” and 2) the fact that within that space “are hidden some secretes from the past [. . .] that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise” (Hogle 2). According to such criteria, *The Crying of Lot 49* draws on Gothic elements insofar as Oedipa’s search for the Tristero brings her into contact with the “seemingly antiquated space” of San Narciso’s hieroglyphics, or the human bones at the bottom of Lake Inverity, or the medieval origins of the Tristero. True to the Gothic genre, such ancient secrets have inexplicably emerged in Oedipa’s rationalized, suburban America. Pynchon indicates as much in how he poetically narrates Oedipa self-recognition in a Remedios Varo painting she discovers in Mexico City. Looking at the image of weaving women in a medieval tower, Oedipa sees her own plight. Pynchon writes, “Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from the outside and for no reason at all” (12). Oedipa’s fear of magical forces is no anomaly in the Pynchonian universe. The experience runs through his novels, and is repeated by the Oedipa-like Maxine Tarnow when she confronts what may be the angel of death in her attempts to track down clues in Pynchon’s most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge*.

The essential factor to Pynchon’s use of such tropes, however, is that Oedipa’s quick-witted independence is not enough to contain these mysterious eruptions from an ancient past. Pynchon does not raise spooky specters only to return his novel to the rationally ordered modern world. Rather, Gothic shadows continue to unnerve and unravel Oedipa’s simplistic view of her life and

her country. While the novels I study here affirm personal experience in a manner consistent with the Gothic's tendency to restore the rational order of Realism, they do not ground the value of the individual in that individual's ability to understand, organize, or explain the social order. Oedipa may be able to identify her tower, but she cannot escape it. Her spirited but ultimately helpless persistence is typical of the socially constructed subjectivity of all of the characters mentioned in this dissertation. She knows the forces determining her experience, but also knows any hopes of individuality she harbors are just as socially produced. Her value to herself and to the story consists in the simple fact of her continued presence.

Otherwise Realist contemporary novels will at times allude to Gothic tropes in order to reject secularization's view of a progressive, linear historical development in which the past is superseded with modern enlightenment. There is a moment in Don DeLillo's *Ratner's Star* (1976) that illustrates his work's direct refusal of the idea that modernity's rationalizing processes have expurgated ancient forms religious mysticism. Early in the novel one character tells another, in what could stand-in as a thesis for how all of DeLillo's novels approach the question of secularization, "we've got to admit the possibility that what we think of as obscure ritual and superstition may be perfectly legitimate scientific enterprises. Our own view of the very distant past may be the only thing that needs adjusting. This past, after all, continues to live not only in remote cultural pockets but more and more in the midst of our supercivilized urban centers. Simply admit the possibility. That's all I say" (35-36). As each of DeLillo's novels illustrate in some way or another, modernity has not reached that clean break with the ancient world it had hoped to achieve.

In these lines DeLillo's character expresses what the critic Vincent Pecora has aptly called a "Durkheimian modernity." Pecora thinks literary criticism needs to leave off its tendency to oppose the modern and postmodern, or the sacred and secular, in favor of a more coherent view of secularization's role in creating the conditions of modernity. A "Durkheimian modernity" would

adopt Émile Durkheim's view that scientific rationality is not structurally opposed to religious thought, but is instead the rarefied development of what religion first strove toward. Just like the rites of primal religions, rational knowledge seeks to organize the world by separating and grouping certain objects and sanctioning certain social values.¹³ In the Durkheimian modernity of *Ratner's Star*, the ancient human past emerges in the heart of modern cities not as confounding aberrations but as unincorporated manifestations of the same rational impulse that founds the secular outlook of modern science and most of "supercivilized urban centers." Kathryn Hume has identified the same thematic thrust in Pynchon's work, noting the degree to which "Pynchon wishes us to recognize our kinship to people in the earlier time" (Hume 65). David Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith use fundamentalist, evangelical Christians in their work to make similar points about such modern institutions as the IRS and the university. Modern secular society, and even modern secular humanistic discourse as depicted in Smith's *On Beauty*, would do well to investigate its own affinities with religious forms of thinking.

3. Things like this keep us safe

Which is what one of the tasks this dissertation hopes to undertake. To return to DeLillo's *Underworld*, the novel begins with a quintessential Durkheimian understanding of modernity. His framing event for a novel that will span from the Cold War to the waning years of the twentieth-century is the legendary, pennant-winning baseball game between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants at New York City's old Polo Grounds in 1951. In DeLillo's rendering, J. Edgar Hoover is in attendance with Jackie Gleason and Frank Sinatra and learns during the game that the

¹³ The larger point of Pecora's book is that secularization is not a singular event but an ongoing process. In the process of making this point, however, he looks to Durkheim as a guide, particularly Durkheim's unique view of the relationship between modern science and primitive religions laid out in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. There Durkheim argues that thought in human culture begins in the social act of separating the profane from the sacred and that this means of organizing the world is the foundation of rationality. One could say that the book had been more aptly titled, "the religious form of elementary life," since his claim establishes the most fundamental logic behind the work of human culture.

USSR has detonated their first atomic bomb. The scene's dramatic climax, however, turns away from the world-historical tensions of the Cold War to the intense emotions that erupt at the baseball game's unexpected ending. DeLillo narrates the closing moments of the novel's opening prologue from the point-of-view of Russ Hodges, who called the game for Giants' fans on the radio, as he reflects on the crowd's elation following the team's game-winning homerun. Though the threat of mass destruction looms over the ball game, that vision of violence is countered by Hodges's fevered reflection on the fans' experience,

Isn't it possible that this midcentury moment enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sunglasses—the mapped visions that pierce our dreams? Russ wants to believe a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way. This is the thing that will pulse in his brain come old age and double vision and dizzy spells—the surge sensation, the leap of people already standing, that bolt of noise and joy when the ball went in. This is the people's history and it has flesh and breath that quicken to the force of this old safe game of ours. (60)

Something more powerful than death, and certainly more than a frivolous diversion, has been felt. A bolt of joy has entered into “the people's history,” and the felt experience of it hints toward hope. And it is of no small significance that though the venue and teams brought together in this moment will soon be buried in the dustbin of history, that moment lives on for *Underworld's* characters with a connective power even greater than the detonated bomb that would haunt Hoover and the rest of the U.S. for decades to come.

What “enters the skin more lastingly” than the machinations of world leaders is that “surge sensation.” Not because baseball is somehow more substantial than bombs, but because of the experience's uniquely social quality and the feeling of collectivity it engenders. What captures Hodges' attention is the living force unleashed in this collective experience, its ability to make everyone *feel* connected. The passage suggests that this unruly crowd cannot become a mob—the elation is too sensitive to its own status as a sudden gift—in that Hodges “wants to believe a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way.” DeLillo's attempt to capture an entire epoch in a

single novel funnels down even further to this experience of the promise of collective life together and its glimmer of peace. Durkheim called the response of such occasions “collective effervescence,” the momentary loss of self that occurs during intensely shared social experiences.¹⁴ Such social experiences point toward society’s transcendent qualities for Durkheim, and for DeLillo they suggest a “people’s history” based on personal experience. Such a people’s history would agree with Zadie Smith that temporality is a mode of experience more than a fact or theory. “Time is not what it is,” she writes at one point in *On Beauty*, “but how it is felt” (129).

Hodges’s feeling of deep, intrinsic connection with others and the histories they intertwine motivates the several subplots of *Underworld*—a novel that repeatedly reminds us, “Everything is connected.” Far beyond the politics of paranoia, the fact that such connections are felt personally by all those involved intimates the possibility of Hodges’s vision of a peaceful culture. In DeLillo, however, the novel itself becomes a mode for experiencing the connecting power of crowds (and retains a crowd’s capacity for harm or harmony). Though it may seem strange to link the overflow of subjectivity that can happen in large crowds with the relatively personal, private, and reflective act of novel reading, Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and Zadie Smith also emphasize precisely this aspect of the novel’s capacity to draw out the emotional resonances of our interconnected existence. Time is their golden thread.

Each chapter of this dissertation explores how a particular novel uses a key aspect of the novel’s narrative structure in order to render sacred the time of individual experience. Plot, story time, narration, description, and characterization are examined in turn through a particular novel. A key component of the thesis I have laid out in this introduction is that these aspects of the novel compose its sacred-making processes. They are the nuts and bolts of how novels create their

¹⁴ See 220ff of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

aesthetic effects and I attend to them as closely as I can because they are how the contemporary novel authenticates the crucial clock of individual human experience.

The second chapter begins with Pynchon's plot and story time in *The Crying of Lot 49*. The novel has cast a long shadow in contemporary American fiction and contains defining thematic concerns and structural characteristics for each of the novels addressed in the following chapters. I identify the importance of a key moment in Søren Kierkegaard's *Repetition* for understanding the relationship between the novel's post horn symbols and its use of communication theory. In *Repetition* Kierkegaard holds up the post horn, which never makes the same sound twice, as a symbol of a more responsible literary ethics. Pynchon's post horns have a similar function. Even as the causal relations of *The Crying of Lot 49*'s plot fail to connect the various post horns Oedipa encounters, the novel's story time endlessly reinvents the ethical implications of Oedipa's search for them. The chapter reads the function of the post horn symbol in *The Crying of Lot 49* as a way of ironically heralding the novel's ethical significance.

The third chapter considers Wallace's incomplete novel *The Pale King*. Where Pynchon's novel uses plot and story time to address the ethics of fiction, Wallace's work addresses the morality of fiction by rethinking the moral function of descriptive prose. Rather than affect his readers with emotional sympathy, I argue that Wallace's novel seeks to use description in order to turn the act of reading into an experience of disciplinary time. As much as *Infinite Jest* marked a turn toward the sentimental, *The Pale King* shows his continuing desire to transcend sympathy as the novel's chief means of connecting with its readers. It looks instead to social institutions and spiritual disciplines to think about how the novel might affect the reader's habits rather than provoking a momentary emotional response. Wallace's final attempt at fiction forces the question: can the novel genre go beyond the aesthetic task of jarring one out of unconscious habit to creating intentionally trained habits and condition moral dispositions?

Chapter 4 turns to Don DeLillo's most recent novel, *Point Omega*, as an attempt to deepen the contemporary's sense of its temporality through a meditative narrative style. The smaller, slimmer novels DeLillo has written since *Underworld* retain his characteristic interest in how the logic of the sacred continues to operate incognito in modern secular society, but their style reads less like *White Noise*'s deadpan banter and sounds more and more like its own sacred ritual. I argue that DeLillo's departure from the expansive reach of his earlier novels represents an attempt to more directly address the problem of how novels can represent the embodied duration of time. This attention to temporality is evinced in a change in prose style in which his previously clipped pacing slows down and creates a graver, more ponderous sensibility.

Zadie Smith's critical essays over the past several years have been preoccupied with the question of character, as have her novels. I argue that the meditation on personal relationships in Smith's *On Beauty*, her most sentimental and traditionally realist novel to date, is an attempt to rethink the significance of the novel's ability to portray multiple character-developing experiences over time. While the novel contains several examples of portraiture and academic discourse, neither images nor theories can explore the intrinsic significance of personal experience quite like the novel. *On Beauty*, I argue, asserts that the novel's ability to narrate events over time—what I call moral time—is vital for understanding the genre's uniqueness as well as the sacred status it seeks to secure for personal experience as a cultural value.

Finally, I conclude with a brief reading of the relationship between technology and embodied experience in Pynchon's most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge*. I show how the novel repeats key themes of *The Crying of Lot 49*, most especially how it continues to assert the ethical relevance of the novel's story time, and why Pynchon's view of personal experience cannot be tied to the body as a strictly biological or organic entity. Though violence and corruption drive the novel's portrayal of a market-governed time—the time it takes for “vulture capitalists” to turn new innovations into

homogenizing forces—the novel genre’s story time continues to create a momentary respite of peace and points toward the very risky value of personal experience. Taken together as a whole, these chapters make the case that the contemporary American novel is giving new ethical value to the experience of secular time.

Chapter 2

Plot and Story Time: *The Crying of Lot 49*

As the ascetics of old placed a skull upon the table and by the contemplation of it directed their meditations, so shall the post-horn upon my table always remind me of what the significance of life really is. Hail to the post-horn!

~Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

1. The ethics of iconoclasm

Secularization, the story goes, helped turn literature into a religion. As religious belief and practice waned in the culture at large, readers increasingly turned to literature for the vestiges of religion's transcendent meaning. The novel, in particular, supposedly provided its readers with forms of moral instruction once delivered from the pulpit.¹ It is not a very accurate story about secularization's effect on the literary culture of the novel, however, if only because it assumes a one-to-one relationship between the novel and the pulpit in which one must fall for the other to rise. By the late 1950s, however, such a "religion of literature" had certainly solidified in the critical consciousness. Modernist writers' devotion to the meaning of form became the institutional norm through the Chicago School's formal explanations and the New Criticism's analytical scalpel. Recall the overtones of sincere devotion in C.K. Wimsatt's title for his famous collection of essays, *The Verbal Icon*, or the seamless cultural fabric implied by Cleanth Brooks's late-life collection, *Community, Religion, and Literature*. The logic of such devotion is in at least one respect flawless—give a poem religious-like reverence and it produces religious-like revelations. Yet the novel, too, was quickly

¹ This assumption was recently reasserted in Philip Gura's 2013 study of American novels, *Truth's Ragged Edge: The Rise of the American Novel*.

swept up in this critical approach, as Faulkner's lyricism became paradigmatic and Nabokov's fussy sentences rode the crest of their popularity.² Like poetry, the novel was a high art that demanded its own "orthodoxy," to use John Guillory's name for the New Critics' cultural agenda.³

The idea that religious culture was waning in the U.S., and that other cultural spheres such as literary study had picked up its fallen standard, certainly found its justification in the sociology of religion. In 1966, the year Thomas Pynchon published *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* and then three years later David Martin's *The Religious and the Secular* and Peter Berger's influential *The Sacred Canopy* began to propose the secularization thesis, the idea that religious belief and practice necessarily recedes as societies modernize and gain wealth. In an undergraduate Sociology textbook published in 1966 Anthony Wallace claimed, "the evolutionary future of religion is extinction" (qtd. in Altinordu and Golski 56). Berger clarified that its extinction would extend across various cultural venues, asserting that secularization "affects the totality of cultural life and ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world" (107).⁴ Cultural authority in secular society, Berger implies, would become entirely from the bastions of secular science.

Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, however, explores another way of understanding the effects of secularization on the novel. Between sociology's secularization thesis and the religion of literature, Pynchon tells another story, one wary of both verbal icons and secular science. As the description of a near-murderous icon on the novel's first page suggests, *The Crying of Lot 49* is wary of religious

² See Schwartz 73-98 for how the literary Left and Right came together at midcentury to assure critical devotion to the value of formal rigor.

³ Guillory makes an argument similar to Schwartz's insofar as he also notes how both the Left and Right came together to establish a new cultural canon—though he emphasizes the need for such a canon to replace a lost form of religious belief in ways Schwartz does not. See Guillory 134-175.

⁴ Berger revisited his earlier work, recanting *The Sacred Canopy*'s view of secularization in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (1999).

fetishes.⁵ Pynchon's Puritan heritage is invoked throughout the text even as it employs its own version of their iconoclasm. Contra the Puritans, however, Pynchon's prevailing bathos mocks overinvesting the language with religious severity. Its ironic playfulness helps it to avoid the playwright Randolph Driblette's verdict on the text-chasing Oedipa, "You guys, you're like Puritans are about the Bible. So hung up with words, words" (62). In the name of subduing such Puritanical passions, I want to argue that *The Crying of Lot 49*, like its image of the muted post horn, intentionally circumscribes itself as a gesture toward that which a novel cannot—and *should* not—represent. In this chapter I make a case for how Pynchon's early novel values the uncertain and confused duration of secular experience over the transcendent experience of meaning produced by its own well crafted, and at points lyrically moving, formal recursions and rich allusions. Against rationalization and religion he posits another system of social values—the secular value of Oedipa's muddled but meaningful personal experience.

Formally, *The Crying of Lot 49* affirms this secular ethic of personal experience in its tenuous plot and extravagant anecdotes. This shortest of Pynchon's novels is without a doubt his most compact and intricate, yet just like his much longer novels it, too, seems to veer off into one backstory after another. Its protagonist Oedipa Maas repeatedly encounters a symbol of the post horn throughout the story, but she cannot figure out the cause behind them or link them together in any meaningful order. Things simply do not add up for Oedipa. In spite of her curiosity, courage, and exuberant independence, she remains flummoxed at the novel's close. She investigates causal links that neither she nor the reader ever verifies.

Plot time, the causal events that keep the story moving, is not what in fact motivates the story time of this novel. The opportunity to tell and connect stories is what motivates its plot. According to E.M. Forster's famous formulation, this would reverse the respective tasks of story

⁵ Pynchon spells it ikon. Why this spelling? The OED's example of the first use of the word with this spelling is in reference to toppling an icon of Saint Thomas. Oedipa would be haunted by a coincidence like that.

and plot. If a story is a narrative of events, Forster writes in his *Aspects of the Novel*, “plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot” (86). Whatever it disregards, Forster’s succinct definition of plot isolates a crucial aspect of how Pynchon’s plot functions in his story’s narrative machinery. In *The Crying of Lot 49* the plot’s rationalizing logic is intentionally stymied. Providing factual knowledge is not the point of a good story and the novel questions the ethical consequences of using direct, causal relationships to determine the meaning of a story.⁶

To state it in Forster’s style, the plot of *The Crying of Lot 49* is that Pierce Inverarity died and Oedipa Maas nearly goes mad with anxiety trying to figure out the secrets hidden in his will. Her curiosity motivates the story, but unlike Forster’s queen who dies of grief, no final event comes of Oedipa’s anxious curiosity. In fact, each new attempt to track down knowledge only produces new clues. Pynchon’s story about Oedipa’s search for the mysterious Tristero System is not reducible to plot points, like the “ones and zeros” of a digital computer that Oedipa sees society reduced to in the novel’s final pages (150). Instead of such neatly formulated causal links she has only the repetition of symbols to keep her going.

Furthermore, the causal relationships she hopes to find behind the Tristero are rendered as less valuable than her mere embodied presence. Besides accusing her of Puritanical respect, the playwright Randolph Dribble tells Oedipa that his play, without the people connected to it, is nothing but “traces, fossils. Dead, mineral, without value or potential” (62). As Amy Elias has argued, Pynchon’s “novels tend to turn to the body rather than to abstract systems of knowledge as the locus of value and meaning, and they value ethical human relations over utopian political schemas” (Elias 129). Against critics who argue that Pynchon’s excessive storytelling creates the

⁶ In this respect, the various anecdotes included in Pynchon’s story time function like a kind of reverse framing device. Viktor Shklovsky identifies framing as a “device of deceleration” and this is certainly a key motivation behind Pynchon’s several narrative asides.

effect of inhuman characters, I argue that Pynchon's storytelling for the sake of storytelling is meant to secure the story as the preeminently human form of meaning. The time of the story—often in opposition to the plot's orientation toward an end result—organizes the events told in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

In order to follow how the plot and story time of *The Crying of Lot 49* thread their way between the New Critics and the secularization thesis, however, I want to situate the novel in another vital though often overlooked context for postwar American fiction—its widespread use of Søren Kierkegaard's work for thinking about literary ethics in the wake of modernism. This Kierkegaardian context helps illuminate how Pynchon's story is both a story about Oedipa and a story about the contemporary novel's response to secularization. In this second story, the secular time of personal experience portrayed in the novel's story world rebuffs both the divinizing and dehumanizing threats it perceives lurking within a too tightly drawn plot.

2. Hail to the post horn!

Pynchon is not often associated with Søren Kierkegaard's writings. Their gap in time, place, and style, however, is of less account than it might seem.⁷ Kierkegaard's thought was a powerful influence on a range of American novelists who, like Pynchon, were beginning their careers in the Fifties—from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (whose epigraph reads: "All sickness is not unto death, neither is invisibility"), to the popular crime novels of Patricia Highsmith (she simply referred to him as "the master" in her journals), to John Updike's suburban tales (Updike confessed that "for a time, I thought of all my fiction as illustrations of Kierkegaard"), to the southern elegance of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (in which, according to Percy, the "whole structure of Binx's search is based

⁷ See chapters four and five of George Cotkin's *Existentialism in America* for an account of Kierkegaard's influence on American culture, from its early translations by the Christian pastor Walter Lowrie to writers to the political machinations of the Oval Office.

upon” Kierkegaard’s work). Saul Bellow’s characters Herzog and Sammler also ruminate over Kierkegaardian themes in order to understand their time and place. For several postwar novelists looking to push beyond modernism, Kierkegaard provided a way to understand both the promise and perils of aesthetic form. Pynchon, however, has never publically voiced any claim at all to Kierkegaard’s influence and his playful novels seem diametrically opposed to Kierkegaard’s ponderous existential hand wringing.

Yet Kierkegaard’s view of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, and comedy’s capacity to mediate between them through indirect communication, is at the heart of how *The Crying of Lot 49* approaches the problem of human communication. The novel’s underground postal service, its lyrical tributes to the transistor radio and a national network of telephone lines, the feedback loop invoked by names like Echo Courts and Yoyodyne, all point toward the difficulty of communication. But what about its ends? What of the people communicating? Are bodies just another form of interference? Does the novel have any interest in the role embodied experience plays in communication? I think it does, and I think Kierkegaard’s theory of indirect communication illuminates why Oedipa feels like her signals are so often crossed. Pynchon has written about his use of communication theory while writing *The Crying of Lot 49*, but nothing has been written to highlight how important Kierkegaard’s aesthetics are for how Pynchon takes communication theory out of its discursive contexts and uses it to animate an artistic genre. For Kierkegaard, direct communication is a form of conveying information but indirect communication is way to create a particular person’s ethical response to a situation. As I argue, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a masterpiece of such indirect communication, a story in which the direct data is not as important as the forms of interference that get in its way.

Kierkegaard’s presence resonates most clearly in the novel’s clarion call—the post horn that comes to symbolize the underground network Oedipa learns to discern as W.A.S.T.E., or We Await

Silent Tristero's Empire. The slim volume Kierkegaard titled *Repetition* culminates with an encomium on the post horn as its momentous symbol. In turning to it I do not want to imply that Pynchon's post horn is necessarily a product of his reading of Kierkegaard. Indeed, my reading of the novel disparages the attempt to identify such sources. However, understanding how Kierkegaard uses the symbol of the post horn helps us understand a crucial aspect of Pynchon's—its repetitions.

Repetition is, for Kierkegaard, philosophy's reworking of the Leibnizian concept of possibility; the post horn announces the possible because it never repeats the same sound no matter how repeatedly one trumpets it. In the face of what seems a persistent sameness, the post horn creates something new. Repeatedly sound the post horn, and each trumpet blow announces its unrepeatable newness. Whereas Oedipa sees a country of tract housing and mass-produced motels, the post horn symbols she discovers on her night of wandering through San Francisco promise something hidden beneath this echo chamber of consumer capitalism.

The critical literature has yet to connect Kierkegaard's post horn to the post horns of *The Crying of Lot 49*. This oversight may be simply because Kierkegaard's theory of irony in modern culture is, as the philosopher Jonathan Lear has bemoaned, "poorly understood" (ix). Or perhaps that Kierkegaard's famous early essay "From the Papers of One Still Living," is rarely considered an example of novel theory (in spite of the fact that it anticipates Mikhail Bakhtin's much more widely cited theory of *lifeviews*). That essay's argument that human life is always *in media res* and that novels should not reflect a character's *worldview* but the trajectory of a *lifeview*—because ethical decisions that must be made on the fly with only the limited knowledge available—offers insight into the abruptness of *The Crying of Lot 49*'s beginning and ending. Yet whatever the reasons for Kierkegaard's absence in critical accounts of the postwar novel, by tracing his importance for *The Crying of Lot 49* I hope to suggest a new way of reading it that adequately explains why its bawdy jokes so often drip with the earnestness of a Victorian novel.

Oedipa is no doubt deeply in earnest, despite the playful tone in which her plight is narrated. So earnest that she begins to cry over lot 49. That is, she comes to the point of tears because she is so desperate to know the secrets hidden behind the stamps to be auctioned off as lot 49 in the novel's closing scene. To get to that final scene, however, the novel follows Oedipa from her days as a disillusioned DJ's suburban housewife to her attempts to settle and uncover the mysteries behind the will of a deceased former lover. Like the protagonist of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's story "Lot No. 249," Oedipa feels she is up against inimical magical powers; but for Oedipa it is not Doyle's animated mummy but "formless magic," "magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all" that worries her (12). The strange magic she ends up encountering, however, are so many clues pointing to a largely unknown but still functioning medieval postal guild. Unlike one of Doyle's detective stories, in every clue Oedipa uncovers there lurks something else she has yet to understand, something else that the reader, too, will not fully understand. Among its several gags, the story is packed with "all manner of revelations," but especially so in its latter chapters, as the symbolic post horns referring to the Tristero multiply in the number of their repeated occurrences. And it is in those repetitions that Pynchon pulls apart the logic of his novel's plot time and replaces it with a form of temporal experience in which Oedipa's continued and creative presence is valued above any explanations she can deduce.

Kierkegaard's *Repetition* dramatizes this embodied subjectivity and its relation to possibility through two scenarios—that of the lover's relation to the beloved and through the differences of time. In the first scenario Kierkegaard explores the relationship between repetition and poetic language's tendency toward abstractions. The lover discovers he is more in love with the poetic recollection of love than the actual person of the beloved. Here Kierkegaard aligns his characterization of Platonic recollection with an aesthetic view of the world—aesthetics, like recollection, can quickly become a way of avoiding actuality. To recollect a love is to place it outside

of actuality in an aesthetic netherworld. In Kierkegaard's scheme, were the lover capable of repetition, he would live out the beauty of his poetic recollection in the daily repetitions of marriage. In *Repetition's* diagnosis, the aesthete-lover is more intensely drawn to lyrically recollecting his love than loving her. In Kierkegaard's separation of the ethical from the aesthetic, the lyricism of literary form is detrimental to a truly ethical relation. I will return to this momentarily in relation to Oedipa, but let me emphasize how different Kierkegaard's view of ethics and aesthetics is from elevation of complex style in both the Left and Right of the postwar literati.

In Kierkegaard's second scenario, however, the pseudonymous author Constantine Constantius attempts to repeat a previous trip to Berlin that he enjoyed. This trip reveals three strikingly different aspects of repetition: 1) there is repetition as the perfunctory and banal, 2) there is repetition as bringing the actual into existence, and 3) there is the impossibility of any circumstantial repetition. In the first case, Constantine becomes bored by the monotony of repetition. In the second, he realizes that any present moment however similar it seems to the past has the possibility of becoming something different. And in the third it seems impossible to repeat his trip because the smallest differences are always creeping in and ruining things.

It is the ethical aspect of the second case of repetition that most interests both Kierkegaard and Pynchon. At the end of the first part of *Repetition* Constantine turns to the post horn as his symbol of how language relates to repetition, how to make an ethical repetition, and how to avoid the wrong kind of repetition. I will quote the passage at length here, using Walter Lowrie's translation from the 1964 edition:

Hail to the post-horn! That is my instrument—for many reasons, and principally for this, that one never can be sure of eliciting from this instrument the same note. And he who puts it to his mouth and deposits his wisdom therein can never be guilty of repetition; and he who instead of making answer to his friend holds out to him a post-horn with a polite request to use it, though he says nothing, has explained all. This is my symbol. As the ascetics of old placed a skull upon the table and by the contemplation of it directed their meditations, so shall the post-horn upon my table always remind me of what the significance of life really is. Hail to the post-horn!

Kierkegaard effuses over this symbol primarily because of how it functions as a means of *communication*. By giving it one has said nothing but explained all. In the first scenario of *Repetition*, that of the lover poetically agonizing over his beloved, language is the true inhibitor of positive repetition, of faith and actualization. For in abandoning himself in the carefully wrought abstractions of language, in delighting in the melancholy of poetic feeling, the lover has limited his view of the actual person. The post horn is a symbol of repetition not only because it always announces itself with a different squawk, but because it knows that such ethical errors lurk poetic speech. The post horn announces that the significance of life is ethical, not poetic. Any literary work that wants to gesture toward that significance must be wary of setting its own aesthetic achievement up as an end in itself. For the many novelists who read Kierkegaard in the Fifties, the post horn preached that literary language should not overreach itself and that books cannot fully contain but only prompt the actual. Like the gift of the post horn, a truly ethical novel must practice a certain tight-lipped, ironic reticence.

Such reticence, what Pynchon calls “ritual reluctance,” is precisely the function of the post horn in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Oedipa first discovers the post horn as a drawing on the inside wall of a bar’s bathroom stall, only to begin finding them everywhere. Her search to understand the Tristero to which they refer consistently provides significant clues that are simultaneously preposterous absurdities. Oedipa encounters this problem in each of her repeated revelations, “Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth;” another “mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none” (150). Pynchon takes great care to remind his readers that the intricacies of his reflexive tale could be about nothing at all. Oedipa bemoans the kind of training she received in college, what made her “unfit perhaps for marches and sit ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts,” precisely because of that New Critical training’s overinvestment in literary language that Pynchon cautions against (89).

What Kierkegaard's repetition helps us to see in Pynchon's symbol is that the post horn announces the danger of assuming that literature is a means to "transcendent meaning." Even as the lover is too quick to fall in love with the poetry his beloved inspires, so too the reader may become enamored with the intricacies of the work's hermetically sealed, referential world.⁸ *The Crying of Lot 49* is finally silent about its own meaning, to which it only haltingly gestures. While Oedipa and Metzger watch *The Courier's Tragedy*, *The Crying of Lot 49*'s play-within-the-novel, its events are related according to a developing logic of "ritual reluctance." In a passage that ironically refers back onto *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon writes:

It is about this point in the play, in fact, that things really get peculiar, and a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words. Heretofore the naming of names has gone on either literally or as metaphor. But now, as the Duke gives his fatal command, a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance. Certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud; certain events will not be shown onstage; though it is difficult to imagine, given the excesses of the preceding acts, what these things could possibly be. The Duke does not, perhaps may not, enlighten us. (55)

This "new mode of expression" is ambiguous, indirect, reticent. The Duke enlightens neither the reader, nor Oedipa, not even the narrator. "Ritual reluctance" aptly names the way in which what Kierkegaard calls indirect communication requires a repetition—ethically responsible literary representation should make its limits known. Lest we miss the import of this phrase Pynchon repeats it again in describing Randolph Driblette's reticence when Oedipa encounters him backstage: "He had managed to create around [the Tristero] the same aura of ritual reluctance here, offstage, as he had on" (62).

This "ritual reluctance" drives the novella's mysterious accretion of post horn symbols, which are deliberately associated with the late night callers whose voices are carried through the

⁸ This is a famously contentious issue, and does not need to be reiterated here. I will simply say that I agree with Edward Mendelson's early contention that Pynchon's prose has an entirely "indicative" purpose behind it. Indeed, in my argument the post horns function as reminders that Pynchon's self-conscious stories are neither about formal reflexivity nor communicating factual content. They are about people.

telephone lines but may or may not reach anyone willing to listen. The post horn and telephone mimic each other as symbols of “the secular miracle of communication.” The novel’s late night callers, through “brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word” (149). As if accumulated attempts will be enough to reach the deep sense of recognition they seek. And indeed, for Oedipa “the repetition of symbols was to be enough” (95) for the value of the experience of searching and discovering them comes to replace any answer they promised.

Oedipa receives these repetitions as a “secular announcement” void of any specific revelation of transcendent meaning. In Kierkegaard’s ironic, indirect communication, this is what the responsibly written novel does—it does not seek to achieve transcendence in either its form or content. Accordingly, Oedipa wonders if these “gemlike” clues are merely “compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (95). But such a direct, epileptic Word, were it to come via the projected world of a narrative fiction, would offer the false comfort of recollection rather than the courage for repetition that Oedipa has begun to show. She abjures that “direct, epileptic Word” for the repetitions that are now “enough” for her.

Such a view of repetition and reticence is not only wary of aesthetic form, but also suggests why Pynchon’s novel takes such obvious pleasure in telling loosely related stories, whether about the Tristero or Peter Pinguid or the Paranoids or the young Metzger’s role in the movie *Cashiered* or the bones of American GIs or the even summarizing the violent bloodbath in *The Courier’s Tragedy*.⁹ If ritual reluctance secures a certain mystery for the Tristero in Driblette’s play, it also points towards why Oedipa’s presence in continuing the search is so important to the structure of the novel and its

⁹ While I will not go into it here, Pynchon’s habitual inclusion of songs in his novels function in the same way—they interrupt the causal relations of plot time in order to open the space for a simple, playful form of human expression that points toward the larger value system of the novel. The seeming irrelevance or pointlessness of those songs is in fact the point. The time of human experience must not be reduced to rational explanations and a novel’s tendency to do so in the machinations of its plot, in Pynchon’s work, must be resisted.

valuation of story time over plot. Were the narrator to explain the post horn symbols rather than repeatedly narrate their discovery, Oedipa (and the reader) would be in danger of mistaking such knowledge for recollected truth. Recollection lacks an ethical relationship to knowledge; it thinks of knowledge as a purely discursive object rather than a human experience.

Again, Kierkegaard's *Repetition* is instructive for understanding how Pynchon's novel portrays the content of its messages as secondary to the experience of sending and receiving. Recollection is Plato's metaphysical answer to the epistemological problem sometimes called the hermeneutic circle. How can we know whether or not something is true without a previously acknowledged standard for weighing the options? But if we begin with such a standard, are we not stacking the deck in advance? For instance, if we want to define justice, how will we recognize the right definition without some sense of what to look for? But if we start out with some preconceived notion of what justice should be, then how can merely restating the given definition amount to truth? To this epistemological conundrum Plato responds with his theory of recollection: you know everything already, but have yet to realize that knowledge. Thus a famous scene in Plato's *Meno* has Socrates show that a slave with no education does in fact know his geometry once he is guided to recollect it.

Whereas Kierkegaard characterizes Plato's recollection as a movement backwards into the past, repetition is a forward motion into what is becoming. In place of mere knowledge, repetition creates through action. If recollection recalls the past, then repetition creates an actuality in the present. Kierkegaard writes, "When the Greeks said that all knowing is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been; when one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence" (149). Note his distinction between knowing and living: "knowing is recollecting", "life is a repetition." Repetition requires a living form of realization, not simply knowledge. The point of Kierkegaard's rather gnomic formulation is that recollection knows actuality through memory whereas repetition realizes actuality through bringing it into existence in

the choices of a particular life. The problem with knowledge is that it is neither satisfactorily creative nor ethical.

Kierkegaard's concept of repetition, however, is both creative and ethical. He opens *Repetition* with an anecdote from the famous biographer of the Greek philosophers, Diogenes Laertius, about Diogenes of Sinope's response to the Eleatic school's denial of motion—he simply got up and silently walked back and forth. This movement, however, becomes the movement of a search in Kierkegaard's rendering. Constantine, too, takes it upon himself to move. The book tells the story of his attempt to repeat the delights of previous trip to Berlin. The search is to find out whether or not such a repetition is in fact possible. Can the same thing happen twice? Or, more importantly, can something new come into being in a seemingly unchanging repetitious monotony?

Pynchon's Oedipa is pregnant with just such a creative possibility. At the novel's climax she comes to a classic Kierkegaardian moment of crisis—she despairs that “this, o God, was the void” (141). Yet she does not lapse into nihilism or even agnosticism. Instead, when Oedipa feels the void of a cosmic silence beginning to swallow her, she begins to suspect that she is pregnant (*Crying* 141-2). That nauseous shudder was not existential despair, but the physically palpable first trimester. Her pregnancy, however, is no ordinary child. According to the narrator, the “gynecologist has no test for what she was pregnant with” (144). What is she pregnant with? Knowledge? Or perhaps a repetition of her own? Oedipa distinctly feels “the need to bring something of herself” to the mysterious connections proliferating from Pierce Inverarity's will (72), and it is this need that drives the plot (or plotlessness) of the novel. Her need to bring something of herself, to be present and witness this string of mysterious symbols, keeps the story going. Furthermore, in bringing “something of herself” Oedipa realizes that this experience is changing her, and that it has increased her sensitivity to change. She is pregnant with an entire world of possibilities. “Shall I project a world?” she asks, wondering how to bring something of herself to uncovering the mysteries of

Pierce's will just as Driblette brought something of himself to Richard Wharfinger's seventeenth-century play.

The novel describes two different scenes in which Oedipa is transfixed by her sensitivity to new possibilities. The first is her descent into San Narciso and the "religious instant" she experiences looking down at the houses so expertly arranged in their tracts, as if they were a hieroglyph meant to communicate something. Later in the novel, however, in a scene infused with Dickensian sentiment, Oedipa weeps for an old sailor who is now a homeless addict. She sees his mattress just like she saw the tract housing—hiding within it an immense amount of data, sublime in the history its intricate particularities might relate. This moment, unlike the "religious instant" that is immediately questioned and parodied, occasions an intense emotional experience that is also a theoretical reflection on the nature of possibility. The shaking man's withdrawal symptoms are portrayed as "a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's ploughshares" (104). Oedipa considers the irony of "dt's"—not the Delirium Tremens of withdrawal that this man is experiencing, but the mathematical concept of time differentials. Time differentials represent the persistence of change, however hidden those changes may seem to the present moment. Confronted with the hopeless state of this addict she remembers that a time differential is "a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was, where it could no longer disguise itself as something innocuous like an average rate" (105). No matter how causally entrenched the current order appears to be, it is in fact changing; both forms of life and forms of death lurk in his breathing, decaying body.

For Oedipa's search and in this man's body, new possibilities take root in specific people. In one of the ironic repetitions that abound in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the miracle of change that is a time differential is registered in the same bodily terms as Delirium Tremens. Pynchon writes, "there was a high magic to low puns, because DT's must give access to dt's of spectra beyond the known sun,

music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright” (105). The irony that DT can mean both the visible symptom of addiction and invisible possibilities offers another example of the irony of the post horn symbols Oedipa finds—their repetitions point back onto the meaningful possibilities of human experience. Constantine keeps a post horn t on his desk in order to “always remind me of what the significance of life really is.”

3. The story of secularization

Stories themselves, irrespective of their content, function like *The Crying of Lot 49*'s repeated post horns. They, too, are reminders of what the significance of life really is insofar as they interrupt the causal logic of the novel's plot with the irrelevant data of human experience. Even when they seem empty of content, like the story of Peter Pinguid and the irrelevant message Mike Fallopian receives just after relating it—as if to emphasize how irrelevant the story is to Oedipa's search—stories themselves are secular symbols of the value of human experience. Such stories provide in miniature the novel's shaggy-dog story structure, in which all the various threads of Oedipa's search do not connect any more than Oedipa discovers proof of the Tristero. But what does it mean to call either the post horn or the structure of storytelling secular?

Pynchon uses the word “secular” four different times in *The Crying of Lot 49* and on each occasion it is clearly synonymous with how things appear to the senses, whether or not those senses can be trusted. The first use of the term in the novel refers to the “secular announcement” of the epileptic's seizure. Oedipa has just heard from the philatelist Genghis Cohen of a dug-up cemetery that may have provided human bones for Pierce Inverity's business pursuits. At this point she has been “sensitized” and “could, at this stage of things, recognize signals like that, as the epileptic is said to—an odor, color, pure piercing grace note announcing his seizure” (75). Pynchon goes on to describe how afterwards, “it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never

what is revealed during the attack, that he remembers” (75). In an elegant yet ironic turn of phrase the “secular announcement” is a “pure piercing grace note,” which is “really dross,” but nonetheless heralds the gold of revelation to come. Crucially, however, there is something missing from this secular announcement. Oedipa wonders if “she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back.” The secular is the ordinary, material world of how things become evident—full of odor, color, and sound, but not therefore excluding the advent of grace. Such secularity does not carry the “central truth itself,” of course, but the indirect references that suggest its possibility. Note once again Pynchon’s clear emphasis on the personal experience of that announcement and how its meaning is in the experience more than the content of its message.

The other three uses of “secular” in *Lot 49* follow this logic: at “the secular level” one can see the pistons of Nefastis’s machine, not the mysterious force animating them (85). Likewise, their enemies might see the “secular Tristero” as the signs and symbols cloaking something more secretive (136). The secular is how things appear to the senses, though that appearance in Pynchon’s rendering often seems to hide something else within. Near the end of the novel Pynchon refers to “the secular miracle of communication” captured in the telephone lines, carrying the unheard messages of another America, “that coded in Inverarity’s testament.” Inverarity has, like the telephone lines, hidden the possibility of a revelation. It is clear that “secular miracle” does not here refer to a religious miracle rationally accounted for by modern science. The secular miracle of communication is a reference to the telephone wires as the secular manifestation of something finally not at all reducible to the purely rational frame. The secular miracle refers to the *prima facie* material content of metal and rubber that makes this form of communication possible.

The use of the free indirect style of narration, or free indirect discourse, is yet another way that Pynchon keeps his novel within that secular frame of reference. Instead of either representing a character's point of view or commenting on that character's point of view from the position of an omniscient narrator, free indirect discourse ironically merges the character and narrator together. It is a form of indirect speech that has slipped back into a direct mode of presentation without any syntactical or mechanical indicators, sometimes called tags.¹⁰ "Indirect" and "direct" have precise narratological meanings here, which differ slightly from Kierkegaard's usage. In a novel with a third-person narrator, the narrated text has access to the characters' thoughts and feelings from the outside. A sentence of narrated text might run: "Oedipa, finally worn out, could not go on living with so much uncertainty." Oedipa is described from the perspective of the narrator, but the narrator has complete access to her interior life. Direct speech, on the other hand, is directly represented as spoken at that moment by the speaker herself; it has no interior access. Indirect speech adds a further remove in that the narrator reports it; though in the character's own words. It is a form of direct speech to write, "Oedipa said, 'I'm worn out and can't live like this anymore,'" since Oedipa's speech is directly represented. Indirect speech, however, places what Oedipa said in the words of the narrator's own reportage: "Oedipa said that she was worn out and couldn't live like this anymore." Free indirect discourse removes the indexical tags (she said, she said that, quotation marks, pronouns, etc.) from the indirect form: "Oedipa felt worn out and uncertain; why keep going when it was all so uncertain?" In doing so, it submerges the narrator beneath the character's own expression, using her particular diction, mood, or elocutionary style.

In order to look at the logic of Pynchon's free indirect discourse I want to return to the book's two key passages previously mentioned: the moment when Oedipa reflects on the relationship of "DT's" to "dt's"—Delirium Tremens and time differentials—and the close of the

¹⁰ See Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, 166.

first chapter describing Oedipa's predicament. Pynchon's use of indirect discourse surreptitiously blurs the distinction between the narrator and Oedipa when she meets the dying old sailor. In the following passage, who is it that exclaims "God help this old tattooed man?"

Trembling, unfurrowed, she slipped sidewise, screeching back across grooves of years, to hear again the earnest, high voice of her second or third collegiate love Ray Glozing bitching among 'uhs' and the syncopated tonguing of a cavity, about his freshman calculus; 'dt,' God help this old tattooed man, meant also time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was, where it could no longer disguise itself as something innocuous like an average rate; where velocity dwelled in the projectile though the projectile be frozen in midflight, where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick (105).

Oedipa emerges from the third person description in such a way that that the description unquestionably becomes Oedipa's memory and feeling, though it is not directly represented with any specific indexical tags. The interjection of "God help this old tattooed man" is clearly marked as Oedipa's through its compassion, its diction, and its sheer propinquity to her idiosyncratic memories.

This kind of free indirect discourse is an inverse of dramatic irony. In dramatic irony, the audience knows what the characters on stage do not; in free indirect discourse, the reader does not know who it is that knows—is it the character's perspective or the narrator's? The question, "Who is speaking?" is not problematic in the visual and aural space of a drama, but it becomes a perceptual strain in a written narrative's ability to blend points-of-view. This form of ironic representation merges the narrator's commentary with a character's thoughts: insofar as the novel is the representation of experience and not its explanation, free indirect discourse is the novel's refinement of narrative experience.

What sets apart how this particular passage employs free indirect discourse, however, is that at exactly the moment it discretely changes its point of reference (from third to first-person and immediately back again) it is discussing the difficulty of pinpointing change: "'dt,' God help this old

tattooed man, meant also time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which change had to be confronted at last for what it was.” Time and space present the illusion of an “average rate” just like a novel presents the illusion of its protagonist’s fixed subjectivity. But change is a subtle thief, always *taking* place below our perceptual radar. When things seem to proceed as they always have, change is yet evident; Pynchon creates this formal reality through his use of indirect discourse in the passage. It is an ironic realization of the problem of difference in repetition, how differences dwell within the strictest repetition. Oedipa confronts this stranger feeling strange, disoriented, even lost, and the narrative style doubles this problem, imbricating her own speech into that of the narrator’s as an awakening to the forces of change in which she is caught.

The catalytic “lines of force” invoked at the end of the first chapter are another example of such forces. Pynchon uses free indirect discourse to elicit the novel’s relationship to the possibilities of representation itself in that chapter’s closing paragraph. The narrator momentarily slips into narrating from within Oedipa’s thoughts without the tags of direct or indirect speech. But the passage goes one step further than this, however, with the last two words. The narrator genuinely abandons his own perspective in assuming hers. The way in which the narrator, as well as the implied author, gets circumscribed by Oedipa’s question, reveals the unmoored freedom of free indirect discourse:

As things developed, she was to have all manner of revelations. Hardly about Pierce Inverarity, or herself; but about what had remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away. There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix. . . . What did she so desire to escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (10-12)

This “just perceptibly out of focus” blurs the character’s thoughts into the narrator’s, the author’s, even the reader’s emphatic question: what else? The “what else?” is not just Oedipa’s what else. The quick and untagged address to the reader seems like an abrupt transition from free indirect discourse to a free direct discourse here. But the careful way in which this is written makes it impossible to tell who is asking, “what else?” Is it Oedipa or the narrator? It is a genuine question: the implied author asks in all sincerity, what else? This seeming slip (free indirect discourse was once thought of as the novelist’s unintentional mistake) in fact sets the tone for the entirety of the novel. These two words evacuate the authority of the authorial voice; neither Oedipa, nor the reader, nor the narrator knows what else.

This uncertainty is how Pynchon construes the experience of secular knowledge in *The Crying of Lot 49*. As such it is another form of “ritual reluctance.” Yet Pynchon’s secular stories are not only tightlipped. They are also at times blatantly profane. In the introduction to *Slow Learner* Pynchon recounts the liberating effect of Saul Bellow’s mixture of high and demotic diction as “not a case of either/or but an expansion of possibilities” (*Slow Learner* 7). “It was actually OK to write like this,” Pynchon comments, “Who knew?” (7). Of course, *The Crying of Lot 49* expands those possibilities by joining Vladimir Nabokov with the Beatles, the board meeting with the musical, Hemingway’s “our nada who art in nada” with the sign of a used car lot. These juxtapositions accompany the goofy slapstick scenarios Pynchon is famous for, such as the drunken Oedipa, in several layers of clothing, flopping around on the bathroom floor as a careening hair spray can nearly ends her life. And yet key to this expansion is Pynchon’s use of such comic moments to express the novel’s very serious ethical sensibility.

A story that consistently verges on disclosing that final revelation that will create a wonder of meaning out of the stuff of secular society takes place amid the profanations of southern Californians in the Sixties—campus radicals, a punk band hoping to capitalize on the British

Invasion, anarchist bureaucrats, anthem singing board members, an LSD peddling psychoanalyst, DJs attracted to teeny boppers, drunk literary scholars, and a Young Republican ostensibly investigating a will but longing for an ultimate apocalypse. To return to the moment when Oedipa has her “religious instant” looking down on San Narciso: the houses, organized in their suburban tracts, remind her “of the time she’d opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. . . . there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate” (14). This deeply secular moment is not a mocking parody of religious experience, but its inflection through the leveling of the sacred with the profane.

Pynchon explicitly historicizes this epiphany with the materiality of the postwar production boom. California’s suburban houses viewed from a Chevy Impala are likened to the circuit board of a transistor radio. And as the religious instant passes, it is the DJ’s records that become the priest’s chalice in the vision Oedipa has of her husband Much Maas’s crisis of belief. This whole scene intentionally enervates the Marcusean project of separating capitalist from cultural production. It is far from mocking the banality of mass production, whether houses, cars, radios, vinyl LPs, even the futility of the then emerging youth counter-culture. To the contrary, it is mass production that enables the “secular miracle of communication” celebrated in the telephone wires whose late night callers summon forth “the unnamable act, the recognition, the Word” (149). It is quintessential trope of Pynchon’s novel that truth and meaning hide within the secular experiences suggested by such unlikely combinations.

The Crying of Lot 49 has no intention of going beyond the “secular level” in its own bid for cultural significance. In fact, it thinks of its secularity as an iconoclastic modesty that points away from transcendent meaning to unresolved and unclear realm of human experience. This modesty, however, is also a formal strategy to emphasize the importance of embodied experience for the novel’s art of storytelling. In my next chapter I turn to one of Pynchon’s direct descendants in this.

David Foster Wallace uses the formal components narrative structure in ways similar to Pynchon—ways that point toward the temporality of embodied experience clearly reminiscent of *The Crying of Lot 49*, a novel whose evident influence on his own work Wallace belatedly acknowledged.

Chapter 3

Description and Disciplinary Time: *The Pale King*

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.

~Zadie Smith, “Difficult Gifts”

1. From character descriptions to disciplining character

In a long dialogue toward the end of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*, Meredith Rand recounts her experience as a patient in a mental health center. She explains that, whatever the doctors said, no amount of knowledge about her problem as a “cutter” could truly help her. Change would only come once she began *acting* differently—only new actions could replace the old ones.

All that matters is that I was doing it and to stop doing it. That was it. Unlike the doctors and small groups that were all about your feelings and why, as though if you knew why you did it you’d magically be able to stop. Which [...] was the big lie they all bought that made doctors and standard therapy such a waste of time for people like us—they thought diagnosis was the same as cure. That if you know why, it would stop. Which is bullshit. [...] You only stop if you stop. Not if you wait for somebody to explain it in some magic way that will presto change-o make you stop. (*Pale King* 486).

According to Rand, knowing “why” will not change your behavior because “diagnosis” is not “the same as cure.” If the medical institution was going to help her, it needed to do more than change her thoughts.

Whatever its implications for medical practitioners, Rand’s insistence on the value of actions exemplifies the aspiration of Wallace’s unfinished novel. Michael Pietsch’s edited version of Wallace’s manuscript, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel*, wants to offer its reader more than the moving moral lessons of its characters’ story world. Instead, it assumes that the act of careful,

attentive concentration is a meaningful moral action, and it includes whole chapters of wearisome reading material in order to prod its reader into practicing such attentiveness. To turn Rand's terms back onto the novel in which she appears—it “diagnoses” its reader with a lazy inattentiveness, but then provides the occasion to “to stop doing it” and replace fecklessness with intense engagement.

Not long into his career Wallace rejected the critical notion that the novel was an amoral source of textual pleasure. The novel's capacity to become a moral cure has been a familiar concern in Wallace's essays and fiction, yet *The Pale King* takes it further than any of his previous work.¹ True, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” established Wallace's characteristic reader-oriented focus in its repeatedly asked question, “For Whom?” And *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* put moral character traits at its thematic center, goading fuller the reader's full participation by directly addressing her as in the ending of “Octet:” “So decide” (160). Even more so, the characters and communities represented in *Infinite Jest* were not content simply to “diagnose a malaise” but “proposed a treatment” for that malaise (Max 214). Yet even that magisterial novel's proposed treatments remain at the level of representational content and emotive impact.

What if a novel could go beyond *proposing* a treatment in its story world to *becoming* the treatment? What if a novel could affect its readers in ways beyond the diagnostic “presto change-o” of sympathy and recognition? Such a non-sentimental affective register, if achieved, would have a different conception of morality in the novel.² For one thing, it would have less to do with the moral center provided by a single protagonist, which Wallace's fiction deliberately lacks. Yet even the

¹ See David H. Evans 171-189 for a summary of the moral consequences of free will and its relationship to religious experience throughout Wallace's work.

² From the theory of morality espoused by the Chicago school at mid-century, to the renewed critical value of sentiment in the eighties, to today's affect studies, the reader's emotional response to the story has been considered the novel's primary mode of moral instruction. Another strand of moral theory, one including Henry James, Lionel Trilling, and the New Critics, instead looks toward difficulty of style and complexity of representation for the novel's moral instruction. Apologias for the ethics of fiction, whether neoliberal (Martha Nussbaum) or deconstructionist (J. Hillis Miller), continue to follow the trajectories first established by R.S. Crane's focus on emotions and Trilling's on difficulty. See Hale 896-905 for a trenchant summary of how recent work in ethics and novel theory expounds on the work of its midcentury precursors.

choices and actions of his novels' many characters would matter less than the simple embodied act of reading. Indeed, such a cure would have to presume, as *The Pale King* does, a moral torpor remedied by sitting still and learning the discipline of attentive reading. Such reading would no longer be thought of as leisurely entertainment, but a kind of moral corollary to regimented physical exercise.

In *The Pale King*, the moral value of a novel's story and discourse—its plot and compelling characters, its wisdom or difficult style—is relegated to a secondary position. Any hard won insights of the novelist are less important than whether or not the novel helps discipline the reader's capacity to focus. Accordingly, *The Pale King's* narrative structure includes a series of exercises meant to test, train, and strengthen the reader's willed absorption in reading dull material.³ Its final effect on the reader largely depends on the reader's choice whether or not to read its uninteresting descriptions and self-consciously artificial passages. This results in yet another twist to Wallace's ongoing dialogue with the morality of Metafiction. While Metafiction prides itself on banishing the categorically misplaced moral sentiments of traditionally realist novels,⁴ *The Pale King* marshals metafictional devices for their moral resources. If television "engages without demanding," as Wallace once wrote it does, at points *The Pale King* deliberately demands without engaging ("E Unibus Pluram" 37).

For instance, in chapter nine's "Author's Foreword" one Dave Wallace directly begs the reader to believe that it is really indeed him speaking. The plea continues through conspicuously belaboured, recursive loops. It becomes for the reader an exercise in staying put and genuinely listening to the cad who has you cornered at a party full of friends. If some readers cannot help but

³ See Ellen Rooney 27-29 for an account of how contemporary perceptions of "readerly impatience" like Wallace's influence accounts of the novel's distinctive generic traits in the digital age.

⁴ See Patricia Waugh 10-11 for an account of how metafictional tropes seek to critique the values associated with Realist narratives.

be amused at such a wisecrack, the chapter that narrates Internal Revenue Service employees simply turning pages will elicit at least a yawn. The chapter absurdly belies the artificiality of realistic conventions by describing each repeated page turn over and over again. It consists entirely of sentences like these, “Ann Williams turns a page. Ed Shackleford searches a file for a supporting document. Joe Biron-Maint turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. David Cusk turns a page. Lane Dean Jr. rounds his lips and breathes deeply in and out like that and bends to a new file. Ken Wax turns a page” (*Pale King* 312). While it seems to flirt with a kind of hyper-realism, this self-conscious stylization of banal gestures reminds the reader of the artificial components necessary to all storytelling while at the same time inviting the reader to practice paying attention to such seemingly dull material. The description is not so much about describing as it is about disciplining a kind of reading.

The ambition of these formal innovations is *The Pale King*’s attempt to function more like a habit-shaping institution than a sympathy-evoking work of mimetic art.⁵ This is largely because Wallace is after more enduring repercussions than the reader’s emotional investment. As the sociologist Anthony Giddens has written, institutions “by definition are the more enduring features of social life” and this is no small part of their vitality (Giddens 24).⁶ Alongside its sections containing attentional exercises, *The Pale King* explores morality in the institutions it depicts. Like its predecessor *Infinite Jest*, it portrays how institutions shape people’s actions and, in turn, their moral dispositions.

⁵ For the breakdown of mimetic wholeness see Henry Veggian on how *The Pale King*’s subtitle “An Unfinished Novel,” is thematically apropos whether or not Wallace himself had “finished” it. See also the entirety of Luc Herman and Toon Staes’ co-edited special issue of *English Studies* on *The Pale King* for the most extensive treatment of the many issues raised by its posthumous publication.

⁶ “Institution” can mean several things. I follow the sociological distinction between institutions and organizations, which are not as enduring. Thus Microsoft is an organization, but capitalism is an institution. Yet the family, or even a specific college or school, is also an institution. In Giddens, institutions include three specific components that evoke the extent to which social institutions are embedded in society at large; they are 1) signification, 2) domination, and 3) legitimation. Institutions, then, include a 1) mode of discourse 2) enforced in a group with the necessary 3) legal legitimacy. While it may seem strange to speak of the novel as an institution, Giddens’s definition shows that it is entirely probable.

In *Infinite Jest* those institutions are the elite tennis academy and the halfway house. In *The Pale King* it is the IRS, which Wallace deliberately represents as a secular version of church practices and beliefs—modelling social values, redistributing wealth, teaching what it means to be good. The various vignettes and sketches composing *The Pale King* focus on a small group of workers at the Midwest Regional Examination Center in Peoria, Illinois, but its thematic unity emerges from this secularized institutional ethos. Just as *Infinite Jest*'s tennis academy juxtaposed the moral blind spots of elite schools against the routines of Alcoholics Anonymous and the Ennet House, the successes (and failures) of the IRS as a moral-making institution are modelled on popular evangelical Christian practices represented in *The Pale King*. While the novel shows the dehumanizing aspects of bureaucratic work as well as the hypocrisies of religion on one hand, it uses the other hand to unequivocally affirm such institutions' methods of moral formation. And though such evangelical practices were obliquely present in the A.A. inspired routines of Ennet House of *Infinite Jest*,⁷ they explicitly provide *The Pale King* with an example of how the novel might produce a more enduring moral impact on its readers' habits.

For a contemporary novel to support institutional models, especially institutions like evangelical churches and government bureaucracies, is peculiar. Critics have shown the prominence of spiritual quests in recent fiction, but the institutions of organized religion are either lampooned or simply ignored.⁸ Such eminent novelists as Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, and Thomas Pynchon imagine new forms of spirituality. Yet Wallace's fiction turns away from that generation of writers' emphasis on spiritual seeking. Pynchon, DeLillo, and Morrison's characters are spiritually open but not particularly religious insofar as their characters' spiritual sensitivity presents alternative values to

⁷ See Kurtz 175-197 for how A.A. emerged from the evangelical sect known as the Oxford Group and kept much of its focus on moral character.

⁸ See Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, John McClure, Amy Hungerford, and Paul Elie for four different critical accounts of varying emphasis on the absence of institutions and prominent presence of religion-less spirituality in the contemporary novel.

the regulated injustices of American institutions. In turn, Wallace's characters act religious in their affirmation of institutional identity and daily routines, but have no interest in spirituality as such. The morality of human actors—not spiritual possibilities—is Wallace's key concern.⁹ Consequently, *The Pale King* looks to the secular consequences of American evangelicalism's spiritual practices.¹⁰

Wallace's attention to the moral effects of institutions, whether religious or not, is a surprising shift not only because novelists have been wary of institutions, but also because scholars studying institutions have been suspicious of morality. The sociology of institutions has questioned whether actors' moral intentions are indeed causal factors in their behavior. According to Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot, this suspiciousness "has led contemporary sociologists to bracket or ignore moral issues, or to suggest that they hid 'real' interests" (Lamont 6). Lamont and Thévenot, however, and a number of other social scientists are beginning to provide empirical evidence to the contrary.¹¹ In particular, the anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann's work on "prayer technologies" and the sociologist Christian Smith's on "moral orders" help elucidate how and why *The Pale King* deliberately conflates morality in the novel with the moral effects of certain institutional routines. They demonstrate that Wallace is less concerned with evoking readerly sympathy through his characters than shaping the character of his readers through the act of reading;¹² as Zadie Smith puts it, Wallace's fiction is "turned outward, toward us" (*Changing My Mind* 273).

⁹ For the best (but rarely cited) explanation of Wallace's relationship to religion see Ervin Beck's online essay, "David Foster Wallace Among the Mennonites."

¹⁰ See Molly Worthen, esp. 6-7, for how the evangelical "crisis of authority" between secular and sacred sources—especially between its paradoxical embrace of secular institutions and equal affirmation of external institutions and internal private beliefs—has made it a uniquely powerful force in American public life, and one certainly worth considering in relation to the contemporary novel.

¹¹ See Steven Hitlin and Stephen Vaisey 3 for how the sociology of morality has been overlooked. For an important contribution to how the sociology of morality might inform literary studies, see Shai M. Dromi and Eva Illouz 351-369.

¹² See Nancy Armstrong 13-15 for an account of why early theories of sentiment thought that "it is important sympathy be something one feels rather than something one does" (Armstrong 13); Wallace was much, much more interested in what "one does" than what "one feels." For Wallace's American antecedents in exploring the novel's relation to evangelical Christianity's view of moral change, see Philip Gura 107-141.

2. Moral order and the novel

Wallace's interest in moving from diagnostic content to active cure predates *The Pale King*. Yet before turning to his final, unfinished novel, I want to begin with Wallace's early thinking about television as a cultural form and Alcoholics Anonymous as an institution. For it was his experiences with TV and A.A. that led him away from modern theories of sentimentality toward thinking about the novel's morality in the much more Aristotelian terms of embodiment, intentionally formed habits, and notions of the good life. Sincerity and sympathy, key terms he was using in the early nineties, only reveal the initial stages of Wallace's thinking on the issue. The more far-reaching aim of a famous essay in which he calls for more sincere modes of expression is its holistic theory of morality and cultural forms.

"E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" was singled out by A.O. Scott as crucial to Wallace's development as a writer and it receives substantial treatment in D.T. Max's biography as marking Wallace's turn away from irony to what Wallace calls "single-entendre principles" (Scott; Max 155-158). In a gloss from the early critical study *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell calls it "one of the most important pieces in Wallace's growing corpus of non-fiction," arguing that it "prepared the way for [the] career-making book," *Infinite Jest* (Boswell 9).¹³ Boswell contends that the essay marks a shift toward incorporating a healthy dose of naïveté into the cynical, postmodern style of his earlier *Broom of the System* and *Girl with the Curious Hair*. Yet what is most distinctive about the essay is neither its reverberating call for a new generation of literary "anti-rebels," nor its relation to the subsequent success of *Infinite Jest*, but rather the acumen with which it understands how a person's moral sensibility becomes habituated.

¹³ Paul Giles goes even further, noting that it has "been seen as a kind of manifesto for his generation of fiction writers" (Giles 328) and Kasia Boddy notes a tendency to see it as "the key to Wallace's subsequent work" (Boddy 23).

The essay argues that television has succeeded in portraying ironic self-reference to its own history and viewership as a desirable form of sophistication.¹⁴ The fact that television is a bisensuous medium that can say one thing and show something entirely different makes it uniquely apt for irony. By the eighties, however, that ironic propensity had turned self-referential. According to Wallace, the “best TV of the last five years has been about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern art could ever have dreamed of” (“E Unibus Pluram” 33). The best television does not generically reflect some other social reality but, in fact, its own history of representation. Wallace cites a number of ironic references to the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* in an episode of *St. Elsewhere* as exemplary of how much television has trained its viewers to experience its reflexivity as in-jokes. What such cases of irony ensure is a form of viewership predicated upon a sense of communal inclusion.¹⁵ Wallace’s key point here, however, is that participating in this entirely abstract community has undeniable moral consequences. Television’s ironic reflexivity values a certain *attitude* toward watching that, with enough time spent watching, can shape one’s moral responses. “Television has become able not only to ensure that we watch,” Wallace writes, “but somehow to inform our deepest responses to what’s watched” (40).

If the average American watches six hours of TV a day, as the statistics Wallace cites claim, then TV has “gotten powerful enough to move from acronym to way of life” (35). Worried that he might sound alarmist, Wallace defends himself by pointing again to the amount of *time* the embodied viewer spends in front of the television. He writes that it is “not paranoid or hysterical to acknowledge that television in enormous doses affects people’s values and self-perception in deep ways” (53). The effects of such “televisual conditioning” are that even the most personal

¹⁴ See Mark Crispin Miller, 3-27, for a contemporaneous and similarly themed but longer and more thorough analysis of the “televisual culture” Wallace critiques in the essay.

¹⁵ Though Wallace thinks such a community is at bottom a shallow one, Wayne Booth is characteristically perceptive to call irony “a more astonishing communal achievement than most accounts have recognized. Its complexities are, after all, shared: the whole thing cannot work at all unless both parties to the exchange have confidence that they are moving together in identical patterns” (Booth 13).

relationships are approached with a TV viewer's ironic detachment. He points out that television, "after all, literally means 'seeing far,'" and this distance "trains us to relate to real live personal up-close stuff the same way we relate to the distant and exotic, as if separated from us by physics and glass, extant only as performance, awaiting our cool review" (64).¹⁶ Wallace believes that the end effect of distanced, ironic watching is that irony becomes "institutionalized," something like a "way of life" or a disposition trained into the viewer (68). He argues that more often than not, it becomes an unarticulated moral conviction about keeping one's distance from "real live personal close-up stuff."

Though Wallace does not use the exact phrase, he portrays televisual culture as a "moral order" that he hopes fiction might redress. According to the sociologist Christian Smith moral orders are "intersubjectively and institutionally shared social structurings of moral systems" (Smith 10). Moral orders are not merely a moral code but the whole constellation of cultural forms that maintain different moral codes. The moral order of television, according to Wallace's logic, would include both coded cynicism as well as the material technologies and real time habits through which it is established—the script's use of irony, sitting still in front of a screen, being invisible to the actors, etc. Through the "intersubjectively and institutionally shared" medium of television ironic detachment becomes a normative expectation. Wallace understands that it is futile to point to the moral content of any particular show when it will not affect the viewer nearly as much as the medium's shared moral order, which is what actually shapes the viewer's moral dispositions.¹⁷ The

¹⁶ Raymond Williams, one of television's most astute cultural critics, would agree. In his essay "Distance," Williams writes that the pressing argument television precipitates is "about the culture of distance, the latent culture of alienation, within which men and women are reduced to models, figures and the quick cry in the throat" (Williams 20-21).

¹⁷ See Stephen Vaisey and Steven Hitlin's "The New Sociology of Morality" for how moral orders compare to similar distinctions, such as Gabriel Abend's between thick and thin moralities, in recent work on the sociology of morality.

very simple point of “E Unibus Pluram” is that in watching television, whether consciously or not, the viewer inhabits a particular moral order.¹⁸

Yet if television can constitute a moral order unto itself, could not fiction as well? And what of the novel, which requires long periods of reading time? The next two decades of Wallace’s work strove to answer that question. The crucial step *Infinite Jest* takes in this direction is to put popular A.A. sayings into dialogue with the literary aesthetics of cliché. For Wallace’s writing, cliché not only represents 1) the sin of allowing someone else to do your thinking for you, but also 2) the virtue of getting past merely *thinking* to realizing the significance of *doing*. Meredith’s Rand’s point that only new actions can change old actions is presaged in conversations at Ennet House in *Infinite Jest*. As Wallace’s biographer points out, these conversations were largely based on Wallace’s own pride-swallowing realization during his recovery at Granada House—that the A.A. adage, “my best thinking got me here,” referred to him as much as anyone else and that it would take something other than thinking to get him out (Max 139).

For the Ennet House characters, clichés hold the truth that repetition is not only deadening, as the aesthetic heritage of literary modernism assumes, but that repetition strengthens, even invigorates. Though repetition might dull the senses, Wallace wagered it could strengthen one’s moral muscle. One begrudging new resident, Geoffrey Day, sarcastically confesses his disdain and need for the anti-intellectual clichés slung around at Ennet House, “So then at forty-six years of age I came here to learn to live by clichés [...] To turn my will and life over to the care of clichés. One day at a time. Easy does it. First things come first. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. Ask for help. Thy will not mine be done. It works if you work it. Grow or go. Keep coming back” (*Infinite Jest* 270). As resentful as Day is to condescend to such a way of life, Wallace uses him to test

¹⁸ Wallace repeats this refrain, “whether consciously or not,” twice in footnotes attached to the passage in *The Pale King* that addresses the moral motivations behind the ubiquity of entertainment media in the “so-called ‘information society’” (85). In Wallace’s account, moral views are often inculcated unawares.

what its truth could mean for narrative form. Turning against the grain of literary wisdom, he uses clichés as a way for the novel to include forms of repetition to urge the inescapability of character formation on the reader. With his critique of televisual irony and the use of clichés, Wallace was beginning to think through the positive possibilities of an institutional aesthetic for the novel.¹⁹

Unlike *Infinite Jest*'s Ennet House characters, it is not simply sobriety that *The Pale King*'s IRS employees hope to habituate, but intense attention for prolonged periods of time. Like sobriety in *Infinite Jest*, however, paying attention in *The Pale King* is a crucial moral skill that takes training in order to learn. Several rote examiners (low level IRS employees, nicknamed “wigglers”) learn that, however strongly motivated, the conscious choice to pay attention is not easily sustained. Refining the capacity to pay attention takes on a pressing priority for them. They are motivated by the hope that, as Shane Drinion (most likely the “pale king” of the title) admonishes fellow employee Meredith Rand, “almost anything you pay close, direct attention to becomes interesting”—even taxes (*Pale King* 456).

This struggle is dramatized in one of the novel's more developed characters, an evangelical Christian named Lane Dean Jr. He strives against the torpor of his job to little avail. He wants to do the job well, but the tedium is too much for him. “Lane Dean had filed far fewer 20s than protocol called for,” and on “Friday he had the fewest 20s of anyone else” (381). His campaign against capriciousness is cast in terms of a spiritual crisis:

Lane Dean summoned all his will and bore down and did three returns in a row, and began imagining different high places to jump off of. He felt in a position to say he knew now that hell had nothing to do with fires or frozen troops. Lock a fellow in a windowless room to perform rote tasks just tricky enough to make him have to think, but still rote, tasks involving numbers that connected to nothing he'd ever see or care about, a stack of tasks that never went down, and nail a clock to the wall where he can see it, and just leave the man there to his mind's own devices. (379)

¹⁹ See Hoberek 217 for the influence of Wallace's “intentional bad form starting at the level of the sentence and extending outward” on the rest of contemporary fiction; see also Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou xi-xii for the paradoxical problem illustrated by the fact that Wallace's view of clichés has become a cliché of Wallace scholarship.

The allusion to the intensely devout seventeenth-century Jansenist, Blaise Pascal (“all human evil comes from a single cause, man’s being unable to sit still in a room”), reoccurs throughout the novel as characters strive to sit still in windowless rooms.²⁰

Alluding to Pascal’s maxim invokes the moral difficulty of Lane Dean’s job, which demands not only a spiritual solution but also the discipline to realize it. Sometimes Lane Dean tries to pray. Other times he thinks of his baby’s face when doing the returns, and this helps him. The baby is Lane Dean’s reason for taking the job; the baby and his wife Sheri “were why, they were what made this worthwhile and the right thing and he had to remember it” (380). He had made Sheri pregnant and, as two evangelical Christians, they decided finally not to go through with the planned abortion. Wallace portrays the scene of that decision through Lane Dean’s thoughts, and particularly in Lane Dean’s ability to pay attention in prayer—his ability to sit still, be quiet, and pay attention to God.

It is no mere happenstance that Wallace uses an evangelical Christian’s prayers to explore how strict attention is developed. Lane Dean’s prayer practices correspond to a recent development in American evangelicalism, where the spiritual qualities of attention are increasingly emphasized. T.M. Luhrmann’s study of American evangelicals focuses on the centrality of the sustained daily practices they use in order to better hear “when God talks back.” *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* studies the priority evangelicals give to specific spiritual exercises in order to experience God in their lives. It is helpful for understanding the peculiarly evangelical nature of Wallace’s IRS because the evangelicals Luhrmann observes turn to the imagination and the written word as a means for training their ability to maintain attentive prayer.

²⁰ At one point, *The Pale King* invokes Pascal’s spiritual explanation when it wonders “why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. Maybe it’s because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that’s where phrases like ‘deadly dull’ or ‘excruciatingly dull’ come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that’s dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention. . . I can’t think anyone really believes that today’s so-called ‘information society’ is just about information” (85).

Luhrmann justifies her study's focus on evangelical practices rather than evangelical beliefs because, "what I saw was that coming to a committed belief in God was more like learning *to do* something than *to think* something. I would describe what I saw as a theory of attentional learning—that the way you learn to pay attention determines your experience of God" (Luhrmann xxi). Like Meredith Rand, Luhrmann argues that actions change you. Believing in God becomes a form of discipline more than any intellectual assent to doctrinal positions. As one of the participants in Luhrmann's study confidently claims, if you want to hear God, you "just need to pay attention" (46).

3. Good people sit still

Chapter six of *The Pale King* flashes back to the moment when Lane Dean, listening for God in conscience searching prayer, decides with Sheri against having the abortion they were surreptitiously planning. Wallace gives the scene lavish description, slowly navigating Lane Dean's affirmations and doubts with white-knuckled narrative control. The chapter affirms that Sheri is, according to Lane's mother, "good people" (the phrase provided the title when *The New Yorker* published it as a short story in 2007). Lane Dean wants to be good people, too. But being good people is complicated for him by the fact that he does not genuinely love Sheri. Because he does not love her he feels caught between either doing something wrong in the abortion or doing another wrong in telling her that he does not love her and does not want the child. Keeping the child and pretending to love Sheri would be equally false. His prayers open up another possibility, however, one he had not considered.

While sitting on a picnic table with Sheri at a local park, Lane Dean is motionless in silent prayer. For him, praying conjures the muscle-memories of baseball practice. "Sometimes when alone and thinking or struggling to turn a matter over to Jesus Christ in prayer" Lane Dean "would find himself putting his fist in his palm and turning it slightly as if still playing and pounding his glove to

stay sharp and alert in center” (*Pale King* 37). Though he does not succumb to the gesture now, the image establishes how praying is a kind of conscious alertness, an eager preparation that requires certain reflex-like habits. And Lane Dean, like an athlete’s body, has levels of moral preparedness so instinctive that his mind has yet to catch up with them. He “knew [the abortion] was wrong, he knew something was required of him and knew it was not this terrible frozen care and caution, but he pretended to himself he did not know what it was that was required. He pretended it had no name” (37-38) The chapter’s suspense is built on Lane Dean’s alert, conscious struggle to find that name, which Wallace keeps hidden through layers of probing until the chapter’s very last sentence.

Up to that last sentence, however, the prose vacillates between Lane Dean’s anxiety toward his painful hypocrisy on the one hand, and his hope for spiritual direction on the other. He realizes that what he liked most about Sheri, that she “was serious in her faith and values,” has become what he “now, sitting here with her on the table, found himself afraid of” (38). The realization of this fear is “an awful thing” because it makes Lane question the sincerity of his Christian faith. Despite wanting to be good people, or rather because of it, Lane recognizes within himself a buried desire to manipulate Sheri. In talking to her about the abortion he admits to himself that he is trying to get her “to open up and say enough back that he could see her and read her heart and know what to say to get her to go through with it” (39). Wallace does not give the reader access to Sheri’s inner thoughts, however, so the reader is left to “read her heart” with the same guesses. Sympathizing with Sheri here is not the point as much as to realize that no amount of knowledge—whether the information that Lane Dean is trying to wheedle out of her or the information that the reader wants in order to take sides—will change the fact that a decision must be made. An action, not a better diagnosis, is required from Lane Dean.

The chapter unfolds Lane Dean’s anxious prayers with layered hypotheses, second-guesses, and quotations from the Bible—traits he learned from “Pastor Steve or the prayer partners at

campus ministries” (*Pale King* 39). Sheri and Lane Dean first met in campus ministries and traces of Pastor Steve’s teaching surface throughout this tortured inner monologue. (Wallace uses evangelical campus ministries to underscore the moral effects of institutions in another key character’s life as well, to which I will soon turn.) And yet, however silly these religious institutions’ hackneyed phrases sound in Lane Dean’s thoughts, Wallace’s tone is far from satirical. Lane Dean’s religious language helps him to refine the skill of searching through prayer for his unconscious motivations. A quiet respect emerges in Wallace’s treatment of Lane Dean in that Lane does in fact want to be a truly good person and even dreads his own hypocrisy: “He might not even know his own heart or be able to read and know himself. He kept thinking also of 1 Timothy 6 and the hypocrite therein who *disputeth over words*” (40). When he realizes that Sheri herself is going to confront him—albeit it indirectly through a well-intentioned lie—he thinks of “Galations 4:16 *Have I then become your enemy?*” His prayers are shaped by his church involvement to the extent that each thought passes through the sieve of a closely studied Bible and the opinions of his fellow Christians. Wallace is both convincing in his portrayal of Lane Dean’s unique interiority and careful to signal toward the external institutions that have formed it.

Thus the attentional learning skills practiced with Pastor Steve and his prayer partners enable Lane Dean’s final epiphany, which comes in a “moment of grace” in which he is “given then to know”²¹ that “he had, in truth, been praying all the while, or some little part of his heart he could not know or hear had, for he was answered” (41). What his ability to pray has “given then to know” is a vision where Sheri will tell him she cannot do it, that he is absolved of all responsibility, and that she will raise the child. Yet in the same moment he also sees that she will be lying. In fact, she can

²¹ Wallace is not artificially elevating his diction with this “given then to know,” but intentionally stultifying it with the earnest archaism that Lane might actually use in prayer. Its literary precedent connotes small town American earnestness in Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*. An American abroad in Paris invokes the term’s parochial resonances from back home: “He was likewise to recall—and it had to count for some time as his greatest comfort—that it had been ‘given’ him, as they said at Woolet, to reply with some presence of mind” (James 117).

neither go through with the abortion nor can she bring on her evangelical family the shame she feels would accompany the child's birth. He sees in this offer that Sheri is "gambling that he is good," that he is in fact good people and will not abandon her, but will learn to love her. Feeling incapable to confront what Sheri expects of him, what he "pretended had no name" now emerges as a lack of courage.

Something else, Wallace writes,

is given to him to feel in the form of a question that never once in all the long week's thinking and division had even so much as occurred—why is he so sure he doesn't love her? Why is one kind of love any different? What if he has no earthly idea what love is? What would even Jesus do? For it was just now he felt her two small strong soft hands on his, to turn him. What if he is just afraid, if the truth is no more than this, and if what to pray for is not even love but simple courage, to meet both her eyes as she says it and trust his heart? (43)

He lacked the "simple courage" to commit to a choice and act on it. Through paying attention in prayer, Lane Dean finally realizes that the situation is a moral problem that requires a moral solution.

Wallace is happy to peddle Lane Dean's evangelical clichés as the controlling voice of the passage. Precisely because he does so, Wallace assures the reader that his character has the courage to follow through with his epiphany about courage, since the epiphany emerges from a virtue he has already mastered. It is not a "presto change-o" epiphany. Lane Dean discovers an unknown avenue for action, feels an elated expansiveness in understanding that he is not trapped, not in fact desperate, because he has the attentional learning necessary to hear "God talk back." His capacity to imagine his own hypocrisy in Biblical terms is what Luhrmann calls the "prayer technologies" evangelical churches often teach. Luhrmann is eager to demonstrate that these "practices work. They change people" (Luhrmann xxii). They have clear and empirically verifiable outcomes. Specifically, they develop a moral aptitude for absorbed attentiveness. As Luhrmann argues, "they change mental experience, and those changes help people to experience God as more real. The practices don't work for everyone, and they do not work for each person to the same extent, but

there are real skills involved here, skills that develop a psychological capacity called absorption” (xxii).

Absorption, it turns out, takes practice. Yet it depends on the imagination, which is usually associated with undisciplined free play. To imagine well, however, requires the ability to maintain focus. Absorption,

is the capacity to focus in on the mind’s object—what we imagine or see around us—and to allow that focus to increase while diminishing our attention to the myriad of everyday distractions that accompany the management of normal life. You let a daydream unfold, or you become wrapped up in the hummingbird hovering at the orange trumpet vine, and your trip to the grocery store slips down in your mind. The absorption scale seems to pick up the enjoyable dimension—imaginative involvement, the delight we take in letting a story or sensation carry us away. (Luhrmann 201)

Absorption is the capacity to focus thought to the exclusion of other concerns or anxieties. It is central to the evangelicals in Luhrmann’s study because absorption develops their relationship with God—it allows them to hear him speaking to them in the midst of everyday life.

Luhrmann describes the practices meant to develop this kind of absorbed prayer as “prayer technologies” that “heighten the significance of certain kinds of words and images, and they draw the thinker’s attention to those words and images and give them force. They are techniques of hyper-attention” (187). The words and images direct attention and, when engaged with consistently, create habits of spiritual “hyper-attention.” As an anthropologist, Luhrmann understands the kind of social conditioning that teaching and refining such actions can effect. She insists that “if you put to one side the theological purpose and supernatural efficacy of prayer, prayer changes the way the person praying uses his or her mind by changing the way that person pays attention. People learn to attend in specific, structured ways when they pray, and some people—the experts—become skilled at doing so” (158). Whether or not any God is out there listening, prayer teaches how to pay attention. Perspicuous in Luhrmann’s account, however, is that these prayer technologies work on the absorption scale just like a good story.

What Luhrmann calls the “techniques of hyper-attention” that “heighten the significance of certain words and images” are strikingly similar to the conventions of realist fiction (158). Attention to small details has long provided the telltale sign of a realist novel, whether those details are the markers of social status or simply an embellished description.²² Such narrative form is itself a technique of hyper-attention. However tenuous the relationship between earnest prayer and passive novel reading, the absorption scale that Luhrmann uses is best understood in terms of novel reading. Luhrmann summarizes: “Absorption, as measured by the scale, is related to reading and the imagination. The more highly you score, the more likely you are to be a reader, and the more likely you are to immerse yourself in rich, imaginative worlds; the more likely you are to be the kind of person who can lose him- or herself in movies and literature” (199).

Reading, like praying, is an action that, when regularly practiced, increases one’s capacity for absorption. The more you read, the more likely you are to pay attention well. Note that reading a novel is not itself a form of prayer for Luhrman. She is not making a claim about the spirituality of reading. Rather, prayer and reading practices are analogous in how they absorb one’s attention at the purely physical level. The novel merely mimics practices learned and reproduced in the institutional life of church-going believers. If you are a good reader of novels then you may be better at developing the prayer technologies necessary to hear God talk back. And if you are good at praying you may be good at paying attention to a novel long enough to become absorbed in its world—even if that world is as boring as taxes. Though attending to taxes, Wallace knows, is going to take some practice.

4. The authorized version

²² See Barthes 141-148 for his influential account of how realistic fiction uses precise details almost at random in order to authenticate a scene. Barthes point about narrative structure corroborates Luhrmann’s point that the skill of absorption has more to do with a particular conventional practice than valid truth claims.

From praying with Pastor Steve to entry-level work at the IRS, Lane Dean has lived with and submitted to authority. At the end of this essay I will turn to how Wallace addresses the relationship between that authority and the etymologically akin role of author. First, however, I want to note how *The Pale King* not only uses evangelical Christians as models for how institutional routines can shape moral character, but also for how institutionally affiliated authority figures play a similar role. As with Lane Dean's Pastor Steve, Wallace satirizes the evangelical view of authority with only the lightest of touches in order to recuperate and then augment its clichés.

The longest continual section of *The Pale King* is a single monologue in which Chris Fogle explains how he came to work for the IRS. Fogle unfolds his story in comparison with an evangelical Christian's testimony of her conversion to Christianity. The comparison both points toward the secular validity of such conversion narratives while it critiques their misunderstanding of lasting character transformation. In order for a conversion to truly take hold it needs more than an initial conversion experience; it takes immersion in a whole new moral order. American evangelical Christianity, however, is characterized by its strong emphasis on the sentiments inspired by such conversion experiences. As the historian Mark Noll has noted, evangelical Christianity originated in a pietistic "protest against ecclesiastical formalism in an urgent appeal for living religion of the heart" and reached its American apogee in the "appeal for conversion" that became the hallmark of the evangelical evangelist Billy Graham's stadium-filling revivals (Noll 90, 53). Yet while *The Pale King* echoes that protest in its appeal for a more conscientious engagement with the world, a "living religion of the heart" is precisely the kind of limited view of cultural change it hopes to transcend.²³ *The Pale King* cares less about "snapping readers awake," as Wallace implied the writer's goal should be in "E Unibus Pluram," than modelling decaffeinated strategies for staying awake ("E Unibus Pluram" 69).

²³ Luhmann's prayer-practicing evangelicals point toward the awareness of such limitations within contemporary American evangelical Christianity.

Chris Fogle's long monologue (other characters call him "Irrelevant Fogle" because of his need to include otherwise irrelevant details in conversation) recounts his conversion from the cynical distance Wallace identified as the moral order of late eighties TV to the disciplined focus of the IRS. Fogle tells the story of "the first genuine authority figure I ever met" who ends up changing his life (*Pale King* 227). The episode is explained in direct relation to a testimony he heard from his evangelical Christian roommate's girlfriend. This roommate is contemptuously described as "fervently involved in a college organization called Campus Crusade, and had numerous pairs of dress chinos and blue blazers and Topsiders, and a smile that looked as though someone had plugged him in" (*Pale King* 210). As a college student with a "cynical, nihilistically wastoid attitude" Fogle mocked the evangelical girl's testimony (211). She tells him that she inexplicably pulled over while driving by a church one day and went in to discover the pastor's sermon seemingly directed at her with an uncanny exactitude. From that day on, she claims, "her life had meaning and direction to it after all" (212). Fogle cannot avoid mocking her while at the same time admitting that his own life was changed by a very similar event.

As Fogle tells the story of that change he notes the truth, however small or distorted, in what her testimony claimed. He tells the interviewer,

I think the truth is probably that enormous, sudden, dramatic, unexpected, life-changing experiences are not translatable or explainable to anyone else, and this is because they really are unique and particular—though not in the way the Christian girl believed. This is because their power isn't just a result of the experience itself, but also of the circumstances in which it hits you, of everything in your previous life-experience which has led up to it and made you exactly who and what you are when the experience hits you. (214)

In dramatic experiences like hearing an unknown pastor speak directly to you from the pulpit, or in reading a novel that bears a similarly deep sense of connection, effective change requires incremental conditioning over time. One does not become inculcated into a moral order by a single dramatic experience.

Fogle goes on to recount the dramatic conversion experience that led him to adopt a wholly new moral order, one that would no longer rely on dramatic experiences. He tells the story of his father's sudden, tragic death and his serendipitous encounter with a "substitute Father"—a Jesuit priest who is a substitute Advanced Accounting professor—who lauds the heroism of tedious jobs.²⁴ "Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is," this substitute Father tells the class that Fogle accidentally wanders into, because such "endurance is, as it happens, the distillate of what is, today, in this world neither I nor you have made, heroism" (229).²⁵ The inspiring exhortation that redirects Fogle's life—he switches majors and eventually takes a job in the IRS that requires enduring "tedium over real time." Fogle understands, however, that the stirring moment undercuts its own assumption insofar as it happens to be a dramatic end-of-the-semester oration. It serves as a catalyst but, like so many passages in the novel, reflexively underlines the novel's attempts at incremental conditioning. *The Pale King* narrates stirring moments that applaud the value of paying attention, and this is one. It also, however, understands the value of the kinds of conditioning necessary to make such moments effective. Even if the evangelical girl's testimony leaves many elements of such conditioning out of her story, *The Pale King* does not. It intentionally includes the boring bits. As one character tells another, sometimes "what's important is dull. Sometimes it's work. Sometimes the important things aren't works of art for your entertainment" (138).

²⁴ It is worth noting that Wallace's own father, James F. Wallace, once noted the value of such courage for a novelist in a work of his on moral philosophy: "Virtue and vice are archaic terms, and courage, honesty, and generosity are no longer much written about—perhaps because they were once the subject of tiresome hortatory speech and writing. Traits of character, however, play an important part in our understanding of human behavior and in our evaluation of individuals and their actions. These ideas are rich and complex. They can be made to yield the most subtle and profound insights about human beings by wise and skilled novelists, historians, and playwrights" (James Wallace 10).

²⁵ Why mix a young evangelical character's testimony with an aging Jesuit authority figure? T.M. Lurhmann notes in her study of American evangelicals that much of their emphasis on imaginative spiritual disciplines makes direct use of Ignatius of Loyola's *The Spiritual Exercises*. See Lurhmann 172-184.

The Pale King announces its status as “a failed entertainment” (*Infinite Jest*’s working title) in the opening chapter’s version of the Jesuit Father’s exhortation: “Read these” (*Pale King* 4). This author-to-reader imperative does not directly refer to enduring tedium in confined space, but in fact to the wide-open space of the Illinois prairie. It refers to the panoply of ignored diversity that composes the purportedly dull Midwestern landscape, including its delightfully named prairie grasses: “shattercane, lamb’s-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spine-cabbage, goldenrod, creeping Charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother’s soft hand on your cheek” (3). Indirectly, however, the “read these” command refers to the tedious parts of *The Pale King*. If you read and pay attention to the dull passages, like the monotonous prairie, they might suddenly become this wonderfully vivid, even lyrical. “Read these” is not only a challenge to the reader, then, but the wager the author asks of the reader—that it is worthwhile to “read these” in order to become more attentive.

Wallace explicitly equates this poetic litany with attentional learning through the scene-setting details Lane Dean sees as he sits with Sheri. Lane’s thoughts are constantly interrupted with what he notices visually, from a person on the other side of the lake to the tree’s shade in which he is partially covered. These observed visual details, like the tumble of his prayers, prompt his epiphany insofar as it is while sitting next to Sheri on top of a picnic table that “Lane Dean first felt he could take this all in whole” (41). The wholeness of his visual field is associated with the wholeness of his self-examination. He sorts through the blurry elements of his moral situation while concomitantly noticing his surroundings with vivid exactness. As Lane has his prayerful epiphany, “everything seemed distinctly lit, for the circle of the pin oak’s shade had rotated off all the way and they sat now in sun with their shadow a two-headed thing in the grass to the left before them” (41). The details—the shadow “to the left” that is a “two-headed thing in the grass”—imagine a precise

image. To what end are such details included? Not to maintain the illusion of the story world but rather to focus the reader's attention on the less-than-dramatic details. One of Wallace's notes for the novel sums up its thematic goal and formal structure, "Central Deal: Realism, monotony. Plot a series of set ups for stuff happening but nothing actually happens" (546). Long passages that name and describe are just what the impatient, plot-driven reader skips. Yet in Wallace's plan the "set ups for stuff happening" would in fact be all that happens.

One character in the novel describes his idea for a concept play that represents this theme. The play consists of no action except for a tax examiner sitting still and going through the motions of his bureaucratic work—turning pages: "The idea's that a wiggler, a rote examiner, is sitting poring over 1040s and attachments and cross-filed W-2s and 1099s and like that. The setting is very bare and minimalistic—there's nothing to look at except this wiggler, who doesn't move except for every so often turning a page or making a note on his pad. [. . .] He sits there longer and longer until the audience gets more and more bored and restless, and finally they start leaving [. . .] Then, once the audience have all left, the real action of the play can start" (106). The scenario suggests that one should attend to the parts of this novel that one would otherwise relegate to the peripheral. To not get up and leave the theatre when nothing happens but to keep watching and waiting—in this case, to keep reading. An entire chapter is an internal IRS memo that lists all the various medical conditions associated with IRS work (87-88). It lists name after name of the physical risks involved in sitting still in a room and concentrating.

Yet such lists and meticulous details are only part of *The Pale King's* moral ambitions to create a difficult, thrillingly monotonous reading experience. Much of the novel retains, even embellishes, the metafictional devices of Wallace's earliest work. Even as the novel invites its reader to become absorbed through the work of paying attention to details rather than character identification, it imposes formal reflexivity as another challenge with which to build absorptive skills. In Wallace's

rendering, Metafiction's warnings against Quixote-like absorption in the illusions of realist fiction become invitations to willed absorption. *The Pale King's* metafictional tropes bring the reader to realize that a story is only story, but also that reading is always more than only reading. Unlike the content of a novel, the act of reading is no timeless illusion. Reading is a real world skill, one that can have very real moral consequences.

Like John Barthes' Metafiction—to which Wallace's work persistently alludes—*The Pale King* lays bare its necessarily artificial narrative structure.²⁶ The ends of such metafictional conventions, however, get recalibrated. In the chapter entitled "Author's Foreword" the Author, self-identified as Dave Wallace, explains that despite employing this glaring trope of Metafiction, he has little interest in "some kind of clever metafictional titty-pincher" (67). He insists that this is why "I'm making it a point to violate protocol and address you here directly, as my real self" (67). This direct address attempts to articulate what is often unnamed, the silent contract between reader and author "which depend[s] on certain codes and gestures that the author deploys in order to signal to the reader what kind of book it is" (73). Of course, this appeal to honesty is partially disingenuous—what the Author has to tell us about himself is not entirely true of David Foster Wallace. Yet the persistent turning of the screw also points toward the truth that conveying information is not the whole of the reading experience.

This "Author's Foreword" rehearses Wallace's view that, as he told Larry McCaffery in a widely cited interview, there is "some weird, delicate, I-trust-you-not-to fuck-up-on-me relationship between the reader and writer, and both have to sustain it. But there's an unignorable line between demonstrating skill and charm to gain trust for the story vs. simple showing off" (McCaffery). For the reader and writer to trust each other, the writer must be ingenious but not insecure. Wallace goes

²⁶ See Paul Quinn 99 for how the novel's fictional IRS symbol invokes Barth; see also Charles Harris 103-126 for Wallace's career long dialogue with Barth's work.

on to clarify that “all the attention and engagement and work you need to get from the reader can’t be for your benefit; it’s got to be for hers.” The late arriving “Author’s Foreword” is in fact an apologia and invitation via metafictional tropes to invest in the writer-reader trust relationship while demonstrating that literary artifice can be used in a variety of ways. Technical chicanery, Wallace asserts, can be for the benefit of the reader *if* it asks the reader to do something for her own good—in this case, to practice paying attention by following each and every recursive loop. What the Author has to tell the reader so directly is that the content of such an intimacy matters a great deal less than the attention required to maintain it. Like the substitute Father’s inspiring speech, the means of making such a point will necessarily contradict it. Neither intimacy nor inspiration matters in either case so much as authority.

The most audacious aspect of the trust relationship that the Author Dave Wallace proposes is that his own authority necessarily includes assumptions about what is “good” for the reader. This blatantly paternalistic authority organizes *The Pale King*’s sprawling length as well as its flirtations with monotony. Rather than character development or an intricate plot, *The Pale King* is confident that it knows what is good for the reader and how to form that reader’s character for the better. It asks for the reader’s trust, but also for submission. To submit to the attentional learning the novel requires is the first step toward adapting its moral order. Yet is such an experiment likely to garner imitation? Whether or not present readers and future writers judge it a success, Wallace has good reason to remind us that all story worlds, however enthralling or formally perfected, are still read in the disordered space and time of this one, which is where they inevitably leave their most meaningful effects.

Chapter 4

Narration and Slow Time: *Point Omega*

We sat and thought.
~Don DeLillo, *Point Omega*

1. A temporary style

Don DeLillo's 2001 novel *The Body Artist* opens with a terse sentence, "Time seems to pass" (9). The novel's last sentence again invokes the movement of time, expressing the protagonist's need "to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was" (126). As it unfolds between these two ruminations, *The Body Artist* itself "seems to pass" with a deliberate attention to the experience of time. The sentences plod across the page with intentional ponderousness—as if the point of reading was to feel the time go by. DeLillo is a novelist known for sprawling, ambitious novels, but this one reads like a refusal of the genre's impulse to rove and collect. It willfully excludes, narrowing its focus so as to better exert its powers of prosaic concentration. When we read that the novel's eponymous body artist "clearly wanted her audience to feel time go by, viscerally, even painfully" (106), DeLillo's reading audience has already undergone a similar experience in the very pace of his prose.

Since the turn of the century, the feel of time passing has become an increasingly prominent concern in DeLillo's work. It preoccupies a character in the 2010 novel *Point Omega* who aspires, "To see what's here, finally to look and to know you're looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion" (6). This self-exhortation comes while he is watching the infinitesimal movements of Douglas Gordon's film installation *24 Hour Psycho*, a work of art that slows down Hitchcock's classic film so that it takes twenty-four hours to watch from beginning to

end. The installation echoes the disciplined tedium of the performance piece at the center of *The Body Artist*, aptly titled *Body Time*. Like *The Body Artist*, *Point Omega* operates as a kind of narrative *ekphrasis*, embellishing a slow moving work of art with the details of an unhurried story. Both novels strive toward a sleek but measured and uncluttered meditation, involving only a handful of characters in predominantly domestic scenes. Yet DeLillo's earlier novels would stretch across the country to trace the tentacles of the entertainment industry (*Americana* 1971) or the intricacies of political plots (*Libra* 1988). Some stretched far beyond national boundaries, reaching across the globe to follow interstellar scientific research (*Ratner's Star* 1976), the movements of multinational corporations (*The Names* 1982) or international terrorism (*Mao II* 1991). Those novels sped along with the clipped, deadpan banter of noir detective fiction so artfully perfected in *White Noise* (1985). While artists and works of art have long been conspicuous components of DeLillo's fiction, why this sudden slowdown, this narrowing of the narrative purview?

While these two post-millennial DeLillo novels are shorter in length and smaller in scope than their predecessors, in another sense they are longer in duration. Time is rendered neither as an epoch nor a fleeting epiphany, but as "an undivided moment on an ordinary morning" (*Body Artist* 26). *Underworld* (1997) may span several decades and take much longer to read, but the slimmer novels succeeding it move more slowly. *Point Omega*, for example, concentrates on people in the terribly undramatic act of waiting. When whatever it is they are waiting for finally happens, it happens offstage and the characters only continue waiting. This change in style and focus, this emphasis on the subjective experience of embodied duration, turns toward a very particular formal question—how can the contemporary novel adequately address the cultural experience of contemporary time? Of all of the novelist's available tools for representing temporality, DeLillo has turned toward writing shorter sentences, shorter paragraphs, even shorter novels, that seem to

elongate the reading experience rather than compress it. Why? Is there a correlation between this abrupt narrative style and the novels' preoccupation with time?¹

On the one hand, this change produces a more human scale. DeLillo's *Underworld* has been criticized for its sprawling plot and underdeveloped characters and shorter may simply mean more manageable, less manic. Perhaps slowing time in the contemporary novel might offer an antidote to the numbing pace of television's quick-cutting images and noise. Perhaps DeLillo's interest in submitting his readers to the experience of slowness indicates that he finds something intrinsically valuable in the act of reading slowly, thoughtfully.

Yet DeLillo's recent novels are all too aware that reducing the novel's temporal imagination to intensifying the present tense duration risks erasing any sense of historical awareness, and hence any hope for its role in genuine social change for the future. Though characters in *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* try to contentedly abide within the immediate moment, other characters in *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Falling Man* (2007) feel entirely overwhelmed by its inescapable enormity. Fredric Jameson has famously associated the loss of historical awareness with late capitalism (*Postmodernism* 21) and *Cosmopolis* jarringly invokes that disorientation. The Zbigniew Herbert poem quoted throughout *Cosmopolis*, "Report from the Besieged City," informs us, "everyone here suffers from a loss of the sense of time." If not everyone in the novel, certainly its protagonist Eric Parker suffers that loss. Yet *Cosmopolis* uncomfortably construes Parker's sleepless wandering through a world abstracted from the constraints of embodiment as spiritually invigorating though ethically careless. The unstructured time of late capitalism is baptized with sublime mysteriousness, as if to transfigure Parker's disorientation into numinous awe.

¹ Garret Stewart has recently argued for the need of narratography to supplement narratological analysis of the novel. Narratology's study of structure misses the surface effects of a novel's reading time, thus ignoring one of the novel's most effective means for creating temporal effects. The novel theory of the Chicago School has little to say about sentence style as well. In attending to the stylistics of DeLillo's sentences, this essay takes up Stewart's argument and offers a narratographical reading of time in the contemporary novel. See 1-11.

Trading history for mystery, however, would be a disastrous exchange. The concentrated present overwhelms Parker as its duration expands into an unchanging, futureless time in which he loses any ethical responsibility (until death returns it). In *Falling Man* characters use the small rituals of daily jogs and repeated wrist exercises to hold at bay the disturbing possibility of an undifferentiated eternity in which God simply *is*, “Because once you believe such a thing, God is, then how can you escape, how survive the power of it, is and was and ever shall be” (*Falling Man* 235). God in *Falling Man* sounds a lot like the late capitalism of *Cosmopolis*—God’s time is an eternal now that threatens human particularity with sublime abstractions.² As in *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man* are preoccupied with questions of time and deliberately restrict themselves to a few characters in confined settings, but in these two novels an immeasurable time looms ominous. They assert the terror of an ahistorical, eternal present tense. If the body registers passing time in *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, then the spirit is unable to gain purchase on the slick temporal terrain of *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*.

Consequently, the slow time of the undivided moment cannot be read as the antidote to contemporary culture’s limited imagination when it is equally a symptom of its failings. Perhaps this is why temporal confusion also haunts *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, though to a lesser degree. *The Body Artist*’s unnerving stranger who “violates the limits of the human” lacks any sense of chronology (102). He befuddles Lauren Hartke, the book’s body artist, because she thinks there “has to be an imaginary point, a nonplace where language intersects with our perceptions of time and space, and he is a stranger at this crossing, without words or bearings” (101). This stranger’s appearance confronts Hartke with the trauma of her husband’s death as her own pure disorientation. She is forced to ask herself if she has the right words to give her sense of time its bearings. *Point Omega*, too, loses track of time insofar as it does not proceed in sequential order. Its

² Alison Shonkwiler thoroughly contextualizes this experience in her essay on *Cosmopolis*, calling it the “financial sublime.” See 248-249.

characters try to slow time down, but one invokes geological time scales that involve apocalyptic visions of a final catastrophic End of Time. Moreover, *Point Omega* addresses the same slippery relationship between words and the human perception of time that disturbs Hartke.

As much as all four of these novels represent a turn in DeLillo's work from unearthing submerged connections to intensifying the subjective differences of temporal experience, each one offers a complicated and contradictory set of values. While it is not clear to what extent the contraction of slow time is affirmed as valuable, it is certainly clear that these novels intend to expand as well as intensify our temporal imagination. The day-to-day events of modern life that they describe provide uncanny repetitions of religious rituals from the ancient past. The more their characters concentrate on either embodied or spiritual contemporaneity, the more those characters are construed as participating in the mysterious meanings of ancient, sacred rituals.

While the style of these novels certainly marks a new direction for DeLillo's novels, the juxtaposition of the ancient and modern, or mystery and history, is in fact nothing new to his fiction. DeLillo has what John Duvall calls "a rare gift for historicizing our present," as well as an insistence on "the novel as a counterforce to the wound of history through the persistence of mystery" (Duvall 2, 3-4). DeLillo's work often portrays primal forms of spirituality erupting in transmuted form right in the midst of our technological society and its political travails, showing how the secular habits of contemporary life reiterate the sacred rites of prior periods. He has long been interested in interrogating what supposedly separates the ancient from the modern and his turn toward the question of contemporary time preserves this skepticism. Perhaps the best way to understand these last four novels is that DeLillo has turned his emphasis from serendipitously weaving the lives of disparate characters together to stretching temporalities out until they cannot but overlap one another. These novels are less about connecting across space and more about connecting through time.

Between their historicized present and the mystery its incompleteness provokes, DeLillo's last four novels evince his enduring interest in the novel's relation to secular culture. The attention he has given to more richly imagining contemporary experiences of time exemplifies how the novel—the literary genre most associated with the rise of secular modernity—might wrestle with the form and meaning of secular time.³ I argue that DeLillo's work should not be read as evincing a “post-secular” moment of renewed religious vitality out of step with the supposed cultural hegemony of secularism. Such linear notions of historical change are precisely what DeLillo's work complicates. Instead, I argue that DeLillo's novels are pushing back against one of the most emphatic effects of secularization—the rationalization of clock time, what *Point Omega* calls “News and Traffic”—with a decisive reinterpretation of, or even return to, the cultural values that have inspired the processes of secularization.⁴

Instead of its more widespread reference to an open public sphere, DeLillo's sense of the secular demonstrates a deep affinity for the concept's original usage—what Christian theology coined as the *saeculum*, the present age of everyday life. The *saeculum* is the period of waiting for Christ's return. DeLillo's recent novels address contemporary experience through this kind of secular timescale, one in which the end of the present is entirely indecipherable yet menacingly imminent. The abrupt endings of his late style—its shortened sentences, shortened paragraphs, shortened novels—focus on the meaning of endings, or rather, on how an end can create the meaning of the present. DeLillo's latest novel, *Point Omega*, presents his fullest treatment of this

³ Ian Watt's influential study *The Rise of the Novel* argues that the realist novel hardened modernity's emerging secular episteme into the ideology of a worldview. Watt's point, now questioned by a host of literary scholars working on the relationship between the novel and secularization, often passes as an unexamined assumption. For instance, Jameson assumes the novel's special ideological relationship to this aspect of the secular when he makes the questionable assertion that its realism is a “new value, contemporaneous with the secularization of the world under capitalism.” It is a point he more or less reiterates in the opening of his newest study of realism in the novel. For Watt, see 13. For Jameson, see “Reflections in Conclusion” 198, and *Antinomies of Realism* 4.

⁴ Peter Boxall has made the case that DeLillo's fiction seeks to offer “a means of redeeming the culture that he depicts.” DeLillo certainly seems to reserve some redemptive task for his novels, and the experience of their slow style is part of that. Yet DeLillo is equally suspicious of attributing entirely benign powers to the novel. I argue here that his work suggests the novel's participation in cultural change can be damning as likely as salvific. See “Media Culture” 45.

mode of secular temporality. In it a secular timescale saves contemporaneity from sacrificing either ethical subjectivity or historical awareness to the sacredness of cultural expression. *Point Omega*'s secular time does not blindly affirm nor stridently exclude the sacred, but tempers and therefore protects it as a vital component of the contemporary novel. To put this claim in its strongest terms—the end of secular time in *Point Omega* represents the very end of human culture.

2. Waiting and watching

Time in *Point Omega* is experienced as waiting and watching. Some of the novel's characters want to escape what they view as the superficial rush of modern time. Others are forced to wait. Yet everyone in the novel is out there in the desert waiting and watching for a revelation of some kind, including the reader.

The novel begins with “a man standing against the north wall, barely visible,” watching a film installation in a gallery of the Museum of Modern Art (*Point Omega* 3). This anonymous figure watches Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* with single-minded devotion because the “nature of the film permitted total concentration and also depended on it” (5). The installation is full of meaning for him, because the “less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw” (5). The slowing down of the frames enables a wealth of revelations, but that wealth is only available to a disciplined few. It takes commitment to plumb the depths hidden in the screen's surface movements: “It takes close attention to see what is happening in front of you. It takes work, pious effort, to see what you are looking at. He was mesmerized by this, the depths that were possible in the slowing of motion, the things to see, the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing” (13). The man, much later in the novel we will learn his name may be Dennis (for expedience I will call him that), is dedicated to making the “pious effort” it takes to get beyond “the shallow habit of seeing.” Is Dennis not the ideal audience for any work of art?

In opening with Dennis's meditations, *Point Omega* immediately troubles that assumption while introducing a familiar figure in DeLillo's fiction. Paul Elie recently characterized the "true believer" in DeLillo's novels as "a man in a small room, nurturing a scheme" (Elie). Dennis is no exception, insofar as he thinks film, one of the most public and communal of art forms, "is solitary" and himself one of the select few disciplined enough to stay in this "secluded room" and study its insights (*Point Omega* 9,4). Film becomes a thing of obsession in this novel and it exemplifies the risks art can involve. Jim Findley, a young documentary filmmaker, claims, "Every project becomes an obsession, or what's the point?" (40). His estranged wife, who becomes alienated from him because of that obsession, asks a question more to the point. "Why is it so hard to be serious," she asks, yet "so easy to be too serious?" (55). Obsession and religious-like devotion often characterize the lonely schemer in DeLillo's work, and the true believers of this novel all converge, like so many ascetics, in the desert.

Point Omega tells the story of Jim's time at Richard Elster's house in the desert of the Anza-Borrego Wilderness in southern California. Both New Yorkers, it is a significant change of scenery for them. Elster's daughter Jessie eventually adds a fourth character to the "too serious" trio of Dennis, Jim, and Elster, and perhaps because she is blithely uninterested in cultural production she becomes the story's innocent victim. Jim is in the desert because wants to make a film of Elster talking about his role in creating "the blat and stammer of Iraq" (21) at the Pentagon. Elster was the intellectual who supported the war, whose writing gave it credence; "the outsider, a scholar with an approval rating but not experience in government" (19). He first refuses Jim's request, but then invites Jim to visit him in the desert to discuss the project. Jim waits for Elster's final word and his stay turns from days into weeks. Whatever Elster's role in the nation's rushing to war, he is trying to slow things down now, taking—as he calls it—"a spiritual retreat" in the desert in which Jim and Jessie join him (23).

If war and obsession threaten the revelatory possibilities of film in *Point Omega*, the desert promises small refuge. Elster has come to the desert “to feel the deep heat beating into his body, feel the body itself, reclaim the body from what he called the nausea of News and Traffic” (*Point Omega* 18). He tells Jim, “Time slows down when I’m here. Time becomes blind. I feel the landscape more than see it. I never know what day it is. I never know if a minute has passed or an hour. I don’t get old here” (24). Time has slowed to the point of seemingly ceasing to pass for Elster. Thus, despite his ability to “feel the body itself,” time loses even the most basic metrics in the desert: “There were no mornings or afternoons. It was one seamless day, everyday, until the sun began to arc and fade, mountains emerging from their silhouettes” (36). The frenetic pace of what Elster calls “News and Traffic” fades into a seamless unity of wakefulness. Elster takes satisfaction in this unmeasured time insofar as it gives the feeling of “deep time,” the “epochal time” of the desert. “Time falling away. That’s what I feel here, he said. Time becoming slowly older. Enormously old. Not day by day. This is deep time, epochal time. Our lives receding into the long past. That’s what’s out there. The Pleistocene desert, the rule of extinction” (72). This seamless day stretches back into the Pleistocene and then forward into a final end for the human species that first emerged from it.

Elster’s desert-bound lucubration echoes the third-century Desert Fathers, who fled the decadence of Rome’s waning imperial empire. Like them, Elster’s visions of time are haunted by the realities of warfare, destruction, murder, even extinction. The desert is no more an ideal spiritual sanctuary from the violent consequences of Elster’s warmongering than Dennis is the ideal viewing audience. *Point Omega* suggests deep and disturbing correlations between Dennis and Norman Bates, the murderous psychotic of Hitchcock’s famous film. DeLillo’s novel goes further than Hitchcock’s film, however, in linking the mere act of watching, and of thoughtful culture in general, to Bates’ psychotic sickness. Even Jim, at Elster’s vacation home in the desert to convince Elster to be captured on film—“up against the wall” as he later puts it (45)—begins to indulge in voyeur-like

behavior toward Elster's daughter Jessie. Moreover, these obsessions are all linked together in the plot's central event—Jessie's abduction and probable murder. As much as we might assume close attention and slow consideration unquestionably good and worthy cultural values, *Point Omega* is not so sure.

The ambiguous value of slow time—even art itself—is further obfuscated by the fact that the narrative voice of DeLillo the cultural critic comes through in the very same short, weighty maxims as Elster's pompous proclamations. The style of the prose invites the reader to wait, to think, perhaps even to obsess over this slow moving novel much like Dennis watches the film, meditating on it. It is written in a calm, if grave, terse indicative mood. The laconic rigidity of its parataxis creates the effect of gnomic maxims demanding further concentration. For instance, the first section of the novel's haiku-like structure ends with a glimpse outside the small gallery:⁵ "Light and sound, wordless monotone, an intimation of life-beyond, world-beyond, the strange bright fact that breathes and eats out there, the thing that's not the movies" (15). The phrases slowly accumulate with philosophical force. Phrases such as "life-beyond" and "world-beyond" are not those of everyday speech, but hint at the epistemology of the Husserlian *Lebenswelt*. Yet the sentence is content to end with just such everyday speech when it calls them "the thing that's not the movies." Well, what is this thing that's not the movies and how does it relate to the movies? Why the heavy philosophical allusions? The sentence introduces such questions but does little to explain them. Instead, it abruptly cuts off with its intimations left reverberating in the silence.

The novel's short paragraphs, too, provide breaks that urge the reader to stop, to wait a moment and think back on what has been read. One paragraph will suggest a thesis without

⁵ At one point in their conversations, Elster pontificates on the representative significance of haiku to Jim and the novel seems to have taken up his point (29). First, it is structured in three parts. It begins and ends with two short, scene-setting monologues from Dennis with a longer section in between, narrated by Jim. Second, it resembles a haiku's brevity and concern with seasonal time and place. And third, it uses something like the classic trope of the haiku's middle section, the *kireji* or "cutting word," when Jim refers the novel's title, *Point Omega*, to the point of a knife edge in the middle section of the novel.

considering it, only for another to pick it up pages later. The short descriptive sentences that usually compose these paragraphs, unlike short dialogue, open a space for the reader's reflective thought processes without the coercive force of speed. The silent pause of white space on each page becomes an essential part of *Point Omega*'s stylistic effect. Indeed, there is a cathedral-like calm in this house of prose. Is the reader expected to attend on it with the devotion demanded by a sacred text, imitating Dennis's "pious effort"?

This question has vexed DeLillo's critics. On the one hand, Amy Hungerford has argued for the sacramental trappings and transcendent experiences to which DeLillo's language aspires (Hungerford 53). David Cowart, too, has argued that in DeLillo's view language "subsumes virtually all human experience" (*Physics of Language* 225-226). Cowart admits to befuddlement at Elster's view that "true life is not reducible to words spoken or written" (*Point Omega* 17), suggesting its value as a truth claim is denied by Elster's status in the novel as a discredited figure ("The Lady Vanishes" 45-46). On the other hand, Laura Barrett is right to claim that language "is less a quasi-mystical vehicle to transcendence in DeLillo's recent novels" inasmuch as its limits and even dangers are increasingly portrayed (Barrett 252). Despite this qualification, however, Barrett thinks the question of language remains at the center of these later novels. "If these recent novels seem to wallow in the inadequacy of language," Barrett writes, "the reader is faced with the irony that the failure of words can only be communicated by words, a paradox not unlike Lianna's Zen koan in *Falling Man*: "God is the voice that says, 'I am not here'" (253). The positive way of putting the same point is that the sacred power of language in *Point Omega* is ironically undercut in order to protect it from the devotion of dogmatic obsession that the novel portrays in its characters.

For example, the slow pace of the dialogue creates a what Jim's wife would call a "too serious" tone. Jim and Elster enjoy riffing off of each other's phrases, but their banter quickly falls into long moments of silence. Though the dialogue is at times clipped, it never moves with the

speed and wit inspired by characters like *White Noise*'s Murray Suskind (indeed, *Point Omega*'s desert has little to no background noise at all). A one-sentence paragraph at the end of one of Jim and Elster's exchanges reads, "We sat and thought" (31). DeLillo's characteristically abrupt deadpans are here rendered as momentary murmurs in the skein of a much longer silence. The syntactical lacunae haunting several of the lines of dialogue insinuate similar pauses within the act of speaking itself. When Jim tells Elster about his proposed film and its single long take against a blank wall, he says "'You'll have every opportunity to talk about these things [...] Talk, pause, think, talk. Your face,' I said. 'Who you are, what you believe. Other thinkers, writers, artists, nobody's done a film like this, nothing planned, nothing rehearsed, no elaborate set up, no conclusions in advance, this is completely sort of barefaced, uncut'"(53). These paratactic enumerations, succinct in their various phrases but grammatically adrift, suggest the litany-like rhythms of religious language—but one poignantly undercut with that insouciant contradiction "completely sort of."

At one point Jim reports Elster's dialogue in explicitly religious terms, "He chanted the words, he intoned liturgically" (28). The parallelism of this sentence is the trademark of litany in liturgical worship, doubling the sentence as both an invocation of liturgical style as well as its exemplar: he "chanterd the words, he intoned liturgically." Insofar as sentences like this formally repeat their content, does Jim's observation refer merely to Elster? Or does it include the whole novel's pervasive litany-like style? Jim is the narrator at this point, but the novel provides little reason to think liturgy Jim's style of thought or expression.

On the other hand, Elster is at turns lampooned. There are good reasons to see him as a comic figure, and Elster succeeds Jerry Lewis as a subject in Jim's filmmaking repertoire. There is a satirical tint to Jim's reporting of Elster's pompous declamation; the alignment with Lewis suggests that excessive gravity may be its own form of histrionics. Yet the novel employs Elster's maxim-dropping wisdom in a variety of ways that seem to refer back to the very style of *Point Omega*, as

when Jim narrates Elster's view that "we become ourselves beneath the running thoughts and dim images, wondering idly when we'll die" (17). Is there not *some* truth to this? If the novel's language seems to suggest its own wisdom and revelatory potential, Cowart is right to point out that Elster's culpable association with the war undercuts the rhetorical effect. Yet Elster confesses that the magical power he once attributed to language was proved ineffectual by the war, thereby directly associating the sacred status of language with an unwarranted war's death and destruction (29).

While literary language can at times sound sacred in the style of *Point Omega's* sentences, the novel provides several reasons to avoid investing artistic culture with sacred significance. Both the literary word and the camera's images are rendered as suspicious fetishes. At one moment in the novel Jessie tells Jim about an elderly couple she used to take care of (69). The two would sit down to watch television, except that the woman would watch the man watching television. Apparently, his reactions to the television were more interesting than the television programming. Jessie realizes at a certain point, however, that she, too, is caught up in this cycle of watching—for she is watching the woman watching the man who is watching television. The image viewed is lost in the recursive act of watching. Like the most photographed barn in America from *White Noise*, Jessie's story questions whether or not there is in fact anything there to see other than people seeing.

The reader, in a sense, watches Jessie watching, and becomes complicit in this tangle of watching. DeLillo pushes the reader to acknowledge his or her own complicity in this unsettling charade, reflecting on *Psycho's* closing scene: "the eyes of Norman Bates, the face coming closer, the sick smile, the long implicating look, the complicit look at the person out there in the dark, watching" (107). Dennis was in the dark, watching; up above the printed page, so is the reader. Is it that all the watching and waiting of this novel, so intent on the promise of wisdom, conveys nothing more than the "sick smile" of watching others watch? And yet, the novel revels in the uncertainty of

this experience, how it feels to be waiting and watching when the unrelenting proximity of the unknown hints at a pending disclosure.

Point Omega tells a story about people waiting, waiting for what promises to be a violent ending. Insofar as it approaches contemporaneity as the suspense of waiting, of being fully aware of both one's limited knowledge and one's limited power to make things happen, *Point Omega* explores the time of the contemporary novel from within the framework of secular time. The secular originated as a temporal concept that grounds what we now think of as its inclusive political ideal (Milbank 1). In the theology of Augustine of Hippo, the *saeculum* is first and foremost a new temporal identification initiated by Christ's ascension and the postponement of his second coming. The word *saeculum* is his Latin translation of the New Testament's Greek word *aion*, or age. Augustine thinks of the *saeculum* as the age of suspended judgment in which Christian's must wait. The *saeculum* requires, to appropriate Jesse Kavadlo's fine phrase, balance at the edge of belief (Kavadlo 10). Secular time is time pulled taught in suspense.

Despite the tendency for "secularism" to refer to the removal of religious faith and practice from the public sphere, the reputed Augustine scholar Robert Markus points to the term's neutrality in Augustine's thought: "Secular does not have such connotations of radical opposition to the sacred; it is more neutral, capable of being accepted or adapted [...] It will be the shared overlap between insider and outsider groups, the sphere in which they can have a common interest and which—from the Christian point of view—need not be excluded or repudiated" (Markus 6). While the sacred and profane are opposed to each other, the secular is the space encompassing both the profane and sacred, and especially the period of time in which Christians must judiciously make use of the profane. In the deeply Augustinian theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, to which DeLillo's title refers, the end of that period of time is also the end of evolution—the point Omega.

Yet before turning to *Point Omega*'s use of Teilhard's theology of secular culture, I want to underscore the ethical stakes informing Augustine's understanding of it. In DeLillo's early novel *Americana*, David Bell is taken with Augustine's line from the *City of God* (where Augustine develops his view of the *saeculum*), "And never can a man be more disastrously in death than when death itself shall be deathless" (*Americana* 21). While DeLillo uses the line to expose the paucity of spiritual resources available in David's corporate office, it captures the extent to which Augustine's *saeculum* is ethically motivated. Secular time is the moment of suspended judgment that precedes the deathless death of eternity. Crucially, the *saeculum* intensifies ethical responsibility through its faith in a future judgment that remains indiscernible from within the present.⁶

Imminent endings can help to invest the present with higher value, or promote irresponsibility. Critic Peter Boxall has noted that DeLillo's "fascination with life at the end" has lately begun to incorporate "the endedness which marks the very conception of a globalized world" (*The Possibility of Fiction* 4). *Point Omega* revives that fascination in the space between individual death and global destruction. Yet what its rendering of endedness reveals is not morbidity but the experience of meaning. In *The Sense of An Ending* Frank Kermode writes that "our end determined fictions" are "what gives each moment its fullness," noting that the loss of the Christian belief in an *imminent* end shifted to an *immanent* end in fiction's attention to the momentary (Kermode 6). Kermode's point is apropos insofar as, in *Point Omega*, the end is always near but never resolved. Thus a novel named after an end point refuses to provide what its title ostensibly assures—the resolution one expects in an ending. The reader is left with several questions in regards to both plot and theme. It is not clear whether or not the crux of the novel's plot, Jessie's murder, has even happened. As much as its unresolved problems proliferate, *Point Omega* is something of a funneling

⁶ The secular in this original sense is the space of discriminating distinctions. One of the first scholars to point to the rich relationship between religion and secularization in DeLillo's work, John A. McClure, has recently put it like this: "DeLillo's work urges the reader to perform a discrimination of mysteries—to check his or her fascination with forensic and esoteric mysteries and explore the possibility of apophatic and sacramental modes of being." See "Mystery" 167.

down of the early DeLillo novel about apocalyptic preoccupations, *End Zone* (1972): we go from an entire *zone* to a very precise *point* in which to end. A point, however, is actually zero-dimensional, used entirely for orientation. The end of *Point Omega* is just such a point of subjective orientation; it is a point from which to value time, more than to measure it. Indeed, no chronological resolution to the muddle of *Point Omega*'s plot time is ever reached.

3. Love in the time of apocalypse

DeLillo's stylistic endings point toward a guarded humility about the contemporary novel's capacity to truly redeem contemporary time from either its rationalized violence or its frantic speed. In refusing to affirm any vision of time outside of the time of possibility, *Point Omega* finally points beyond itself. In this novel it is not a novel's words or a film's images or any other creative cultural form that finally provides meaning, but the human contact that comes with human love.

The central event of the novel is a violent abduction that echoes the missing Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) in *Psycho*. Rather, it is the central *nonevent* since the novel never describes it, never even uses Jessie's point of view, and never directly authorizes it. Someone appears to have taken her from the house while Jim and Elster were out grocery shopping. This sudden disappearance destroys the retreat Elster had sought in the desert. It is a personal tragedy that brings a very different meaning to Elster's musing about extinction and the end of the world.

Elster's sagacious bluster tends toward cataclysmic visions. Demeaning the calamity of the Iraq war he championed, Elster claims, "Iraq is a whisper" (50). "Something's coming," he mysteriously predicts to Jim, a paroxysm of much greater consequence for the planet. "But isn't this what we want? Isn't this the burden of consciousness? We're all played out. Matter wants to lose its self-consciousness. We're the mind and heart that matter has become. Time to close it all down.

This is what drives us now” (50). Elster’s thinks a final extinction is coming, one presaged by a longing in human consciousness for its own destruction.

Fittingly, the house to which Jim, Elster, and Jessie have come was originally Elster’s first wife’s house, a paleontologist. It is to the French paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, that Elster goes to explain his theory of The End. Teilhard, a famous paleontologist who was also a Jesuit priest, died in New York City on Easter Sunday of 1955, during the spring semester of DeLillo’s freshman year at the Jesuit university in New York City, Fordham. It is hard not to assume that the event and the posthumous publishing later that year of Teilhard’s hitherto banned book, *The Phenomenon of Man*, would not have in some way attracted the young DeLillo’s attention. Teilhard’s work was also crucial to one of DeLillo’s influences, Flannery O’Connor—*Everything that Rises Must Converge*, is a phrase from Teilhard’s work and refers to the same spiritual interpretation of evolutionary theory as the title of DeLillo’s novel—everything that rises converges on the Omega point. Whether or not Teilhard’s thought was an immediate influence on the young DeLillo, his 2010 novel takes Teilhard’s theory of the Omega point for its title and developed theme, just as it takes up O’Connor’s religious overtones and the figure of the violent outsider.

According to Elster, Teilhard “said that human thought is alive, it circulates. And the sphere of collective human thought, this is approaching the final term, the last flare” (51). The “Omega point” is Teilhard’s name for this last flare, a final transformation beyond the human as we now know it; in Elster’s terms, “a leap out of our biology” (52). In Teilhard’s theory, things become more and more complex, drawn on to their ultimate end in the Omega point. The human species has been remarkable for its ability to maintain itself, to avoid proliferating into other species. His explanation is that the evolutionary process has turned inward—the geogenesis and biogenesis of earlier eras have become the psychogenesis of an increasing complex collective thought. Of this turning point Teilhard asserts, “without prejudice to what may still be developing slowly and secretly in the depths

of the nervous system, evolution has since that date overtly overflowed its anatomical modalities to spread, or perhaps even to transplant its main thrust into the zones of psychic spontaneity both individual and collective” (Teilhard 203). These “zones of psychic spontaneity” continue the evolutionary processes; they are what Elster is referring to when he says, “We’re the mind and heart matter has become.” In Elster’s rendering, “Consciousness accumulates. It begins to reflect upon itself” (*Point Omega* 72).

This accumulated consciousness is what Teilhard called the “noosphere”—from the Greek word for mind or intellect, *nous*. The noosphere is an ontologically substantial but immaterial crust, or spherical overlay, of accumulated consciousness wrapping around the world. More than any single destructive End Point, the noosphere is *Point Omega*’s more subtle and familiar DeLilloian them. Indeed, *Underworld*’s oft-repeated line “everything is connected” could be an apt explanation of Teilhard’s noosphere, as would *Underworld*’s mystical internet serve as one of its more provocative illustrations. The connections in consciousness that weave together the noosphere are not merely ephemeral ideas but very real products of human culture that should not be separated from the processes of evolutionary theory. In *The Phenomenon of Man* Teilhard approvingly cites Julian Huxley’s phrase that human culture is nothing other than “evolution become conscious of itself” (Teilhard 221). The noosphere is Teilhard’s attempt to think through the full reality of human culture and its effects on life more generally.

Elster, true to his tendency to equivocate, seems to misconstrue the creative aspects of Teilhard’s noosphere. For instance, in place of increasing psychogenesis as we draw nearer the “point Omega” (as the sketch of evolutionary eras in *The Phenomenon of Man* calls it), Elster asserts a death drive more akin to Freud’s pessimistic theory of culture than Teilhard’s.⁷ To Elster, conscious

⁷ David Cowart has noted the reversal of “Omega point” to “point Omega,” implying that DeLillo is in fact utterly changing Teilhard’s ideas. I would be wary, however, of overdetermining this switch since Teilhard does in fact use the phrase “point Omega.” Most significantly, it is how Teilhard labels his diagrammatic illustration of the view of geological

humans “want to be stones in a field” (*Point Omega* 53). Conflating the dynamism of Teilhard’s cultural noosphere with extinction is precisely the ambiguous attitude toward culture that *Point Omega* portrays. While the noosphere might herald the achievements of human culture since the Pleistocene, we have now entered an Anthropocene that pronounces human culture’s disastrously destructive tendencies. The Anthropocene is what some scientists have begun calling the new geological era they contend we now inhabit, when humans have reached the point of influencing geological time. Indeed, rather than the increasing diversity of the noosphere, the Anthropocene is characterized by manmade extinctions. While we may want to distinguish between the ethical effects of artistic culture and the pollution of industrial manufacturing, *Point Omega* is not confident that the distinction between them will hold.

The gap between, on the one hand, Teilhard’s actual view of an increasing complex web of cultural consciousness and, on the other hand, the death drive with which Elster conflates it, opens a vital space for the novel’s sober affirmation of the ethical responsibility assumed in secular time. For *Point Omega* the novel is not a polemical warning against any coming extinction as much as a creative gesture toward the experiences of meaning portrayed in its human relationships. In its rendering, secular time is a time of waiting *together*. The rites of domesticity fill much of the novel’s limited action, as Jim duly notes, “I wondered if we were becoming a family, no more strange than most families except that we had nothing to do, nowhere to go, but that’s not so strange either, father, daughter and whatever-I-was” (55).

These developing relationships are crucial to the novel, but it has no interest in the nuclear family or the clichés that sometimes parade under the banner of “family values.” Whether it is the immigrants dying in the deserts surrounding Elster’s house, or Jim’s silent anxiety for his neighbor

history put forth in *The Phenomenon of Man*. Julian Huxley, too, thought nothing of calling it simply the “point Omega” in his introduction to Teilhard’s thought. For Cowart, see “The Lady Vanishes” 47. For Huxley’s usage, see “Introduction,” *The Phenomenon of Man* 18-19.

who walks down the stairs backwards, or for that matter Jim's neglected and now estranged wife; whether it is Jessie who talks to strangers but cannot talk freely with her own father and mother, or Elster who needs company in order to be alone; whether it is Dennis desperate to speak with someone, or even the mouse caught in a trap that brings Jim and Elster's company to three—*Point Omega* takes Elie's characterization of DeLillo's true believer as a man alone in a room and wonders if it is good for man to be alone.

Moreover, the novel offers an astonishingly tender image of unexpected compassion. Jim's ministrations to the grieving Elster surprise with their attentive concern. Jim attends to Elster's body. He feeds him. He cuts his hair. When Elster coughs on the way to the airport, and Jim goes so far as to wipe Elster's discharged phlegm from Elster's motionless hand, Jim realizes that he has—for the first time—forgotten his film (99). In giving his days to caring for the humiliating needs of a man whom his film would have humiliated, Jim has learned how to be serious but not too serious. He has escaped the prison of his obsession.

Elster learns too, through grief, about the misplaced relevance of his apocalyptic fears. For the catastrophe that finally arrives is not the end of the universe, but the unsolvable murder of his single cherished daughter. Jessie joins Elster and Jim in the desert because her mother believes she has fallen into an unhealthy romantic relationship that needs to end. One day while Jim and Elster are in town getting groceries, she suddenly disappears, having left all her belongings and no clues behind her. Dennis, from whom her mother hoped to save Jessie by sending her to the desert, has probably abducted her. Jim and Elster report her as missing but find little cause for hope of discovering anything. A knife is discovered by a search team, but without blood and no other traces as to its carrier or its use. After Jessie's disappearance, however, Jim and Elster's need to watch and wait takes on a very specific subject. "One of us was always on the deck, keeping watch," Jim narrates. "We did this well into the night. It became a ritual, a religious observance" (87). Waiting is

no longer a theoretical approach to the end of the universe; Elster's leisurely reclamation of his body is suddenly overwhelmed with incapacitating emotions.

Elster loves his daughter dearly, and the disappearance is traumatic. Jim reflects on how this loss focuses Elster's theorizing:

I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck, half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not. (98)

The Omega point may be millions of years away, but here and now a single life has ended and that single life holds a universe of meaning for Elster. What Jim here calls "funneling down" is what DeLillo's novels have been doing since *Underworld*—paring down the narrative structure of the contemporary novel to the most basic forms of cultural meaning. *Point Omega* has funneled down its narrative to the point at which language meets love and death—the single "point of a knife as it enters a body." In fact, this funneling down of the entire universe to the disappearance of a single consciousness is foreshadowed in Elster's response to Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, that it was like watching the universe die. Elster and Jim come in during the famous "shower scene" when Janet Leigh's character is about to die and Elster reacts to her impending death as much as to the slowing down of the film for it "was like the contraction of the universe"—to one life ending (47). For all the careful watching and waiting, for all the musing on the possible potency of word and image, human relationships become the predominant source of missed meaning in *Point Omega*. Time is not the problem. In *Point Omega*'s final diagnosis, the contemporary moment is not characterized by a lack of time as much as a lack of love.

Chapter 5

Characterization and Moral Time: *On Beauty*

It's almost *anti*-portraiture: he doesn't want you to look at the faces; he wants you to look at their *souls*.
~Claire Malcolm in *On Beauty*

1. Characterization after Foucault

Can one paint a soul? Whether or not Rembrandt ever achieved the feat, as *On Beauty*'s poet Claire Malcolm avers in my epigraph to this chapter, Zadie Smith thinks that the novel needs it. According to an essay Smith wrote about morality and the novel, what "less metaphysically challenged times" called "soul" is "the rogue element" still needed to make a novel great ("Fail Better"). Yet only a few years prior she had derided a critic's invocation of soul as sloppy ("How It Feels"). And again, a few years after, arguing for the sacred significance of an author's individual life experience, she derided how the novels of "lyrical realism" fall back on clichés about the "deep pool of the self" ("Two Paths"). The idea of some persistent kernel to personal experience is clearly important to how Smith thinks about the novel. Her work is known for being attuned to social differences, not the metaphysics of soul. Why soul? Why does she invoke soul to laud and then deride it? Is she simply, as she puts it, "changing my mind"?

Perhaps, but it points toward a persistent ambivalence in her fiction. To Smith "soul" is a word for the irreducible singularity of personal experience. It is not some kind of spiritual or ontological essence but quite the opposite—the utterly contingent happenstances of social identity and accrued experiences. While certain conceptions of soul will invite her derision, others are vital to how she thinks about the novel. In her view, souls take time to develop and are distinctive insofar as

the concoctions of experience that shape any specific person are bound to differ. Souls are not eternal essences; they take time to grow. Her novel *On Beauty* bears an epigraph that asks, “how else could we find depth/ of character, or grow souls” but through time? “Time is how you spend your love,” one line in the novel admonishes, and that time is what cultivates a soul. In *On Beauty*, it takes time to grow a soul, but they grow whether attended to or not.

The academic who is the closest thing to a main character in *On Beauty*, the Rembrandt scholar Howard Belsey, would find such talk of souls amusing if not perniciously retrograde; Claire Malcolm’s effusion over Rembrandt’s soul provoking anti-portraiture would strike him as foolishness. Though much of the plot is driven by Howard’s extramarital affair with Claire, Howard’s antihumanism could not be any farther from Claire’s soul disclosing anti-portraiture. Howard’s stance against the ideological folly of such spiritual idealizations appears throughout *On Beauty* alongside of various portraits, from Hyppolite to Lewis to Rembrandt, symbolically staging debates over the nature of knowledge, the individual, and—indirectly—a novel’s view of characterization. As sympathetic as Smith with the theories Howard espouses, she uses him to show how the novel’s moral time is quite a different thing than either portraiture or theory.

In this chapter I show how *On Beauty* uses both Howard’s specialty in the art of portraiture and his theoretical discourse in order to illustrate the novel’s unique ability to narrate the effects of time on a character. Howard’s daughter Zora directly challenges Claire’s idealized views of creative genius with, “But after Foucault . . . where is there to go with that stuff?” (219), a gauntlet that *On Beauty* reflexively throws down for itself. The novel does not respond with an abstract argument, however, but by emphasizing its ability to narrate different experiences and the different effects of those experiences over time. Indeed, in this way it uncannily follows the trajectory of how Foucault’s own thought asked itself the same question, eventually turning away from a theoretical interrogations of subjectivity to the disciplinary arts of moral formation—or as he called them,

“technologies of the self.” Smith’s view of characterization is attuned to the logic of this turn insofar as it insists on the time it takes to create character. In her rendering, discursive statements submit to the novel’s portrayal of contingencies. The various discursive sources from which Smith draws in this novel, whether Iris Murdoch and Elaine Scarry’s aesthetics, E.M. Forster and George Eliot’s theories of the novel, or Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Foucault’s antihumanism, all intrude upon Howard’s abstract theory like so many vibrant, but minor characters. And so do the novel’s several visual portraits.

Critics have written about the hybrid identities of Smith’s characters (Moss, Beukema) as well as the ethical implications of her aesthetics (Gasioreck, Hale, Tolan), but in this chapter I address how she thinks about characterization’s relationship to narrative time. I will make my case for Smith’s view of characterization in the novel by first establishing how she uses certain social signifiers to express her idea of soul. Then I will show how her characters change over time and why that change matters for how the novel understands its relationship to the portrait as well as the forms of academic discourse it includes. Finally, I will close by showing how the experience of beauty in *On Beauty* tests discursive forms of truth against the sacred meaning of the singular, unrepeatability of personal experience.

2. Symbolic portraiture

One of the ways Smith conveys the sacredness of personal experience in her novel is to invite a comparison between the novel’s version of characterization and the art of portraiture. Both the literary genre of the novel and the visual art of portraiture fuse social signifiers with the particularities of an individual person.¹ Unlike Claire Malcolm’s *anti*-portraiture, the novel in which

¹ Though the visual portrait has its own form of narrative and its own ways of alluding toward the past or future, it does not have a way to narrate the changes in personal character and the causes of those changes both in the moment and

she appears is quick to affirm the effects of contingent, physical experience on the soul. Smith's penchant for including visible signs of social status in her characterization is an affinity her writing has with the art of portraiture. "Portraiture is thus about body and soul," according to Shearer West, because it "represents the 'front' of a person—their gesture, expression, and manner—in such a way as to convey their distinct identity as well as to link him or her to a particular social milieu" (West 36-37). Like good portraiture, Smith is careful to describe the signs of the particular social milieu in which her characters move.

She takes evident joy in doing so. Her sketch of the character Jack French is a good example of how Smith uses social signifiers to represent key aspects of a character's personal experience. As the Dean of the Humanities Faculty at Wellington College, where Howard Belsey teaches, French provides little more than a flat, minor character. The reader is rarely asked to identify with him, and his role is largely to provide comic effects with his aggravatingly slow way of talking and never quite making eye contact. Smith uses these Dickensian tics to characterize various social differences, either between Jack's privileged New England background and Howard's working class roots or Jack's position as an administrator and Claire Malcolm's as a creative writing professor. These tics are not simply indicators of his social group; they reveal key aspects of what makes Jack Jack.

He is first introduced with a long description worth quoting at length. Smith looks to portraiture—this time Lewis, not Rembrandt—to highlight her characterization:

Jack French on his long playboy legs in their New England slacks. How old was this man? The question had always troubled Howard. Jack French could be fifty-two. He could just as easily be seventy-nine. You couldn't ask him and if you didn't ask him you'd never know. It was a movie-idol face Jack had, cut-glass architecture, angled like a Wyndham Lewis portrait. His sentimental eyebrows made the shape of two separated sides of a steeple, always gently perplexed. He had skin like the kind of dark, aged leather you find on those fellows they dig out, after 900 years, from a peat bog. A thin yet complete covering of grey silk hair hid his skull from Howard's imputations of extreme old age and was cut no differently than it would have been

over time. As Richard Brilliant has pointed out in his work on portraiture, unlike the novel, the visual portrait's dominant means of expressing its subject's identity is spatial, not temporal (31).

when the man was twenty-two, balanced on the lip of a white boat looking out at Nantucket through one sun-shading hand, wondering if that was Dolly stood square on the pier with two highballs in her hand. (64)

Jack French's indiscernible age is of a piece with the congenial reserve he shows throughout the novel. Smith's use of the free indirect style to pose the question of his age here hints that this is not merely Howard's view; it is a marvel he shares with the other faculty who know Jack. While Jack has his mysteries, he is no inscrutable character; these are garish brush strokes.

The passage is characteristic of Smith's work in that its exaggerated catalogue of class markers teeters on overstatement. He has been grotesquely drawn and his excessively slow speech exacerbates her exaggerations each time he appears. Yet more importantly, Smith chooses her descriptors for their social resonances. Right down to the punch line ending of Dolly waiting with the highballs. Prior to that, however, a single sentence describing Jack's face conveys his money, regional traits, and education, moving from his "movie-idol face" being "cut-glass architecture" to the steeple-like lift of eyebrows that find the world not nearly as clean cut as his hair. Jack's personality—a mélange of money, elegance, and education associated with the northeast—is expressed in the most basic aspects of his manners. However marginal a figure to the plot, Jack French is in fact an excellent example of Smith's approach to characterization in *On Beauty*. Even the more developed characters are represented by their conventional behavior, their routine actions and reactions. This is not because they are undeveloped or shallow. Their habits are not positioned against richer interior struggles because Smith's characters are who they are because of how they act. Her view of characterization is rigidly Aristotelian in this aspect—their habits express their character.

The model of Jack French offers the beginnings of her theory of characterization, but it is also Smith's theory of personhood. Smith claims that though she used to envy writers who could assume a homogenous readership, her need to write for people of various backgrounds and levels of

education is helpful because it “keeps you on your toes” (“This Week”). She thinks that anticipating such different readers has sharpened her sensitivity to how social forces like class structure shape human experience. For Smith, the distinguishing “varietals of voice and lifestyle (bad word, but I can’t think of another) are fundamentally significant. They’re not just decoration on top of a life; they’re the filter through which we come to understand the world. To be born into money is ontologically different than to be born without it, for example” (“This Week”). The “varietals of voice and lifestyle” that keep her on her toes are, according to Smith, the way life is experienced and the origin—or “filter”—from which personal experience takes shape. Class markers in the novel are part and parcel of how the novel thinks about human experience because, as she argues, a person’s character is shaped by their place in society. Jack French is who he is, is “ontologically different,” because of his social positioning.

In one of the novel’s key scenes, two different characters discuss a portrait’s symbols while the prose narrating the scene uses similar symbols to differentiate between the two character’s social milieu. Kiki Belsey is African-American, middle-class, progressive, and an atheist; Carlene Kipps is a Caribbean-born Englishwoman, with aristocratic reserve, an earnest Christian faith, conservative political views, and traditional views on gender roles. Kiki’s Christian son fell in love with Carlene’s rebellious daughter, and their husbands are lined up against each other in a squabble over university politics. The scene opens with Carlene’s hired help answering the door ushering Kiki into the “leebry” where Carlene sits in a “white calico Victorian armchair” (167). These cues are contrasted with Kiki, who comes in wearing tight jeans and bringing pie. The two are soon trying to keep from arguing over their very different views of marriage or the liberal bias of PBS. Smith uses these quickly recognized social markers to identify key components of these characters’ identities.

They are not mere generalizations, however. Such symbols point toward the particularities of the characters’ life experiences. Smith has little interest in showing how their personalities somehow

transcend these social trappings. When Kiki notices one of Carlene's portraits hanging on the library wall, however, the two very different women experience an unlikely rapprochement. The Kipps's house is full of original portraits, but Hector Hyppolite's *Maîtresse Erzulie* was purchased directly from the artist when Carlene first visited Haiti. The Belsey home, on the other hand, has none. Both Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps study portraiture. Yet Howard the art theorist has banned all representational work from their walls. He cannot abide the regressive humanism their images entail. When Carlene asks Kiki what she thinks of the picture, her most prized painting, Kiki confesses, "I just love portraits. We don't have any paintings in our house. At least, none of human beings" (175). Carlene thinks this "terrible"—people are the whole of life for Carlene. Carlene tells Kiki, "I don't ask myself *what* did I love for," because that is "a man's question. I ask *whom* did I love for" (176). Personal relationships are sacred to Carlene—and to *On Beauty*, though not for such explicitly gendered reasons. Yet this conservative Christian character goes on to describes her favorite painting of a voodoo spirit as a mash-up of abstract symbols. It has nothing do with realism or personality.

According to Carlene, the portrait "represents love, beauty, purity, the ideal female and the moon . . . and she's the *mystère* of jealousy, vengeance and discord, *and*, on the other hand, of love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty, and fortune." To this Kiki only responds, "Phew. That's a lot of symbolizing." Critics have had similar responses to Smith's novels and the verdict could as likely refer to Kiki herself and this very scene. It is a full of symbolic generalizations, too. It is significant then, that the portrait is not an occasion for a dramatic or moving experience of beauty. Their banter is light-hearted or nervous, not deeply engaged. Moreover, the narrator describes Hyppolite's painting as "painted in a primitive, childlike style, everything flat on the canvas. No perspective, no depth" (175). Yet Hyppolite's portrait is valuable to particular persons—to Kiki and her new relationship with Carlene because it is so comprehensive. Consequently, this trove of

incongruous symbols, the Kipps most valuable painting, is bequeathed from Carlene (who will soon die of the illness that haunts her in this scene) to Kiki with the inscription, “there is such shelter in each other.” The fact that this line is the second use of Smith’s husband Nick Laird’s poetry in the novel furthers the scene’s indirect endorsement of Carlene’s view of personal relationships. The portrait is not powerful because of its fidelity to an original or the mysteries of interiority that it captures. Its symbols take on meaning as a link between these two women and the portrait becomes the defining catalyst behind the novel’s spiraling denouement.

3. Howard’s end

While the conventions of portraiture are evident in Smith’s own art, she goes far beyond them. As a character, Howard shows how different the novelist’s characterization is from the artist’s portrait. Though readers rarely have access to his thoughts unmediated by the narrator’s commentary, Howard dominates much of *On Beauty*’s narrative space. Howard’s middle-aged moral growth is the main preoccupation of the novel’s plot. The final scene brings the process of that growth into contact with his theory of Rembrandt’s portraits. In it the untenured professor arrives late after getting stuck in traffic to give a lecture that could likely be a turning point in his ill-fated career. Taking the podium, he realizes his notes are still on the seat of his car, parked too far away for retrieval. Howard clicks silently through the digitally projected paintings on which he meant to speak. Jack French, uncertain what is happening, reassuringly whispers loudly to his son who is also in attendance, “*You see, Ralph, the order is meaningful*” (442). Had Howard remembered his notes, he would have argued that the images do not achieve anything like the kind of meaning Jack French assumes. And he would have responded to the painfully slow whisper with his quickest, clipped English accent. He would have argued that Rembrandt did not create transcendent truths about the human condition but unduly idealized attempts to pay the bills.

The scene is the novel's final moment, and behind Howard's silence is a novel full of his arguments about Rembrandt. To Howard the idea of genius, or even the idea that a work of art might be a special form of meaning, hides a nefarious cultural politics. In the novel's opening exchange of emails (in a nod to Forster's use of telegrams in *Howards End*), Howard's son Jerome asks, "Have you found a way to prove Rembrandt was no good yet?" (5). While this is a crass misrepresentation of sorts, it indicates a key theme of Howard's long but unfinished manuscript, *Against Rembrandt: Interrogating a Master*. "Interrogate" is Howard's preferred term to describe the kinds of intellectual activities he strives toward in his courses and his research. As a repeated mannerism it is the counterpart to his boorish insistence on defining terms instead of stating beliefs. The sense in which Howard uses the word "interrogate" clearly echoes Alain Robbe-Grillet's use of the term. Smith has used Robbe-Grillet's work in her own criticism and is likely alluding to the idea put forth in Robbe-Grillet's "The Use of Theory:" "For the function of art is never to illustrate a truth—or even an interrogation—known in advance, but to bring into the world certain interrogations" (Robbe-Grillet 14). The work of art for Howard is not a function of specifically human values but discursive formations; he teaches his students to create just such "interrogations." A Rembrandt portrait does not represent an achievement of human civilization but an occasion to ask new questions about what motivates the ideological pretensions we ascribe to it.

Instead of espousing these theories in his now noteless lecture, Howard mutely gazes into the assembled audience and sees his estranged wife Kiki and her "bare and gleaming" shoulders. At this precise moment in the narrative he comes to an image of the love of Rembrandt's middle age, and manages to croak out his first words of the evening "*Hendrickje Bathing*, 1654," (442). As Howard looks out at the audience and finds Kiki in it, seeing in "her face, his life," he proceeds to zoom in on the image. Smith writes, the "woman's fleshiness filled the wall. He looked out and saw Kiki only. He smiled at her. She smiled." Yet what he sees in the now huge image of Hendrickje's

skin is “the ever present human hint of yellow, intimation of what is to come” (443). In zooming back and forth on Hendrickje’s skin, and looking back and forth from Kiki’s bare and gleaming skin to Hendrickje’s, Howard sees what the portrait can only hint at in Hendrickje but that the novel has described in his experience with Kiki—the passing of time. Silent before the image, Howard does not interrogate it but suddenly encounters a powerful reminder of the time he has lost.

On Beauty tells the story of Howard learning that the limitations of time on his own life cannot be escaped through theory. In ending with a portrait’s intimation of lost time, however, *On Beauty* refers back on its own narrative and the events and actions it has used to develop the character of Howard Belsey. Indeed, it is apropos that a professor who specializes in a famous portrait artist is blind to what any novelist instinctively knows—it takes time to develop a character. Howard, as the adulterous debacle that has estranged him from Kiki makes clear, suffers from a lack of character. Knowing that morality is often invoked by people like the Kipps, he is wary of it. And yet, he begins to realize that no interrogations can transcend his embodied relation to time. Needing to prove his character to Kiki, what can he do but plead for “the concession people always beg for: a little more time”? (398).

On Beauty’s final section, “On Beauty and Being Wrong,” bears an epigraph from the poet Mark Doty that aptly summarizes Howard’s problem: “When I say I hate time, Paul says/ how else could we find depth/ of character, or grow souls?” In Doty’s line, souls are the product of an embodied individual’s experiences, which need time as much as space for variation. Smith’s novel consistently invokes the passing of time, from pausing to note the changing seasons of its yearlong cycle to specifically naming the ages of even minor characters (except for the inscrutable Jack French, whose age it makes much ado of omitting). “Time is not what it is but how it is felt” (129), Smith reminds us in one of the novel’s several aphoristic sentences. The essentially subjective nature of time is reiterated as one of the things that Howard “just did not believe, as his father did, that

time is how you spend your love” (302). How does Howard go from not believing that time is how you spend your love to begging for a little more time?

As opposed to flat characters like Jack French, Smith portrays in Howard how the same person can contain two contradictory sets of habits. The readers are not given copious access to Howard’s inner world apart from what he says and does. Yet what he says do not line up with what he does. That disconnect is what precipitates his fall, or his end as it were. Jack French and Howard are both expressed in their mannerisms. The mannerisms that best express Howard, however, run against each other insofar as the sophistication of Howard’s speech patterns are at odds with the banality of his sexual promiscuity. He has no time for clichés and yet lives them out. In Howard’s dialogue, he asserts a fierce need for rigor. He will insist on pedantic distinctions in even casual and intimate conversations. “Define believe,” he demands at one point; and at another, “Define genius.” Though he demands his interlocutors to see the consequences and assumptions of their terminology, he enacts the stereotypes of a midlife crisis with an inarticulate aplomb.

Smith reveals that he was artlessly quick to play the role his lover assigned him in their hapless affair. In the at turns disturbing and hilarious scene in which he has sex with the young college freshman Victoria Kipps, Victoria keeps a running commentary lifted from the worst clichés of pornography. As painful as they are to read, they barely register with Howard. Apparently his interrogations have failed him. Howard’s daughter Zora’s hurt reaction to this new depth of despicableness is instructive (capitalized in the original): “IT’S SO BORING, DAD. IT’S SO FUCKING OBVIOUS” (433). This is precisely the problem of Howard’s behavior in the novel. His view of personal responsibility lacks anything close to the conceptual rigor of his views on aesthetics and politics. Zora’s indictment is the novel’s verdict insofar as Howard’s moral failings are indeed obvious and predictably boring. Yet this contradiction in his moral character is in fact who he is as a character—his habitual patterns of speaking and his habitual patterns of action do not connect.

This contradiction is evident in Howard's response to music in the novel, as well as visual art. Before seeing mortality in Hendrickje's skin, a crucial funeral scene surprises Howard with a moving experience in which he is overwhelmed with a vision of his and his beloved family members' deaths. After waking up from sleeping through a free performance of Mozart's Requiem that his newly converted Christian son wanted the family to attend together in hopes of ameliorating the effects of his parents' tense relations, Howard jumps up, "That it, then? . . . Everyone been touched by the Christian sublime? Can we go now?" (71). Howard disdains the piece's attempt to "fake me into some metaphysical idea by the back door" (72). He does not notice—as his wife does—that his Christian son Jerome has been moved to tears. The argument could be made here that Howard's integrity is that he lives his theory—that he is above sentimental tripe despite the pull of family. Yet it is precisely the same piece will move him to tears later at Carlene Kipps's funeral.

This time when Howard hears the same requiem that put him to sleep earlier in the novel, he is "in a manner both sudden and horrible—mortally affected by it" (286). He feels above the music's Christian sentimentality, and yet the contingency of events is such that Howard "was quite certain he was making embarrassing noises. He was powerless to stop them." Smith goes on, foreshadowing the final scene's zooming, "His thoughts fled from him and rushed down their dark holes. Zora's gravestone. Levi's. Jerome's. Everybody's. His own. Kiki's. Kiki's. Kiki's. Kiki's" (288). Unlike a portrait, the novel can narrate both experiences—first falling asleep and then weeping, as well as the experiences between them that conditioned Howard for an entirely different reaction. It can narrate Howard championing his theory that Rembrandt was only trying to make money in his paintings and then show Howard deeply affected by the way Rembrandt uses pigmentation to evoke the mortality of his beloved.

Another way Smith portrays the gap between the limitations of Howard's personal experience and his theory is in his attitude toward belief. Beliefs are for Howard something that the

intellectual life exists to purge. They are a symptom of right-wing pathologies. When Howard first confronts the Kipps family's oldest son Michael over what he thinks is the engagement of Jerome to Michael's sister Victoria, he half-heartedly attempts to broach their different value systems: "look, of course I know you and your family have 'beliefs,'" began Howard uneasily, as if 'beliefs' were a kind of condition, like oral herpes" (38). This condescending tone becomes a mere downcast glance as he wearily listens the son's irate response. Each new example of the "flight from the rational, which was everywhere in evidence in the new century [. . .] on the television, in the street and now in this young man—weakened him somehow" (38). This capitulation captures Howard's tendency to ignore his own beliefs as well as his tendency to denigrate the beliefs of others.

The limitations of time not only create changes in character, but also necessitate a certain degree of belief. A brief sketch of one of Howard's students, Katie Armstrong, offers a foil to Howard's assumption that beliefs, like a disease, can be carefully avoided. While Katie has no function in the plot, her belief in beauty contrasts Howard's theorizing. She is a young prodigy, a mere sixteen, who has decided to study the arts despite the fact that "her parents' relative poverty and limited education" should have steered her toward medicine or law. The description of Katie's love of painting shows how Smith's free indirect style of narration slips quietly in and out of the voice of the character being described. Katie imagines some day "writing a book on Picasso, who is the most amazing human being Katie has ever come across" but is overwhelmingly perplexed by Dr. Belsey's class on "Rembrandt, who is the second most amazing human being Katie has ever come across" (249-250). This slippage is in part because of Smith's deep sympathy with Katie's belief in art, that it is worth her time and can reveal something about human experience not reducible to Howard's ideology critiques.

Katie is an ingénue among Wellington College's more sophisticated, more cynical, and wealthier students. Her enthusiasm for such geniuses makes her bewildered by Howard's approach

to Rembrandt's paintings: "What we're trying to ... *interrogate* here ... is the mytheme of artist as autonomous individual with privileged insight into the human. What is it about these texts – these images as narration – that is implicitly applying for the quasi-mystical notion of a genius?" (252). Katie works assiduously at her coursework, but no amount of work seems to be able to help her understand what is happening in Howard's class. What Howard is intent on interrogating is nothing less than what Katie believes is Rembrandt's imposingly "*human* faith in the world" (250). The leap outside of her own perspective is so hard for Katie because what Howard treats as an object of dispassionate inquiry she assumes is a necessarily personal conviction. Is not the point of his art to convey something of this human faith in the world as it is? Katie cannot conceive of discursive formations like "the human" floating free of the personal investment of belief—and neither can *On Beauty*. In its reflexive meditation on characterization *On Beauty* asserts its belief that personal experience is sacred. Why? Because that is what novels do, Smith implicitly answers, they place discursive formations within the temporality of human experience. As the namesake of the Belsey family dog and one of Smith's several interlocutors in the novel, Iris Murdoch, puts it, "Here above all the contingency of the characters must be respected" (271). The narrative time of the novel in Smith's rendering pays its respects to that contingency.

4. Sacred revelations

Beauty, like belief, cannot circumnavigate experience via theoretical discourse in *On Beauty*. The novel's many portraits serve as emblems of human relationships, but also as the personal and purely contingent nature of artistic experience. *On Beauty*'s eponymous theme is approached from a variety of viewpoints in the novel. Whether Jerome's Christian belief, Zora's juvenile professionalism, Levi's urban pretensions, Howard's theoretical convictions, Kiki's latent feminism,

or even in Jack French's befuddled attempts at being agreeable, the characters usually respond to beautiful objects through their own previously established character traits. Artistic encounters include a variety of contingent variables, their own formal power only a key ingredient. What beauty reveals in *On Beauty*, however, is the effects of time. It reveals changes in character because certain of art's insights are only available through a personal experience of the work. When Mozart's requiem first bores then overwhelms Howard the new effect is both the occasion for a deeply personal realization about himself as well as inspired by that realization. Smith's novel contextualizes the several contingencies that come together to create aesthetic experiences.

Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* is one of the sources Smith names in her acknowledgments for how she thinks about beauty in *On Beauty*. Indeed, Smith's title directly invokes Scarry's. According to Scarry, beauty is a quality that emerges in certain kinds of experience. It does not inhere in the beautiful object *sui generis*, but as an individual subject's particular quality of experience. Scarry's book establishes three characteristic features of beauty: "beauty is sacred," "beauty is unprecedented," and "beauty is lifesaving" (23-24). None of these are formal requirements, such as proportionality or elegance of diction. Beauty is sacred because of how it provides an unexpected form of salvation; it is sacred precisely because no specific quality can rationally define beauty as such. In Scarry's rendering, beauty does not exist apart from a personal experience of it.

Howard experiences all three of Scarry's characteristic features in the novel's closing scene as he looks at the portrait of Hendrickje. First, he is silent in reverent awe before the picture, seeing in it for the first time his own mortality and the hope he has in Kiki. His silence and sense of the moment renders it sacred. Second, it is a moment of revelation for Howard insofar as his viewing of the picture like this is unprecedented. The humility in the human mortality of Hendrickje's flesh mirrors Howard's humiliation, and his relation to the painting is altered in the same moment that his

personal and professional relations are also altered. Finally, it is lifesaving insofar as Howard's professional death is also a moment of insight about Kiki and his despair at the forgotten notes is enveloped in the giddy expectation it engenders.

This twin dependence—of art on the person and the person on the personal experience of art—is explicitly described as such in several scenes. In one instance, Howard looks at a Rembrandt painting he “has seen so many times he could no longer see it at all” (144). He is preparing a slide show for the semester's first day of class, a slide show that accompanies a lecture he has given several times before. The image is of Rembrandt's *Dr Nicolaes Tulp Demonstrating the Anatomy of the Arm*, which indirectly provides *On Beauty* with the title to this section, “The Anatomy Lesson.” When Howard sees the painting this time, however, “Howard felt himself caught in the painting's orbit” because he “could see himself laid out on that very table.” It is the uniquely personal association that catches him—the disgrace and vulnerability he feels after news of his affair with Claire Malcolm has become public. He sees himself “white and finished with the world, his arm cut open for his students to examine” (144). Other encounters with beauty in the novel like this one have little to do with the aesthetics of taste; they are entirely relative to the character's specific experiences. To echo Murdoch, here above all contingency must be respected.

In an essay on the novelistic aesthetics of *On Beauty*, Dorothy Hale argues that Smith's treatment of beauty deliberately avoids the question of whether or not novels are themselves beautiful by leaving novels out of her characters' experiences of art—they see paintings, listen to music, read poetry, but never read novels. The only novel to appear in *On Beauty*, *Room with a View*, is never read, only ridiculed as unbearable by Howard to his father. Furthermore, as Hale points out, unlike the paintings, music, and poems included in it, *On Beauty* itself is not nearly as lovely or lyrical. Hale links this and Smith's own statements on the novel to a tradition of novel theory that assumes novels are novels because of their capacity to represent social differences. They contextualize

contingencies. Too many lyrical flights of fancy in a novel threaten to overwhelm its characters with the single, archly literary voice of an author. According to Hale, the “constitutive sociality of the novel’s representational project has always put it in tension with the formal control and effects that would most often call forth praise of its beauty” (817). The more a novel achieves something like formal control over its polyphony of perspectives the less it sounds like a novel.

Yet Smith thinks that a novel’s unique authorial insights should provide a *cantus firmus* to that polyphony of viewpoints. In Smith’s words, style “is a writer’s way of telling the truth,” and the uniqueness of an author’s style is vital to a novel’s capacity to provide revelations like the works of art in *On Beauty*. Hale considers the aphoristic sentences in *On Beauty* in order to point out just how imbedded even these allegedly “beautiful” moments in the novel are in fact laden with the problems of social positions—many of them are in fact observations about the nature of social groups. For instance, when Zora interrupts her mother sitting on the backdoor’s threshold, Smith writes, “The older we get the more our kids seem to want us to walk in a very straight line with our arms pinned to our sides, our faces cast with the neutral expression of mannequins, not looking to the left, not looking to the right” (194). This nugget of wisdom about teenagers and parenting is rendered through free indirect discourse. The perspectival uncertainty leaves in question whose these observations are (Smith’s, the narrator’s, Kiki’s?), and their tendency to associate wisdom with social stereotypes—in this case teenagers—further complicates what such moments actually mean. Hale argues that Smith’s novel thereby enacts the genre’s relationship to beauty—turning it into a question to probe and ponder rather than a moving experience.

Another example is how Howard “just did not believe, as his father did, that time is how you spend your love” (302). Is this a beautiful moment in the novel, aphoristically expressed because Smith authorizes the sentiment? Or is a subtle satire of working class sentimentality? Another I have already cited, “Time is not what it is but how it is felt” captures the young Zora’s feeling that the

past summer has not changed her (129). The novel explores the variable subjective differences that make legislating the beauty of such aphorisms problematic. It places them in a perspective, one that—in time—might change. In Hale’s reading of Smith, the perspectival art of the novel makes an ethical point about the nature of propositional truths:

By dramatizing the negotiation between positionality and proposition that takes place in and through a social world, *On Beauty* encourages us to question the source of aesthetic judgments and also shows how difficult it is to justify or share the personal experience of beauty. If it seems a mistake to ask, “Is *On Beauty* beautiful?” that potential error is [. . .] exactly what Smith seeks to point out through her understanding of the art of the novel as a perspectival endeavor and an ethical task. (842)

For Smith, propositional truths are always mediated by social positions within the art of the novel. What I have argued about the portrait-like symbolism of her characterization is of a piece with Smith’s use of what Hale calls “propositional truth.” Howard, however, would more likely call them discursive formations in need of interrogation. The aesthetic structure of *On Beauty* is not so many poetic and beautiful meditations, but a compilation of, in Smith’s phrase, “ways of being in the world.” Taken together they pose questions about the relationship between personal experience and theoretical judgments. As much as he is mocked, Howard’s suspicious ideology is credited by the novel’s structure and its insistence that theory comes from people and their circumstances matter. Yet the novel, unlike Howard himself, includes his experiences in that foray.

Moreover, the “ethical task” of the novel cannot be separated from Smith’s approach to characterization as represented in manners rather than interiority. Smith’s emphasis on embodied actions rather than psychological development provides the novel’s several characters with remarkable vivacity, despite how many there are. Smith betrays the value of this method to her own fiction in an analysis of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. She describes Eliot’s novel as exemplifying a “riot of subjectivity.” She is referring to the “famous Eliot effect, the narrative equivalent of surround sound. Here is the English novel at its limit, employing an unprecedented diversity of

‘central characters,’ so different from the centrifugal narratives of Austen” (*Changing My Mind*). It is easy to see this riot of subjectivity in Smith’s work. If Howard seems to dominate the narrative space, his once mentioned student Katie Armstrong more quickly wins the reader’s regard as the more eager student of Rembrandt’s paintings. While Kiki dominates her home at 83 Langham Ave, subduing muscly teenage boys by their elastic waistbands, her daughter Zora’s ambitious CV-padding tyrannizes the Wellington faculty. Levi Belsey may be a minor character, singularly drawn for the comic effects of an affluent teenager’s bravado about life on the streets, but when his tears fall they scald with their sudden tenderness. The young poet phenom Carl conveys infectious pleasure in one scene and then humiliated despair in another. Each character vies for the reader’s attention, giving the overall effect of several different lived perspectives on art, family, ethical responsibility, and the university.

It may seem strange that the slogan of *Howards End*, “Only connect!” could provide any inspiration for a novel so riddled with differences. Indeed, one must be wary of overemphasizing the disparities between Smith’s characters, for they share much in common—time together, for one thing. Beyond another exemplary tale about the perspectival nature truth, *On Beauty* typifies an aesthetic claim about the social nature of experience. In its world, perspectives are inseparable from the fields of embodied experience between specific people. When Carlene, whose function in *On Beauty* mimics Ruth Wilcox’s in *Howard’s End*, tells Kiki, “I don’t ask myself what did I live for,” but “*whom* did I live for” (176), she goes on to say, “I didn’t live for an idea or even for God – I lived because I loved *this* person.” Social interactions compose the original surface of human experience. In her essay on George Eliot, Smith claims that it was Eliot’s “contention that human experience is as powerful a force as theory or revealed fact. Experience transforms perspective, and transformations in perspective, to Eliot, constitute real changes in the world.” This way of knowing needs no justification beyond itself. It is set apart as sacred, however trivial the personal perspective

it consecrates might seem. Smith writes, “the commonplaces” that one of Eliot’s characters “thinks and speaks” “are human experience, too, and therefore sacred.” What is special about human experience, as opposed to theory or fact, is the simple fact that *this* particular person is the field through which it is processed. Changes in perspective are “real changes in the world” yet utterly singular.

When Smith writes that Eliot is “the secular laureate of revelation” (Frank Kermode has made the same point about Smith),² it is because “Eliot has replaced metaphysics with human relationships.” Smith’s own view of personal experience emerges from a similar attempt at displacing metaphysics with her own homespun truths about the nature of human relationships, which she includes in *On Beauty* as so many authorial asides. The metaphysics, however, are hard to purge and Smith has no problem calling human experience “sacred.” *On Beauty* treats it as such in order to render it, in her words, “as powerful a force as theory or revealed fact.” Indeed, this is what is so secular about the novel—its embrace of its own sacred-making logic as vital to the understanding the value of human experience as such. Neither religious truth nor rational argument justifies the novel’s value of human experience as sacred; the novel’s respect for the contingencies of character render it sacred.

² See near the end of Kermode’s “Here She Is.”

Chapter 6

Conclusion: The *Bleeding Edge* of Secular Time

What I'm really looking for ... probably won't be
anyplace any search engine can get to.
~Reg Despard in *Bleeding Edge*

A dissertation on the contemporary novel would be wise to avoid hasty conclusions. In place of them, I will finish this dissertation with one of Pynchon's repetitions. Pynchon has returned to *The Crying of Lot 49* with his two most recent novels, *Inherent Vice* (2011) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013). Both revisit his early novel's format of following a single protagonist on the search to uncover what turns out to be either an intrigue of the very rich or a spiritual mystery or neither. *Inherent Vice* returns to *The Crying of Lot 49*'s southern California, but a decade later in the Seventies. *Bleeding Edge*, his first novel to take place almost entirely in New York City, returns to the female private eye figure with Maxine Tarnow. That she seems like a repetition of Oedipa Maas is intentional—in a key scene Maxine peels out in a '59 Chevy Impala, in another she refers to her plans to attend a Tupperware party.

The repetition of these themes and figures in Pynchon's latest work further illustrates the case I have been making about how the contemporary novel narrates the values of secular time. *Bleeding Edge* explicitly addresses its sense of time in its defense of fictional stories. It portrays and then denigrates both capitalist and nationalist sources of value. In their place, it offers its own tender confidence in embodiment and the risks bodies incur. At first glance embodiment might seem irrelevant to *Bleeding Edge*, insofar as the novel takes place on the heels of the dot-com bubble, refers extensively to the internet and computer software, and makes the technological *dis*embodiment of virtual reality its most consistent motif. Moreover, it exemplifies yet again Pynchon's long held

interest in secular versions of resurrection through technological means. Yet the body in *Bleeding Edge* is no biologically isolated object that such technologies might someday replace. In fact, virtual reality becomes yet another way of understanding how stories value personal experience. Embodiment in *Bleeding Edge* is animated by creative experience and a multitude of cultural bonds, not unlike what another New Yorker, Walt Whitman, once called “the body electric.”

Such embodied electricity drives the technological innovation of DeepArcher (pronounced like “departure”) and gives the novel its title. The “bleeding edge” is a trade term for a more intense, risk-embracing step beyond what is typically called the cutting edge of technological change. “No proven use, high risk, something only early-adoption addicts feel comfortable with” (78) is how one of DeepArcher’s creators defines the industry’s use of the term. Maxine certainly seems to spend plenty of useless time in the virtual world of DeepArcher. But while she is down in its deep web of electric connections, she finds important clues, even avatars that reconnect her to now dead friends. She spots her two sons Ziggy and Otis playing in an idyllic virtual city of their own creation. DeepArcher’s virtual space is only in one sense a true “departure” from this world. In another sense, it is a place to reimagine what the “meatspace” of this world might be like, if only for the moment before hackers and, worse, the novel’s “vulture capitalists” take it over and reduce its creative possibilities.

The “bleeding edge” is just that momentary, creative surge of unmarketable risk. It represents a gap in the market’s conquest to reduce such free and even useless forms of expression to something that can be bought and sold. As this emblem of inimitable risk, technology’s bleeding edge is linked to the body’s blood. For people represent the highest risks in this novel. Maxine loses two close friends through the course of the story. While she and her husband are split up at the novel’s opening, he eventually moves back in. Though he may or may not stay, Maxine does not

deny her renewed emotional investments in the relationship. The risk both Maxine and the novel are wagering the most on, however, is the risk of raising children.

In the novel's final scene, which Michael Chabon makes much of in his perceptive review of the novel,¹ Maxine gets ready to walk her two boys to school. It is a repetition, for the novel opened with the same scene. This time, instead of walking with them to school as she always has, Maxine merely waves goodbye to them and they go off on their own for the first time. In one of Pynchon's flights of profound lyricism, the moment connects the novel's deep virtual space with its deepest value. Maxine glimpses her boys waiting for her, getting ready to go, "and of course that's when she flashes back to not so long ago down in DeepArcher, down in their virtual hometown of Zigotisopolis, both of them standing just like this, folding just this precarious light, ready to step out into their peaceable city, still safe from the spiders and bots that one day too soon will be coming for it, to claim-jump it in the name of the indexed world" (476). The lyrical lavish signals Maxine's recognition that these people are risky investments. They are bathed in "precarious light," whether it is the sun's or a computer screen's. Their innocence is yet another bleeding edge about to be swallowed up. But there are risks worth taking, more ephemeral worlds worth imagining, and children worth letting go.

Yet is not such a celebration of the novel's innocent "as if" qualities itself a childish lapse in responsibility? Is it not, in fact, stories inherent vice? As if to respond to such a charge, Pynchon tells of Maxine's friend who writes an academic journal article "which argues that irony, assumed to be a key element of urban gay humor and popular through the nineties, has now become another collateral casualty of 11 September because somehow it did not keep the tragedy from happening"

¹ Chabon, perhaps Pynchon's only rival using the novel to seriously celebrate boyhood antics, certainly wrote one of the novel's best reviews. See Chabon, near the end of the review for the role of the goodbye scene.

(335).² Her friend goes on to tell Maxine, “As if irony [...] actually brought on the events of 11 September, by keeping the country insufficiently serious—weakening its grip on ‘reality.’ So all kinds of make-believe—forget the delusional state the country’s in already—must suffer as well. Everything has to be literal now” (335). It is a reaction that has more or less been codified in literary criticism by the likes of Wendy Steiner and Amy Hungerford.³ Sincere expression, once pilloried, has supplanted ironic trickery. Pynchon, however, demurs that literal thinking is not the sign of a healthy culture. Though some critics see in this turn the rise of sincerely honest expression, he fears that unimaginative literalness is little more than a kowtowing to the status quo. A willingness to believe that the cutthroat cutting edge, not the bleeding edge, is indeed the cultural vanguard. Maxine responds to her friend’s diagnosis by telling her that Ms. Cheung, her boys’ English teacher, “has announced that there shall be no more fictional reading assignments” in the wake of the Twin Tower’s destruction (335). Fictional irony, like Socrates’ ironic methods, must be banned or it will corrupt the morally impressionable youth.

Pynchon will have none of this and asserts again and again that even the silliest stories provide a crucial locus of cultural value. Stories, in the time it takes for people to write and read them, create expressions like the Ziggy and Otis’s “peaceful city.” Virtual reality as Pynchon imagines it is not meant to transcend “meatspace” as much as provide yet another kind of story telling in which people and the contingencies of personal experience matter more than markets. While *DeepArcher* provides that alternative space, the novel has no illusions that it will last or that it can actually provide the Arcadian fields of eternal bliss. Technology, and culture more generally, are neither a damning devil nor a salvific savior in *Bleeding Edge*. In fact, as I argued in Chapter 2, Pynchon is wary of making too much of his emphasis on the novel’s possibilities. *Bleeding Edge* seems

² Throughout the novel Pynchon and his characters refer to 11 September instead of September 11th or 9/11, as if to make the point that novels need not stick the official cultural line.

³ See Steiner 18 and Hungerford’s “On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary,” 411.

to agree with the character that says, “Culture, I’m sorry, Herman Göring was right, every time you hear the word, check your sidearm. Culture attracts the worst impulses of the moneyed, it has no honor, it begs to be suburbanized and corrupted” (56). The bots and spiders ready to attack Zigotisopolis, or simply the more pedestrian norms of suburban values, are ever on the prowl.

Pynchon may not believe that culture will save the world, but he refuses to allow the novel to fall into the values of the literal, indexed world. The stories of his endlessly fertile fictions point toward another source of value. I hope that my brief reflections have shown how his allusive stories provide elusive moments, moments that give an evanescent spark to the joys of Ziggy and Otis’s peaceable city. Such a moment of peace is similar to the moment that DeLillo’s Russ Hodges thinks might “keep us safe.” Both refer to useless games that nonetheless provide irreplaceable experiences, the kinds of experience that “enter the skin more lastingly.” It is how they think of their novels. All of the novels that this dissertation has studied point toward just such a temporality—a time in which secular culture might value the irreducibility of personal experience as fundamentally sacred. And a secular culture so conceived would be truly novel indeed.

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