Performing the ‘Fiction-Writer’s Reader’: David Foster Wallace and Critical Rhetoric

by

Mitch Cunningham
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I am the author of the thesis entitled

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Abstract

Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace?

This study explores the complex notion of implied readership in Wallace’s short fiction collections by constructing a theoretical basis for discussing ‘readers’ in Wallace’s work and reception. Wallace’s self-reflexive and characteristically self-conscious relationship to his readers is well-noted within contemporary scholarship. However, the estranging extent to which this literary self-consciousness repeats, re-imagines and re-abstracts very particular (and often very Freudian) ideas about reading and criticism has received comparatively little attention to date. Accordingly, the key methodological resource that this study proposes is psychoanalytically-informed reader-response theory, especially that of Peter Brooks, which attunes the study to significant Freudian and post-Freudian anxieties in *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), *Oblivion* (2004).

The central contention of this study is that, of all the possible reading-positions suggested in Wallace’s psychoanalytically-aware metafiction and
adopted in influential interpretations of that work, certain ‘readers’ repeat. Responding to the critical rhetoric of contemporary Wallace Studies, the dissertation proposes a typology consisting of literalistic readers who identify, imaginative readers who critique, abstract readers who narrate and performative readers who negate, and locates these reading-positions at the margins of Wallace’s short fictions and essays. These four ‘readers’ are subsequently modelled as instances of transferential-neurotic (self-reflexive and repetitive) discourse. Through close attention to theme of performance in Wallace, the study investigates the ways in which Wallace’s texts perform or act-out the response of psychoanalytically-informed readers, and models this performance in terms of self-reflexivity and repetition. On this basis, the study provides a novel interpretation of Wallace’s short fiction in terms of its own estranging performances of ‘reading’ and ‘readers’.
Ask me how I am, ask me how I've been / And then stand and watch and hope and wait and with any luck/ I'll be an earthquake, and I'll clear a space here/ Where you can put pictures and silence and sleep/ And you can stop asking, 'cause you'll be / You'll be / You'll be/ Down in the centre of the earth with me

- Paul Dempsey (2001), Manmade Horse. Melbourne: Murmur
Introduction:
Performing the ‘Fiction-Writer’s Reader’

Fiction for me is a conversation for me between me and something that May Not Be Named – God, the Cosmos, the Unified Field, my own psychoanalytic cathexes, Roqoq’oqu, whomever. I do not feel even the hint of an obligation to an entity called READER – do not regard it as his favour, rather as his choice, that, duly warned, he is expended capital/time/retinal energy on what I’ve done.

(Wallace, in Max 2012: 145, sic)

This thesis is concerned with the relationship between literary works and their critical reception, and the way in which certain critical paradigms become defined through specific interactions between readers, authors, critics and texts. The thesis explores the theoretical continuities between David Foster Wallace’s work and the works of major Wallace scholars, and comments on the emergence of "David Foster Wallace Studies" as a critical paradigm. In essence, this thesis argues that David Foster Wallace’s understanding of his own work has significantly delimited the interpretive options available to contemporary Wallace scholars. To explore this claim, the thesis juxtaposes close readings of Wallace’s short fictions and close engagements with contemporary Wallace scholarship, whilst highlighting a
particular shared dimension of these texts - namely, their problematisation of the word 'reader' in relation to activities such as interpretation, criticism and, more generally, reading.

This focus on critical paradigms and their emergence situates the thesis as a form of reader-response criticism, which describes and theorises the text in relation to specific reception contexts. In *Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory*, Davis and Womack define the theoretical paradigm of reader-response criticism as consisting of three questions: "do our various responses to literary works produce the same (or similar) readings?; can literary texts genuinely enjoy as many meanings as readers are able to create?; are some readings essentially more valid and justifiable than others?" (2002). To address these questions, reader-response criticism produces "models for understanding the reading process itself", alongside "mechanisms for exploring the ways in which the construction of literary works shares in the production of meaning" (2002). A successful reader-response model reflects on particular modes of reading or 'implied readership', whilst relating these modalities to broader literary-critical paradigms. Davis and Womack moreover highlight the heterogeneity of contemporary reader-response criticism, and point to the fields of "rhetoric, structuralism, history, psychology, and feminism" as precursors for such criticism (2002). In the case of this thesis, the goal is to relate particular modes of reading in Wallace's texts to the broader paradigms of psychoanalytic literary theory and David Foster Wallace Studies.
A cornerstone mechanism for reader-response theory is the notion of an 'implied reader', which identifies specific modes of reading represented within or inferred through the literary text. In the work of Wayne C Booth, this notion correlates with that of the 'implied author', and pertains to normative discourses of reading and writing revealed in particular literary contexts:

In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value or judgment; moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical [...] The elements usually discussed under 'aesthetic distance' enter in of course; distance in time and space, differences of social class or conventions of speech or dress — these and many others serve to control our sense that we are dealing with an aesthetic object, just as the paper moons and other unrealistic stage effects of some modem drama have had an 'alienation' effect. But we must not confuse these effects with the equally important effects of personal beliefs and qualities, in author, narrator, reader, and all others in the cast of characters. (Booth 1987: 276)

The concept of the implied reader is particularly useful when considering the relationship between literary texts and their critical reception, calling our attention to the paradigmatic language used within texts (both literary and critical) to describe particular reading experiences. Wolfgang Iser contrasts the theorisation of the implied reader with a more generically empirical "history of responses" - i.e. the reported experiences of real readers, including critics (1978: 28). Drawing on psychoanalytic theories of response, Iser posits two hypothetical processes for reconstructing a non-empirical 'reader', "the first constructed from social and historical knowledge of the time, and the second extrapolated from the reader's role laid down in the text" (28).
Accordingly, the ‘implied reader’ is a form of idealisation of the competence required for a reader to sufficiently understand a given text or utterance.

As a paradigmatic field of enquiry, Wallace Studies is arguably fixated on the first of these hypothetical ‘readers’, at the expense of the second - for every textual and structural reading of Wallace's texts written today, there are at least two more readings overtly premised on the author's own historically-specific and normative critique of postmodernity. By reading this paradigm through a transferential-neurotic ‘author-reader’ model, the thesis distinguishes further between the 'ideal' (which is to say normative) reader of Wallace and the various reading-activities implied within Wallace's texts. These latter activities – which the thesis terms identification, critique, narration and negation - can be understood in both their paradigmatic aspect (i.e. their utility to historical readers of Wallace) and, as I will argue here, in their repetition and reprisal throughout Wallace's self-reflexive short fictions.

More specifically, the thesis explores these particular reader-response discourses from the perspective of psychoanalytic literary theory, and reviews iterative variations of the term 'psychoanalytic reading’ in relation to the David Foster Wallace text. This approach emphasises the constructed-ness of particular terminologies about reading, whilst locating specific continuities and variations between Wallace's works and a psychoanalytically-informed reception context. Following existing scholarship, I explore the extent to which Wallace's works posit the literary encounter as an "act of communication between one human being and another" (Wallace 1997; 144),
and examine the self-reflexive strategies which support this contention within those works. A psychoanalytic reader-response model is thus deployed to shed new light on these strategies, and their avowed concern for what this thesis terms the 'author-reader relationship'. Though Wallace's works appear to invite an infinite number of interpretations of this relationship, the recurrence of psychoanalytic reading-tropes in these works lends a degree of consistency to certain significant claims made about the Wallace 'reader' in contemporary scholarship. These claims, viewed through the concept of acting-out (transference-neurosis) in Freudian metapsychology, can help us understand the complex discourse of reading and interpretation set forth at the margins of Wallace's fictions and reception. Through the concept of transference-neurosis, detailed below, I want to investigate the complex critical ideas which underpin Wallace's conception of the author-reader relationship, highlighting the specific ways in which 'readers' are constructed in his short fictions, essays and interviews.

The study proceeds from the assumption, widely canvassed and theorised in contemporary scholarship, that the American author and essayist framed his literary project in terms of that project's 'readers', that his works "reconfigure the writer-reader relationship" as part of their response to the epistemological and ontological dilemmas posed by late postmodernity (Kelly 2010: 146). To explore these issues, the thesis investigates Wallace's short fictions, focusing on the major collections Girl with Curious Hair (1989), Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (1999) and Oblivion (2004). Responding to these texts, and their contested theorisation within the field of Wallace Studies, the
present study distinguishes between four unique reading-positions in relation to Wallace's formally-inventive and rhetorically-engaged body of work. Drawing on the terminologies of contemporary Wallace scholars, these positions are termed readers who identify, readers who critique, readers who narrate and readers who negate. The four 'readers' defined in this thesis represent four differing views on the relationship between literary criticism and psychoanalytic theory. Notably, these psychoanalytic perspectives also present variations on the idea of a literary 'cure', which is pertinent to the therapeutic and cathartic aspects of the reader-author relationship articulated within Wallace's works. My model views therapeutic catharsis in terms of specific reading outcomes - the successful identification, critique, narration or negation of textual meaning within a given literary paradigm.

However, this thesis views the recurrence of particular reader-response discourses in Wallace's work and reception as a form of 'estrange-ment-effect'. This effect is commonly understood through the Brechtian metaphor of 'breaking the fourth wall', in which the theatrical performer breaks with realist convention to acknowledge both the presence of an audience and, self-reflexively, the constructed-ness of their own performance. However, I wish to argue for a more radical form of estrangement in Wallace's writings, which acknowledges the author's engagement with and subversion of this prevailing performative model. In this reading, Wallace's repeated invocations of the 'author-reader relationship' represent a form of resistance to interpretation, which this thesis investigates through a psychoanalytically-informed reader-response model. To explain this resistance, the study traces the idea of the
transference-neurosis as performance, a textualised *acting-out* of the past as a “present-day force” (Freud 1916), drawing on major works by Paul Ricoeur (1978), Peter Brooks (1992; 1986) and Shoshanna Felman (2012) in this regard. These works represent an intersection of a wide range of literary concerns, including hermeneutic philosophy (the philosophy of interpretation and exegesis), structural narratology (the study of narrative logic and structured intentionality), and post-structural or deconstructive criticism (the critique of narrative and intentional logic). Through this novel psychoanalytic reading, I consider the case that Wallace’s texts perform or act-out their ‘readers’, through the estranging mechanisms of repetition, re-imagination and re-abstraction.

In this sense, this study remains concerned with the broader impacts of resistance and repetition in metafictional texts like Wallace’s, and with exposing the strange extent to which these ‘fictions about fiction’ engage and disrupt our own ways of thinking about ‘reading’. There is, I think, something quite estranging about this repetitious rhetoric of the ‘reader’ in Wallace, a strangeness which can arguably help illuminate the interpretive difficulties at stake in Wallace’s more challenging writings, and point the way to a more sophisticated understanding of readers, reading and interpretation within those writings. From a psychoanalytic position, repetition always discloses the presence of unconscious content. Therefore, when Wallace’s texts repeat, particularly when they repeat anxieties about psychoanalytic reading as such, it is legitimate to view these repetitions through a psychoanalytic framework. Of course, ‘repetition’ is undoubtedly one of the most over-determined terms
in classical Freudian theory, pertaining to a whole host of psychodynamic and metapsychological processes, along with the numerous interpretive discourses which attend these processes in Freud’s writings. I have restricted my use of the term to the contexts of transferential-neurotic repetition, *acting out*, though there are inevitable and productive connections to be made between this form of repetition and related modes of psychoanalytic reading. Through the language of transference-neurosis, the thesis models four major forms of repetition:

1. the repetition of particular affective and identificatory frameworks, revealed via transference;
2. the repetition of particular neurotic critiques in relation to these frameworks, revealed via transference-neurosis and related obsessional discourses;
3. the repetition of particular self-conscious attitudes towards psychoanalysis as an explanatory framework unto itself;
4. and, finally, the repetition of the transference-neurosis, revealed via the self-reflexive interpretive dialogues performed by analyst and analysand in the traditional Freudian clinic.

To distinguish between these forms of repetition, the thesis makes use of the new terms ‘re-imagine’ and ‘re-abstract’, which respectively highlight textualised examples of the transference-neurosis and overt returns to
Freudian interpretive tropes in Wallace’s works. A fourth term, ‘perform’, is also used, to describe the blurring of metapsychological and metafictional discourses in Wallace’s works as a whole. These terms denote four broad relationships between Wallace and psychoanalytic reading, and describe the complex relationship between Wallace’s works and the literary transference-neurosis. They also allow for the articulation of a psychoanalytically-informed reader response model, the foundations of which are outlined in subsequent chapters of this study.

The goal of this analysis is to develop a more detailed understanding of the so-called author-reader relationship in Wallace, by investigating the limits and vicissitudes of this idea in Wallace’s own texts. Formally, these fictions are taken to represent paradigm instances of the author’s self-reflexive concerns with readership and reception, which Wallace typically expresses in terms of the encounter between ‘texts’, ‘authors’ and, most significantly, ‘readers’. Whilst the significance of this encounter is certainly not lost on the author, or on contemporary studies thereof (See Chapter 1), its idiosyncratic presentation in Wallace’s texts remains something of a challenge for the critical interpreter of Wallace. In fact, there are points at which this rhetoric is not engaging at all, but rather estranging – in the author’s characteristically dense and hyper-referential style of storytelling, there is often little to distinguish the reader of the Wallace text from the self-reflexive ‘readers’ imagined or abstractly implied within such texts. Of course, there are bases upon which such a distinction can be made – we can distinguish, for example, between the ‘readers’ implied by Wallace’s texts and those theorised in
influential studies of the author; we might also distinguish between the idea of empirical readers (or in Wallace’s terms, “human beings”) and the hypothetical representation of such ‘readers’ within Wallace’s texts. The problem with such distinctions, as we shall see, is that they appear characteristically obscured or collapsed at key points in the author’s own rhetorically-engaged fictions.

Accordingly, the search for a Wallace ‘reader’ requires close attention to those strange points at which the Wallace text conflates the activities of readers, authors, narrators, characters and texts. In order to understand this strangeness, this study repeats the simple question: Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace? The answer, in this study, is itself a peculiar kind of repetition – repetition of ‘readers’, of rhetoric about readers, of abstract and even deconstructive performances of particular and specific author-reader relationships. Through these readings, I am interested in the ways in which Wallace’s texts repeat particular persuasive ideas about how we, the supposed ‘reader’ of Wallace, can and perhaps even should read texts. Moreover, Wallace’s self-reflexive treatment of Freudian reading-tropes raises questions about the relationship between psychoanalysis and literary theory, ostensibly challenging the legitimacy of psychoanalysis as an explanatory framework for texts. To understand and address these questions, I have investigated their precedents in psychoanalytic literary theory, whilst also highlighting the self-reflexive dimensions of psychoanalysis as an interpretive paradigm.
Through this mode of investigation, the thesis demonstrates that certain types of ‘reader’ repeat in Wallace’s texts, and that this repetition is usually marked by an estranging escalation of interpretive stakes. In describing the evolution of Wallace’s technique over time, the thesis makes reference to the author’s ‘escalation’ of particular reader-positioning strategies - for example, when examining the shift from readers who identify to readers who critique in Wallace’s early-middle period fictions. These evolutions in style tend to make visible the explicitly transferential-neurotic connotations of earlier strategies, and thus represent an escalation of the reader response model canvassed herein. Wallace’s literary treatment of ‘love’ involves this kind of escalation, as the author visibly substitutes the language of transference-neurosis in place of naive questions about the author-reader relationship; Wallace’s relationship to David Lynch is another case in point, to the extent that this relationship also discloses Wallace’s focus on ‘psychoanalytic reading’ as a form of literary communication. Escalation also connotes a raising of stakes, dramatic or conceptual, and thus helps this thesis to punctuate Wallace’s literary engagement with Freudian ideas, and to explore the story of that engagement over time.

This argument aims at extending the insights of contemporary Wallace scholarship by observing the paradigmatic connections between literary and critical performance and the concept of transference-neurosis in Wallace’s short fictions. Whilst the ubiquity of Freudian terminology and ideas in Wallace’s works has been recognised and theorised by key works within the field – particularly Marshall Boswell’s Understanding David Foster Wallace
(2003) and Mary K Holland’s essays ‘Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*’ (2006) and ‘Mediated Immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*’ (2013) – I believe that the significance of the Freudian transference, and the co-location of that significance in what we call ‘psychoanalytic literary theory’, has yet to be fully considered in Wallace’s works. Freudian theory has been used by scholars to describe the psychological ‘realism’ of Wallace’s texts, particularly in terms of characterisation and the representation of consciousness. Building on these readings, this study places a greater emphasis on the interpretive and explanatory dimensions of psychoanalytic thought, which are explored here through the self-reflexive theorisation of the author-reader relationship in psychoanalytic literary theory.

Nevertheless, these concerns can be productively theorised through close attention to the transference-neurosis, in a way which reflects and reflects upon the specific forms of psychoanalytic interpretation at stake in Wallace’s metafiction. As my extended readings of Wallace Studies and psychoanalytic literary criticism in Chapters 1 and 2 indicate, the transference-neurosis can provide us with a substantial heuristic and theoretical model for talking about the ‘reader’ in contemporary Wallace Studies, especially in relation to ideas like empathy (or literary “love”), suspicious hermeneutics (or “Theory”, as theorised by Adam Kelly [2010] and Clare Hayes-Brady [2010; 2013]) and the ‘implied author’ of Wallace’s texts (the strange figure of the author “himself”, as theorised by critics such as Toon Staes [2014] and Mike Miley [2016]). This analysis demonstrates that when Wallace writes about the
author-reader relationship, he more often than not broaches the subject of performance, and that when he does, he frames this latter subject in a decidedly transferential-neurotic way. The result, for this critic at least, is estranging. In the chapters that follow, I’d like to draw out this estrangement across four “levels” – the literal, the imagined, the abstract and the performative – which correlate with the four types of ‘reader’ established here and in subsequent chapters. Through this modelling, this study provides an effective reading of acing-out in Wallace’s challenging metafiction, whilst considering that term’s strange definition and re-definitions within 20th-century psychoanalytic criticism.

Nevertheless, the intriguing thing about Wallace’s metafiction is that it self-reflexively anticipates this kind of investigation, providing visible attempts at a psychoanalytically-aware account of its own escalatory anxieties. A compelling example of this anticipation occurs towards the end of Wallace’s short essay ‘Greatly Exaggerated’, when he offers his summary thoughts on D.L. Hix’s Morte D’Author: An Autopsy and Roland Barthes’ ‘death of the author’ thesis:

It’s finally hard for me to tell predict just whom, besides professional critics and hardcore theory-weenies, 226 dense pages on whether the author lives is really going to interest. For those of us civilians who know in our gut that fiction is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane (Wallace 1997: 144, emphasis mine)

I repeat and return to this claim – the characteristic idea of fiction as “an act of communication between one human being and another” – throughout this thesis, because I think it exemplifies the rhetorical and critical uncertainties
at stake in Wallace's literary project as a whole. However, the thesis argues that the repetition of this claim, the return to the idea of “communication” between “human beings”, needs some working-through if it is to serve as an adequate accounting of Wallace's significance for new readers and new audiences. By considering this rhetoric, and its impact on our own critical rhetorics about Wallace and his fiction, the study provides a new basis for thinking and talking about the Wallace ‘reader’, and for examining those instances in Wallace's fiction and reception where the role of this ‘reader’ can appear most uncertain or paradoxical.

As we shall soon find, there is nothing simple about repetition in Wallace, nor indeed about the ‘readers’ or ‘readings’ which proliferate and compound upon one another in his works. In fact, I think that close attention to the dynamics of reading and repetition can yield vital insights into the uniquely psychological strangeness of the David Foster Wallace text, particularly when it comes to questions about interpretation in the wake of postmodernity. Like the scholars canvassed and conversed with in this study, I believe that Wallace's texts do achieve something like an “act of communication” with their reader; by charting the extent to which this kind of rhetoric repeats in Wallace, the present study reflects on the literalistic, imaginative, abstract and performative bases for this kind of claim. However, this study builds on existing research because it theorises the estranging dimensions of this rhetoric, by taking into account the extent to which Wallace’s short fictions repeat, re-imagine and re-abstract their ‘reader’. If Wallace's texts do provide an effective discourse on how they are to be read,
it is nevertheless important to observe how this discourse premises itself on repetition, and to consider the impacts of the repetition on paradigmatic criticism of the author and his works.

This introduction repeats, introducing the author twice – first, through a specific and strange interview with the *Boston Globe*’s Matthew Gilbert, and second, through the idea of the ‘fiction writer’ in Wallace’s seminal short story ‘Octet’ (1999). The purpose of this introduction is to establish the broad idea that Wallace is an author concerned with the idea of fiction as “an act of communication between one human being and another” (1997: 144). By revisiting this concern, whilst also questioning the *acting-out* of empirical and hypothetical ‘readers’ in Wallace’s metafiction, we are thus poised to discover a rhetoric which is at once literal, imaginative, abstract and performative, when it comes to the simple enough question of *how that rhetoric is or is ‘supposed to be’ interpreted*. Who, then, is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace? Who are we in relation to this ‘reader’, especially given the proliferation of ‘readers’ in virtually every aspect of Wallace’s literary project? To answer these questions, we need to understand how Wallace’s fiction supposes or simply poses and positions its ‘readers’. I believe that Wallace’s shorter writings provide an effective field of enquiry for answering these kinds of questions, whilst remaining beholden to the constraints of the traditional dissertation format. I want to share with you my estrangement with and from Wallace’s fictions, by observing the various forms of estrangement which those fictions suggest, and investigating the (almost)
unlimited amount of author-readers relationships that get spoken about within such contexts.

But first, another not-so-simple question: who is David Foster Wallace?

“first a pre-response and then a gaggle of responses”:

Four Rhetorics of the ‘Reader’ in Wallace

In an interview with Matthew Gilbert in 1997, Wallace is asked a simple enough question – having lived a year inside the “American hype machine”, following the publication of his watershed novel Infinite Jest, how does he “feel” (77)? “Do you want a univocal answer?” asks Wallace in return, “Because I can pretend as if I feel one way about it. But, of course, the reality is that at last count I feel about fifty-three different ways” (77). As a compromise – and for the sake of “journalistic concision” – Gilbert allows Wallace to answer the same question four times, getting four distinct responses. These responses are worth repeating in full, because they exemplify the kinds of rhetorical positions investigated in this study, and the specific sense of estrangement that attends such positioning. The first reads thus:

– Feeling No. 1, edited down: “I think the book is the best thing I’ve ever done, and I’m proud of it, and it was an extremely pleasant surprise to have it get a lot of attention, and some of that is absolutely great” (77)

Plain-spoken, yet “extremely” and “absolutely” enthusiastic about Jest and its reception, this rhetoric sees Wallace in the familiar position of literalistic interlocutor – an author who first and foremost a human being, both
responsible for and “proud of” his own literary utterance, and the kinds of “attention” those utterances receive from other readers. This kind of rhetoric suggests an un-ornamented appeal to the reader’s empathy, their attentive identification with the author’s own explicit statements of ownership and intention. Accordingly, I use the term 'literal' to describe non-figurative discourse in relation to Wallace’s work - specifically, discourses which nominate an extrinsic or 'real-world' referent for the Wallace text. This usage follows in part from Hayes-Brady, who identifies "the recurrence of literalised or embodied problems" in Wallace’s works, which are "part of a process of investigation: Wallace presents a hypothesis in narrative or structural form, testing the literalised hypothetical product to retrospectively postulate causality" (2016: 12-13). In other words, literal reading involves the claim that the Wallace text ‘is about’ one subject or another - for example, the claim that Wallace's fictions literally refer to certain kinds of reader-author relationship. In a psychoanalytic idiom, these claims can also evoke what Shoshanna Felman calls 'vulgar' psychoanalytic reading, the "literalisation of textual sexuality" (1978: 108). As I suggest in Chapter 3, Wallace's literalistic concerns for the 'reader' are often accompanied by overtly sexualised and erotic hypotheses about reading.

This rhetoric is somewhat ambivalent, however, equivocating on how “great” our attention might be. We see this ambivalence translated into Wallace’s second “Feeling” about his literary fame:

– Feeling, No 2: “I’m also someone who has problems with self-consciousness. There’s a part of me that craves attention, but
it’s an increasingly small part. I’ve seen attention [mess up] writers I admire. I’m leery of it, and a great deal of the hype occurred at a time when rudimentary arithmetic yields the result that most people haven’t read the book. So it’s hard to take it seriously at the same time that it’s gratifying” (77, sic)

This second rhetoric reads like a reversal or rejoinder to the first – perhaps cynically, Wallace suggests that many of his most vocal proponents had not even read his works by the time those works became well-known. In other words, Wallace appears suspicious of his “attention”, quietly imagining that attention as a kind of pretence or façade. But this sense of suspicion is also directed inwards, towards the author's own craving for attention and “problems with self-consciousness”. Notably, Wallace doesn’t even mention the reader in his first rhetoric, but by the time he does, we are already engaged with a sense of ambivalent “self-consciousness”, in which the idea of literary attention is both “gratifying” (or “absolutely great”) and, in the final estimation, “hard to take seriously”. I use the term 'imaginative' to describe figurative (i.e. non-literal) discourse in relation to Wallace's works, specifically as it relates to classical psychoanalytic interpretation - that is, to the construction and testing of analytic hypotheses in the Freudian clinic. This discourse remains connected to the literalistic technique established in Wallace's early works, insofar as it involves "perspective and values, negotiated between speakers" (Holland 2013: 119), whilst placing an increased focus on the critical activity of readers in relation to the Wallace text. The anticipation of psychoanalytic critique in Wallace is an example of imaginative discourse par excellence, to the extent that Wallace re-imagines particular forms of psychoanalytic reading, and presents these forms as a
matter of characterological and narratological significance. The term should be distinguished from the Lacanian term 'Imaginary', which designates pre-verbal or prototypical ontologies drawn from the subject's early childhood - while such ontologies are no doubt in play at the literal level, they are at this stage superseded by the symbolic (or Symbolic) questions raised in the classical psychoanalytic dialogue, and the mutual re-imagination of that dialogue which takes place under the sign of transference-neurosis.

Between these two responses, then, we have encountered a certain kind of rhetorical antagonism – moving from a sense of literal communication to one of self-conscious imagination, Wallace’s rhetoric provides us with at least two conflicted senses of the ‘author’ in relation to his ‘reader’. Gilbert’s article also highlights this tension, when he describes Wallace “qualifying his statements and simultaneously conducting a review of his interviewer’s interviewing style, which he calls ‘psychiatric’” (77). Wallace, seemingly caught between two variations of the same respondent – what this study would call a reader who identifies and a reader who critiques – keeps alerting us to how he is being read, or indeed whether he is being read at all. Following our own rhetorical scheme, we might expect to see this dilemma complexified further in the answers to follow (this is indeed the case). But in Wallace’s own choice of words, we can already detect a certain essential tension, which is not so much ambiguous as it is antagonistic, resistant to straightforward interpretation. As I will proceed to show, this self-reflexive antagonism is most evident in, and in fact a crucial component of, the author’s conflicted rhetorics
of fame, reading and literary critique. But the lure is there – Wallace, repeating himself, appears to be repeating 'readers' as well.

At this point in the interview (or rather, at this point in the same question), Wallace's responses expand dramatically in scope, reframing certain interpretive encounters – in this case, both the interview and the reception of Jest – through additional layers of self-conscious rhetoric. In this third response, Wallace ends up recounting the experience of his own first interview, in a way that reflects back on the encounter at hand:

-Feeling No. 3: “I had never been interviewed before. In the first interview I did, I was talking about old girlfriends and who I didn’t like. And the guy shut off the tape recorder halfway through and said ‘I need to explain a few things to you.’ He put a couple of embarrassing things in his story, but 90 percent of the horrible stuff he didn’t put in out of his own decency. So big feeling number three: This” – his finger points back and forth between us – “is hard” (77).

This mini-narrative, of a curated interview with a younger (and from the sounds of it, nastier) version of David Foster Wallace himself, recontextualises the scene at hand, as helpfully indicated by the author's exuberant hand gestures – consider for a second the movements implied by a finger pointing “back and forth”. These gestures (rhetorical and actual) present a curiously abstract version of the preceding responses. On the one hand, this rhetoric imagines a narrative of interruption, of an interviewer critically intervening to “explain a few things”, and intervening again to keep out “90 percent of the horrible stuff” said by Wallace. On the other hand, this rhetoric enthusiastically refers back (through the recounted gesture) to the literality of the interview “at hand”. Accordingly, the term 'abstract' is used in this thesis
to distinguish further between literalistic and imaginative approaches in Wallace's texts, and to qualify the use of the term 'narration' in relation to specific critical paradigms. For our purposes, 'abstracted' or 're-abstracted' discourse will involve the use of psychoanalysis as an explanatory discourse - the most notable evidence of this discourse in Wallace comes from his relationship to American director David Lynch, and the indisputably Freudian reading of the director's work provided in the essay 'David Lynch Keeps his Head' (1997). Likewise, abstract narration is shown to occur in the contexts of Wallace Studies, specifically with regard to the relationship between readers, authors and texts. It is at this level of discourse that the role of psychologically-informed literary criticism, and psychoanalytic criticism in particular, become clear.

Nevertheless, it also appears that we are dealing with another kind of rhetoric here, a fourth mode of response which alerts us to a further range of autobiographical and editorial stakes. At the level of abstraction, Wallace appears to be translating some of the essential conflicts between the literal and the imagined in his previous responses. So it is no surprise to find these conflicts repeated in Wallace's final response to literary fame:

—Feeling No. 4: “Exquisite irony, because a lot of the book is about hype and spin and position. So it’s really an enormous cosmic joke. It’s like, OK kid, you want to learn a little bit about hype? Have a taste from the big boy’s drinking fountain. And not a big gulp, because I’m well aware of where books exist in the consciousness of the culture. I thought I was very sophisticated and had learned a lot about hype from TV. But it’s entirely different. The cliché that getting a lot of attention is not the same as getting a lot of affection takes on new dimensions when you learn it through experience.” (77)
In this final rhetorical turn, Wallace highlights the strangely self-referential nature of his whole experience with literary fame, describing it as a symptom of *Infinite Jest*’s own games with “hype and spin and position”. Wallace describes this as drinking from the “big boy’s drinking fountain” – though, he immediately equivocates, he knows exactly “where books exist in the consciousness of the culture”. Despite (or perhaps because of) this self-awareness, Wallace finally expresses his experience in the form of an ambivalent “cliché” – in his words, the idea that “getting a lot of attention is not the same as getting a lot of affection”. This cliché effectively brings us full circle, in the sense that it repeats all of the preceding responses in the form of intertextual reference, equivocation and abstracted self-narration. In fact, this entanglement reads like a kind of short-circuit of the preceding responses, a strangely compelling rhetoric of “experience”, “Exquisite irony” and “the consciousness of the culture” in one.

In other words, Wallace’s four-fold response to the question of literary fame contains a kind of performative escalation, a distinct and visible movement through layers of critical and rhetorical uncertainty. As I will argue here, this kind of performance ultimately gestures in two directions – outwards, towards the literal readers of an imagined or ‘implied author’ (Staes, 2014), and inwards, towards the imagined, abstracted and implied ‘readers’ suggested within Wallace’s texts. So in less than 350 words (though no less than four responses), Wallace has managed to traverse a complex and involved discourse on how his texts are to be read, a discourse which appears to depend on a particularly anxious escalation of stakes – referring at once to
the literality of reading, the imagination of readers, the abstraction or implication of ‘readers’ and, at the extreme, the performative uncertainty of the ‘reader’ as an organising concept. The term 'performative' is used in this thesis to describe the self-reflexive enactment of particular author-reader relationships within metafiction. On this reading, a metafictional text anticipates various interpretations of its own contents, and reproduces or 'performs' these readings at the level of text. However, these performances arguably take on new significance under the transferential-neurotic model. The estranging repetition of specific psychoanalytic reading-tropes, coupled with the performative complexity and self-referentiality which has defined Wallace’s work to date, demands closer attention to the dynamics of acting-out, which arguably shape Wallace’s own views on literary dialogue as an "act of communication" between author and reader. Building on prior readings of Freud in Wallace, the term ‘performance’ thus highlights the extent to which author-, character- and reader-focused criticism depends on the recognition of particular psychoanalytic tropes, most notably in relation to the transference-neurosis and related metapsychological ideas.

All of this brings us back to our central question: Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace? This question is significant because it challenges the insistence of Wallace’s own rhetorics on reading and interpretation, in a manner which investigates the various kinds of reader-identity or interpretive agency at stake therein. In the chapters that follow, I thus provide an effective heuristic typology for understanding Wallace’s rhetoric of the ‘reader’, which can help shed light in our own use of the term in Wallace scholarship. Whilst
this typology highlights four unique and recurring types, it does not claim to exhaust the possibilities of Wallace’s discourses on reading – as Wallace suggested to Gilbert, there could be as many as fifty-three different ways to approach the problem, or perhaps the possibilities are as indefinite and infinite as those suggested in Wallace’s own fictions. But while there may be a near-infinite number of referents for the term ‘reader’ in Wallace’s texts, it remains entirely fair to say that some references repeat, in ways which illuminate and impact upon our understanding of the term in relation to Wallace’s works.

Given the viability of our model, its extensions within contemporary Wallace Studies and psychoanalytic literary theory (See Chapters 1-2), and the productive application of this model to all major phases of the author’s literary career (See Chapters 3-6), the thesis makes a case for at least four Wallace ‘readers’. By providing a substantive account of these ‘readers’, their role, and their repetition, the study thus investigates the curious and complex relationship between critical rhetoric and the fictions of David Foster Wallace. Wallace’s texts famously question the idea of literature as an "act of communication" (1997), and pursue elaborate definitions of the term 'act' in a postmodern literary context. This approach is often viewed by scholars as a creative synthesis of Wittgensteinean linguistics and JL Austin’s speech act theory (Boswell, 2003; Burgess, 2014) - in this sense, Wallace’s texts are thought to devise normative language-games through the proliferation of performative and constative speech acts, while of course problematising the conditions under which such utterances take place. This model is explored
thoroughly in Chapter 1, and taken to define the essential self-reflexivity of Wallace's literary project. The thesis augments this self-reflexive speech act model through a specialised focus on psychoanalytic reader-response theories, within which the idea of a literary-critical 'act' is fraught with transferential-neurotic connotations. The term acting-out is used to contrast instances of transferential-neurotic discourse with the more generically self-reflexive speech acts canvassed in Wallace's texts; a full elaboration of this model is provided in Chapter 2. However, an illustrative example of this strategy occurs in Wallace's short story 'Octet', which already contains at least one metalanguage about how it is supposed to be read. In highlighting the psychoanalytic theme of acting-out, we can thus gain a fuller (albeit stranger) sense of David Foster Wallace the author, the metafictionalist implicated in a whole a range of post-theoretical and transferential-neurotic schemes.

“an act of communication” and acting-out:

Transference-Neurosis and Reader-Response

In the essay ‘Greatly Exaggerated’, David Foster Wallace famously refers to “those of us civilians who know in our gut that fiction is an act of communication between one human being and another” (1997: 144). This kind of common-sense, plain-language appeal to the ‘reality’ of fiction is one of the hallmark characteristics of Wallace’s broader literary project, particularly when considered against the more hyper-real parameters of that project. Despite this appeal’s tongue-in-cheek placement – within an essay about the
‘Death of the Author’, no less – there is something almost over-familiar in Wallace’s references to “us civilians”, to communication “between one human being and another”, to knowing “in our gut” what fiction is and should be. We are dealing, after all, with an author who saw postmodernity as a sort of moral and communicative dead-end, “a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law” (1997: 81-82), and who took every opportunity to remind his readers of this diagnosis, particularly in his more overtly ‘metafictional’ works like ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’ (1989), ‘Octet’ (1999) and ‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’ (2004).

Meanwhile, in more psychoanalytically-inclined texts such as ‘Here and There’ (1989), ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’ (1997) and ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’ (2004), the question of artistic and literal performance arguably becomes a question of tremendous psychological import: nowhere is this better exemplified than in Wallace’s enthusiastic appreciation of David Lynch, which appears to be an index for his appreciation for Freudian indices, the “anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally arrested, borderlinish parts of the director’s psyche presented with very little inhibition or semiotic layering” (Wallace 1997: 166). Arguably, Wallace’s more abstract theories of “Expressionistic” cinema bear a striking similarity to the theories imagined and abstracted in his own works. The Lynchian ambit of Wallace’s fiction is certainly apparent in his seminal late work ‘Oblivion’, which arguably seethes with transferential themes and neurotic discourse (See Chapters 5-6). However, whilst we have suggested a correlation between Wallace’s works and psychoanalytic interpretive themes, and located this correlation somewhere
within Wallace's fraught discourse on the author-reader relationship, we have yet to properly define the meaning of 'transference', 'transference-neurosis' and *acting-out* in a properly psychoanalytic sense. By establishing these concepts here, we can begin to see the ways in which a psychoanalytic literary perspective addresses the literalistic, imaginative, abstract and performative tensions suggested in Wallace's discourse of the 'reader', and consider the author's uniquely metafictional relationship to Freudian themes and tropes.

Laplanche and Pontalis define psychoanalytic transference as "a process of actualisation of unconscious wishes", typically occurring in the context of the analytic situation (1973: 454). The transference "uses specific objects and operates in the framework of a specific relationship with these objects" (454) - in a more general sense, it involves the expression of a particular, unconsciously-determined relationship between the analysand in treatment and the 'object' of the analyst. Through the transference, "infantile prototypes re-emerge and are experienced with a strong sense of immediacy" (454) - under the conditions of transference, the analysand thus attributes particular, prototypical qualities onto the analyst, whilst experiencing their relationship to the analyst as an immediate, manifestly present-tense phenomenon. While the transference is classified as a form of resistance to the psychoanalytic work, it is also characterised as the principal dynamic of the psychoanalytic 'talking-cure', the "terrain on which all the basic problems of psychoanalysis play themselves out" - in classical metapsychology, "the establishment, modalities, interpretation and resolution of the transference are in fact what define the cure" (454). The transference can thus be described
as a relationship in which certain forms of reading and reader-construction play out. But how do these relationships come to be expressed through discourse, particularly literary discourse? And how do response-oriented terms like ‘identification’, ‘critique’, ‘narration’ and ‘negation’ find expression within this discourse?

To answer these questions, it is helpful to situate the transferential discourse of the analysand – which can itself take on many guises – as a form of self-reflexive response to psychoanalytic interpretive technique. In defining the transference as a clinical phenomenon, Laplanche and Pontalis make the following crucial distinction between the empirical experience of the analysand (their historical past or life history) and the hypothetical and discursive nature of their relationship to the analyst:

when Freud speaks of the transference repetition of past experiences, of attitudes towards parents etc., this repetition should not be understood in the literal sense of that restricts such actualisation to really lived relationships. For one thing, what is transferred, essentially, is psychical reality - that is to say, at the deepest level, unconscious wishes and the phantasies associated with them. And further, manifestations of transference are not verbatim repetitions but rather symbolic equivalents of what is being transferred. (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973: 459)

In other words, the transferential relationships enacted in the Freudian clinic are built on a kind of symbolic equivalence between “really lived relationships” and a constructed psychical reality, which expresses “unconscious wishes and the fantasies associated with them”. This latter, hypothetical reality is akin to the discourse of an obsessional neurotic, insofar as it represents a sort of self-
reflexive of the analysand’s experience within the clinic. In the *Introductory Lectures*, Freud defines obsessional neurosis thus:

Obsessional neurosis is shown in the patient’s being occupied with thoughts in which he is in fact not interested, in his being aware of impulses in himself which appear very strange to him and his being led to actions the performance of which give him no enjoyment, but which it is quite impossible for him to omit. The thoughts (obsessions) may be senseless in themselves, or merely a matter of indifference to the subject; often they are completely silly, and invariably they are the starting point of a strenuous mental activity, which exhausts the patient and to which he only surrenders himself most unwillingly. (Freud 1966: 320-321)

“Certainly,” Freud goes on to say, “this is a crazy illness” (321). For Laplanche and Pontalis, obsessional neurosis is "expressed through symptoms which are described as compulsive-obsessive ideas - obsessive ideas, compulsions towards undesirable acts, struggles against these thoughts and tendencies, exorcistic rituals etc. - and through a mode of thinking which is characterised in particular by rumination, doubt and scruples, and which leads to inhibitions of thought or action’ (1973: 280). The difficulty of the obsessional neurotic, it seems, is their inability to relate their delusional frameworks to the task of analysis; whilst vigorously recounting their experiences of compulsive and obsessional acts, the neurotic is held back by resistance insofar as they neglect to answer to the transferential dynamics of their treatment.

In Freud's "theory of the talking cure"), the transference-neurosis "refers to an artificial neurosis into which the manifestations of the transference tend to become organised" (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973: 461). This follows from Freud's earlier classification of the transference neurosis,
"characterised by the libido's always being displaced on to real or imaginary objects", as opposed to the patient's ego. (461). In the context of metapsychology, however, the transference-neurosis is structured such that "the whole of the patient's pathological behaviour comes to be re-orientated around his relationship with the analyst" (462), a process which "coordinates formerly disparate transference reactions" and "allows the whole of the symptoms and pathological behaviour of the patient to take on a new function by becoming related to the analytic situation" (462). The transference-neurosis is thus expressed through the analysand's self-conscious relationship towards the analytic situation itself, a situation which is masked by the immediacy of the transference for both the analysand and their discourse.

In Freud, the term 'acting out' designates a wide range of verbal behaviours, through which the transference-neurosis is both expressed during the course of the psychoanalytic treatment. In The Introductory Lectures, Freud distinguishes acting out and the "intellectual resistance" exhibited by obsessional neurotics (1966: 358), on the basis that the transferential-neurotic "knows how to put up resistances, without going outside the framework of the analysis" (359). By contrast, the obsessional-neurotic "fights by means of arguments and exploits all the difficulties and improbabilities which normal but uninstructed thinking finds in the theory of analysis" (258); "he is quite ready to become an adherent of psycho-analysis - on the condition that it spares him personally" (358). By situating their discourse within and in relation to the psychoanalytic dialogue, the transferential-neurotic enjoys no
such distance from their experience – as a result, the descriptive and
behavioural arc of transference-neuroses is more extreme:

From the descriptive point of view, the range of actions
ordinarily classified as acting out is very wide. At one pole are
violent, aggressive and criminal acts - murder, suicide, sexual
assault, etc - where the subject is deemed to proceed from an
idea or tendency to the corresponding act [...] at the other
extreme we find much more subdued forms - although the
impulsive aspect must still be evident: the act is ill-motivated
in the subject's own eyes, constituting a radical departure from
his usual behaviour even if he rationalises it after the fact.

As Freud writes, "We must be prepared to find, therefore, that the patient
yields to the compulsion to repeat, which now replaces the compulsion to
remember, not only in his personal attitude to his doctor but also in every
activity and relationship which may occupy his life at the time"(1914: 149). By
acting out, the analysand "repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under
the condition of resistance" (149). Nevertheless, it is within this complex
sphere of repetition, in which the verbal and actual behaviours of the
analysand are fraught with transferential-neurotic significance, that the self-
reflexivity of the classical Freudian dialogue arguably becomes clear. Under
the conditions of transference, the analysand is given to overt repetitions of
their empirical past, via their hypothetical relationships with the analyst.
However dissociative and dysphoric those relationships may appear to be,
they remain part of the “terrain” of psychoanalysis, and inform "the
establishment, modalities, interpretation and resolution of the transference",
which is the verbal and material “cure” promised by Freud’s classical method
Chapters 1 and 2 establish two interconnected models for reading Wallace. The first model is inductively derived from major Wallace scholarship, and highlights the self-reflexive nature of Wallace's relationship to the reader - it is from this model that the critical terms 'identification', 'critique', 'narration' and 'negation' are derived in relation to Wallace's texts. The second model augments the first, introducing psychoanalytic correlates for the critical terms used in Wallace scholarship - by problematising these terminologies as a form of transferential-neurotic discourse, an acting-out, the thesis investigates the metafictional and metapsychological dimensions of Wallace's fiction, whilst responding to major readings of that fiction in contemporary scholarship. In the chapters that follow, this narrative of the transference-neurosis and its resolution – which is in effect a self-reflexive narrative of the psychoanalytic dialogue as such – will be explored in relation to key themes in Wallace's work and reception. These themes correlate closely with the reader-response models suggested above – identification, critique, narration and negation – whilst infusing each of these terms with a more concrete psychoanalytic significance. This study uses 'performance' as a cognate for acting out, to help indicate the theatrical, dramaturgical and metafictional margins of my enquiry into Wallace's short fictions. The key focus of this study, however, is to establish the psychoanalytically-informed nature of these fictions, and the various means by which Wallace translates transference-neurosis into literary performance. When I say that Wallace's texts 'perform their reader', I mean four things - they solicit that reader's identification in a particular empathetic or moralistic framework; they
provide obsessional corrections and re-interpretations of those frameworks; they posit new mediations of those frameworks in relation to the reader; and, finally, they enclose all of the above dynamics in the language of transference-neurosis, a language which is predicated on the subject's self-conscious relationship to analysis and interpretation.

In classical psychoanalysis, *identification* refers to a "psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model that the other provides" (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973: 204). Identification is related to a variety of psychological concepts including "imitation, Einfühlung (empathy), sympathy, mental contagion, projection, etc" (205), but is distinguished by its structural significance for psychoanalytic theory as a whole.

"It has been suggested for the sake of clarity that a distinction be drawn within this field, according to the direction in which the identification operates, between an identification that is heteropathic (Schleler) and centripetal (Wallon), where the subject identifies his own self with the other, and an idiopathic and centrifugal variety, where the subject identifies the other with himself. Finally, in cases where both these tendencies are present at once, we are said to be dealing with a more complex form of communication, one which is sometimes invoked to account for the constitution of a 'we'." (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973: 206)

As a theoretical precursor to Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex, and his general theorisation of the psychical apparatus and its development, identification is viewed as "the operation itself whereby the human being is constituted" (205). Under the conditions of transference, the analysand’s prototypical identifications with others (parents, siblings, authority figures et al) are expressed in the form of a present-day relationship with the analyst.
Through this repetition, the subject assimilates aspects of the other’s personality (real or imagined) into pre-existing and prototypical frameworks of identification. Chapter 3 considers the relationship between empathetic and erotic forms of reading in relation to Wallace, grouped under the category of *readers who identify*. The chapter considers how empathetic identification, a theme defined throughout Wallace’s work and reception, lends itself to a form of psychoanalytic reading which Peter Brooks calls "textual erotics" (1986: 8). Following this model, to read Wallace empathetically is to engage with eroticised ideas about the author-reader relationship, and to view the text as a site of interplay between and identification with these ideas.

Meanwhile, psychoanalytic critique is premised on the recovery of unconscious materials - wishes, desires, memories and so forth - from these materials' distorted expression within the analytic situation. The prototypical form of such critique is Freudian dream-work - "that of examining and tracing the relations between the latent dream-thoughts and the manifest dream-content, and the process by which the latter has grown out of the former" (Freud 1901: 169). In this sense, psychoanalytic critique is a form of exposure, a translation of idiomatic expression into new and constructive discourse. Under the conditions of transference, the analyst’s work consists "in replacing [the analysand’s] ordinary neurosis by a ‘transference-neurosis’, of which he can be cured by the therapeutic work" (Freud 1914: 153). This emphasis on recovery and reconstruction, and the distinction between ‘latent’ and ‘manifest’ contents reinforced thereby, places classical psychoanalysis alongside many of the emancipatory social discourses of the 20th century -
Paul Ricoeur writes that "the distinguishing characteristic of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche is the general hypothesis concerning both the process of false consciousness and its deciphering" (1978: 34). Similarly, Freud writes:

"The delusions of patients appear to me to be the equivalents of the constructions which we build up in analytic treatment - attempts at explanations and cure [...] Just as our construction is only effective because it recovers a fragment of lost experience, so the delusion owes its convincing power to the element of historic truth which it inserts in the place of the rejected reality" (Freud 1938: 386)

Chapter 4 considers the relationship between critical and diagnostic forms of reading in relation to Wallace, grouped under the category of readers who critique. The chapter considers how theoretically-informed critiques of Wallace, such as psychoanalytic criticism, must contend with the overt critiques of "Theory" dramatised throughout Wallace's works. To read Wallace critically, in this sense, is to diagnose particular aspects of Wallace's texts from a pre-defined theoretical position, whilst accounting for the anticipation of such a position within those texts.

For literary theorists such as Peter Brooks, psychoanalysis is "a primarily narrative art, concerned with the recovery of the past through the dynamics of memory and desire" (1992: xiv). In Brooks' narratological model, Freudian concepts such as identification and critique are used to understand the dynamic structure of texts, specifically in relation to the interpretive faculties of the reader. Through this model, Brooks explores "that which moves us forward as readers of the narrative text" (35), presenting a form of psychoanalytic reading which "promises, and requires, that in addition to such usual narratological preoccupations as function, sequence, and paradigm, we
engage the dynamic of memory and the history of desire as they work to shape the recovery of meaning within time” (36). For Brooks, the psychoanalytic modelling of transference offers a dynamic model for understanding the author-reader relationship:

When, as analysand or text, you call for interpretation from the analyst/reader, you put yourself into the transference. Through the rethinkings, reorderings, reinterpretations of the reading process, the analyst/reader 'intervenes' in the text, and these interventions must also be subject to his suspicious attention. A transferential model thus allows us to take as the object of analysis, not author or reader, but reading, including of course the transferential-interpretive operations that belong to reading (Brooks 1986: 14).

Brooks' model is discussed further in Chapter 2, but can be defined here as a counter-transferential reader-response theory, which models the reading process in terms of transference-related themes and concepts. Accordingly, Brooks' model also applies Freud's theorisation of the analytic situation to the paradigm-building activities of the literary critic. "If narrative indeed has to do with the recovery of the past," he writes, "and more generally with the attempted rescue of meaning from passing time, the psychoanalytic model of remembering is invaluable since it reaches out to include repeating, working-through and reconstruction" (1992: 321).

By incorporating these textual and critical dynamics, Brooks' model, and its self-reflexive extensions in Wallace's works, this study suggest new ways of engaging with the 'author-reader relationship' in contemporary criticism. Chapter 5 considers the relationship between author-centred and symptomatic reading in relation to Wallace, grouped under the category of readers who narrate. The chapter considers the extent to which Wallace
defines the 'author' in psychoanalytic terms, and the way in which this definition mediates certain tensions between identification- and critique-oriented forms of reading. Following this model, authorial intention is partially derived through a mediation of the text's erotic and diagnostic dimensions - positively, through the text's identification of particular reader-author relationships, and negatively, through the text's critique or subversion of those relationships. Chapters 5 and 6 of the thesis connect Wallace's discourse on the author-reader relationship to the films of David Lynch. Lacanian critic Todd McGowan describes Lynch's cinematic approach as one which "breaks down the distance between spectator and screen" (2007: 2), self-reflexively exposing the relationships between fantasy and desire which inform the spectator's cinematic experience. In Wallace's essay on Lynch, these relationships are explored through a discourse on authorial "Expressionism", which arguably elides the role of the implied spectator in relation to Lynch's films. However, the return to Lynchian reading-tropes in Wallace's Oblivion suggests a more sophisticated treatment of the author-reader relationship, and open new avenues for investigating the psychoanalytic themes addressed by both artists.

One of the difficulties in reading Wallace's works is distinguishing the voice of the 'author' from the myriad narratorial and authorial personae presented within the text (Staes 2014). Similarly, it can often be difficult to distinguish the perspective of Wallace scholars from the implied 'readers' presented in their writings. The Wallace-Lynch intertext provides a new perspective for discussing this ambiguity, particularly in relation to the
psychoanalytic reader-response theories explored in this thesis. Wallace's texts reprise the themes of ghostly and literary 'possession' as part of their broader investigative discourse on the author-reader relationship (Staes 2014; Hering 2016). The thesis links this thematic preoccupation in Wallace to the dialogic workings of the psychoanalytic transference, following Felman's description of the transference as "a love-relation that both organises and disguises, deciphers and enciphers [narratives], turning them into their own substitute and their own repetition" (2012: 178). This dynamic relationship between the themes of love and possession is discussed in Wallace's essays on David Lynch and autobiographical narrative, which are investigated in Chapter 5. Wallace's intriguing reading of David Lynch's work, and the concurrence of this reading with a psychoanalytically-informed reader response model, enable new inter- and intra-textual readings of Wallace's own works, particularly the short stories collected in Oblivion (2004). Through the full extension of the transferential-neurotic model, the thesis provides a close engagement with these late-period fictions, presenting them as a culmination of the author's self-conscious experiments with psychoanalytic reader-positioning.

The thesis responds to the Wallace-ian theme of negation - particularly ironic or dialectical negation of particular reading schemes - by locating this negation in Wallace's own reprisal of Freudian reading-tropes (coupled with decidedly Lynchian themes and motifs). Chapter 6 considers the value of transferential-neurotic discourse in relation to Wallace, following from the author's engagement with psychoanalytic interpretation in his late-period
fiction, to establish the category of readers who negate. Laplanche and Pontalis define negation as a "procedure whereby the subject, while formulating one of his wishes, thoughts or feelings which has been repressed hitherto, contrives, by disowning it, to continue to defend himself against it" (1973: 260).

"In German, 'Verneinung' denotes negation in the logical and grammatical sense [...] but it also means denial in the psychological sense of rejection of a statement which I have made or which has been imputed to me e.g. 'No, I did not say that, I did not think that'. In this second sense, 'verneinen' comes close to 'verleugnen' (or 'leugnen'), to disown, disavow, refute." (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973: 261)

Negation is a characteristic tool of the obsessional neurotic - in the Introductory Lectures, Freud paints an entertaining picture of the neurotic who says "Yes, that's all very nice and interesting, and I'll be very glad to go on with it further if it were true. But I don't in the least believe that it is true; and, so long as I don't believe it, it makes no difference to my illness" (1917: 358-359). Negation holds an "indicative value" for psychoanalytic thought, "signalling as it does the moment when an unconscious wish begins to re-emerge, whether during the treatment or outside it" (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973: 262). Freud performs a similar negation in 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', describing a transferential-neurotic who says (whilst acting out) "See what happens when I give way to such things. Was I not right to consign them to repression?" (1914: 151-152).

From this reading-position, earlier heuristic concepts such as empathy, suspicion and authorial intentionality are shown to be determined by the theme of transference-neurosis - under this model, Wallace's self-reflexive
appeals to the 'reader' are viewed primarily as forms of acting-out, performed through an overt juxtaposition of metapsychological and metafictional reading-tropes. This position allows for a retrospective grounding of the positions preceding it, insofar as each of Wallace's engagements with psychoanalytic reading involve a self-reflexive problematisation of transference-neurosis in literary terms. From this vantage-point, we are able to prosecute the claim Wallace's counter-transferential animus towards psychoanalysis is itself a symptomatic aspect of his texts, which represents an estranging form of resistance to interpretation. These symptoms can be interpreted through a psychoanalytic reader-response model, provided that this model also accounts for the self-reflexive dimensions of Wallace's writing.

The thesis model distinguishes between two forms of psychoanalytic self-consciousness - obsessional-neurotic utterance and transference-neurotic performance. The initiation of the psychoanalytic treatment, according to Freud, "brings about a change in the patient's conscious attitude towards his illness" (1914: 151). This change in consciousness takes different forms in the Freudian clinic. For example, the obsessional neurotic (See G24) is liable to prolong their self-conscious relationship to treatment indefinitely, through self-reflexive verbal strategies: "he is anxious to get us to instruct him, teach him, contradict him, introduce him to the literature [...] He will often allow the analysis to proceed on its way uninhibited, so that it is able to shed an ever-increasing light upon the riddle of his illness" (1917: 358). Transference-neurosis, however, is a form of self-consciousness developed within the clinical dialogue, "an intermediate region between illness and real life", an
"artificial illness" which makes visible the analysand's unconscious resistances to treatment (1914: 152). The obsessional mode is monologic; the transferential mode, meanwhile, is grounded in a dynamic and dialogic series of relationships.

The thesis distinguishes between two "act[s]" of communication relative to Wallace - a self-reflexive verbal act (which is often figured as dialogue or communication 'between human beings' in Wallace's work and reception) and a hyperbolic written act, through which Wallace's texts overdetermine particular ideas about reading and interpretation. This distinction necessitates the alternating expression of readers and 'readers' in relation to the Wallace text - while both terms nominally refer to the same (real or imagined) agent, the latter indirectly highlights the complex textual and interpretive work that must take place before such an agent is identified. The thesis highlights texts in which the role of the 'reader' is problematised by Wallace, typically through the author's self-reflexive appropriation of particular (psychoanalytic) interpretive schemes. By distinguishing between four such schemes at the outset, the thesis is able to demonstrate how these texts establish literal, imaginative, abstract and performative ideas about psychoanalytic reading, whilst interpositioning these ideas to produce specific literary effects. By examining these effects, and the conceptual connections which inform them, the thesis provides a broader exegesis on the relationship between Wallace's texts and psychoanalytic literary theory. Under this reading, Wallace's attempts to surpass the self-reflexive limits of postmodern writing are shown to involve a complex return to Freudian
theories of dialogue and interpretation, within which the 'author-reader relationship' is theorised as a form of transferential-neurotic performance - an acting-out of particular literary anxieties within the text.

Wallace's texts are concerned with forms of otherness and alterity, particularly when it comes to the relationship between readers, authors and texts (Hayes-Brady 2013). As such, Wallace is prone to using gendered and eroticised language when referring to his own 'reader'. While this is not an explicit focus of the thesis, the transferential-neurotic and obsessional discourses canvassed by this model may raise productive questions for feminist scholars within the field. I would moreover agree that Wallace's estranging rhetoric of the 'reader' is, or at least appears to be, obliquely gendered (Hayes-Brady 2013), and potentially reveals a great deal more about Wallace's framing of themes like love, male anxiety, narrative intentionality and post-critical Theory. Whilst there are certainly male 'readers' in Wallace's fiction, it is nevertheless a fact that Wallace's extemporised 'readers' are female, at least in his own statements on the matter. This becomes a strange fact when we consider the adjacency of male anxiety and metafictional performance in Wallace, for example in a text like 'Octet' (1999), which exclusively imagines the 'fiction writer's reader' as female, or the story cycle 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men' (1999), which disclose and repurpose the identity of an anonymous, female 'interviewer' (See Chapter 4). I think that the Freudian and post-Freudian dimensions of Wallace work reveal this gendered ambivalence quite Directly. Nevertheless, my study indirectly highlights the extent to which gendered or ambivalent rhetoric plays out in
Wallace, particularly in light of more erotically or paradoxically-inclined readings of the author and his works. Having canvassed an essential strangeness in David Foster Wallace’s rhetoric of the ‘reader’, it is important that we consider that rhetoric’s estranging effects through the vast and heterogeneous field of Wallace scholarship, so that we might effectively address our question: Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace? Subsequent parallels are drawn in this study between Wallace and Lynch in this regard (See Chapter 5),

The thesis models four types of psychoanalytic reading in Wallace’s fictions, and demonstrates the complex relationships between these ‘readers’ across different stages of the author’s literary career. By presenting these reading-positions in a typological manner, the thesis demonstrates the distinct paradigmatic approaches which inform Wallace’s work, and suggests new theoretical connections between these interpretive discourses and the work of prominent Wallace scholars. In so doing, the thesis effectively addresses the limits of a Freudian reading of Wallace, tracing the necessity of such limits within Wallace’s own repetitions and working-through of Freud, as indicated by his repetitions, re-imaginations and re-abstractions of the ‘reader. For this reason, a thoroughly reasoned post-Freudian reading of Wallace would incorporate a suspicious awareness of gendered speech and dynamics in Wallace’s texts, particularly as those texts veer towards, repeat, re-imagine and re-abstract certain increasingly suspect reader-rhetorics. This may be the transference-neurosis lurking at the heart of David Foster Wallace’s “framed tales”, which are at once other-directed and other-
exposing, other-repeating phenomena – there’s a great deal of conflict at stake in this author-reader relationship., and when we turn our attention to contemporary readings of Wallace, we are bound to find this conflict translated onto broader areas of concern). Nevertheless, and however fraught the process, this ambivalence matters in Wallace’s fiction – it forms a partial basis for the more ‘paradoxical’ elements of Wallace’s rhetorics on reading, particularly in texts like the McCaffery and Miller interviews, and even in texts like ‘E Unibus Pluram’ (See Chapter 1).

In this study, I find that the repetition of ‘readers’ in Wallace’s fiction yields a peculiar kind of fourth-person address, which – like the study itself, and the terminologies it investigates – might be effectively described as a New Hyperbole. The term ‘New Hyperbole’ is a sonorous pun on Adam Kelly’s term ‘New Sincerity’ (2010), which is simply intended to highlight the parallels between an elaborative and hyperbolic form of literary exegesis (such as mine) and the kinds of sincere and reader-focused forms found in contemporary Wallace Studies. The connecting point for these approaches is Wallace’s own work, of course - to the extent that these works achieve sincerity through hyperbolic themes and techniques, they remain objects of intense interest and scrutiny for contemporary scholars, and a worthwhile launching-point for any sustained consideration of critical rhetoric in the 21st century.

Earlier readings of Wallace in relation to psychoanalysis stress the author’s paradigmatic focus on self-reflection, personal identity and subjective experience. However, Shoshana Felman distinguishes between two
forms of the term "Freudian Reading", which "can refer to refer either to Freudian statements or to Freudian utterance: a reading can be called 'Freudian' with respect to what it reads (the meaning or thematic content it derives from a text) or with respect to how it reads (its interpretive procedures, the techniques or methods of analysis it uses)" (2012: 164, original emphasis). This distinction is pertinent to both Wallace's work - which is full of overtly Freudian contents and meanings - and to this thesis - which is moreover concerned with Wallace's response to psychoanalytic procedures and methods. Wallace scholars have noted the author's engagement with psychoanalytic themes and concepts (Boswell 2003; Holland 2006; Tracey, 2010). These readings tend to utilise psychoanalytic theory in an explanatory fashion - identifying Freudo-Lacanian metaphors within Wallace's texts, engaging with the author's normative critiques of primary narcissism, traumatic recollection, and so forth. However, the relationship between Wallace's texts and psychoanalytic literary theory is comparatively underdeveloped in these readings - while there are many Wallace-ian critiques of Freud to be found in the existing literature, there has yet to be a sustained critique of Wallace's texts from the perspective of Freudian literary theory.

"the dramatist himself, coming onstage"

The paradigmatic language used by critics - from author-specific terminologies to overt reader-response rhetorics - necessarily frames the way in which we think and speak about the 'meaning' of a given text. In Wallace's
texts, this dynamic is figured self-reflexively, to the extent that these texts incorporate overt critiques of their own modernist and postmodernist "inheritance" (Boswell 2003: 1), effectively questioning the situation of authors and readers within the cultural, theoretical and linguistic paradigms of contemporary postmodernity. Responding to this critique, Wallace scholars are engaged in the development of new paradigmatic approaches, which appear to be primarily concerned with what Adam Kelly calls the "writer-reader relationship" (2010: 146). However, these approaches remain arguably dependent on the terminologies established in Wallace’s own writings, a claim which this thesis demonstrates through close consideration of key Wallaceian terms such as ‘empathy’, ‘suspicion’, ‘narration’ and ‘negation’. Moreover, the use of response-oriented rhetoric - the recourse to claims about ‘readers’ in relation to Wallace - is shown to be a worthwhile topic in its own right, to the extent that this rhetoric frames the paradigmatic dimensions of Wallace’s work for contemporary audiences.

Wallace’s short fiction collections, released at crucial stages in the author’s literary career, provide clear working insight into the challenges of writing the reader, and provide innumerable examples of the author’s experiments with narrative, tone-of-voice, authorial presence and related interpretive tropes (C.f. Boswell 2003, Holland 2013, Staes 2014). By examining these works through the theme of transference-neurosis, and establishing the necessary conditions for a psychoanalytically-informed reader response theory of Wallace, the thesis lays the groundwork for further engagement with Wallace’s three novels and related criticism. This approach differs from the
vast majority of extant scholarship on Wallace, insofar as critics have started from the novels - and, as Adam Kelly has noted, from influential statements in 'E Unibus Pluram' and the McCaffery Interview (Kelly 2010) - to define the character of Wallace's short fiction. By contrast, the thesis seeks to highlight marginalised or hitherto under-represented ideas about reading in a body of work that, compared with the critical acclaim of a novel like Infinite Jest, has not yet received the attention it deserves. The reader-oriented nature of this thesis, and its concomitant focus on critical paradigms in relation to Wallace, allows for a more direct engagement with existing scholarship on the author and his works. While the thesis incorporates terminologies from a broad range of sources within Wallace Studies, it also stresses those sources' reliance on alternate reader-response discourses; these discourses function in a similar way to their literary counterparts in Wallace, insofar as they work to identify, critique, narrate and negate certain aspects of the reader's experience. To demonstrate this, the thesis engages in close readings of influential works in the field, juxtaposed with close readings of the transference-neurosis in Wallace's short fictions.

The thesis omits discussion of Wallace's major novels - debut The Broom of the System, acclaimed masterwork Infinite Jest and posthumously-compiled-and-released The Pale King - to provide scope for considering the marginal and arguably under-theorised dimensions of Wallace's short fictions, particularly these fictions' relationship to the author-reader models discussed in contemporary criticism. Greg Carlisle's typological guide to the themes, motifs and techniques used in Infinite Jest is an aspirational model
for this kind of criticism. The thesis' focus on the limits of the author-reader relationship, and the ways in which these limits are described in Wallace’s heterogeneous short works, form the basis for an alternative perspective on the author and his work, which may yet be applied to a more comprehensive consideration of the novels in future research. However, if the thesis of transferential-neurotic reading can be demonstrated in Wallace’s short fictions, then it is possible that a great deal of assumptions within novel-based Wallace criticism may need to be rethought. By reformulating these assumptions through psychoanalytic literary theory, the thesis raises four questions that novel-based criticism ought to continue answering. What does it mean to identify with a David Foster Wallace text? What do theoretically-based critiques of Wallace’s texts share in common with this identificatory mode? How do tensions between explicit and implied modes of readership become translated in scholarship on the novels? And, finally, how do the novels approach the theme of performance, and how might this theme relate to the psychoanalytic reader-response models considered in this thesis?

By asking these questions, this study provides a substantive account of what Wallace meant when he spoke of fiction as “an act of communication between one human being and another” (1997). This kind of rhetoric is pursued throughout Wallace’s body of work, from watershed novels such as *Infinite Jest* (1996) to complex accounts of postmodernity and audience in essays such as ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’ (1997) and ‘Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky’ (2005), and of course in the author’s numerous interviews on the broad subject of ‘fiction-writing’ (C.f. Burn, 2012). Again,
Wallace’s various references to the ‘reader’ are rhetorical in the simple sense that they are persuasive – they compel some form of interpretive action, even if that action is simply a change in perspective on the part of their intended recipient. But given the author’s polymathic involvement with the fields of literary criticism, cultural theory and the philosophy of language, we often find Wallace’s ‘reader’ referred to in more abstract terms, as in the following well-known excerpt from the author’s interview with Larry McCaffery:

We still like to think of a story ‘changing’ the reader’s emotions, cerebrations, maybe even her life. We’re not keen on the idea of the story sharing its valence with the reader. But the reader’s own life ‘outside’ the story changes the story. You could argue that it affects only ‘her reaction to the story’ or ‘her take on the story’. But these things are the story. This is the way Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism’s helped me most as a fiction writer: once I’m done with the thing, I’m basically dead, and probably the text’s dead; it becomes simply language and language lives not just in but through the reader. (Wallace, in McCaffery 2012: 40, original emphasis)

In case the emphasis isn’t clear, Wallace continues: “The reader becomes God, for all textual purposes” (40). In other words, ‘the reader’ is a figure of decisive, “God”-like textual significance for Wallace, a figure whose reactions and interpretations can often be assumed to define the ultimate meaning of the text in question. On this basis at least, we might think that the Wallace ‘reader’ simply cannot be defined within the text itself – that they are necessarily anterior to the text, their reaction unpredictable, their interpretation their own; hence Adam Kelly’s powerful description of Wallace’s works as indicative of a ‘New Sincerity’ in fiction, “structured and informed” by their “dialogic appeal to the reader’s attestation and judgment” (2010: 145).
In this sense, the implied identity of Wallace’s reader is both literal and shockingly effective: the ‘reader’ of Wallace is us, the readers holding his books and responding to their various claims upon our attention and investment. In contemporary ‘Wallace Studies’, this idea is most commonly understood in the form of a dynamic “conversation” between the reader and the text, what Marshall Boswell calls an “intimate zone of communication, of subjective interaction” (2003, p17). In other words, Wallace’s rhetoric of the reader has had a major impact on the way his texts are read and spoken of, an impact which has enabled powerful insights into ideas such as literary empathy, suspicious hermeneutics, narrative self-reference and, at the extreme, metafictional self-reflexivity (See Chapter 1). Though Wallace’s texts canvass an enormous array of topics and themes, they are arguably framed by and oriented towards the ‘subject’ of the reader. Reading and interpretation are explicit themes in Wallace’s texts, and inform those texts’ self-reflexive investigations of postmodern life and culture. Moreover, the subjective experience of the reader - specifically, their experience of reading the Wallace text - is addressed time and time again in the author's writings, and forms a major part of his rhetoric on the author-reader relationship more broadly.

By reviewing and investigating this impact, the present study sheds new light on the complex rhetoric of criticism at stake in Wallace’s works, and in our so-called “conversations” with the author and his complex literary legacy. But what do we talk about when we talk about the ‘reader’ of a literary text, or of ‘meta-fictional’ texts such as Wallace’s? In this study, that question is in fact bound up with multiple, differing ideas about what we might call the
literary encounter as such – for example, the idea of fiction as an “act of communication” between “human being[s]”, also described by Wallace as a “deep, significant conversation with another consciousness” (Miller, 2007). It seems here that Wallace is referring to the reader in a literalistic sense, as literally “another consciousness” for the text to engage itself with. This kind of rhetoric comports with our common-sense, generalist sense of ‘reading’ as communication with the text; to this end, we are most likely to find literal ‘readers’ referred to in reviews, cultural criticism (particularly reader-response theory) or even political journalism. But while this reference to a reader beyond the text is one thing, we might also consider the kinds of readers imagined within the text itself, for example in Wallace’s various fictional narratives of reading, dialogue and communication. In this second-order or imaginative sense, the experience of reading is effectively ‘written-into’ the various acts of reading dramatised or recounted within a given text; consider also the various letter-writers and correspondents at stake in a text like Henry James’ The Turn of the Screw (C.f Felman, 2012), or the culprits, schemers and investigators in virtually any kind of detective-fiction. David Hering has identified "a recurrent oscillation between narrative models of monologism and dialogism" in Wallace's fictions (2016: 7), which he describes as "a continual modification and clarification of the mode of authorial presence, an ongoing attempt to establish an author persona that interacts dialogically with the text" (8). In my psychoanalytic reading of the dialogic model, Wallace’s texts can be said to function as analysand, susceptible to the dialogic and reconstructive intervention of the reader as analyst. In the monologic model,
however, the analyst/analysand relationship is reversed - on this reading, Wallace's texts become the analyst, monologising and indeed pathologising the anticipated response of the 'reader' as analysand. This tension represents two sides of the transferential reading model advanced by Peter Brooks, which "allows us to take as the object of analysis, not author or reader, but reading, including of course the transferential-interpretive operations that belong to reading" (1986: 14).

Wallace's texts certainly play on this kind of “logicking work” (Holland, 2013), creating unique distinctions between the empirical reader ‘of’ the text and the hypothetical reader ‘in’ the text – or indeed collapsing those very distinctions, as in the seminal short fiction ‘Octet’ (1999). In any account highlighting this distinction, we see a third possible extension to the term ‘reader’, which this study describes as an abstracted ‘reader’. This kind of ‘reader’ is helpfully illuminated in texts such as ‘Greatly Exaggerated’, particularly when Wallace considers the abstract nature of ‘reading’ in the wake of postmodernity. Speaking again to the influence of thinkers like Foucault and Barthes, Wallace writes:

writing is a better animal than speech because it is iterable; it is iterable because it is abstract; and it is abstract because it is a function not of presence but of absence: the reader's absent when the writer's writing and the writer's absent when the reader's reading. (140)

We also see this kind of abstraction at stake in Wallace scholarship, for example when Boswell refers to Wallace’s “desire to build a text that treats its reader like a lover” (2003), or in Kelly’s account of a “spiraling search for the truth of intentions” in Wallace’s fiction (2010: 139) – in the uncertain spaces
created between Wallace’s literal and imagined ‘reader(s)’, we discover clear bases for speaking of an implied reader, similar to Toon Staes’ idea of an ‘implied author’ (2014). Our use of the term ‘reader’ thus refers in at least three ways – literally (as in the case of empirical readers), imaginatively (as in the case of culturally-hypothesised ‘readers’) and abstractly (as in the case of literary analysis and critique). As we can see, each usage of the term ‘reader’ represents a distinct variation on the one preceding it – a self-conscious turn, a complexification, an expanded sense of reference – suggesting several distinct ‘layers’ to the act we call reading.

For Wallace, this sort of reader-positioning could be thought of as an encounter with metafiction itself, or, as he once put it, “trying to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the illusions of the pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that came before it” (McCaffery 2012: 40). Though he describes this approach as a “permanent migraine” (40), it is clear that Wallace’s texts remain concerned a certain kind of metafictional exposure, the limits of which are explored clearly in texts such as ‘Octet’. “With the now-tired S.O.P. meta-stuff”, writes Wallace,

it’s more the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what’s going on is artificial and that the artificer is him (the dramatist) and but that he’s at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the fact that he’s back there pulling the strings [... ] viz. not interrogating you or having any sort of interchange or really even talking to you but rather just performing in some highly self-conscious and manipulative way (Wallace 1999: 135, FN2, emphasis original)

Wallace’s dramaturgical metaphor for metafiction, as an effect of a “the dramatist himself” addressing his “reader/audience”, is particularly pertinent
for its placement within ‘Octet’, a text which appears to exhaust the various literal, imaginative and abstract extensions of the term ‘reader’ at stake in Wallace’s work more broadly (See Chapter 3). Moreover, it alerts us to the uniquely performative nature of Wallace’s rhetoric on readership, something which Kelly has highlighted in terms of the “age of theory”, specifically the “interrogation and re-evaluation of basic concepts of selfhood, intention, and performativity” (2010: 135). Following Ricoeur, Adam Kelly defines ‘suspicious’ interpretation as an approach which "emphasises what it sees as the blindnesses caused by ideological investment, historical ignorance, and psychological repression" (138). The latter term, psychological repression, is of clear significance to our psychoanalytic model – suspicious psychoanalytic reading, in terms of the recovery of latent and/or unconscious materials, is considered in detail in Chapters 2 and 4.

In our final count, then, our use of the term ‘reader’ can refer to at least four different levels of literary utterance. The first encounter is literal, quite simply an “act of communication”. The second encounter is imaginative, as the events of writing and reading are creatively re-imagined within the literary text. The third encounter is abstract, referring to various rhetorical and imaginative limits, such as the idea that “the reader’s absent when the writer’s writing and the writer’s absent when the reader’s reading”. The fourth encounter is something else entirely – it is at once an intersection of the preceding levels and a self-conscious expansion thereupon. We see this kind of rhetoric at stake throughout Wallace’s body of work, particularly as the author grapples with his own sense of “audience” in overtly metafictional texts.
such as ‘Octet’ and Oblivion (See Chapter 6). Boswell characterises Wallace's final collection, Oblivion, as an exploration of solipsism - "the multiple ways in which his characters are not only alone inside their heads but also controlled, sometimes to the point of madness, by the layered, nested, entropic workings of their interiors" (2013: 151). Boswell goes on to read this strategy as a "pessimistic" rejection of authorial empathy in favour of textual "enclosure", "a form of dense description without redemption" (168).

My reading substitutes the term 'performance' for enclosure, whilst detailing the extent to which earlier forms of the author-reader relationship in Wallace court the positive themes of madness, possession and nested interiority. And by taking a broader view on the subject of the mind in Wallace’s works – and recommending a more transferentially-aware reading of those works – the thesis explores a range of negative and liberating perspectives on the author-relationships theorised above. The main question remains as to whether one benefits from a psychoanalytically-informed reading of Wallace. On the topic of reading literature via psychoanalysis, Shoshanna Felman writes:

‘There is often something radically strange in the language of others,’ writes an American critic. But doesn't writing about madness involve, precisely, the necessity of encountering - in language - something radically strange? Taken by itself, each language is auto-familiar: it has its own concepts, its own system of thought which, within it, conditions the unthinkable. The way we think and speak arises out of decisions our language has already made for us: language discreetly dictates to its users - in an invisible manner - self-evident assumptions and proscriptions that are inscribed in its grammar (which is, by definition, imperceptible from inside the language). In order for grammar to appear as such, one must dislodge one's
language from its self-presence, from its assumptions and proscriptions, by subjecting them to the otherness of a different grammar, by putting them in question through the medium of a foreign language. (Felman 2012: 18-19)

By retracing the sorts of ‘readers’ referred to, imagined within and implied by Wallace’s fictions, the present study is thus poised to provide a thorough analysis of Wallace's rhetoric of reading. If Wallace's texts indeed represent an “act of communication”, conveyed in a foreign language, and if the reader of Wallace is indeed supposed to “act upon” what they have read, it is clear that we are dealing with live materials, which presuppose an actual event of reading – the recurrence of the term “conversation” in contemporary scholarship is an index for this sort of rhetoric (Cunningham, 2016). But close attention to this rhetoric reveals a fourth, decidedly Wallace-ian extension to the term ‘reader’, which exemplifies the complex rhetorical stakes of his literary project as a whole. Wallace’s texts are, by and large, fictions about fiction – self-reflexively refer to their own status and identity as ‘texts’, and the complex paradigmatic movements between literality, imagination, abstraction and performance at stake in this identity.

Structure of the Thesis, Notes on Style

These stakes inform the title of the present study, ‘Performing the ‘Fiction Writer's Reader’: the apostrophic framing of the term 'reader' in relation to an implied or imagined “fiction writer” says something about the way we approach Wallace’s texts today, as best evidenced when we consider the ways in which those texts approach “us”, the reader. With a nod to the
author’s love of pop-cultural paraphrase, my study outlines four kinds of ‘Close Encounter’ with Wallace’s texts, predicated on the movement between the literal, the imaginative, the abstract and the performative within those texts. Wallace arguably appropriates Freudian metapsychology to explore different forms of author-reader relationship. This dynamic helps to situate Wallace’s work as a form of postmodern metafiction. Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern poetics in terms of "the paradoxes set up when modernist aesthetic autonomy and self-reflexivity come up against a counterforce in the form of a grounding in the historical, social, and political world" (1998: ix). For Hutcheon, the primary genre of postmodernism is historiographic metafiction, defined as texts "which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1988: 5). The primary object of such a poetics, for Hutcheon, is "the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness", an assumption further reflected in liberal humanist notions such as "authorial originality and authority" and "the separation of the aesthetic from the political" (xii). While this dynamic is typically applied to theories of authorship in Wallace (Staes 2014), the humanistic assumption of a unified 'reader' of Wallace has yet to be fully explored. Indeed, the incorporation of Freudian metapsychology - which disputes the idea of self-identical, humanistic subject - presents new challenges for the reader of Wallace, which are explored throughout this thesis.

The study begins with a review of scholarship, highlighting the self-reflexive significance of the term ‘reader’ in Wallace’s work and reception
(Chapter 1). Following the idea of an “act of communication”, this chapter outlines four distinct interpretive acts presupposed by Wallace Studies, expressible as intentional claims about the author in relation to the contemporary reader. In the first encounter, “Wallace identifies (with) the reader” – from the author’s discourse on literary “love”, to the erotic significance of the “reader/lover” in Boswell (2003), we see the persistence of Wallace’s appeal towards fiction as a literal “act of communication” between the text and its reader. This claim highlights the unique centrality of empathetic identification to Wallace’s literary project as a whole, and to his early short fictions in particular (See Chapter 3). In the second encounter, “Wallace critiques the reader” – from trenchant diagnoses of the postmodern condition in “E Unibus Pluram”, to the kinds of “logicking work” explored by Holland (2013) and Clare Hayes-Brady (2013), we can begin to see the value of suspicious hermeneutics for Wallace’s project as a whole, particularly when it comes to that project’s “unflinching critique of narcissism as an impediment to empathy and sincerity” (Holland, p107). This claim highlights the value of suspicious critique to Wallace’s literary project, particularly when it comes to middle-period texts such as Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (See Chapter 4). In the third encounter, “Wallace narrates the reader” – in Wallace’s cultural essays, journalistic works, reviews and interviews, there is a kind of abstract substitution at work, particularly as the author imagines “himself” as reader in essays such as ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’ (1997) and ‘How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart’ (2005). Through this work of abstraction and implication, Wallace’s cultural journalism effectively narrates the abstract event of
reading, in a way which highlights the value of critical abstraction for the author and his works (See Chapter 5). Oblivion

In this final sense, Wallace’s works become less of an “act of communication” and more of a metafictional acting-out, in which the author continually revisits and revises his texts’ relationship to the ‘reader’, progressively escalating that relationship with each major short fiction collection. By approaching Wallace’s rhetoric of the reader in this way, we are thus poised to ask the question: Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace? This question is apostrophic as well, placing the ‘reader’ a step removed from literality – given the complex entanglement of the term’s meaning for Wallace, and the sense of rhetorical urgency purported thereby, I believe it necessary to consider the various kinds of “bracketing” and structural paraphrase which attend our use of the term, particularly when we ask the question “Who are we in relation to Wallace’s texts?” If we interpose a third question “What kind of ‘readers’ appear in Wallace’s texts?” – an authorised move, given the ubiquity of such accounts in contemporary Wallace Studies – then we are positioned to investigate the abstract, literal and imagined sense of the term ‘reader’ in Wallace’s work more broadly.

This question is explored in Chapter 2, which provides a post-Freudian reading of the term transference-neurosis in relation to Wallace’s rhetoric of the ‘reader’. In Freud, the transference is often described as a kind of estranging spectacle, premised on the uncanny repetition of past relationships and investments. For this study, the key methodological significance of the
transference is that it allows for such acting-out to take place within a specific discursive context – that of the transference-neurosis, which is premised on “a change in the patient’s conscious attitude towards his illness” (151), and the subsequent construction and negotiation of a “new transference meaning” (an “artificial illness”) through the course of the analytic treatment (153). In my reading, the transference-neurosis is a self-reflexive phenomenon, because it necessarily implicates the analysand’s conscious (or self-conscious) attitude towards their own treatment. Nevertheless, this self-consciousness towards treatment is primarily explicable in terms of repetition – it represents an escalation, in the form of discourse, of the transferential behaviours being acted-out in the therapeutic dialogue. This tension between self-reflexivity and resistance, particularly when it comes to question of psychoanalytic interpretation, is particularly significant for critics such as Ricoeur, Brooks and Felman, who have each responded to the idea of psychoanalytic literary criticism by theorising the literary text in transferential or performative terms.

In the subsequent demonstrative/analytic chapters, the question of Wallace’s reader proceeds through key ‘phases’ in the author’s literary project, typically marked by a major short story collection. Chapter 5 is distinct in that focuses on two marginal Wallace essays, both focused on the autobiographical and rhetorical significance of reading. The thesis investigates direct and indirect references to psychoanalytic literary theory in Wallace’s short fictions, and relates these references to the paradigmatic language used by Wallace scholars. The thesis suggests a progressive arc in Wallace’s literary project, in which the author’s self-reflexive response to psychoanalysis
becomes increasingly visible with the release of each major short fiction collection. On this view, problems introduced in Wallace’s early works - most notably, the idea of an empathetic author-reader relationship - are returned to and revised in later works. The idea of a theoretically-determined reader response model - in essence a model of ‘reading’ shaped by adherence to one theoretical paradigm or another - can open this thesis to the charge of schematism. In defence of this approach, I would point out that a wide majority of terminologies used in this thesis are inductively derived from their usage in Wallace Studies - terms like ‘empathy’, ‘identification’, ‘suspicion’, ‘critique’, ‘literalisation’, ‘enclosure’ and ‘performance’ already carry significant theoretical weight in discussions about Wallace, and are used here to investigate the paradigmatic contours of Wallace’s work and reception.

The thesis’ construction of four ‘readers’ or reading-positions - readers who identify, readers who critique, readers who narrate and readers who negate - is also performed inductively in the thesis chapters, each of which demonstrates a new aspect of Wallace’s relationship with psychoanalytic reading, and the positioning strategies which make this relationship visible in Wallace’s texts. These terms are deductive insofar as they demarcate new concepts, but they by no means foreclose or exhaust the possibilities for other theoretically-determined models of the ‘reader’.

In Chapter 3, I ask: What is the significance of readers who identify in Wallace’s early fiction? This chapter revisits the theme of empathetic identification in Wallace’s works, highlighting the extent to which texts such
as *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) reimagine this theme as a kind of complex “love” towards the reader. By exploring the erotic significance of this theme in Wallace’s early works (C.f. Boswell, 2003), I find that we are better able to account for the intentional claim that “Wallace identifies (with) the reader”, i.e. that his works enable new forms of empathetic identification of and with their contemporary ‘reader’. The thesis responds to the predominant theme of empathetic identification in Wallace’s works by suggesting a Freudian correlate for this theme—namely, the transference. Following Hayes-Brady, I thus explore "Wallace's repeated invocation of love as a kind of primary force, a catalyst in the transaction of communicative exchange" (2016: 9), viewing this "repeated invocation of love" as form of transferential-neurotic discourse in the collection *Girl with Curious Hair*. This reading is contrasted with the reader-response models of Marshall Boswell, and the curious idea of the Wallace reader as "reader/lover".

In Chapter 4, I contrast this literalised idea of “love” with the kinds of antagonism imagined within Wallace’s middle-period fiction, through the positioning of *readers who critique*. This chapter investigates the complex status of suspicion and suspicious hermeneutics in texts such as *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), highlighting the intense ironies at stake in the author’s ‘mature’ literary style. In this ambivalence, the theme of literary “love” is voiced through the suspect discourses of “hideous men”, who can be defined by their self-conscious (and antagonistic) relationship to the suspicious reader. By charting this ambivalence, and its impact on contemporary Wallace Studies, we may thus investigate the claim that
“Wallace critiques the reader”, i.e. that his works provide critical insight into the assumptions and expectations of their own ‘postmodern’ audience. Having admitted a Freudian hypothesis about Wallace, the thesis questions the utility of ‘psychoanalytic reading’ in relation to the literary text, noting the proliferation of psychoanalytic reading-tropes (and their metafictionalised equivalents) in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). The thesis highlights the recurrent themes of transference and transference-neurosis in Wallace’s formulation of the reader-writer relationship, and notes the predominantly obsessional nature of these formulations in Wallace’s middle-period writings. This reading responds to the theme of suspicious critique in Wallace’s works by considering the relative compatibility of reader-response models in Mary Holland, Clare Hayes-Brady and Adam Kelly.

Through our psychoanalytic reader-response model, we are moreover situated to parse the various abstract and metafictional readers presupposed by Wallace’s texts, and to consider the various movements between these levels in Wallace’s own rhetorics on reading and interpretation. To wit, Chapters 5 and 6 each explore a meta-rhetorical ‘solutions’ to Wallace’s ambivalence, provided by Wallace’s essays on authorship and autobiography on the one hand, and his late-period fictions such as *Oblivion* (2004) on the other.

In Chapter 5, I ask: What is the significance of readers who narrate in Wallace’s essayistic works? This chapter explores the self-conscious presentation of the persona “David Foster Wallace” in the essays ‘David Lynch
Keep his Head’ (1999) and ‘How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart’ (2005). These marginal works highlight the significance of the “narrative contract” (Staes, 2014), and the complex autobiographical and intentional stakes of this contract for Wallace and his works. In this sense, Wallace’s performance of “himself”, as author or ‘reader who narrates’, represents one solution to the kinds of textual and rhetorical ambivalence at stake in his discourse of the ‘reader’. By reviewing the scope and limits of this solution, we may thus contend with the claim that “Wallace narrates the reader”, i.e., that his works negotiate their own legitimating conditions by engaging with the ideas of reading and narrative as such. Having raised the significance of psychoanalytic reading within Wallace’s fiction, the thesis considers the author’s own attempts to articulate the terms of a Freudian reading as such, and finds further confirmation for a psychoanalytically-informed reader response model in the essays considered. As with more prominent essayistic examples, these works reflect on the writer-reader-text relationship in great depth; more strikingly, they develop transferential-neurotic claims about this relationship, while reflecting on the cinematic and autobiographical dimensions of these claims at great length. By exposing these claims, the thesis responds to the predominance of authorship (and authorial intentionality) as organising themes for Wallace criticism, exploring the novel idea of an author-response model in the works of Toon Staes and Mike Miley.

Conversely, Chapter 6 asks: What is the significance of readers who negate in Wallace’s late-period fiction? This chapter explores the sophisticated re-imagining of metafiction and the metafictional dialogue in
the collection *Oblivion* (2004), a text which effectively repeats, replays and works-through the diverse rhetorical strategies deployed by the author throughout his career. In this approach, *Oblivion* self-consciously reprises the kinds of ‘reader(s)’ imagined in Wallace’s earlier works, particularly in its metafictional treatment of empathetic identification, suspicious critique and narrative understanding. But in so doing, Wallace effectively displaces the significance of such ‘reader(s)’ onto the various ‘language-games’ performed by the text itself. It is within such games that the transferential (and indeed metafictional) significance of Wallace’s literary project is made explicit in transferential-neurotic terms. By highlighting this significance, we are thus able to consider the threshold claim that “Wallace negates the reader” – i.e. that his texts effectively de-legitimise (or at least irreducibly complicate) our sense of that reader’s agency and authority. At the extreme limits of Wallace’s rhetoric of the reader, we have effectively navigated from the abstract to the metafictional, at once elaborating on Wallace’s literalistic “conversation”, and exposing the kinds of schematic transference (or performance) at stake in Wallace’s late fictions. Along the way, we will have engaged key Wallace scholars on core Wallace questions, whilst investigating those questions through their literal, imaginative, abstract and performative extensions in Wallace’s own works.

Wallace arguably appropriates Freudian metapsychology to explore different forms of author-reader relationship. This dynamic helps to situate Wallace’s work as a form of postmodern metafiction. Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern poetics in terms of "the paradoxes set up when modernist
aesthetic autonomy and self-reflexivity come up against a counterforce in the form of a grounding in the historical, social, and political world" (1998: ix). For Hutcheon, the primary genre of postmodernism is historiographic metafiction, defined as texts "which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1988: 5). The primary object of such a poetics, for Hutcheon, is "the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness", an assumption further reflected in liberal humanist notions such as "authorial originality and authority" and "the separation of the aesthetic from the political" (xii). While this dynamic is typically applied to theories of authorship in Wallace (Staes 2014), the humanistic assumption of a unified 'reader' of Wallace has yet to be fully explored. Indeed, the incorporation of Freudian metapsychology - which disputes the idea of self-identical, humanistic subject - presents new challenges for the reader of Wallace, which are explored throughout this thesis.

This thesis' specific focus on psychoanalytic reading in Wallace echoes my concerns with existing psychoanalytic readings of Wallace, particularly in the works of respected critics Marshall Boswell and Mary K Holland. Though the relationship between Wallace and Freud is undoubtedly proven in these works, particularly in relation to concepts like primary narcissism, literary diagnosis and cure, there remains a question around the validity of psychoanalytic concepts in relation to Wallace's texts - the sheer self-awareness that these texts display towards psychoanalytic theory (and psychoanalytic literary theory in particular) has typically warned critics away
from attempting a full-scale psychoanalytic reading of Wallace's texts. To explore this dilemma, and the fraught relationship between psychoanalytic reading and literary criticism that it arguably presupposes, this thesis draws on the insights of Peter Brooks, Shoshanna Felman and Paul Ricoeur, each of whom has considered the links between psychoanalytic thought, critical paradigms and the art of interpretation. By highlighting the productive theme of *acting-out* (transference-neurosis) for these thinkers, I suggest new ways of interpreting Wallace's texts through psychoanalysis, which take into account the inherent self-consciousness and self-reflexivity of those texts towards Freudian ideas.

Finally, some notes on the style of this thesis. The term 'reader' (in scare quotes) is used to highlight instances of constructed or overdetermined forms of reading in Wallace's texts, which are alternately described in this thesis as 'reading-positions'. This usage typically involves contrasting the hypothetical 'readers' of Wallace (as defined under our model) with pre-existing discourses about reading and interpreting Wallace's works. These discourses necessarily involve claims about empirical readers, which are figured without scare-quotations to the extent that they comprise assumed or as-yet-unexamined reading-positions in relation to Wallace. Italicisation is employed to highlight specific usages of thesis terminology, particularly in the formulation of *readers who identify*, *readers who critique*, *readers who narrate* and *readers who negate* the David Foster Wallace text. Like the governing conceptual term *acting-out* (also italicised), these terms refer to a range of processes and subject-positions, which this thesis canvasses in Chapters 1 and
2; italicisation highlights the fact that these are composite terms, reconstructed through their initial theorisation to their complex appearance in Wallace's texts. Though effort has been made to limit the use of first-person rhetoric, the thesis occasionally deploys first-person statements ('I think that...', 'I want to explore...') to distinguish thesis-specific claims from their counterparts in Wallace's work and reception. Moreover, the thesis uses inclusive phrasings such as 'We have seen...' and 'How are we to...?', primarily as a means of orienting readers to specific aspects of an argument or text. Given the proliferation of subject- and reader-positionings at stake in Wallace's works, it is helpful to keep one's own positionings as simple and readable as possible.

**Conclusion: The ‘Fiction-Writer's Reader’**

This thesis aims to provide a meta-rhetorical analysis of the term ‘reader' as it appears in the works of American metafictionalist David Foster Wallace, which takes into account the author's own complex relationship with what this study calls critical rhetoric. This latter term suggests a rather wide field of study, which might potentially include everything from hermeneutic philosophy – the philosophy of interpretation and exegesis, as embodied and exemplified in theorists such as Paul Ricoeur – to more theoretically-inclined and deconstructive forms of criticism and critique. In order to narrow this field, and provide an effective account of Wallace and critical rhetoric in ‘the time we have together’ (that is, within appropriate limits of the dissertation
style), I have elected to focus on a simple, yet arguably illuminating, piece of critical rhetoric: the complex construction of ‘reader(s)’, the reference to, imagination of or abstract theorising of what literary criticism often calls, quite simply, ‘the reader’. This study highlights the effective ubiquity of this terminology within contemporary David Foster Wallace Studies, and investigates the extent to which critical statements about Wallace depend on concomitant statements about the ideal or implied Wallace ‘reader’.

Moreover, this approach builds on this research by considering the extent to which Wallace’s own rhetoric about reading and interpretation – for example, his famous maxim that fiction should function as “an act of communication between one human being and another” (Wallace 1997: 144) – have helped shape our use of the term ‘reader’, particularly given the complex imagination of readers, writers, critics and texts demonstrably at stake in Wallace’s texts. It is no secret that David Foster Wallace idealised his readers, through statements which sometimes elevate the ‘reader’ to a position of “god”-like meaning and significance (in McCaffery 2012). In response, this study enquires as to whether Wallace’s texts ‘imply’ their reader as well, and whether this process of implication or enclosure can serve as an adequate descriptive basis for Wallace’s broader hermeneutic or post-theoretical ambitions. This enquiry is significant, I think, because it highlights those aspects of Wallace’s texts which tend to defy description, to resist easy articulation or explanation, whilst also exploring the extent to which Wallace scholarship observes and represents this resistance as a matter of critical significance. However, as I argue herein, the ‘reader’ is not only implied, but
explicitly and effectively performed in Wallace's fictions – despite their far-reaching theoretical ambitions, it can often appear as if all Wallace is trying to do is repeat his reader on the page, as often and as complexly as possible. To read Wallace's rhetorics about reading, then, is to observe repetition in Wallace's texts and extra-literary utterances (including, of course, his essayistic and journalistic works). When I observe this repetition, I become estranged from the Wallace text, and become curious about my own supposed status as 'reader'.

Under my psychoanalytic model, literary 'estrangement' is refigured as resistance to interpretation, theorised here as a form of acting-out. It is this dizzying effect of estrangement, whose basis lies in a strange kind of repetition, which I am committed to observing in the time we have, and of demonstrating through close readings of Wallace's three major short story collections, Girl with Curious Hair, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men and Oblivion. In order to read these works, the study suggests an alternative critical rhetoric, which views repetition (in this case, of the 'reader') as a kind of “acting-out”, which I model here through a post-Freudian critical perspective which emphasises the connections between metafictions (fictions about fictions) and the theoretical phenomenon of transference. The thesis uses the term 'post-Freudian' to describe a critical paradigm in which Wallace's relationship to classical psychoanalysis has been fully considered. However, this usage it at least partially ironic, since it presupposes the question of psychoanalysis as an explanatory discourse, and proposes some kind of ironic 'return to Freud' in any event. As Felman writes:
how Freudian is a Freudian reading? Up to what point can one be Freudian? At what point does a reading start to be 'Freudian enough'? What is a Freudian reading, and in what way can it be defined and measured? (Felman 2012: 103)

When Wallace wrote or spoke about performance, he invariably wrote or spoke about the transference, which Sigmund Freud artfully described as an acting-out of the analysand’s past as a literal “force” in the present. Likewise, and perhaps despite Wallace’s sophisticated relationship to Freudian theory, and indeed with virtually every kind of literary “Theory” under the sun (Kelly 2010), I think that there is something left to be said about the persistence of Freudian tropes in Wallace’s short fictions, particularly Oblivion, which has been taken as evidence that “Wittgenstein’s solution” – in Wallace, that of an enclosed language-game between predetermined or over-determined ‘speakers’ – “might not be enough” to solve the interpretive dilemmas of Wallace’s late-phase fictions about fiction (Boswell 2013: 155). Yet if this is the case, if Oblivion represents an apotheosis or antithesis to Wallace’s avowed literary project – a counterpoint, in other words, to ideas like literary empathy, suspicious hermeneutics and interpretive abstraction already at stake in contemporary Wallace scholarship – then it remains to be seen whether such ideas hold up inside the ‘Nightmare of Consciousness’ diagnosed by Boswell (2013).

If Wallace’s texts can comprise such nightmares, then I believe that the Freudian ambit of Wallace can be theorised further, in ways which expose the literalistic, imaginative and abstract rhetorics at stake in Wallace, and whether the idea of performative acting-out ultimately supplants or
supersedes the kinds of “act of communication” argued for in Wallace’s earlier fictions. Moreover, this counterpoint reading, which is conscious of existing readings of Freudian and Lacanian psychology in Wallace (Boswell, 2003; Holland, 2006), and of Wallace’s relationship to ‘suspicious’ or exposure-oriented hermeneutics (Kelly, 2010; Hayes-Brady, 2010), but which nevertheless sees the strange pertinence of Freud for Wallace’s short fictions, particularly when it comes to themes such as performance and transference. If Wallace’s texts constitute a kind of ‘game’ with their reader, then I would argue that this game is transferential – it depends, in other words, on Wallace’s estranged (yet also estranging) relationship to Freudian themes and tropes, particularly in later texts like *Oblivion*. To further the case for psychoanalysis in relation to Wallace’s broad-ranging and rhetorically-complex works, the present study considers the intentional and rhetorical mysteries posed by Wallace’s treatment of the transference, that is, of *acting-out*. What is ‘acted-out’ or repeated in Wallace’s fiction? More often than not, the ‘reader’ – at least, that is the case I intend to make clear in the following chapters, by providing a versatile review of Wallace’s statements about ‘readers’, his critical rhetoric of the ‘reader’. Of all the possible reading-positions suggested in Wallace’s psychoanalytically-aware fictions, and adopted in influential interpretations of that work, *certain ‘readers’ repeat*.
CHAPTER 1
“an act of communication”

It’s the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction: ‘I don’t really care what it is I say, I care only that you like it. But since your good opinion is the sole arbiter of my success and worth, you have tremendous power over me, and I fear you and hate you for it.’ This dynamic isn’t exclusive to art. But I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader.

(Wallace, in McCaffery 2012: 25)

Introduction: Critical Paradigms in David Foster Wallace Studies

This chapter investigates key areas of concern in contemporary David Foster Wallace scholarship, in order to highlight the complex significance of the term ‘reader’ in relation to Wallace and his works. By reviewing antecedent claims about the relationship between Wallace and the reader, the present chapter provides a preliminary working account of self-reflexivity in Wallace scholarship, as indicated by the field’s complex treatment of three concepts – empathetic identification, suspicious critique and critical abstraction. These concepts are, I think, essential to the way we talk about
Wallace, especially when considering the self-reflexive nature of the author’s rhetoric on reading and interpretation. Nevertheless, as the critics engaged with in this chapter have all pointed out, these self-reflexive aspects of Wallace’s fictional project remain ambiguously defined in relation to the author’s plain-spoken insistence that fiction is (or should be) “an act of communication between one human being and another” (Wallace 1997: 144).

While empathy is undoubtedly the most prominent angle for discussing this kind of ambiguity, close attention to the scholarship reveals a far more complex critical paradigm, which expresses a diverse range of theoretical and post-theoretical discourses on criticism and reading (and which incorporates, of course, Wallace’s more overt ventures into these subjects in numerous articles, essays and interviews). Following from the concerns with paradigmatic language outlined in the introduction, my aim here is to provide a foundational sense of this self-reflexive ambiguity in Wallace’s texts, particularly as it impacts on contemporary critical narratives around those texts. In so doing, this chapter provides further elaboration of the term ‘reader’ within contemporary Wallace scholarship.

On this basis, it is of course pertinent to begin the present study with a recapitulation of Wallace research to date, especially when that research is itself highly concerned with what the author had to say about the practice and reception of fiction. It is no secret that Wallace had ideas on how texts (including his own) were to be read, and that many of these ideas have been thoroughly canvassed already in Wallace Studies, particularly in major contributions from Marshall Boswell (2003; 2013; 2014), Adam Kelly (2010a;
2010b; 2014; 2015), Mary K Holland (2004; 2013), Clare Hayes-Brady (2010; 2013), Lee Konstantinou (2012), David Hering (2010; 2016), Toon Staes (2014) and Stephen Burn (2012a; 2012b; 2013). In these works, and in the burgeoning field influenced by these works, Wallace’s articulations of the reader-text relationship have inspired a wide range of self-reflexive interpretive approaches, within which the role of the critic, and the functions of criticism as a communicative practice, are placed into decisive question. Meanwhile, Wallace’s forceful arguments for ideas like literary empathy, the critique of postmodernity, the role of the author and the nature of metafiction are notoriously complex, and remain difficult to disentangle from their presentation in his equally-complex fictions. This particular sense of difficulty is a motivating focus for the present study – like the critics considered here, I am interested in the ways that Wallace’s texts have anticipated or impacted upon their own critical reception, and the ways in which scholarship to date has effectively responded to this dynamic.

By retracing the paradigmatic language of contemporary Wallace Studies, and the kinds of interpretive difficulties raised by this language, this chapter thus lays the essential groundwork for the close analyses of Wallace to follow. As suggested in the introduction, the overt self-reflexivity of Wallace literary project can be effectively described as a form of repetition – specifically, a return to or reprisal of psychoanalytic discourses about the reader-text relationship. As this chapter demonstrates, the key index of such repetition is the extent to which ‘readers’ are discussed and contested in Wallace’s work and reception. While reviewing the baseline idea of self-
reflexivity in Wallace, then, I have also sought to connect this idea with the
diverse reader-positioning strategies that this idea makes possible, whilst
observing the repetition of particular psychoanalytic reading-tropes within
the works of prominent Wallace scholars. The idea that there is already a
critical rhetoric in Wallace’s fiction, and that attempts to reconfigure that
rhetoric end up repeating it in strange ways, is described here as an escalation
of interpretive stakes. The foundations of this claim are established through
this chapter and its methodological counterpart, which take up the question
of the Wallace ‘reader’ from two different angles. By retracing the idea of an
“act of communication” through prominent works within the field, this
chapter considers the self-reflexive rhetoric at stake in Wallace’s fiction, and
the literalistic, imaginative and abstract possibilities suggested by that
rhetoric. But having connected this self-reflexivity to a particular critical trope
– reference to or repetition of the ‘reader’ – this chapter also frames the
psychoanalytically-informed discussions about repeating, reading and
transference-neurosis which follow in Chapter 2. If Wallace’s texts are as
concerned with the ‘reader’ as they repeatedly say they are, then there is a case
to be made that certain concerns repeat. By locating specific repetitions, and
considering what it is for a ‘fiction about fiction’ to repeat itself, this study will
subsequently ground its finding in the Freudian idea of acting-out, whilst also
gesturing, perhaps by way of exhaustion, towards the limits of a
psychoanalytic reading of Wallace. I have said that Wallace’s metafictional
works appear uniquely conscious of their ‘reader’, whilst maintaining that this
literary self-consciousness is an estranging literary phenomenon, whose
effects may be better described as a kind of acting-out, a performance of the ‘reader’ in place of actual critical dialogue with actual readers.

By reviewing the specific kinds of repetition at stake in Wallace’s rhetoric of the ‘reader’, and the complex theoretical language used to justify this repetition, we can better understand the self-reflexivity of Wallace Studies as a critical paradigm. Broadly, this study argues that the field of literary criticism involves making significant and persuasive claims about texts, about authors and about readers. Wallace’s texts, which are paradigmatically aware of their situation ‘as’ texts, amplify and exemplify this particular critical situation, whilst exploring and challenging that situation’s preconditions in postmodern literary theory (‘Greatly Exaggerated’, 1997), televisual irony (‘E Unibus Pluram’, 1997), biography (‘Joseph Frank’, 2005) and so forth. As a consequence of this sophisticated, far-ranging and self-conscious literary project, the field of Wallace Studies is also uniquely aware of its own status as literary criticism. Whether advocating the author as herald for a new literary vanguard (Boswell 2003: 1), investigating the significance of “Sincerity” (Kelly 2010), “hyperawareness” (Hayes-Brady 2013) and narcissistic ambivalence (Holland 2013) in his works, or considering pertinent theoretical and ideological frameworks in which those works can be understood (Konstantinou 2012; Staes 2014; Hering 2010), major scholarship on Wallace has seen the acts of reading and critical exegesis placed into question time and time again, in a manner which both indicates the complex interpretive challenges at stake in Wallace’s texts. This critical self-awareness is one of the
most interesting things about contemporary Wallace Studies, and is also particularly suited to an author like Wallace, whose self-reflexive engagements with cultural, theoretical and philosophical paradigms are also considered here. On this basis, this chapter connects these major works with the preliminary concerns of this thesis, with each section highlighting a particular question around the concept of an author-reader relationship in Wallace’s works and reception. Like Wallace’s texts, Wallace scholarship is often explicitly concerned with what it takes to ‘make a claim’, whether that claim is about the world we live in, the various worlds imagined in fiction, or the more abstract and theoretical worlds suggested by literary criticism and the metafictional text. However, in order to investigate the vast wealth of claims at stake in contemporary Wallace Studies, it is arguably important to take a step back and distinguish between different paradigmatic approaches to the author and his works, particularly as indicated or implied by the works of major scholars in the field. By retracing these approaches, this chapter outlines four effective senses of the ‘reader’ in relation to Wallace and his literary project, which are investigated further in Chapters 3-6 of the present study.

Taken together, these ‘readers’ provide insight into what Wallace meant when he described fiction as “an act of communication”, and what scholars mean when discussing the ideas and commitments at stake in the author’s expansive works. Viewed apart, these ‘readers’ can help us understand the complex paradigmatic and rhetorical stakes of those same
works. By distinguishing between literal readers who identify, imaginative readers who critique, abstract readers who narrate and transferential-neurotic readers who negate, this study presents a meta-rhetoric for the Wallace reader, which reflects and reflects upon the games with literality, imagination and abstraction at stake in Wallace’s short fictions and essays. The plurality of reading-positions at stake in Wallace’s fiction borders on the hyperbolic, but close attention to existing scholarship on the Wallace ‘reader’ indicates that these are specialised areas of concern. Whether discussing the idea of an “act of communication”, challenging this notion or considering its more abstract bases, I find that the most estranging thing about the Wallace’s rhetoric of the ‘reader’ is that rhetoric’s reprisal of certain Freudian ideas about reading, repetition and transference-neurosis. In advance of this psychoanalytic account, I have elected to highlight the ways in which estrangement – alternately figured as interpretive uncertainty, ambiguity or antagonism – has been most effectively dealt with in existing Wallace scholarship. Crucially, this approach allows for a more direct articulation of the typology put forth here, concerning statements or rhetorical claims about the ‘reader’.

The present chapter provides substantive weight to these ideas by considering their complex articulation by Wallace and Wallace scholarship, and by specifically highlighting the significance of the term ‘reader’ in these same discussions. With Boswell and Kelly, I revisit the theme of empathetic identification in Wallace’s early rhetorics on fiction, whilst considering the forms of immediacy, immanence or common-sense understanding revealed
therein. With Holland and Hayes-Brady, I take up the question of suspicious critique in Wallace’s works, with a particular focus on narrative, thematic and characterological analysis of texts in a postmodern context. Finally, with Staes, I consider the kinds of critical abstraction conveyed by Wallace’s works, particularly when examined alongside more abstract contexts of critical rhetoric and reader-response theory established in the introduction. Here I note that the theorisation of the ‘implied author’ (Staes 2014) provides both a preliminary abstract basis for contemporary Wallace Studies (allowing for more broad-ranging engagements with the field), whilst also repeating certain escalations or anxieties from precedent analyses of the Wallace ‘reader’. It is at this point that our concern with the ‘implied reader’ becomes viable, and our escalatory move towards a fourth reading position – which recognises and reflects on such repetitions of such ‘readers’ in critical rhetoric – becomes significant.

“Wallace identifies (with) the reader” –

Literality, Reference and Repetition

Who are ‘we’ in relation to David Foster Wallace and his texts? This is a question that gets asked often, albeit indirectly, by scholars in the field of Wallace Studies. We are, after all, the nominally-intended audience of Wallace’s fictions – the readers buying his books, actually reading, thinking about and talking about them and so forth. But we are also led to ask this kind
of question by Wallace's own texts, particularly when those texts remain involved with complex questions of identity, agency and response, and especially when considering the significance of terms like ‘reader’, ‘reading’ and ‘readership’. For one paradigmatic example, we could consider an essay like ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’ (1997), which contains many of the author’s most strident and compelling statements about “a certain subgenre of pop-conscious fiction, written mostly by young Americans” (49), as well as postmodern irony and ‘millennial’ attitudes towards reading and interpretation. These statements are couched in the language of television and “televisual culture” (49), and threaded through Wallace’s famous critique of same – for the author, the evolution of television as both medium and cultural mediator had made it “invulnerable to […] transfiguring assault” (50), that is, insusceptible to the kinds of suspicious and abstract ironies deployed in metafiction or postmodern “Image-fiction” (51-54). In ‘Pluram’, this ironic invulnerability has something to do with the attitudes and expectations of readers, and the ways in which television “managed to become its own best analyst” (30), by repurposing these expectations for the viewing audience:

‘Television’, after all, literally means ‘seeing-far’; and our six hours daily not only helps us feel up-close and personal at like the Pan-Am Games or Operation Desert Shield but also, inversely, trains us to relate real live personal up-close stuff the same way we relate to the distant and exotic, as if separated from us by physics or glass, extant only as performance, awaiting our cool review […] Television has pulled the old dynamic of reference and redemption inside out: it is now television that takes elements of the postmodern – the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm
and rebellion – and bends them to the ends of spectation and consumption (64, original emphasis)

There is quite a lot to unpack in this sort of statement – the reference to television’s ‘literal’ meaning, the idea of feeling “up-close and personal” whilst distancing ourselves from “real live personal up-close stuff”, and the complex implied links between ideas like reference, redemption, spectation and consumption. But for now, it is sufficient to highlight that these issues, as presented by the author, are in some way supposed to be our issues. In the versatile essayistic style of ‘Pluram’, Wallace makes it clear that the various attitudes of television and fiction being considered are extensions of audience expectation – from routine use of the third-person, to the imagining of “fiction writers as a species”, “oglers” and “viewers”, to figures like “Joe Briefcase” – “the average U.S. lonely person” (23) – who effectively personifies the kinds of consumption and spectatorship avowed by the essay. In his oft-cited concluding remarks to ‘Pluram’, Wallace suggests that “the new rebels” of avant-garde literature “might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists” (81) – that is, artists who are defined by their “willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law” (81-82). But this strange televisual polemic, of lurkers, starers, oglers, viewers, yawners, eye-rollers, nudgers and “ironists”, remains ultimately concerned with the act of the interpreter, as Wallace concludes the essay on an ambivalent note: “I guess that means we all get to draw our own conclusions. Have to. Are you immensely pleased” (82).
When Wallace talks about the ‘reader’, there is always an element of identification at stake. But what is being identified? Or rather, who is being identified with? These kinds of questions have animated Wallace scholarship for well over a decade, particularly in major works by Marshall Boswell and Adam Kelly, which investigate complex questions of empathy, sentimentality and sincerity within Wallace’s fictions and broader literary project. In the influential *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), Boswell aligns Wallace’s project with a kind of “third wave modernism” (1), whose characteristics are drawn from the complex strategies of modernist and postmodernist fiction in the 20th century. For Boswell, Wallace’s literary innovations stem from his attention to the epistemological and ontological consequences of postmodernity for the fiction writer (10), particularly when it comes to issues like empathetic identification and suspicious irony. On the one hand, Wallace’s texts partake in a modernist “valorization of individual subjective experience” – hyper-complex and intentionally indeterminate, Wallace’s texts play on epistemological questions of definition, sense and meaning (10). On the other hand, these texts also partake in a decidedly postmodernist shift of emphasis “from epistemology to ontology, the study of metaphysical grounds, essentially of being” (11). In this latter sense, the Wallace text operates in a curious intellectual space, whose grounds appear essentially uncertain – this is certainly borne out by a text like ‘Pluram’, which places postmodern and televisual ontology squarely within its sights, whilst deliberately failing to conclude itself outside of those frameworks. This sort of uncertainty has been noted by critics like A.O. Scott, who asks “Are
[Wallace's] harangues against the tyranny of irony meant to be taken in earnest, or are they artfully constructed simulacra of what a sincere anti-ironist might sound like?” (2000: Para 10).

Responding to Scott, Boswell suggests that Wallace's texts are indeed earnest in some sense – whilst repeating key strategies from modernist and postmodernist literature, and partaking heavily in the theoretical discourses of his time, Wallace is unique in his attention to “the delusion that cynicism and naiveté are mutually exclusive” (in Boswell: 16), a focus which enables the author to examine and potentially get beyond certain generic and intentional restrictions through effective communication with his reader. The result, for Boswell, is that Wallace's texts “succeed in creating a special, surprisingly intimate zone of communication, of subjective interaction, that is unlike anything else in contemporary literature” (19). For Boswell, this sense of communication is surprising because it inheres in a context of sophisticated uncertainty, of the kind frequently represented in fictions like Infinite Jest (1996). Nevertheless, it is there, plain as day, in Wallace's texts, for example when the author speaks to the differences between “good art” and “so-so art” in the McCaffery interview – the key difference, Wallace suggests, has “something to do with love”, or rather “with having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love, instead of the part that just wants to be loved” (2012: 50).

Wallace's unvarnished emphasis on literary love indicates just how seriously the author took the idea of literature as a vehicle for empathetic
identification, or what Boswell terms “subjective interaction” (2003: 17). Moreover, it arguably highlights the author’s strident sense of the literal – in our rhetoric, the sense of a reader ‘beyond’ the text, a non-figurative identity to whom the text might address its various declarations of love (See Chapter 3). I believe that Boswell’s work highlights literalistic and figurative dilemmas which are central to Wallace’s fictions, and is a necessary resource for talking about empathy, identification and literality in those fictions. These dilemmas often hinge on the idea that Wallace’s texts are, in a paraphrase of his own words, “both diagnosis and cure” (Boswell 2003: 17) – that is, they are in one sense an epistemological (or modernist) diagnostic tool, and in the other a kind of ontological or postmodern “cure” for the various symptoms thus diagnosed. In other words, Boswell’s work helps inform the idea that Wallace both identifies and identifies with his reader, and explores these ideas through the theoretical lenses of modernist and postmodernist theory. Understanding David Foster Wallace proceeds to unpack this doubled sense of the Wallace text through the twin themes of “ironic awareness” and “gooey” sentiment or sentimentality (17), in following complex claim about the author and his intentions:

Wallace’s work, in its attempt to prove that cynicism and naiveté are mutually exclusive, treats the culture’s hip fear of sentiment with the same sort of ironic self-awareness with which sophisticates in the culture portray ‘gooey’ sentimentality; the result is that hip irony is ironized in such a way that the opposite of hip irony – that is, gooey sentiment – can emerge [...] He does not merely join cynicism and naiveté; rather, he employs cynicism – here figured as sophisticated self-reflexive irony – to recover a learned form of heartfelt
naiveté, his work’s ultimate mode and what the work ‘really means’, a mode Wallace equates with the ‘really human’ (17)

Notably, Boswell is quick to distinguish this claim – that Wallace really means to recover a sophisticated “form of heartfelt naiveté” in fiction – from the idea that cynicism and naiveté are “merely” conjoined themes in Wallace’s texts. The ambivalent juxtaposition of the cynical and the sentimental in Wallace’s works, particularly his early fictions, does appear geared towards this sort of identification – that is, a progression from sophistication to earnestness, from the literary and complex to the literal and ‘really human’ dimensions of fiction. This dynamic is of course reflected in Wallace’s own rhetoric, particularly when the author suggests things like “Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it’d find a way both to depict this dark world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it” (in McCaffery 2012: 26), or that “fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being” (26, original emphasis). Suggesting a ‘reader’ is one thing, and referring to them is another; this is something that Boswell’s work, in its readings of the sentimental, the sophisticated and the human in Wallace, sets out to accomplish.

In Boswell’s works, particularly Understanding David Foster Wallace, this author-reader relationship can be effectively described as erotic. From his complex articulations of love and dialogue, to articulations of the reader as “lover” of the text, to thorough readings of Freudian and Lacanian psychology in Wallace’s works, Boswell arrives at certain psychologically-informed claims about Wallace ‘reader’, whose significance is often framed by human sexuality
and the theory of mind. Sex forms a kind of substitute literality in Boswell’s reading of Wallace, for example when he speaks of the author’s “desire to build a text that treats its reader like a lover” (2003: 113), reflecting the exegetical impulses of (in Wallace’s words) an “architect who could hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetrate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict” (in Boswell: 114). These are complex referential statements. They certainly equate the act of reading and the act of sex, even if that latter appears bound up in Wallace's ambivalent feelings about hating, feeling and loving “enough” to perpetrate a “special kind of cruelty” towards the reader. Nevertheless, this approach provides Boswell with the tools to understand Wallace’s early approaches to empathy and identification, particularly in instances of doubled or dichotomous meaning. This approach appears again, in a more refined form, in Boswell’s contributions to A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies, a collection which he edited alongside Stephen Burn. Here, Boswell posits that:

The intrinsic complexity of Wallace’s books demands close attention to their unique organization and verbal density; but at the same time, these works insistently reach outside themselves, through layered allusions, metaleptic jumps, and a thematic obsession with connection (2013, xi)

While this appears to have much less to do with sentimentality, the idea of a text “reach[ing] outside” of itself is crucial to how we understand Wallace’s works, and their peculiar claims upon our attentions, investments and identifications. The thematic “obsession with connection” theorised by Boswell help us understand the epistemological and ontological ambit of those works as well – Wallace’s texts appears eternally caught up in a
performative contradiction, calling the reader's attentions inwards (towards self-consciousness and complexity) and outwards (towards allusion, metalepsis, and literal ‘reality’) “at the same time”, perhaps ambivalently. These references ‘beyond’ the text, and more often than not to readers outside of or beyond the text, are a crucial part of Wallace’s own complex rhetoric on reading, something which I consider much further in Chapter 3. For now, suffice it to say that Boswell’s subtly erotic approach to interpreting Wallace has proven particularly valuable to the present study – though my approach to Freudian hermeneutics differs somewhat (See Chapter 2), I can thank Boswell for illuminating some of the gooier sophistications of Wallace and his literary project, and suggest that there is more to his textual erotics than meets the eye.

Through this sustained emphasis on identification, often conveyed in the more metaphoric form of what we might call ‘literal literary love’, Wallace’s complex rhetoric on fiction anticipates a range of interpretive issues, including issues around the identity and empathetic agency of the reader. In the dual epistemological/ontological model advanced by Boswell, we can begin to highlight areas of concern for contemporary scholarship. The first is an insistence on reference– that is, epistemological identification or location of a term in its proper contexts. With their expansive sense of place and detail, Wallace’s texts exhaust what Stephen Burn and Matt Tresco have called the “encyclopaedic” dimensions of metafiction (Burn 2012: 27; Tresco 2012: 121), whilst also exposing the ideas of definition and encyclopaedic containment as “an impossible, elusive quest” for semantic and
epistemological certainty (Tresco: 114). In one sense, then, to identify is to refer, even if this act of definition occurs in contexts of maximal epistemological uncertainty. Wallace’s texts consistently repeat and refer to this kind of dilemma, and often break down complex issues into questions about the meaning of words, as in the essay ‘Authority and American Usage’ (2005), a review of modern American lexicography.

On this basis, the present study is partly premised on the idea that the act of definition is certainly at stake in Wallace’s ontological critique of postmodernity, particularly when placed into juxtaposition with the literal fact of reading – more often than not, with the strangely literalistic experience of reading Wallace’s texts. In other words, I see a significant parallel between the ways in which Wallace talks about reading (as a “human” or even “really human” exchange) and the ways he writes about ‘readers’; one of the defining characteristics of Wallace’s fictional project is that project’s strange insistence that reading is a non-figurative event, or rather that it cannot be exhaustively figured or defined by the writer. Again, this sense of literality comports with Wallace’s idea of fiction as “an act of communication between one human being and another” (1997: 144). Notably, Clare Hayes-Brady’s work challenges this sense of the literal in Wallace’s works when by highlighting the extent to which, in the “act of communication” claim, “Wallace was not so much fine-tuning the craft of storytelling as he was investigating the reality of communication” (2010: 34, emphasis mine). Before turning our attention to this work, however, it is pertinent to consider whether the question of literality – with all of its erotic, definitional and intentional uncertainties – can
resolve itself on its own terms, and whether those terms are not in fact anticipated in Wallace’s own rhetorics about reading and interpretation.

When we are what we call readers ‘of’ Wallace, we are inevitably repeating certain attitudes and assumptions about the ‘reader’ suggested by Wallace, particularly around empathising with the text in the experience of reading. At the same time, however, this sense of ‘literal reading’ is not exactly subtle in Wallace’s works – we can always consider a text like ‘Octet’ (1999), whose exhaustive style defines and over-defines the activities of the reader to a point of near-absurdity (See Chapter 4). But when conveyed in the various forms of empathy, erotic connection or subjective interaction, Wallace’s claims about identifying with and within the text take on a kind of plain-language or common-sense authority, one which propels his texts beyond epistemological questions of identity towards ontological questions of agency and even intentionality. Two questions arise from this trajectory. First, when we talk about the ‘reader’ of Wallace, or of any literary text, are we simply referring to our own reading experiences in a generic sense? And second, are we making particular claims about the identity and agency of ‘other’ readers as well?

These kinds of questions are taken up in the works of Adam Kelly, as in the influential essays ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in U.S. Fiction’ (2010) and ‘David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas’ (2014). Like Boswell, Kelly is concerned with the capacities of the Wallace text to appeal beyond itself, specifically through the discovery and indirect recovery of
sincerity as a meta-literary theme. Kelly’s modelling of sincerity highlights the existential and intentional stakes of Wallace’s literary project, and the complex presentation of these stakes in texts such as ‘Octet’. For Kelly, traditional sincerity is a mode which communicates the intentions and identity of a speaker, which is to be distinguished from authenticity, which figures communication in a more performative or non-identical sense (2010: 132-135). This distinction is, perhaps by design, rendered highly unstable in Wallace’s texts, which offer any number of conflicting and conflicted perspectives on the role of the Wallace speaker, more often than not the narrator(s) of respective Wallace texts (139). Addressing this uncertainty, Kelly locates the author’s style alongside French critical theorist Jacques Derrida, highlighting the theme of ontological paradox as a defining characteristic of both writers:

[Wallace and Derrida] both develop a writing that relentlessly interrogates its own commitments, and a logic that reflects back on itself to the greatest degree possible. In doing so they aim to offer a critical alternative to what Paul Ricoeur has termed a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, the prevailing approach to literature and culture that emphasizes what it sees as the blindnesses caused by ideological investment, historical ignorance, and psychological repression (2010: 138)

For Kelly, this critical alternative is thus framed as a kind of self-reflexive paradox. Kelly highlights ‘Octet’ as an instance where the Wallace text, despite or perhaps because of its anxious “self-conscious pre-empting of its own reception” (144), succeeds in gesturing beyond its own highly-fraught reception contexts, paradoxically accommodating sincere intentions amidst a maximally insincere style. Bound by their own self-reflexive utterances,
Wallace’s narrators and interlocutors provide ample evidence of this paradoxical sense in the author’s project as a whole, particularly when it comes to questions of authorship and intentionality. By retracing these kinds of themes, Kelly’s work provides unique insights into ontologies of authorship and spectatorship in those fictions, as “structured and informed” by the judgment of an empirical and/or hypothetical reader, whom Kelly identifies as “the text’s true other”, and whose agency and identity are a limiting threshold for the workings of the Wallace text more broadly (144-145).

Kelly is a key influence on the present study, particularly when it comes to locating the epistemological and ontological questions posed by contemporary Wallace Studies. Whilst I have differing opinions on the meaning of ‘Octet’ (Cunningham, 2015), and on the value of Ricoeur and suspicious hermeneutics to Wallace scholarship more broadly (See Chapter 2), I’d say that Kelly’s work does provide a number of essential insights into the dilemmas posed by Wallace’s texts, particularly when it comes to post-critical theories around the themes of “love, trust, faith and responsibility” (139). In this sense, his works can help us understand the complex questions posed by empathy and empathetic identification in Wallace’s works as well. Like Boswell, Kelly is concerned with the strange intentionality of the Wallace text, and with the identification and definition of these intentions within contemporary scholarship. This is to say that both scholars investigate the ways in which empathetic intentionality ‘appears’ in Wallace’s works, particularly in light of the author’s more literalistic statements on fiction and
interpretation, and particularly despite the proliferation of insincere, inauthentic and indeterminate discourses within Wallace’s texts. I think this paradox is best expressed when Kelly in the 2012 sincerity essay, where he asks the following questions about Wallace and the idea of literary performance:

If, according to Wallace, a writer must anticipate how his work will be received by readers in a complex culture, and thus about communicating what sounds true, rather than simply what is true, is he really being fully sincere? Is this a ‘congruence of avowal and actual feeling,’ or even an endorsement of ‘single-entendre principles’? Is there not a schizophrenic and/or manipulative quality at work here that counteracts the good intentions of the artist as a communicator of truth? (2010: 135)

To understand this kind of intentional paradox, it is important to consider the distinctions drawn in Kelly’s work between “suspicious” hermeneutics and what we might call sincere reading. These distinctions emerge out of Wallace’s broad-ranging departures from particular discourses of academia, postmodernity and critical “Theory” (138), which appear to anticipate the more reflexively-figurative nature of contemporary critical exegesis. These concerns are comparable to Boswell’s concern with “sophisticated irony” (2003: 17, see above), which contrasts Wallace’s “use of irony and self-reflexivity” (18) with the other-directed and metaleptic dimensions of his works – again, their effective questioning of “what it is to be a fucking human being” (Wallace, in McCaffery 2012).

While Kelly questions some of the performative bases for this contrast, his work is nevertheless concerned with the idea of an empirical ‘reader’ beyond the text, something which can be effectively demonstrated by considering the functions of suspicion and suspicious reading diagnosed in
the New Sincerity essay (2012). For Kelly, the major dynamic of suspicious reading is that of a “surface and depth model conventionally assumed to characterize secrecy” (143). This model is premised on the discovery of a “conditional secret” within the text, that is, an ulterior meaning or “motive” (141) whose expression is conditioned by forces such as those named above (ideological investment, historical investment and psychological repression). The authentic “exposure” of such depths is, on Kelly’s reading, a predominantly epistemological gesture, which treats the literary text like a puzzle to be solved, typically through the interpolation of critical theories of the subject and discourse. Building on the work of Lionel Trilling, he argues that “authenticity conceives truth as something inward, personal, and hidden, the goal primarily of self-expression rather than other-directed communication” (132), and in which traditional ideas of sincerity – such as Trilling’s definition of sincerity as a “congruence of avowal and actual feeling” (in Kelly: 132) – come to be understood as forms of “bad faith” or “artificial dishonesty” in practice (133). The authentic author recognises and exploits the gaps between avowal and feeling; the sincere author, at least on the traditional reading, aims at a form of public and “other-directed” communication of intent. As interpretive themes, sincerity and authenticity thus concern the intentional identity of a given author or reader – that is, the kinds of meaning or knowledge that might be deduced from authentic (or insincere) discourse versus sincere (or inauthentic) utterance.
The issue, for Kelly, is that Wallace’s works appear to inhabit and exploit both of these definitions at once. Though there is undoubtedly an element of paraphrase in Kelly’s reference to “the good intentions of the artist as a communicator of truth”, there is also little doubt that we are looking to discover such intentions or truths in Wallace’s texts, even as those elements remain uneasily juxtaposed with the “schizophrenic and/or manipulative” qualities of those same texts. By investigating this paradoxical juxtaposition of sincere “good intention” and “bad faith” authenticity, Kelly makes a strong case for a New Sincerity in relation to Wallace’s fictional project, thus providing a complex intentional model for identifying with and interpreting Wallace’s works. Like Boswell’s “third wave modernism” (2003: 1), the sincerity thesis provides both a context and a trajectory for Wallace’s literary project – the context being postmodernity, the “age of theory” or suspicious hermeneutics, in which epistemological and ontological certainty has been effectively displaced by the interpretive interventionism of the academy; the trajectory, then, being a movement through and beyond this interpretive “double-bind”, towards a “complex, contemporary logic” of the text and its intentions. In the introduction to the New Sincerity essay, Kelly lays out the problem thus:

Both sincerity and authenticity, as Trilling defines them, assume a wholeness to the inner self, a lack of internal division regardless of what shows on the outside. The force of appearance/reality and surface/depth distinction is fully at work in both concepts, so that when Andre’ Gide famously remarks that ‘One cannot both be sincere and seem so’, this rejection of outward sincerity still involves a commitment to the wholeness
of inner being that remains a characteristic of authenticity (135-136)

This preliminary reference to “appearance/reality” and “surface/depth” distinctions (of a kind with the critical strategies of interpreters like Ricoeur) is particularly significant for understanding Kelly’s work. The problem he identifies, I think, is that of conditional identification, following the various conditions suggested or imposed by discourses of “ideological investment, historical ignorance, and psychological repression” (2010: 138). The ‘depth’ identified in a literary text is always in some sense a conditioned depth, related in Wallace’s works to the activities of suspicious interpreters – “the America Wallace depicts in his fiction has exactly this character”, writes Kelly, “is already radically over-exposed, with many secrets appearing in open view” (138). This context informs the intentional trajectory of Wallace’s literary project, as articulated by Kelly:

David Foster Wallace’s fiction, in contrast, asks what happens when the anticipation of others’ reception of one’s outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic. Former divisions between self and other morph into conflicts within the self, and a recursive and paranoid cycle of endless anticipation begins, putting in doubt the very referents of terms like ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘inner and ‘outer’. (136)

Kelly’s reference to “the acting self” is also pertinent for the present study. However, whilst I am also concerned with conflict and anticipation in Wallace’s body of work, I have elected to highlight the semantic complexity of terms like “the acting self” as well, and the strange interposition of these terms in Wallace’s rhetorics of fiction and reception. Nevertheless, we can see
already that this rhetoric provides the basis for a new theorisation of identification in metafiction, and indeed of sincere metafiction as per Kelly’s analysis.

One corner of Wallace Studies, then, is specifically and effectively concerned with the idea that “Wallace identifies (with) the reader”, in the doubled sense that his texts pose complex empathetic and intentional questions to the reader, and – I argue – in the sense that they are concerned with literal/empirical readers who identify. The issue, of course, is that while Wallace’s texts can indeed be erotic or sincere, their language is seldom plain, as suggested by Boswell’s reference to “reader/lover[s]” (2003) and “metaleptic jumps” (2013), or Kelly’s theorising of conditional and unconditional speech in Wallace. Subsequently, if there is anything literal in Wallace’s texts, it is supposed to be our experience of reading them. For this reason, when Wallace writes about empathy and literary love, he does so with a particular experience of reading in mind, and very often projects this experience outwards or towards a particular sense of the ‘reader’. It is the gesture beyond the text that interests me the most, particularly as that gesture – particularly in Wallace’s short fiction – is always performed through broader conflicts, including those of authorial intention and definition, ontology and epistemology, empathy and irony, sincerity and suspicion and (in ‘Pluram’) “reference and redemption”. Yet whether taken as one big paradox, or a series of smaller escalating paradoxes, it is clear that Wallace’s body of work presents a unique and complex intentional disposition towards readers who identify, a
disposition which is arguably reflected in Wallace Studies’ utile deployment of the paradoxical as an interpretive mode. Again, this claim will be taken up further in Chapter 3, which investigates the literality and eroticism of Wallace’s early fictions in further conversation with Boswell.

For now, it suffices to say that Wallace’s rhetoric of the reader has had a clear and effective impact on the way his works are read today, as evidenced through the theorisation of empathetic identification as a meta-literary theme in contemporary Wallace Studies. In fact, I would go as far as to say that empathy, as read and spoken about in Wallace’s fiction, forms a kind of common-sense or plain-language basis for our contemporary conversations with the author and his works. This is obviously highly important for our own reader-response analysis of Wallace, since it provides the motive for plain language wherever possible – when talking about something as complex as the ‘reader’ in Wallace’s works, it is thus prudent to ask ourselves precisely how literal our statements about such ‘readers’ can be, despite the characteristic drive to understand ‘literal literary love’ and ‘really human communication’ in our readings of Wallace.

“Wallace Critiques (with) the Reader”

Imagination, Suspicion and Re-Imagination

This brings us back to the key claim under consideration – the positing of fiction as “an act of communication between one human being and another”
(1997: 144). In one sense at least, this idea is literalistic – it goes to the idea of Wallace’s texts as a literal conversation, an empathetic act, a diagnosis and a cure, etc. “To describe Wallace’s texts as interested in connection or communication or alleviating sadness through fiction may already be a cliché” write Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, “but it also happens to be a true cliché” (2012: xii). Nevertheless, this kind of clichéd claim for identity and agency in relation to Wallace’s works is caught up in broader, conflicting contexts – Cohen and Konstantinou’s The Legacy of David Foster Wallace offers a complex representation of these contexts, in which “Everyone everywhere is mediating, re-mediating, intermediating, disintermediating, and hypermediating everyone else” (xvi). Whilst claiming the literal in this fashion, it is important to observe the movement beyond literality in Wallace’s own works as well – that is, their imaginative reappropriation of ideas like identification, like empathy and like literary love – because we will soon find those kinds of ideas drastically re-imagined, refiuged or even hideously “disfigured” (Holland, 2013) in texts like Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (1999). The idea of literary imagination, or of re-imaginaion is of particular interest to me here – what is the difference between, say, an actual or literal reader referred to by Wallace, and the kinds of hypothetical readers, interpreters and interlocutors referred to by Wallace’s fiction?

This question is important, I think, because it helps to indicate certain movements or evolutions in Wallace’s rhetoric of readership, particularly as those texts appear to become increasingly invested in the identity and agency
of the ‘reader’. Hence this study’s return to the idea of suspicion, particularly suspicious and exposure-oriented critique – in the works of Mary K Holland, Clare Hayes-Brady and others, we will be poised to restate the counter-claim that Wallace’s texts do indeed have hidden depths, that their ploys for surface meaning (and for the recognition that surface meaning ought to be the dominant way of reading things, that it is in fact the ‘really human’ way of going about it) can be effectively translated through counter-intentional themes like literary and cultural narcissism, gender politics and gendered linguistics, and of course Wallace’s own highly-suspicious critiques of postmodern life and culture. In the essay ‘Joseph Frank’s Dostoyevsky’, Wallace casts a critical eye on the typical postmodern reader, or at least repeats the kind of person who he would take to be such a ‘reader’. Considering the ideological intentionality of an author like Dostoyevsky, Wallace at one point compels us to:

Ask ourselves why we seem to require of our art an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions, so that contemporary writers have to either make jokes of them or else try to work them in under cover of some formal trick like intertextual quotation or incongruous juxtaposition, sticking the really urgent stuff inside asterisks as part of some multivalent defamiliarization-flourish or some such shit (271)

It is uncanny, of course, that this question – ostensibly posed by critic Joseph Frank, and his literary biography of the Russian author “FMD” (258) – is virtually identical to the kinds of critique posed in ‘E Unibus Pluram’, those of reference and redemption turned inside out, or of the postmodern “ironist” who is “impossible to pin down” by any concerned or suspicious observer (1997: 67, original emphasis). But then again, we are accustomed to finding this sort
of repetition within Wallace’s texts, even his expansive para-literary utterances (interviews et al).

Though these statements about the hypothetical reader are often difficult to ‘pin down’ – Wallace is a gifted ironist himself – they are nevertheless pre-exposed in Wallace’s fictions, more often than not presented through suspicious frameworks like misogyny, toxic masculinity and regressive self-consciousness. In other words, though these elements of Wallace’s texts are expressible in the form of an erotics (as in Boswell) or a hermeneutics (as in Kelly), they are also indicative of an aesthetics. We know this because of the work of scholars like Mary K Holland, who has certainly taken the lead in exposing the narcissistic structures of Wallace’s novels (2004), and indeed of the author’s subsequent critiques of narcissism in texts such as Brief Interviews (Holland 2013). Building on this work, Clare Hayes-Brady has effectively diagnosed the ambivalent gender politics of Wallace’s fiction more broadly, through research which actually exemplifies (perhaps contra Kelly) the value of suspicious, depth-oriented or exposure-centric exegesis in and for those fictions.

In contrast to his early-period fictions – whilst maintaining certain estranging proximities to the idea of fiction as literal literary love – Wallace’s middle-period works irreducibly complicate our understanding of the author’s intentions with regards to the ‘reader’, even as those intentions are (arguably) brought increasingly closer to the reader’s attention over time. This dynamic is typically evidenced through the characteristic evolutions and
involutions of the author’s style between short fiction collections – his treatment of particular themes through narrative, the differing strategies of fragmentation and remediation negotiated by short fictions like ‘Octet’ (1999). On this note, it is pertinent to highlight the sheer difference in one’s reading experience of a text like *Girl with Curious Hair* and a text like *Brief Interviews*. One is an exhaustively fun exercise in postmodern pastiche, the other an exhaustingly confronting piece of work, fragmented by the emergence of the author’s singularly self-referential voice and his repeated references to sexual violence and brutality. Similar dichotomies repeat: empathy and suspicion, epistemological and ontological identification, sincerity and authenticity, etc. But what changes between collections, I think, is the extent to which Wallace effectively re-imagines the literary encounter (See Chapter 2) – rather than attempting to reclaim the literal reader ‘of’ the text, the emergence of Wallace’s “mature” voice signals an intensified focus on the kinds of readers made possible ‘within’, or perhaps even constructed by, his texts. This movement from literality to imagination presents new interpretive difficulties for the contemporary Wallace reader, for whom the epistemological and ontological grounds appear to have shifted once again – rather than dealing with empirical readers beyond the text, we are now supposed to discover hypothetical readers within the text as well.

This study begins tracing these kinds of interpretive stakes by highlighting the persistent and insistent repetition of the term ‘reader’ in Wallace’s work and reception, if only because the movement towards
imagination poses new kinds of epistemological aporia and ontological impasse. By reviewing this escalation of stakes with Holland and Hayes-Brady, the present study thus lays the ground for new imaginative reconstructions of Wallace’s texts, premised on the almost self-reflexive suspicious nature of those texts. This kind of methodology ultimately informs my own approach, both in its reliance on philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur (See Chapter 2) and its attention to Wallace’s rhetorics on reading and interpretation. In this sense, I hope to do justice to the kinds of “logicking work” suggested by Holland (2013: 110), particularly when it comes to subjects like literary love and the strange erotics of the literary encounter in Wallace (See Chapter 4).

In the present study, this logicking work (suspicious reading) comes down to the complex bracketing of the term ‘reader’ for discussion – the evolution of Wallace’s disposition towards such ‘readers’ prompts this study’s subsequent discussions of (literalistic) readers who identify and (imaginative) readers who critique, whilst considering the consequences of that turn itself (See Chapters 3-4). After all, if Wallace’s texts identify, either erotically or diagnostically, isn’t there plenty to be said about what gets identified? This sort of question is exemplified in the works of Mary K Holland, particularly the essays “the art’s heart’s purpose”: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of Infinite Jest’ (2006) and ‘Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men’ (2013). These essays are important in that they highlight the epistemological ambit of Wallace’s literary project, specifically exploring the extent to which Wallace’s texts define and hypothetically judge their own “audience” whilst,
of course, soliciting that audience’s complicity with graphically anti-sympathetic voicings of intention and interpretation. “Comprising 23 separate pieces and 37 or so different voices,” she writes in ‘Mediated Immediacy’:

[Brief Interviews] aggressively explores the warped workings of relationships – largely male-female and primarily their linguistic workings – by creating personae that shock and disgust us with admissions of bad behaviour, then add offense by demanding our identification and understanding (2013: 107)

As with Adam Kelly, Holland’s analysis begins with a kind of theatrical framework, describing an intersection of voices and personae which helps indicate our movement towards imagination – it is already clear that there is room to consider the kinds of ‘readers’ voiced within Wallace’s texts, as well as the “demanding” dynamics of his middle-period fiction in particular (See Chapter 4). But whereas Kelly’s approach identifies Wallace in terms of an “unconditional secret beyond representation”, specifically a paradoxical juxtaposition of the conditional and the unconditional (143), Holland’s work helps show us just how often Wallace conditions the literal intentionality of his texts, or at least those intentions voiced by his imagined ‘Hideous Men’. The “brazen solicitation of empathy for all kinds of mental, physical and emotional disfigurements” in Brief Interviews is, for Holland, the basis for Wallace’s “likewise discomfiting generic disfigurements” (107), particularly his suspicious reworkings of gender and power in texts like ‘Octet’ and the titular ‘Brief Interviews’. Given this brazen and often discomfiting approach on the part of Wallace, it is especially pertinent to define the role of suspicious critique within contemporary Wallace Studies, particularly for scholars influenced by Holland’s work.
When contrasted with the works of Boswell and Kelly, for example, Holland’s work provides us with an alternative modelling of literary intentionality, which takes into account the persistence of suspicious hermeneutics within Wallace’s project more broadly. Such a model, recall, would be tasked with the recovery of hidden meanings within a given text, often relying on the theorisation of textual “depth” or the intervention of emancipatory social discourses (Kelly 2010: 138). Holland’s essay ‘Braving the Narcissistic Loop’ fulfils and arguably exceeds this basic definition of suspicious critique, drawing on the social criticism of Christopher Lasch and Sigmund Freud’s theorisation of primary and secondary narcissism to unpack Wallace’s text’s relationship to irony, and to prosecute the counter-intentional claim that “Infinite Jest fails to deliver on the agenda that Wallace set for it”, specifically through its failure to “recognize and address the cultural drive towards narcissism that fuels and is fuelled by irony” (2006: 218). In Holland’s post-Freudian reading, narcissism presents a kind of infantile and infantilising “repetition compulsion” (236), which thematically over-conditions the majority of Wallace’s texts, whether the author is writing in a narcissistic way or merely diagnosing the narcissistic traits of others. Again, this kind of claim involves both a context and a trajectory. The context, while differing in its emphases, remains largely the same: postmodern uncertainty, specifically leveraged through televisual notions of entertainment and enjoyment. This much is clear when Holland writes about postmodern “recursivity”, responding to the N Katherine Hayles’s theorisation of anti-interiority and “the illusion of autonomy” (C.f. Hayles 1999) in Wallace’s works:
Thus far, critics of *Infinite Jest* overwhelmingly read the novel optimistically, finding in it strong evidence that Wallace succeeded in fulfilling the artistic agenda he set out in his 1993 interview and essay. [...] Rather than view recursivity as the novel’s noble end goal, I point out that this illusion of autonomy [...] still persists through narcissistic desire as an irrational, largely unconscious longing that relentlessly afflicts characters despite their attempts to deny or escape it (225).

However, this trajectory of suspicion – subtly indicated by a distancing from optimism and the positing of “noble end goal[s]” – necessarily involves the identification of depth, in this case the kinds of “irrational” or “largely unconscious longing” at stake in Wallace’s texts. In other words, rather than prioritising contexts and possibilities beyond those texts, Holland’s work prompts us to focus on those possibilities already articulated within them - note also the location of narcissistic desire at the level of imagination, as something which primarily and “relentlessly afflicts characters”. This suspicious modelling of Wallace has had a profound impact on the present study, informing the positive move towards psychoanalytic literary theory (See Chapter 2) and helping to frame discussions of suspicion and readers who critique (See Chapter 4) in particular. To my mind, Holland is among the first major scholars to have effectively engaged with the limits (and indeed the potential failures) of Wallace’s rhetoric on interpretation, and indeed to have challenged that rhetoric on strong theoretical grounds. Following Holland, my study seeks to demonstrate those points at which “recursivity, through the society of consumption and mediation, becomes pathological” within Wallace’s texts (225, emphasis mine).
Nevertheless, this suspicious turn presents new interpretive difficulties for the Wallace reader, particularly one already well-versed in ideas like literary love, empathy, gooey sentiment, new sincerity, and the like. Here again, I think the problem is one of intentional definition – the critical and diagnostic approach suggested by Holland brings with it a renewed epistemological imperative, premised on the rediscovery of surface/depth tensions, both in the author’s texts and in his diverse reception contexts. But how do we do this without compromising the plain-language or commonsense pleasures afforded by Wallace’s rhetoric of fiction? Holland’s essay ‘Mediated Immediacy’ offers one answer, effectively reprising the fraught interplay of epistemological and ontological intent canvassed by Boswell and Kelly above, whilst continuing to advocate a more depth-oriented approach:

Most essentially, [Brief Interviews] continues [Wallace’s] rejection of postmodernism’s unproductive irony in favor of a return to sincerity through fiction. But to this concern about irony, Brief Interviews adds an unflinching critique of narcissism as an impediment to empathy and sincerity, most often as wielded by men in solipsistic ‘relationship’ with women [...] Brief Interviews, then, explores the degree to which men’s sexual desire for women taints and often prevents any attempts by men to extend empathy, or anything like their ‘true’ selves, to women because of the fraught interplay between language, desire, and power (2013: 107, 108)

This approach clearly offers an alternative view on the kinds of erotic and hermeneutic possibilities at stake in Wallace’s fiction. The author’s “unflinching” critique of narcissism here serves as the basis for a depth analysis of gendered and sexualised language in Wallace, which is both exposure-oriented (highlighting the “collection’s ability to compel its reader to do this logicking work”) and resolutely intentional (suggesting that this compulsion
provides the collection’s “ultimate integrity”) (110). The productive juxtaposition of this approach with the “sincerity through metafiction” thesis is, I think, important. Despite differences in emphasis, the ideas that ‘Wallace identifies with the reader’ and ‘Wallace critiques with the reader’ are not, in and of themselves, incompatible. And yet, they are decisively presented as such within Wallace’s fiction – whether treating their “reader/lover” (Boswell), or appealing to their “text’s true other” both conditionally and unconditionally (Kelly), Wallace’s texts exploit the antagonistic dynamics of metafictional irony in profound and often diabolical ways. This is, finally, the kind of antagonism that Holland’s work helps indicate – the imagination of ambivalent human beings, interpreters usually, whose imagined activities are at once suspicious and suspect. This is an idea I explore further in ‘Chapter 4: specifically highlighting the theme of metafictional performance and transferential “acting-out” in Brief Interviews.

With this kind of suspicious perspective in mind, we may thus reconsider the value of something like Paul Ricoeur’s suspicious hermeneutics (See Chapter 2), particularly when dealing with issues like literary empathy and identification. When Wallace talks about the reader, there is always an element of critique at stake – so what is being critiqued? Or rather, who is being critiqued with in Wallace’s texts? Clare Hayes-Brady takes up this question in two essential essays, ‘The Book, The Broom and The Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of David Foster Wallace’ (2010) and “…”: ‘Language, Gender and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster
Wallace’ (2013). Both essays provide vital insight into the role of suspicious hermeneutics in Wallace’s works, with a particular focus on language philosophy and contemporary surface/depth theories of reading and representation. In ‘The Book, The Broom and the Ladder’, Hayes-Brady highlights to the author’s “absolute mimesis of flawed voices”, in part evidenced by his tendency “to avoid omniscient narration in favour of dialogue, first-person narration, or internal-monologue-style third-person narration” (30):

This narrative structure – what I call Wallace’s ‘skeletal narrative’, which involves the undermining and eventual collapse of a surface narrative to reveal the ‘true’ or ‘real’ story, by means of jarring elements planted within the narrative voice itself – was something that Wallace would develop and refine over the whole course of his career, and was one of the great innovations of his writing (30-31).

For Hayes-Brady, this strategy of “absolute” mimesis thus provides the basis for a kind of depth reading of Wallace, specifically highlighting the “jarring” elements and effects of his discourse as a means of collapsing or undermining a particular “surface” narrative. Moreover, this interpretive approach is in part derived out of Paul Ricoeur’s theorisation of “dual identity” – that is, of a conflict between the “inherited and imposed” aspects of the self (idem) and the “creative and self-determining” aspects of that same self (ipse) (in Hayes-Brady: 29). The conflict between idem and ipse in Wallace’s works is reflective of the tensions canvassed above – between sophisticated irony and spontaneous empathy, between conditional and unconditional intentionality, between mediation and immediacy and so forth. Nevertheless, the suspicious re-imagination of these tensions as conflict arguably distinguishes Hayes-
Brady’s work to date, again facilitating our own focus towards the essentially paradoxical (or perhaps simply contradictory) presentation of such tensions within Wallace’s texts. In this regard, her recently-released monograph *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (2016) is to be considered essential reading as well.

Again, this approach is exposure-centric, attuned to the epistemological puzzles posed by Wallace’s fiction. Yet for Hayes-Brady, this kind of exposure has a particular ontological grounding as well. As Holland has suggested, the critical “logicking work” demanded by Wallace’s texts (most often through their use of suspicious or suspect discourse) is an essential component of those text’s attempts at soliciting empathy. Yet in ‘Mediated Immediacy’ at least, this exegetical impulse is ultimately directed towards the recovery of literality (in the form of the sincerity thesis) through the imaginative contexts of Wallace’s fiction – the core strength of this argument, I have suggested, is its ability to conjoin the themes of suspicion and identification without subtly privileging the latter. In ‘Language, Gender and Modes of Power’, Hayes-Brady arguably extends this approach by bracketing the question of literality altogether, reincorporating themes such as other-directed empathy and therapeutic communication within a decidedly hypothetical analytic framework. Most notably, this allows for an effective suspicious critique of gender in Wallace’s literary project as a whole, outlined thus:

Masculine linguistic power is characterized in Wallace largely by direct speech, linguistic play, and univocality, with oppositional
characteristics such as excessive quotation or tonal slippage indicating a lack of coherent identity. By way of contrast, Wallace signifies the corresponding security and coherence of identity in female characters via vocal plurality, dialogue, verbal manipulation, and, most interestingly, the infiltration of the vocal patterns of the men who seek to subjugate them (2013: 131-132)

By exposing the fault-lines of Wallace’s re-imagination of gender, over and above his literalistic discourse on love and empathy, Hayes-Brady provides us with an effective hypothetical model for suspicious exegesis in relation to Wallace. This model is explicitly premised on the empirical construction of character in Wallace’s work, and provides a series of representational and characterological binaries in this regard – “direct speech, linguistic play, and univocality” form one side of this semantic divide, while “vocal plurality, dialogue and verbal manipulation” form the other.

Moreover, the suspicious claim linking these elements – the claim that Wallace’s texts represent gender difference in the form of unresolved or unresolvable conflict – provides a new angle to our discussions of empathy in Wallace. This angle is unique because it takes the representational strategies of the text (as revealed by semantic critique) as an a priori origin-point for discussing Wallace’s literary project as a whole. In other words, Hayes-Brady locates the ontological significance of Wallace’s project substantially within the text, rather than beyond it. Subsequently, the representational conflicts posed by the Wallace text are not preceded or resolved by the admission of ontology; rather, they form the precise conditions through which that prior – and very often hidden – ontology becomes visible and expressible. This reversal of emphasis – proceeding from imagination to literality, rather than
the other way round – makes Hayes-Brady’s work an essential addition to the Wallace Studies corpus, not least for its command of suspicion as a theoretical strategy. Whilst sharing this suspicious focus, I have elected to explore some of its antecedents in the field of psychoanalytic literary theory as well, motivated by the proximities between Wallace-ian suspicion and the theoretically-specific idea of transference-neurosis in fiction (See Chapter 2). While the theoretical contexts of this idea have not been fully established, I think it fair to say that Holland and Hayes-Brady’s work provide clear accounts of what such a transference-neurosis might look like in Wallace. In Chapter 5, I will highlight some of Wallace’s more expressive or expressionistic ideas about “borderlinish” reading in relation to filmmaker David Lynch as well. For now, suffice it to say that suspicion remains an effective and wholly authorised response to a text like Brief Interviews, even while noting the persistence of literalistic and empathetic rhetoric within such texts.

In this second corner of Wallace Studies, then, we are dealing with the idea that Wallace critiques (with) the reader, both in the sense that his texts effectively anticipate their own interpretive conditions and – I subsequently argue – that they remain concerned with the imaginative activities of readers who critique. Following our prior discussions of intentionality, definition and literary empathy, we can observe that the idea of theoretical suspicion retains a peculiar significance in Wallace’s texts – those texts do possess depth, their obsessive attempts to deny such depth to the reader. In Kelly, this impossible dynamic occasions the critical turn outwards, to empirical readers beyond the
text; in Holland and Hayes-Brady, this dynamic necessitates a turn *inwards*, to the kinds of narrative, thematic and characterological strategies hypothesised within Wallace’s texts. Of course, the reality of Wallace’s criticism is far more complex than that – for example, each of the scholars considered thus far has taken great pains to consider the strange relationship of interiority and exteriority suggested by Wallace’s works, particularly Boswell, for whom the dialectic of inside/outside informs a kind of erotic and exegetical imperative. But for the sake of contrast, it is interesting to note how subsequent scholars have refigured this dialectic based on their approach to the ‘reader’. Holland, for example, arguably recapitulates a form of Boswellian erotics in this reading of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, particularly highlighting the ironic treatment of lovers and readers therein:

The man who ironically argues that being a ‘Great Lover’ [BI 28] requires allowing his partner the supreme pleasure of pleasing *him* strikes us as quite earnest only a page earlier when he is extolling the virtues of mutual sexual generosity, a definition of ‘great’ loving that sounds quite reasonable. Is it merely agreeing with him that makes him earnest for us? What constitutes earnestness in conversation, and how does one construct it in language? (2013: 119)

Again, what is an “act of communication” in the contexts of Wallace’s work and reception? The juxtaposition of these questions in Holland’s work, particularly in response to earlier theorisations of identification in Wallace, helps indicate the often-fraught relationship between literalistic and imagined ‘readers’ in contemporary rhetorics of Wallace, whilst locating this relationship squarely in the realms of language and representation:
These interviews remind us that recognizing earnestness and generating empathy depend on perspective and values, negotiated between speakers; and that both require complex narrative construction and context to be present in language. (119, original emphasis)

In a similar vein, Hayes-Brady’s work playfully reverses some of Wallace’s more overt rhetorics on readership by pointing out that “Wallace’s references to his imagined readers always – to the point of affectation – envisaged his readers as female” (2013: 133 [emphasis mine]). At the level of imagination, or of suspiciously affected or “imagined” readers, the present study is thus able to provide new insights into the ambivalent nature of Wallace’s rhetorics on reading, particularly where such rhetorics are transposed into narrative, thematic and characterological contexts. Whether writing women, rewriting men or re-imagining suspicious interpreters, Wallace’s texts partake in a very peculiar conception of literary love, arguably distinguishable from the kinds of plain-language empathy discovered in his earliest works. This is something I explore further in Chapter 4, concerning the re-imagination of suspicious readers in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999).

“Wallace narrates (with) the reader”

**Abstraction, Criticism and Authorship**

How, then, does the Wallace text actually go about suggesting or constructing its reader? We are definitely led to consider this question in Wallace Studies today, given the highly-abstract and playfully theoretical
nature of the Wallace ‘reader’ in contemporary scholarship more broadly. Having effectively reopened the question of intentionality in Wallace already, it is pertinent to reconsider the author’s treatment of such in the essay ‘Greatly Exaggerated’ (1997), particularly given this text’s focus on contemporary capital-T Theory and the so-called ‘Death of the author’ thesis. The text is in fact a review, of a book by H.L. Hix called *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy*. Wallace’s theoretical framing of the book is of particular interest here, as he places the “metaphysical viability of the author” into question across numerous interpretive or meta-interpretive contexts (139). “For Romantic and early-twentieth-century critics, textual interpretation was author-based”, writes Wallace, “For Wordsworth, the critic regards a text as the creative instantiation of a writer’s very self” (139). On this basis, it goes without saying that the writer’s intentions, as an expression or instantiation of their “very self” in the form of text, would effectively matter in the final adjudication of that text. But the effective advent of the ‘Death of the Author’ thesis, as in Roland Barthes and what Wallace calls “the shift from New Criticism and structuralism to deconstruction” (138), places this common-sense idea of literary intention well beyond reach, in ways we have seen dramatised and theorised in Wallace’s texts already. In this sense, the “writer’s very self” – or the “relevant mental condition” of an author or text – are attempts to describe Hobbesian ‘authors’, defined by Wallace as “Persons who, first, accept responsibility for a text and, second, ‘own’ that text, i.e. retain the right to determine its meaning” (139).
With Barthes, however, Wallace takes up two main points against such an ‘author’. First, “a writer cannot determine his text’s consequences enough to be really responsible” for that text’s reception (139). We have certainly seen this intentional dilemma time and time again in Wallace’s work and reception – in their overbearing and unwieldy attempts at determining the consequences of their texts, Wallace’s various authorial proxies self-reflexively dramatise the reader’s absence, their status as the “text’s true other” (Kelly 2010: 145). The net effect of this strategy is a kind of hypothetical surplus-meaning in Wallace’s literary project as a whole, which becomes visible in the reference to and reimagining of ‘readers’ throughout his fictions, essays and interviews. This meaning is hinted at in Wallace’s second rejoinder to the idea of the ‘author’, when he writes that “the writer’s not the text’s owner in the Hobbesian sense because it is really critical readers who decide and thus determine what a piece of writing really means” (139, original emphasis). Again, the gesture outwards, secured by a rhetoric of undecidability and uncertainty – in Wallace’s take, the author is neither responsible nor particularly authoritative, and instead it is “critical readers” who must decide what the text means, and even indeed how it means.

This kind of reader-oriented rhetoric – which of course culminates in Wallace’s suggestion that writing is an “act of communication” between an ‘author’ (literal or imagined) and another “human being”, the critical reader (144) – allows us to consider the movement towards critical abstraction in Wallace’s literary project, especially in light of the literalistic or imaginative
discourses considered thus far. Like the qualifiers ‘literal’ or ‘imagined’, the term ‘abstract’ can mean a whole lot of things, but begins to take on specific meanings when read in conjunction with the author’s rhetoric on reading and interpretation. The most useful deployment of the term, I think, revolves around the activities of the literary critic in the wake of postmodernity, and the various formal, ideological or hermeneutic practices available to such a critic. This has certainly been a preoccupation of the scholars considered thus far, who have each taken up the questions of epistemological truth and ontological being in relation to the Wallace text, and devised particular abstract models – which usually involve the identity or agency of a ‘reader’ – for identifying and critiquing these questions. Similar theorisations of the ‘reader’ have been shown to occur in Boswell and Holland, particularly around the themes of empathetic identification and critical suspicion – in each case, we have had cause to encounter an abstract reflection on the conditions of literary exegesis ‘as such’, often specifically reflecting upon the author’s own rhetorics on reading and interpretation at the turn of the 21st century. This new dynamic represents an effective escalation on the literalistic and imaginative rhetorics otherwise deployed by the author, and provides us with a third position from which to read and “read with” Wallace: a position of abstraction, premised on the idea that Wallace narrates (with) the reader. The theorisation of the critical reader in Wallace – for example, in the work of scholars such as Toon Staes – arguably provides us with new and distinct angles for discussing the identity and agency of the Wallace ‘reader’. Through their pre-eminent focus on the question of critical abstraction, these studies
provide a substantive basis for the claim that “Wallace narrates (with) the reader” – again in the doubled sense that they narrate their own reception-contexts, and that they effect or compel the ‘reader’s own abstract concerns with such contexts.

Toon Staes examines this dynamic from the vantage-points of narrative theory and contemporary reader-response theory, in his thorough analysis of the implied author in Wallace's fiction, titled ‘Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach’ (2014). Staes’ work is notable for its rethinking of empathy and suspicion in Wallace's novels, and for consistently questioning the abstract conditions for empathy provided in contemporary scholarship. This approach proceeds on a largely narratological basis, which distinguishes itself at the outset from more literalistic or imaginative approaches:

Although the notion of the implied author may well be drawing heavy criticism in recent narrative theory, empirical research indicates that readers infer a representation of the writer while reading, merging the information that they gather from the text with the knowledge they have about its author [...] Given his widely quoted views on literature, the average reader may already have a keen image of Wallace before touching the first page of his books. No matter how often a writer brandishes his opinions, however, it would be unwise to take these at face value: especially for novels as challenging as Wallace’s, the possibility exists that we start reading things into them that are simply not there. (24)

The key turn here, once again, is the critical bracketing of the Wallace text’s literality – the specific avoidance of “face value” claims in favour of a more abstract formulation of the problem: “The following pages address this problem by raising questions about the relationship between author, narrator, and text,” writes Staes, asking “how does Wallace present himself as a writer,
how does that translate into his novels [...] and which narrative strategies does he use to that end?” (24). The foregrounding of narrative imagination – the representation and re-imagination of concepts through narrative discourse – is also unmistakable here, as are Staes’ suspicions about the literalistic excesses of contemporary Wallace Studies. Despite his focus on empathy, Staes remains wary of Wallace’s mysterious or paradoxical rhetorics of interpretation, pointing out that “the zeal with which critics have latched onto [E Unibus Pluram] and the accompanying interview with Larry McCaffery has given Wallace’s work an uncomfortable air of the holier-than-thou” (25).

Building on this suspicious hermeneutics, Staes provides an abstracted theoretical basis for reading the implied author in Wallace, based on what he calls the “empathy-altruism hypothesis” (25), which foregrounds the substitution of “experiences of narrative empathy” for “shared feelings with real others” (Keen, in Staes: 25). This theorisation of the ‘author’ – which, I will subsequently note, is heavily framed by statements about ‘readers’ – has had a major impact on the present study, because it effectively traces many of the movements between literality, imagination and abstraction in Wallace’s rhetorics of authorship and interpretation. My research explores similar questions, whilst reversing their emphasis, asking instead how readers are presented by Wallace and implied by’] his texts, and investigating the consequences of such an implication on our own critical rhetorics of Wallace. But our intentions are, I think, largely the same – to remind you that Wallace’s complex rhetoric on fiction, whilst compelling, does not necessarily tell the
whole story, and does not in and of itself provide an abstract basis for reading Wallace's fictions.

Staes' theorisation of the ‘implied author’ is in fact comprised by a deluge of theoretical or definitional statements about contemporary readers, which confirm and reinforce many of the concepts explored above, particularly identification, imagination, suspicion and, of course, empathy. These sorts of statements are significant for the present study, insofar as an abstract focus on the implied author of Wallace's texts would appear to authorise a renewed focus on the implied audience of those texts as well (See Chapter 5). Moreover, retracing Staes’ theorising of the ‘reader’ can help us locate his works alongside the thinkers canvassed thus far, whilst highlighting the recurrence of particular epistemological, ontological and rhetorical issues at this more abstract level of theorising. “Narrative empathy,” writes Staes, “hinges primarily on the reader’s willingness to engage intellectually and emotionally with the text” (28) – that is, it is a function of identification, as suggested by Boswell and Kelly above. In Wallace's texts, however, this function is characteristically obscured: “The many underspecified actions and textual gaps in *Infinite Jest* indicate that it is up to the reader to reorganise the seemingly unrelated narrative strands into a meaningful whole” (28). The effect of under-specification, or narrative indeterminacy in Staes’ formulation, is of particular interest here, as it highlights Wallace's unique command of “unnatural narration” – “consciousnesses bleeding into one another, multiply embedded narratives, and other examples that obscure the idea that narration
is a form of communication involving a sender and a receiver” (28). However, as Staes goes on to note, “Every reader who fills in the gaps in a text does so on the basis of her or his own knowledge, preferences and experiences” (29); consequently, the Wallace text establishes the condition that “In order to achieve a complete and satisfying interpretation of [Infinite Jest], readers actually have to produce information” (29, original emphasis). This kind of observation, I think, begins to distinguish Staes’ approach from the theorists canvassed above – it is the explicit movement towards the production of information, to a more explicit rhetoric of abstraction which takes into account both literal and imaginative discourses of ‘reading’ and authorship.

Staes’ approach appeals, moreover, to those inclined to suspect Wallace’s own rhetorics of interpretation, particularly because it is grounded outside of or apart from that rhetoric – for example, citing empirical (neurological) studies of readers, and the critical re-imagination of readers by narrative theorists such as Gerard Genette, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Brian Richardson. From this abstracted position, Staes’ work effectively reframes the paradoxical characteristics of Wallace’s texts in terms of their literary and critical effects, specifically the twin effects of over- and under-determination of meaning. Stated in the abstract: “Underdetermined texts send no clear message as to how they are to be read. Overdetermined texts send diverse or mutually exclusive messages” (38). By retracing these kinds of theoretical statements, and simply highlighting their status as statements about readers, the present study takes things a step further: I am specifically concerned with
the complex use of the term ‘reader’ in contemporary critical rhetoric, and the strange rhetorical authority that such use confers. Arguably, this study represents the reverse of an implied author approach – by centralising our focus through the ‘reader’, we have already been led to contend with numerous difficult-to-qualify statements about authorial intentionality. The benefit of such an approach, I think, is that it helps distinguish between different kinds of rhetorical overdetermination suggested by scholars like Staes, whilst specifically exploring the potential overdetermination of the term ‘reader’ in Wallace’s work and reception. The complementarity of our works can thus be argued on the basis of the indeterminacy/overdetermination thesis. At this abstract level, and having noted our theoretical precedents in Wallace Studies to date, I believe there is much yet to discover about the implied reader of the Wallace text, particularly when such ‘readers’ remain potentially overdetermined by criticism.

With this functionally-abstracted sense of the ‘reader’ in mind, we have thus arrived at a sophisticated-enough vantage-point from which to consider the sheer breadth of contemporary Wallace Studies. Whilst Wallace has already been seen to refer outwards to the age of theory (Kelly) and to peer inwards on questions of the narcissistic imagination (Holland), the positioning of these strategies in contemporary critical discourse remains an open question, as evidenced by the theoretical heterogeneity of Wallace Studies as a discipline. In the eight or so years since the author’s literal death, there have been at least five major critical collections released on the subject.
of David Foster Wallace, under the titles Consider David Foster Wallace (Hering [Ed], 2010), The Legacy of David Foster Wallace (Cohen & Konstantinou [Eds], 2012), A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies (Boswell & Burn [Eds], 2013), David Foster Wallace and “the Long Thing”: Essays on the Novels (Boswell [Ed], 2014) and Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and the Long Thing (Bolger & Korb [Eds], 2014). Add at least three phenomenal pieces of literary journalism – D.T. Max’s biography Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace (2012), the interview collection Conversations with David Foster Wallace (Burn [Ed], 2012) and David Lipsky’s Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace (2010) – have also arrived in that time, with the latter adapted for the screen as The End of the Tour (Ponsoldt, 2015). Add also standalone works from Boswell (2003), Greg Carlisle (2007) and Stephen J Burn (2012), as well as new or incoming studies, and you can certainly make a case for the rapid realisation and codification of knowledge in relation to the author and his works. This rapid emergence has been noted by Adam Kelly in the essay ‘David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline’ (2010b), which highlights the “democratic” proliferation of knowledge around Wallace, and the canny coexistence of scholarly publications and international conventions with the activities of “skilful and committed non-professional readers, who publish their findings in the public domain of the web” (Para 4).
But with the steadily escalating influx of critical materials about Wallace in mind, it is nevertheless clear that the field is moving into particular areas of specialisation, as evidenced by recurrent themes such as empathy, suspicion and authorial identity, and the recurrent and concurrent theorisation of concepts such as literality, imagination and abstraction. What do all of these approaches have in common, aside from their concern with Wallace? Their concern with the reader of Wallace, whether that concern is literal, imagined or abstract – or, as is obviously most often the case, with some unique admixture of these three levels.

Having traversed this circuit already, with help from Boswell, Kelly, Holland, Hayes-Brady and Staes, we can conclude by considering some of the more effective representations of the ‘reader’ in Wallace Studies, moreover highlighting the work of emerging and established Wallace scholars. In the work of Allard den Dulk, we find Wallace’s literalistic rhetorics transposed through existentialist philosophy – in the conclusion to ‘Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of Self’ (2014), he writes that Wallace’s fiction “points out the real world and urges us to pay attention to it, to commit to it, and thereby, to become ourselves” (58). Meanwhile, Lee Konstantinou’s excellent post-ideological analysis of Wallace, ‘No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief’ (2012) contains the following suspicious critique of the author’s “strictly literal” rhetorics: like Wallace, “Postironists are more concerned with overthrowing a particular type of person, the ironist, and have far less to say about changing the institutional relations that give rise
Andrew Warren has sought to model the kinds of “community” imagined or abstracted in Wallace, through the provision of four discursive types, “Contracted Realism, Jargony Argot, [Spontaneous Data Intrusions] and Free Indirect Wraith” (80) – I recommend this piece quite a bit, particularly for its acknowledgment that characters in Infinite Jest “struggle not merely against one another but, more generally, against its narrative structure even as that structure struggles to encompass them” (80). And in the brilliant ‘How We Ought to Do Things With Words’, Alexis Burgess provides the definitive reading of Wallace’s linguistic prescriptivism, through a close reading of ‘Authority and American Usage’ (2005) which highlights the author’s “establishing that our linguistic choices can often have nonlinguistic consequences of pretty obvious practical and ethical significance”, and that “given what we already care about, we should also care about how we express ourselves (2014: 16). And finally, David Hering has written eloquently about fractal narrative structure in Infinite Jest in his essay ‘Triangles, Cycles, Choices & Chases’ (2010), and in the book David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form (2016). “The reader gradually becomes aware of an increase in the size and focus of the chapters as they read,” writes Hering, as the initial shorter chapters of IJ become re-abSTRACTed or “retrospectively understood to form part of the overarching structure so we are ultimately aware of the gargantuan system of relationships that operates across the entire novel” (90).

Across this heterogeneous discourse about literature, I believe we can make a case for the persistence of the ‘reader’ as a point of interpretive
reference, even in the face of Wallace’s complex rhetoric of reading and interpretation, and the evident challenges which this rhetoric poses for us today. This chapter has traversed issues around epistemology and ontology, naivete and cynicism, sincerity and authenticity, sincerity and narcissism, empathy and suspicion, identification and critique and finally, abstraction in the form of the implied reader. And yet throughout this process, we have had cause to observe the sheer ubiquity of the term ‘reader’ in Wallace’s work and reception, and to reconsider this term in the contexts of contemporary critical rhetoric.

This approach has been guided by a definitive and plausible logic – again, I reason that Wallace tends to speak about his reader in four ways, each representing an escalation or self-conscious turn upon the terms of the preceding rhetoric. But if this is the case, then our fourth level – the level of enclosure, of metafiction or meta-rhetoric – still eludes us, even despite the wealth of commentary available on literal, imagined and abstract ‘readers’ of Wallace. In other words, our study has a context – the ‘implied reader’ of post-postmodern metafiction, as indirectly revealed in Staes and in Wallace Studies more broadly – but no trajectory, that is, no particular premise on which to judge this context outside of its own discursive or theoretical parameters. And yet, we have seen that these critical parameters repeat – with the ongoing emergence of books about Wallace, conventions and conferences about Wallace, movies starring Jason Segel as Wallace and yes, even PhD dissertations about Wallace, we are bound to see the further repetition of
themes such as empathetic identification, suspicious critique and literary intentionality, Each of these repetitions will bear out in some way the idea that “Wallace narrates (with) the reader” – that his texts offer unique insights as to how they are meant to be read, and indeed as to what reading means for Wallace and his contemporary audience. I consider this idea further in Chapter 5: readers who narrate, by reading Wallace alongside two unlikely contemporaries – the director David Lynch, whose cinematics Wallace described in ‘David Lynch Keeps his Head’ (1999), and the tennis prodigy Tracey Austin, whose ghost-written memoir Beyond Centre Court: My Story is the subject of Wallace’s ‘How Tracey Austin Broke My Heart’ (2005). The aim of this detour is to consider new contexts within Wallace Studies by reconsidering what Wallace calls “Expressionism” – the activity or strategy of an author “getting inside the head” of their audience (1999) – whilst also reconsidering Wallace’s abstract presentation of “David Foster Wallace” in his para-literary works. With Staes, and with scholars such as Staes and Mike Miley (2016), this chapter indicates a more exposure-oriented approach to the question of the ‘author’, by juxtaposing the appearance of that author with the consistent reappearance of ‘readers’ in Wallace’s early cultural-journalistic works.

Conclusion: Performing the ‘Fiction-Writer’s Reader’ (I)

Beyond this given theoretical context, there remains something kind of troubling about Wallace’s rhetorics on reading, which I am often at a loss
to describe myself. I know full well that when I read a text written by David Foster Wallace, I am somehow engaged in an “act of communication between one human being and another”, and that I am seeing that “act” presented on the page, and that my peers see either variant of this “act” as representative of the quality and versatility of “David Foster Wallace the author”. But what interests me, and what governs the entirety of this study, is the sheer and simple fact of repetition – that is, the fact of the actual concept of reading being placed into question, time and time again, in Wallace’s fiction. A simple enough reason for the escalation of reader-rhetorics in Wallace is that he simply couldn’t let go of his reader – as scholars of Wallace knows, his work is a masterful tribute to literary self-obsession, typically appearing to have hypothesised and exhausted every known interpretive possibility before the critic has even raised their pen. But this self-reflexive obsession leaves traces, which can be routinely observed at that most crucial of narrative junctures – the constructive repetition of readers who identify, critique and narrate the Wallace text.

This is where our typology of performance comes in handy once again; by distinguishing between the literal, the imagined, the abstract and the performative senses that we have of the term ‘reader’, we can begin to offer new commentary on the use of the term in Wallace’s project more broadly, as well as in exciting emerging research on the implied author and authorial “performance” (Miley, 2016; Staes, 2014). The completion of our circuit is thus provided on the basis of repetition, of the specific repeating of themes like
literality, imagination and abstraction in Wallace’s work and reception. The movement towards enclosure in Wallace is thus signalled by the interposition of three major questions. Who are we in relation to David Foster Wallace and his texts? Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace? And, finally, how are we to ascertain the identity and agency of such ‘readers’, particularly in light of the author’s complex and assuasive rhetorics about reading? This typology suggests that there are four major types of claim at stake in contemporary Wallace Studies, each providing us a new vantage point for assessing the author’s complex rhetoric on reading and the literary encounter. As we shall see, this typology authorises a particular kind of rhetoric, or rather a diverse set of rhetorical positions, predicated on the escalating repetition of the term ‘reader’ in fiction and criticism alike.

In the first corner of this typology, Wallace identifies (with) the reader. This kind of claim is evidenced whenever someone, more often than not Wallace, makes a claim for a reader ‘beyond’ the text, whether in his discussions of literary “conversation” in McCaffery (1993) or his complex treatment of literary “love” in Girl with Curious Hair (1989). As a kind of referential definition, Wallace’s identifications of his reader are many and complex; as a form of literary empathy, Wallace’s literary identification with his reader have been taken as a sign of the author’s entire predisposition towards fiction-writing in the information age.

Yet in the second corner, Wallace critiques (with) the reader. This kind of claim arguably inheres in the suspicious quality of Wallace’s writings,
particularly middle-period works such as Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (1999) and even Infinite Jest (1997). As a kind of rhetorical imagination, Wallace’s texts critique their own postmodern preconditions; nevertheless, this critique is itself subject to self-reflexive scrutiny in those same texts. In this ambivalent or bifurcated sense, Wallace’s texts identify, identify with, critique and critique with their reader all at once – the adaptive complexity of Wallace’s texts, their complex presentation of readers, writers and texts alike, presents the basis for the third corner: Wallace narrates (with) the reader.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this narration comes from two places. First, it comes from Wallace “himself”, or more specifically in the abstract notion of “David Foster Wallace” the author (Staes, 2013), or in the various self-presentations of same in Wallace’s essays and interviews (Miley, 2016). Second, it comes from Wallace’s texts, in their abstract re-imagining of this same process, more often than not in the form of a cultural, journalistic or political essay.

As I argue subsequently, this re-imagining or re-abstraction of a particular subject term – the ‘reader’ – can be read as a kind transferential-neurotic discourse, that is, an “acting-out” of certain unconscious exegetical anxieties on the part of the Wallace text. This claim is pursued and elaborated in the following chapter, which presents a novel reading of the Freudian transference-neurosis in Wallace. This will allow us to better understand the kind of claim canvassed at the beginning of this chapter – that is, Wallace’s positing of a “familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction”, a “desperate desire
to please coupled with a kind of hostility towards the reader”. This kind of definitional diagnosis is not uncommon in Wallace’s far-reaching statements about his ‘reader’, and I have elected to preface chapters of this thesis with an overtly “Freudian” statement about the ‘reader’ in Wallace, to highlight those moments at which the author and his literary project can appear most estranging to contemporary audiences. The proximity of Wallace’s “act of communication” thesis to psychoanalytic ideas about transference and performance is, I think, quite illuminating.

By reconstructing the theme of “acting-out”, and the kinds of critical estrangement afforded by 20th century psychoanalytic literary criticism, Chapter 2 offers substantial methodological grounds for negotiating Wallace’s rhetoric of the ‘reader’, alongside some of the more prominent paradoxes in contemporary scholarship on the author. In the claim-making and classificatory style deployed above, I will argue that Wallace negates (with) the reader, an effect evident in late phase fictions such as _Oblivion_ (2004) and _The Pale King_ (2010). These fictions (_Oblivion_ in particular) take us full circle, repurposing the ‘reader’ in a game of transferential-neurotic uncertainty, which takes into account the diversity and heterogeneity of meaning behind concepts like literality, imagination and abstraction (See Chapter 6). Wallace’s final short story collection is both self-reflexive (reflecting in particular on the author’s empathetic technique) and estranging (in its blatant repurposing of Freudian tropes and anxieties). This negative technique is something I will
compare to the transference-neurosis in Freud, which is typified by the production of self-reflexive discourse by the analysand under treatment.

Thus, there is perhaps no escaping our enclosed sense of Wallace and his fictional project as a whole – the feeling of pre-determination or manipulation in Wallace's texts, and the consequences of this feeling for the engaged interpreter of those texts. Nevertheless, by unpacking this interpretive predicament, this approach fulfils the heuristic promise of the study as a whole, allowing the new reader of Wallace access into some of the more overt ‘Close Encounters’ suggested by Wallace's literary project and its diverse reception contexts. Having suggested four complex rhetorical positions in the introductory chapter – a literalistic position, an imaginative position, an abstract position and a performative position – it remains for us to establish whether these positions are unique to or especially beneficial for existing studies of Wallace. My novel reading of performance, predicated on a post-Freudian reading of the term “acting-out” in Wallace, offers an enthusiastic yes to both of these concerns. Through the positing of such games, Wallace's texts anticipate or foreclose upon their own effect on readers; yet as an imagined disclosure, an acting-out of the author-reader relationship in discourse, these texts provide an performative metacommentary on their own operations as texts. The escalation from the literal to the imagined to the abstract to the performative sense of the ‘reader’ is essential to Wallace's rhetorics of same. Moreover, we experience this rhetoric; it is at once conveyed as the substance of Wallace's metafictions, and by the repetition of that substance in contemporary scholarship.
Chapter 2

Acting-Out

As time passes I get less and less nuts about anything I’ve published, and it gets harder to know for sure when its antagonistic elements are in there because they serve a useful purpose and when they’re just covert manifestations of this ‘look-at-me-please-love-me-I-hate-you’ syndrome I still sometimes catch myself falling into.

(Wallace, in McCaffery 2012: 32)

Introduction: “look-at-me-please-love-me-I-hate-you”

This chapter provides an alternative reading of self-reflexivity and repetition in Wallace’s works, which takes into account the persistence of Freudian and post-Freudian models of reading in contemporary Wallace scholarship (Boswell, 2003; Holland 2006, 2013). This reading emerges out of my engagements with the field in Chapter 1, which have placed the ‘implied reader’ of Wallace’s fiction into decisive question. By observing the particular significance of themes such as empathetic identification, suspicious critique and critical abstraction in discussions of Wallace, we have also begun to establish productive parallels between those discussions and the various self-reflexive rhetorics pursued in Wallace’s fictions and essays. In one sense, then,
we can say that Wallace’s fictions are self-reflexive because they repeat certain persuasive ideas about reading. The uncertain (yet surely multivalent) nature of the author’s “act of communication” thesis has provided clear evidence of this already, as has the estranging repetition of such uncertainty in texts such as the Gilbert interview (2012; see Introduction). But what is it to say that a text repeats? Moreover, why do such repetitions lead to such estranging effects? Chapter 1 has provided us with part of the answer – estrangement (through eroticised discourse, say, or through utilisation of theoretically ‘suspicious’ discourses) is simply a necessary component of Wallace’s empathetic agenda, the formal and thematic ‘negative’ of the “really human” communication that the author sought within his fiction. But the destabilisation of this relationship – between the “act[s] of communication” avowed by Wallace and the repetition of inhuman or even anti-human discourses in his fiction – has also been a long-standing concern for scholars of Wallace, who all recognise (to differing extents) that statements about ‘reading Wallace’ require negotiating certain estranging instances of ‘Wallace reading’. Because when Wallace reads – or more accurately, when his writings start making claims, offering critiques or rendering abstractions – these readings self-reflexively return to and repeat certain ideas about the ‘reader’.

These ideas are the focus of my reconstructive efforts in this study, and have been grouped by the tropes of (literalistic) readers who identify, (imaginative) readers who critique, and (abstract) readers who narrate (See Chapter 3-5). Having considered the particular significance of such ‘readers’ in contemporary Wallace scholarship, it remains for us to consider whether
the repetition of these ideas (even in the form of self-reflexive exposition, explanation, or exegesis) can itself account for the estranging nature of repetition in Wallace's fiction. In investigating this idea, I have elected to highlight a particularly estranging vector in Wallace's short fictions – specifically, the persistence of Freudian and post-Freudian tropes in the author's discussions of the 'reader'. Through close attention to four seminal psychoanalytic works – Freud's metapsychological essay 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through' (1914), Paul Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1978), Peter Brook's 'The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism' (1986) and Shoshanna Felman's *Writing and Madness* (2012) – this chapter provides novel insight into the estranging dynamics of acting-out in fiction. As this chapter suggests, the weird world of 20th century psychoanalytic literary criticism can provide an effective alternative basis for reading Wallace's fiction, particularly when that fiction remains concerned with certain performative and transferential ideas about reading, repeating, working-through and acting-out. By engaging with these ideas, we may thus set the stage for the claim that Wallace's texts perform their 'readers', through the estranging mechanisms of repetition, re-imagination and re-abstraction.

While Freudo-Lacanian thought is an acknowledged vector in contemporary Wallace Studies, there is much to be said about the epistemological and ontological bases for 'reading Freud in Wallace' (and indeed of reading Freud with Wallace, as this study seeks to do). As this chapter's readings of Freud, Ricoeur, Brooks and Felman indicate, some of the more effective arguments for “the status of the ‘and’ linking psychoanalysis
and literary criticism” (Brooks, 1986: 3; Felman 2012: 149-159) have already been made by prominent Freudian and post-Freudian critics of the 20th century, and it is thus appropriate to consider whether these arguments remain in play in psychoanalytically-aware, dialogically-disposed metafictions like Wallace’s. There is at least one point on which Wallace appears almost perfectly in sync with these ideas – that is, his insistence on the estranging yet therapeutic nature of the literary text, as evidenced by the idea that Wallace’s fiction functions as both diagnosis and cure (Boswell, 2003), or rather that its diagnostic functions engender or effect empathetic outcomes (Holland, 2013) (See Chapter 1).

What follows, then, is a reading of psychoanalytic theory that is particularly inflected by Wallace’s own ideas about literary transference and performance, which have already been obliquely signalled by his complex rhetoric of the ‘reader’ – most importantly, through this rhetoric’s emphasis on performative and engaged modes of reading, which this study likens to the activities of a transference-neurosis in the classical Freudian sense (1914). In this reading, the “act(s) of communication” repeated, re-imagined and re-abstracted by Wallace’s fictions are viewed here as akin to the discourse of a Freudian analysand, due to their shared self-consciousness towards psychoanalytic interpretive method as such. This self-consciousness enables the production of new (estranged, yet discursive and observable) meanings within the dialogue between analyst and analysand, specifically within the discourse which both participants construct and negotiate. But this second-order psychoanalytic dialogue remains, in virtually every sense, performative
– it is a game of masks, of identities quite literally ‘assumed by’ speakers, particularly as the clinical transference results in new forms of self-presentation, imaginative construction and critical representation on the part of analyst and analysand alike.

Nevertheless, I maintain that this transferential-neurotic game matters in Wallace’s fiction – as this study suggests, the most estranging thing about Wallace’s rhetoric of the ‘reader’ is its proximity to Freudian ideas about acting-out, and close attention to this term yields valuable insights when discussing “act(s) of communication” in Wallace’s fiction. Through this novel reading of the term ‘acting-out’, specifically in the contexts of Wallace’s short-fictional project, I suggest a simple point of departure: the ‘reader’, as it has been formulated thus far in this study, is an index for those points at which Wallace repeats particular transference-neuroses, that is, particular second-order responses to the question: Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace? If we take this question as a basis for performative critique, a challenge to Wallace’s rhetoric (since it questions that rhetoric’s uncritical repetition of the term ‘reader’), then we can begin to articulate the more suspicious or exposure-oriented vectors of the claim that ‘readers’ repeat in Wallace.

The psychoanalytic perspective arguably authorises this study’s use of the verbs repeat, re-imagine and re-abstract. Under the conditions of the transference-neurosis, the analysand is no longer dealing with a ‘real’ phenomenon, but with a self-conscious disposition towards ‘unreal’ hypothetical phenomena, necessitating one’s self-conscious formation of new
discourse, new explanations, new abstract connections (Lear, 2006). I believe that something similar occurs in Wallace’s self-reflexive fictions, particularly when those fictions begin to insist that they are quite specifically not transferential (in a manner which produces, inevitably, a string of excessive claims which indicate that those texts do, in fact, inhere to some transferential dynamics). To quietly insist that they are, then, is to engage with a proliferation of second-order meanings, which remain specifically and explicitly indexed by concerns around the ‘reader’ – specifically, with the idea of readers who negate. This negation – of the claim that fiction is “an act of communication between one human being and another” (Wallace 1997: 144) – is not the same as a suspicious critique of that claim. It involves, rather, a certain wholesale deconstruction of Wallace’s empathetic project, or at the very least of its rhetorical underpinnings. It would be conveyed, most likely, from one of the older psychoanalytic schools, for which empathy, intentionality and even love might be seen as a semiotic conspiracy, a transference-neurosis or “acting-out” that is (the imagined ‘reader’ would suggest) nothing more than a substitute for any real “act of communication”.

I say ‘would be’ because this is precisely the kind of ‘reader’ that Wallace imagines in his final short story collection – as this study will ultimately reveal, Freudian psychodrama is at least one basis upon which Wallace himself will ask the question Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace?, estranging scare quotes and all (See Chapter 6).

We have defined the transference – and the related concepts of obsessional neurosis, transference-neurosis and acting-out – in our
introductory chapter. But for the purposes of our discussions here, we will define the transferential-neurotic ‘reader’ – the subject of classical psychoanalytic reading – in the following ways. The transferential subject repeats: the most famous instances of the transference are in fact declarations of love for the analyst, which Freud takes to be repetitions or defensive projections of prior relationships onto the analytic ‘present’. Moreover, the transferential subject re-imagines: when made aware of particular repetitions in their speech, the analysand provides numerous possible accounts for this repetition (which are, of course, further iterations of the same phenomena). These second-order responses form the basis for the analyst’s intervention, which is primarily discursive – the analyst performs their work on the transference-neurosis by re-abstracting particular connections within a predefined discursive space. At the same time however, the specific loci and trajectories of the transference-neurosis – as will be demonstrated in Ricoeur’s work on psychoanalytic hermeneutics, Brooks’ formal erotics and Shoshanna Felman’s critical hermeneutics – retain a certain illuminating and estranging proximity to the idea of ‘reader’-construction in Wallace’s fiction.

Without pre-empting this analysis, I’d like you to consider this definition of literary dialogue from Peter Brooks’ 1986 essay ‘The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism’:

A transferential model thus allows us to take as the object of analysis, not author or reader, but reading, including of course the transferential-imperative operations that belong to reading. Meaning in this view is not simply ‘in the text’, nor wholly the fabrication of a reader (or a community of readers), but in the dialogic struggle and collaboration of the two, in the activation
of textual possibilities in the process of reading. Such a view ultimately destabilizes the authority of the reader/critic in relation to the text since, caught up in the transference, he becomes analysand as well as analyst (1986: 14)

Crucially, Brooks will proceed to connect this interpretive psychodrama to the more traditional idea of a framed tale, whose theoretical coherence appears dictated through the deliberate construction of the ‘reader’ (a “surrogate addressee” for the transferential desires of a given text):

The narratee, the addressee, the ‘you’ of the text is always in some measure a surrogate for the reader, who must define his own interpretation and responses in response to the implied judgement, and the discursive implication, of the explicit or implicit textual ‘you’ (11)

The advantage of a Brooksian model, in this instance at least, is its near-total congruity with Wallace’s statements about ‘readers’. Even whilst admitting the specific interposition of the transference, and the necessary refusal of authority that this interposition confers, the above statements seem to me to be an effective counter-response to the more overtly transferential (or transferential-neurotic) aspects of Wallace’s own ‘declarations of love’ for the ‘reader’ (See Chapter 3). Moreover, as we shall see, the interposition of psychoanalytic literary theory and Wallace Studies allows for a more thorough discussion of estrangement in the Wallace text. Wallace’s anxious take on the (transferentially-)framed tale is enough to alert us to this concern, particularly as we situate this performative reading in broader psychoanalytic contexts. This estrangement, like Wallace’s fiction and Freud’s transference-neurosis, is to be considered a self-reflexive effect, primarily achieved through repetition – that is, more simply, through “acting-out”.

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As we shall see, this theoretical groundwork forms the necessary basis for the psychoanalytic reader-response readings of Wallace which follow. At the outset, however, we can make a few basic observations about Wallace’s texts which may arguably warrant a more judicious awareness of Brooksian methodology in relation to those texts. These are simple observations, but they are underwritten by the ‘four readers’ hypothesis which I have brought to bear on Wallace’s works thus far. First, these texts have a surprising tendency to evoke the reader’s sympathies through overt declarations of love for that reader. Second, they also provide elaborate examples of such declarations, though grotesque and hideous parodies of “lovers” and ‘readers’ alike. Third, they present rhetorically-complex ideas as to how they (the texts) should be interpreted. And fourth, they repeat certain essential relationships between ‘reader’ and ‘author’ at the level of text, a strategy which seems inevitably conditioned by certain authorial or metafictional anxieties on the part of “Wallace the author”.

The specific strangeness of these gestures reminds me, quite vividly, of the strange rhetoric of the classical Freudian analysand, even – or especially – when Wallace frames such gestures with a canny self-awareness of transferential idioms and tropes. Again, this self-awareness has been well-documented, but I am rather concerned with the estranging proximities between this strategy and Wallace’s insistent return to Freudian ideas within his fiction. For example, we might reconsider some of the more well-known claims in the Wallace corpus from a more informed post-Freudian perspective, for example the author’s claim that good art has “something to
do with love”, that is, with “having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved” (McCaffery 2012: 50, emphasis mine). Here and elsewhere, Wallace refers back to psychoanalytic ideas about fiction, which are not exactly resolved by the author’s definition of love as “having the discipline” to “talk out” certain parts of “yourself”. In fact, I believe it is sometimes fair to say that Wallace’s fictions refer back transferential and performative ideas about talking-out (acting-out) as a matter of necessity – while there is no doubt that Wallace’s texts practice a kind of self-reflexive love for the reader (See Chapter 3), it remains to be seen whether this love is not simply exhausted by a close reading of the transference in Wallace.

Reading the Literal with Freud

In the 1914 essay ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’, Sigmund Freud reconsiders the evolution of psychoanalytic theory following the theorisation of the transference, distinguishing the activities of the informed Freudian analyst with pre-transferential approaches such as Breur’s cathartic method (hypnotic regression), as well as the kind of interventionist approaches that had characterised earlier forms of the psychoanalytic work (146). In these different hypothetical phases of the psychoanalytic treatment, the role of the analyst differs according to the empirical location of psychoanalytic knowledge, particularly in relation to the pre-history (or more simply the ‘past’) of the analysand in treatment. Whether through a kind of
repetitive return to that past (as per hypnotic suggestion), or an re-imagin-ation of that past (as per analytic exegesis), Freud indicates that the work of the analyst had been concerned with “The situations which had given rise to the formation of the symptom and the other situations which lay behind the moment at which the illness broke out” (146).

However, with the theoretical advent of transference, we see a marked redefinition of what we might call the classical Freudian analyst:

Finally, there was evolved the consistent technique used today, in which the analyst gives up the attempt to bring a particular moment or problem into focus. He contents himself with studying whatever is present for the time being on the surface of the patient’s mind, and he employs the art of interpretation mainly for the purpose of recognizing the resistances which appear there, and making them conscious to the patient. [...] The aim of these different techniques has, of course, remained the same. Descriptively speaking, it is to fill gaps in memory; dynamically speaking, it is to overcome resistances due to repression (146-147).

In this almost-benign theorising of psychoanalytic practice, Freud is actually setting up one of the most enduring theoretical contributions to the psychoanalytic corpus in its fraught century or so of existence. ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’ asks after the descriptive and dynamic bases of the classical psychoanalytic dialogue, and grounds its answers through the complex epistemological and ontological dilemmas posed by the transference, a phenomenon which is thought to account for both descriptive “gaps in memory” and dynamic “resistances due to repression”. On this basis, the transference is a cornerstone mechanism of resistance to the work of psychoanalytic interpretation – through it, Freud writes, “The patient brings out of the armoury of the past the weapons with which he defends himself
against the progress of the treatment – weapons which we must wrest from him one by one” (150). Yet despite this formulation, the transference is also thought to be the principal dynamic of the Freudian cure, that is, the basis on which the analyst succeeds in “curbing the patient’s compulsion to repeat and […] turning it into a motive to remember” during the course of the psychoanalytic treatment (153).

In other words, the transference suggests a prescriptive diagnosis – the analysand repeats the past in distorted forms – and a descriptive cure – by repeating, the analysand is led to remember and work-through aspects of their own self-expression. My study highlights a key aspect of this dynamic – the development, in the clinical dialogue, of a transference-neurosis – in order to relate Freud’s strange phenomenology of the clinic to more productive accounts of acting-out in psychoanalytic criticism.

However, when defining the transference, it is pertinent to note the particular framing of the concept in Freud, particularly in texts like ‘Remembering’. For example, Freud often imagined the transference as a kind of estranging interpersonal drama – a sudden declaration of love for the doctor, a hysterical pregnancy, the sudden interruption or cessation of treatment – in which the analysand’s forgotten (repressed or unconscious) past is literally repeated acted-out through the contexts of the analytic encounter (1914: 149). Whilst its symptoms can often be more mundane, Freud argues that under the yoke of transference, “the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out”. Freud
immediately clarifies that this acting-out is a kind of repetition: the analysand reproduces his past “not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (149, original emphasis). This sense of performance is, I have suggested above, the key point of connection between Freudian hermeneutics and the “act[s] of communication” suggested by the Wallace text. In both instances, we are dealing with a particularly fraught kind of intentional claim – a claim about the analysand’s ‘real’ intentions – conveyed primarily through discourse. We are moreover concerned with the expression of that intention as discourse, and the extent to which that expression is conditioned or impacted by non-intentional factors.

In Freud, meanwhile, we can here observe that the analysand is first and foremost performing their own “compulsion to repeat” (150). On the idea that “the patient repeats instead of remembering”, Freud writes:

We may now ask what it is that he in fact repeats or acts out. The answer is that he repeats everything that has already made its way from the sources of the repressed into his manifest personality – his inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his pathological character traits. He also repeats all of his symptoms in the course of the treatment. And now we can see that in drawing attention to the compulsion to repeat […] we have only made it clear to ourselves that the patient’s state of being ill cannot cease with the beginning of his analysis, and that we must treat his illness, not as an event of the past, but as a present-day force (150)

When acted-out, the analysand’s illness becomes literal, a “present-day force” – under this insight, the Freudian analyst no longer goes looking for past situations because those situations have literally found them, under the auspices of a motivated “compulsion to repeat” (150). However, for the
analysand, this compulsion is experienced as a genuine, motivated reality. Prior to the analytic work, the analysand experiences their feelings towards their doctor or treatment as “something real and contemporary” (151). For example, Freud notes that when “the transference becomes hostile or unduly intense and therefore in need of repression, remembering at once gives way to acting out” (150). Again, this return to the strange literality of transferential discourse, to conditioned declarations of love or hate in the place of authentic reflection and remembering, is characterised by Freud as a form of resistance to interpretation.

Nevertheless, the extent to which this resistance takes the form of verbal repetition – that is, the extent to which the Freudian analysand “does not listen to the precise wording of his obsessional ideas” or “grasp the actual purpose of his obsessional impulse” (151) – helps provide the preliminary bases for our readings of the transference-neurosis in Wallace. For now, we might simply observe that some of Wallace’s most enduring attempts at defining his ‘reader’ – the McCaffery interview (2012), essays like ‘E Unibus Pluram’ (1997), early fictions like those in Girl with Curious Hair – are characteristically described as expressions of love for that reader (See Chapter 3). Before going further, of course, it remains to be seen how this phenomenon of acting-out actually impacts Freud’s ontology of the clinic – what is it about the transference that necessitates a change in disposition on the part of the analyst, the movement from direct intervention to a more dynamic and descriptive approach? Freud’s major innovation in this regard involves the subsequent theorising of the transference-neurosis, a move which will allow
us to connect the transference with broader discursive and dialogic trends in psychoanalytic theory.

Recalling our introductory chapter, we can say that the transference-neurosis is premised on the analysand’s self-conscious relationship to their own treatment, that is, a “change in the patient’s conscious attitude to his illness” (151) and, the production of a self-reflexive account for that relationship. Recall also the form that the latter account is voiced by Freud. The patient’s transference-neurosis asks the analyst “See what happens when I really give way to such things. Was I not right to consign them to repression?” (151). This question, or cluster of questions (See what happens? Was I not right?) challenge the descriptive and dynamic bases of the new psychoanalytic treatment explicitly, albeit dramatically.

In response to what we might call the analysand’s therapeutic self-awareness, Freud proceeds to outline the successful conditions of the new psychoanalytic treatment. “The main instrument,” he writes, “For curbing the patient’s compulsion to repeat and for turning it into a motive for remembering lies in the handling of the transference” (155, emphasis mine). How does the analyst handle the transference? How does repetition become transformed into a “motive for remembering”? Freud answers:

We render the compulsion harmless, and indeed useful, by giving it the right to assert itself in a definite field. We admit it into the transference as a playground in which it is allowed to expand in almost complete freedom and in which it is expected to display to us everything in the way of pathogenic instincts that is hidden in the patient’s mind. Provided only that the patient shows compliance enough to respect the necessary conditions of the analysis, we regularly succeed in giving all the
symptoms of the neurosis a new transference-meaning and in
replacing his ordinary neurosis by a ‘transference-neurosis’ of
which he can be cured by the therapeutic work (153, emphasis
mine)

For a preliminary example, let’s say the analysand one day blurts out “That’s
not true, dad!” to his analyst. Whereas the second-wave psychoanalyst would
cut to the chase, pointing out the analysand’s obvious and pertinent fixation
on his fathers, authorities et al, etc, the new Freudian observes this repetition
and asks something like “That’s the fifth time you’ve called me dad in as many
minutes, why is that?” By simply calling attention to the strangeness of the
analysand’s discourse – particularly when that discourse frames the analyst in
a particular idiosyncratic way, and expresses certain patterns of attachment
and ideation – the analyst counters the analysand’s self-awareness and
prompts a second, more positive or constructive awareness, a transference-
meaning.

Now, instead of noticing nothing (and calling everyone Dad), the
analysand is able to productively ask himself “Why do I keep doing that? Is it
impacting my treatment? Actually, why can’t I keep doing that? Doesn’t my
analyst tell lies anyway? Don’t all my dads tell lies?” and so forth. Freud’s
‘playground’, I think, is comprised of these second-order questions, following
from the first counter-transferential question: Why does your discourse repeat
in this way? Or, expressed another way: Who, exactly, are you talking to?
Whilst these questions have an obvious epistemological basis, the
transference-meanings they create, the analysand’s subsequent attempts to
talk their way out of parapraxis, to justify, to reconsider, and ultimately to
repeat again, form a substantial descriptive background for the present study. The observation of such second-order responses, and of the stories that such responses tell, helps distinguish my research from earlier uses of Freud in Wallace scholarship, whilst providing new grounds to consider the ontological basis of psychoanalytic reading in Wallace’s fiction.

The significance of the Freudian transference, for this study at least, is to provide a productive basis for reading the transference-neurosis within Wallace’s texts, particularly to the extent that those texts repeat, re-imagine or re-abstract certain transferential themes and effects. There is, I think, a peculiar exegetical imperative attached to this approach – the observation of repetition requires a particular ability to identify, critique, narrate and/or negate the materials repeated, especially when those materials concern the potential interpretation of texts (this of course connects with the present study’s choice of the terms readers who identify et al). On this basis, it is helpful to consider how Freud goes on to define the transference-neurosis as a descriptive and dynamic phenomenon:

The transference thus creates an intermediate region between illness and real life through which the transition from one to the other is made. The new condition has taken over all the features of the illness; but it represents an artificial illness which is at every point accessible to our intervention. It is a piece of real experience, but one which has been made possible by especially favorable conditions, and it is of a provisional nature. From the repetitive reactions which are exhibited in the transference we are led along the familiar paths to the awakening of the memories, which appear without difficulty, as it were, after the resistance has been overcome (153-154).

The transferential literary theories collected in this chapter (Brooks in particular) all refer back to Freud’s theorisation of an intermediate region, an
“artificial illness” which takes on real significance for both analyst and analysand. This artificial illness remains made up of second-order questions, “repetitive reactions exhibited in the transference”, which are themselves accessible and susceptible to the interventions of the classical Freudian analyst, who here aims at discovering “familiar paths” across the analysand’s emotionally-fraught discourse. Moreover, this turn towards second-order discourse allows us to consider the more imaginative and abstract extensions of the transference, particularly in relation to concepts like literary intention and critical rhetoric (See Chapter 1). What is the difference, then, between the actual response of an analysand in the Freudian clinic and the kind of responses suggested by the literary (or metafictional) text? Meanwhile, how do Wallace’s texts get beyond their own concerns with repetition, particularly when it comes to the proliferation of second-order ‘readers’ evidenced already in this study? Does Wallace relate to the transference on a more-than-literal level?

By turning our attention to the work of Paul Ricoeur, we can begin to consider the hermeneutic relevance of psychoanalytic literary criticism more broadly, and continue to consider Wallace’s complex relationship to suspicious (theoretical and post-theoretical) re-imagination. Again, this move is secured by the strange pertinence of the term “acting-out” – having observed the strange literality of the transference-neurosis in Freud, it remains to be seen how this estranging effect translates into the more specified fields of literary criticism and critical rhetoric.
Suspicious Re-Imagination in Paul Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy*

Paul Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* is a paradigm-setting analysis of classical psychoanalysis from the vantage point of hermeneutic philosophy, which places the idea of psychoanalytic thought as a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' into decisive question. This is obviously quite significant for the present study, particularly given the typical location of thinkers like Freud and Lacan in Wallace's critical reception, for example in Kelly and Hayes-Brady's respective imaginings of suspicious hermeneutics in Wallace (See Chapter 1). The Freudian transference has already appeared to authorise some strain of interpretive intervention, premised on the "awakening of memories" through the identification of repetition in the analytic encounter. But this approach still seems a step removed from the kinds of aggressive surface/depth models presupposed by Wallace. Whilst the approach recognises the necessity of depth (simply because it remains aware of repetition and resistance), its descriptive dynamics have been located in the second-order responses of the analysand, the latter's reactions to and re-imagination of the analytic situation, particularly when their first response – which might as well be parapractic speech – comes under scrutiny. In other words, we are as concerned with transference-neurosis in Wallace's works as we are with actual literary transference – in fact we must be more concerned with the former, given the author's own self-conscious relationship to psychoanalysis, talk-therapy and themes such as traumatic recollection (Tracey, 2010). Nevertheless, on our reading, Wallace's texts can be said to read like a transference-neurosis, given both their “thematic obsession with
connection” (Boswell, 2013) and the second-order acting-out of such obsessions in relation to the ‘reader’. This kind of distinction helps us reconsider Wallace’s treatment of the transference on a more imaginative level. While the strange literality of the author’s dialogue with his ‘reader’ certainly carries weight in the subsequent discussion, I am once again inclined to consider such declaration of love in terms of their neurotic (because re-imagined) extensions.

This is where Ricoeur’s hermeneutic resituation of Freud becomes most pertinent. *Freud and Philosophy* provides a range of answers to the twin imaginative questions of “what interpretation is” and “how psychoanalysis enters into the conflict between interpretations” (1978: 19). Ricoeur’s conflict of interpretations designates a kind of hermeneutic schism, that is, a conflict between different philosophical modes of reading and understanding texts. For Ricoeur, this conflict exposes two approaches to critical exegesis, the second of which – the school of ‘suspicion’ – we have already had cause to examine (See Chapter 1). The first approach, framed by Aristotelian semantics and religious phenomenology in Ricoeur, is predicated on the “recollection” or “restoration” of meaning (1978: 28). His remarks on this approach are, I think, pertinent to our discussions of Wallace:

The contrary of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith. What faith? No longer, to be sure, the first faith of the simple soul, but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith. Let us look for it in the series of philosophic decisions that secretly animate a phenomenology of religion and lie hidden even within its apparent neutrality. It is a rational faith, for it interprets; but it is a faith because it seeks, through interpretation, a second
naiveté. Phenomenology is its instrument of hearing, of recollection, of restoration of meaning. ‘Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe’ – such is its maxim; and its maxim is the ‘hermeneutic circle’ itself of belief and understanding (28).

What interests me here is Ricoeur’s juxtaposition of recovery-based hermeneutics with the more exposure-centric (that is, suspicious) capacities of psychoanalytic discourse. For good reason, Ricoeur’s location of the Freudian theory of mind alongside Nietzschean genealogy and Marxist critique are considered benchmark theories in the critical tradition of suspicion. Ricoeur defines these approaches in terms of “the general hypothesis concerning both the process of false consciousness and the method of its deciphering” (34). The phenomenon of transference is a handy reference here. As Freud has suggested, the transference is a kind of unconsciously ciphered discourse, which also points the way to its own deciphering through the analytic work.

Yet the transference presents its own kind of second naiveté as well – the resolution of the transference-neurosis and the return to self-aware or conscious speech is, as we have seen, the nominal aim of the psychoanalytic dialogue in essays like ‘Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through’ (1914). This trajectory points the way for Ricoeur’s situation of Freud within the ‘conflict of interpretations’: as he subsequently puts it, “The question now is not simply why an interpretation, but why these opposed interpretations?” (42). How, then, does the transference-neurosis become involved in the conflict of interpretations? In Ricoeur, this sort of neurotic antagonism becomes a source of imaginative significance, because of its hypothetical
realisation within the psychoanalytic theory of interpretation, for example Freud's well-known *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). On this basis, Ricoeur provides a simple analogical model which spells out the interpretive movements at stake in his reading of Freud:

The analogy that may exist between the second meaning and the first meaning is not a relation I can place before me and inspect from the outside. It is not an argument; far from lending itself to formalization, it is a relation adhering to its terms. I am carried by the first meaning, directed by it, toward the second meaning; the symbolic meaning is constituted in and through the literal meaning which achieves the analogy by giving the analogue. In contrast to a likeness that we could look at from the outside, a symbol is the very movement of the primary meaning intentionally assimilating us to the symbolized, without our being able to intellectually dominate the likeness (17).

In classical dream-analysis, this contrast between first-order and second-order meaning is typically understood as the movement between surface and depth meaning, i.e., the suspicious recovery of latent structures from the analysand's manifest repetitions. But prior to this kind of symbolisation, Ricoeur identifies a movement towards abstract imagination – that is, towards the interiority of the text, the event of a text "intentionally assimilating us to the symbolized". There is a pronounced element of Lacanian linguistics to Ricoeur's theorisation of symbol and double meaning in *Freud and Philosophy*, conveyed in the movement between literal meaning and intentional depth. As with Brooks and Felman's theorisation of the psychoanalytic author-reader relationship, we see a situation cannot be "inspected from the outside", because of the interpreter's fraught co-implication with language, their essential distance from (yet concern with) literal meaning. This Lacanian
situation has been effectively described in Wallace Studies, particularly in studies which compel the reader's attentions 'beyond' the text – Boswell's readings of the inside/outside dialectic in Wallace are essential reading in this regard, as we have seen.

Nevertheless, the suspension of literal meaning – as suggested in the counter-transferential refusal of the truth of the analysand's discourse – remains a clear point of reference for the present study, because it authorises the move towards second-order 'truth(s)' in Wallace, which are themselves striking for their “assimilating” capabilities. On Ricoeur's reading, then, we might say that first-order or 'literal' meaning has been effectively put into question by the psychoanalytic approach. Building on this approach, the present study observes the repetition and proliferation of truths about the 'reader' in contemporary critical rhetoric, as well as in Wallace. The key benefit of Ricoeur's psychoanalytic approach, I think, is that it highlights the necessary detours through the critical and philosophical imagination which must take place before we arrive at literal statements about things, especially texts.

On this basis, the theme of transference can help shed light on Ricoeur's subsequent treatment of critique and identification in Freud, in a manner which highlights the persistence of suspicious imagination across these respective discourses. In the transference, the analysand's spoken discourse is distorted by repetition, and this distortion sheds characteristic light on the issues under consideration in the analytic dialogue, particularly
within texts like ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’ (1914). The patient does not remember; the patient acts-out their past for the analyst, by effectively situating the latter within hypothetical scenarios of investment and exchange. In light of this, Ricoeur provides a phenomenological account of what occurs in the transference:

That which makes the analytic relationship possible as an intersubjective relation is indeed, as we have said, the fact that the analytic dialogue, within a special context of disengagement, of isolation, of derealization, brings to light the demand in which desire ultimately consists; but only the technique of the transference, as a technique of frustration, could reveal the fact that desire is at bottom an unanswered demand... (417, emphasis mine)

The problem with this phenomenology of dialogue is that it is incomplete. Ricoeur subsequently distinguishes psychoanalysis from phenomenology, by way of a haunting quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which suggests that phenomenological enquiry does not say “in a clear way what psychoanalysis said in a confused way; it is rather by what it only hints at or reveals at its limit – by its latent content or its unconscious – that phenomenology is in harmony with psychoanalysis” (in Ricoeur: 417). These marginal hints and hypothetical limits provide us with a context and a trajectory for reconsidering a field like Wallace Studies, which is no stranger to concepts like phenomenology, existentialism and, of course, dialogue. On the one hand, then, we can say with Ricoeur that the transference provides a “special context of disengagement, of isolation, of derealization” (1978: 417) because it allows a certain suspension of belief with regards to certain supposedly empirical aspects of the analysand’s discourse – for example, in the latter’s apparently-
sincere belief that they are in love with their analyst, and that the analyst may in fact be able to reciprocate that love somehow.

On the other hand, however, in the transference-neurosis this suspicion becomes realised as a trajectory or technique of frustration, which effectively results in the formation of a treatable transference-meaning. My study figures this frustration through the observing of repetition in Wallace, as predominantly conveyed through the critical reconstruction and re-imagination of the ‘reader’ in his texts. Through this kind of imaginative approach, we may thus have cause to observe Wallace’s empathetic (dis)engagements with the reader, his suspicious re-imagination of ‘readers’ within his texts. Since Freud’s theory of the transference incorporates this kind of self-reflexive account of the psychoanalytic dialogue, we may subsequently consider the extent to which transferential acting-out determines our abstract vocabularies for thinking and speaking about the Wallace ‘reader’. In this sense, the study provides a reader-response model for discussing Wallace’s fiction and reception; however, this approach is metarhetorical for its inductive adherence to persuasive statements about the ‘reader’ by Wallace and Wallace scholars. But without getting ahead of ourselves, we may consider again how the ‘reader’ is abstracted in texts, particularly within the transferential terms which we have set for Wallace’s fictions already. This is where the aforementioned work of Peter Brooks comes into play.
Re-Abstracting the ‘Reader’ with Peter Brooks

Peter Brooks’ 1986 essay ‘The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism’ observes the operation of the transference in 20th century narrative theory, highlighting the abstract notion of the ‘implied reader’ in structuralist and psychoanalytic narratology. “Psychoanalytic literary criticism has always been something of an embarrassment,” Brooks declares, highlighting his general concern with “the legitimacy and force that psychoanalysis may claim when imported into the study of literary texts” (1). Brooks begins the essay with a clever recapitulation of Freudian theoretical criticism, which, like Freud and Ricoeur, sets out a series of theoretical positions in relation to psychoanalytic knowledge. The major issue, for Brooks, is that “psychoanalysis in literary study has over and over again mistaken the object of analysis” (1).

On this basis, Brooks writes that “Traditional psychoanalytic criticism tends to fall into three general categories, depending on the object of analysis: the author, the reader or the fictive persons of the text” (1-2). To summarise, author-based criticism locates meaning in the mind of a text’s creator; character-based criticism observes meaning through the actions or interiorities of “fictive persons”; and reader-based criticism “willingly brackets the notion of author in favour of the acceptable and also verifiable notion of reader” (2). This broad-based reading typology informs some of our theorising of the ‘reader’ – that of readers who identify (with the fraught and literal intentionality of an ‘author’), readers who critique (often on the basis of
imagined ‘readers’) and readers who narrate (their own empirical and hypothetical accounts of the reading process).

However, as Brooks points out, each of these approaches bears uncanny traces of largely-outdated psychoanalytic themes – by mistaking or misrepresenting the object of analysis, classical Freudian criticism often “displaces the object of analysis from the text to some person, some other psychodynamic structure” (2). For Brooks, the improper use of psychoanalysis helps reveal the interpretive risks at stake in the classical Freudian method. Again, these risks refer back to the suspicious hermeneutics suggested in Ricoeur, the deciphering of false speech in the Freudian interventionist model. “Psychoanalysis is imperialistic”, Brooks writes, “almost of necessity” (3). In Freud’s work at least, the work of analysis often remains wedded to the idea of epistemological intervention, conveyed in Brooks’ imagining of Freud as a “conquistador”, “extend[ing] remarkably the empire of signs and their significant decipherment, encompassing all of human behaviour and symbolic action” and so forth (3). Speaking to this idea, Brooks speaks to his own theoretical dilemmas with Freud, which are based once more on the curious (and at times interventionist) conjunction of ‘psychoanalytic theory’ and ‘literary studies’:

We continue to dream of a convergence between psychoanalysis and literary criticism because we sense that their ought to be, that there must be, some correspondence between literary and psychic process, that aesthetic structure and form, including literary tropes, must somehow coincide with the psychic structures and operations they evoke and appeal to [...] Part of the attraction of psychoanalytic criticism has always been its promise of a movement beyond formalism, to that desired place
where literature and life converge [...] I very much subscribe to that urge, but I think that it is fair to say that in the case of psychoanalysis, paradoxically, we can go beyond formalism only by becoming more formalistic (4, original emphasis)

Brooks is subtly concerned with the abstract notions of convergence and coincidence suggested by psychoanalytic literary criticism. To describe these notions is to consider the difference between a text which identifies with a reader and a text which identifies a ‘reader’ – the first text appears to converge upon the identifications of the literal reader, while the second text actually appears to try and coincide with their ‘reader’. But the movement towards imagination – towards characters, narrators and narratives – is not enough to resolve this dilemma, because it cannot yet account for the charge of interventionism. While a characterological account can prove quite useful, particularly in the sorts of “situational-thematic” analyses provided by, for example, feminist criticism (2), Brooks suggests that such an approach is “methodologically disquieting in its use of Freudian analytic tools in a wholly thematic way, as if the identification and labelling of human relations in a psychoanalytic vocabulary were the task of criticism” (2).

As we have already seen, the field of Wallace Studies has thus far considered and largely avoid this sort of risk. Mary K Holland’s situational-thematic analyses of narcissism in Infinite Jest and Brief Interviews with Hideous Men suggest a more productive and self-aware kind of feminist criticism than the kind imagined by Brooks (See Chapters 1, 3), whilst Marshall Boswell’s theorising of erotic sentimentality actually bears productive similarities with the textual “erotics” claimed in ‘Psychoanalytic Literary
Criticism’, and in Brooks’ extended work Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (1992). Nevertheless, the question of ‘psychoanalytic literary criticism’, of theoretical convergence and coincidence, remains an open one in these subsequent studies. Whilst each of these approaches has merit, the psychoanalytic approach can sometimes appear short-sighted, at least according to Brooks. In borrowing from Freud to imagine authors, characters, situations, themes and even readers, we potentially divert our own attentions away from the “textual and rhetorical” dynamics of criticism (p2), and the curious manner in which texts reimage the author-reader relationship.

But in revisiting these limits, Brooks discovers the basis for a new kind of textual erotics, “attuned to form as our situation, our siting, within the symbolic order, the order within which we constitute meaning and ourselves as endowed with meaning” (8). In Brooks’ analysis, this narrative situation is inevitably framed by the spectacle and mystery of the transference-neurosis, and the dynamics of acting-out. For Brooks, The transference is inherently textual, comprising “a semiotic and fictional medium wherein the compulsions of unconscious desire, and its scenarios of infantile fulfilment, become symbolically present in the communicative situation of analysis” (1986:30). Whence Brooks’ semiotic accounting of the Freudian clinic:

The analyst (I paraphrase Freud here) must treat the analysand’s words and symbolic acts as an actual force, active in the present, while attempting to translate them back into the terms of the past [...] to restore the links between ideas and events that have fallen away, to reconnect isolated memories and to draw conclusions from interconnections and patterns. The analyst
must help the analysand construct a narrative discourse whose syntax and rhetoric are more plausible, more convincing, more adequate to the give account of the story of the past than those originally presented, in symptomatic form, by the analysand (10).

In this abstracted sense, the transference serves to highlight the ambivalent nature of our engagement with the literary text – routinely described in terms of struggle, conflict, agitation or antagonism, we enter this kind of dialogue through “our very act of reading, in our (counter-)transferential desire to master the text, as also in the desire to be mastered by it” (11-12). In this context, the various limits placed on psychoanalytic hermeneutics – such as the absence of a psychologically-viable ‘author’, the displacement of attention onto characterologies, theme, situation, et al – effectively intersect, suggesting a more psychoanalytically-attuned rhetoric for discussing those same displacements in precedent analyses of Wallace. By exploring this reader-response rhetoric, and its manifestations within Wallace’s work and criticism, we will have laid the groundwork to connect our reading of Freud and the transference to the kinds of metafictional “conversation” imagined by Wallace and his texts.

This is where the notion of the implied reader proves most useful to the present study. For Brooks, literary criticism is best characterised by “a willingness, a desire, to enter into the delusional systems of texts, to espouse their hallucinated vision” (16). Yet Brooks makes it clear that this espousal is in fact a complex negotiation of meaning between reader and text, in which the potential response of the former is placed into question by the latter. This sense of dialogue informs Brooks’ definition of a framed tale – that is, a
narrative explicitly framed by its relationship to an imagined ‘reader’ or interlocutor. Framed tales “stage the presence of a listener or narratee, whose reactions to what is told are often what is most important in the narrative” (11), thus espousing elements of their own reception within the text. Brooks writes:

Texts are always implicitly or even explicitly addressed to someone. The ‘I’ that speaks in lyric ever postulates a ‘Thou’ [...] Even in texts which have no explicit narrator or narratee, there is necessarily a discourse which solicits a response, be it only in the play of personal pronouns and the conjugation of verbs (11).

This seems dangerously close to what Wallace had in mind when he referred to fiction as an “act of communication between one human being and another” – a solicitation of response, a dialogised mode of expression, an espousal of a worldview which encloses on the worldviews of its various supposed ‘others’. But first, it is important to locate the significance of the transference in this newly-abstracted definition of literary dialogue – how does the text implicitly or explicitly address itself to the reader? Is this incompleteness itself a kind of acting-out?

In Brooks, the transference emerges as a key point of distinction for psychoanalytic criticism, particularly for the kinds of textual and rhetorical criticism available to contemporary audiences. It is easy to imagine this criticism as formalistic and lifeless, having already been stripped of “authorial mutants”, “Oedipal triangles in fiction”, other “person[s]”, “other psychodynamic structure[s]” and such (2). But one of the best things about reading Brooks, I think, is that he doesn’t quite dispense with these kinds of wild psychoanalytic intentionality – rather, he provides abstract models for
thinking and speaking about them, particularly as they appear in self-aware narrative texts and self-aware literary theory. A case in point is his artful framing of the transference in relation to literary interpretation:

Within the transference, recall of the past most often takes place as its unconscious repetition, acting it out as if it were present: repetition is a way of remembering, brought into play when recollection in the intellectual sense if blocked by repression and resistance. Repetition is both an obstacle to analysis – since the analysand must eventually be led to renunciation of the attempt to reproduce the past – and the principal dynamic of the cure, since it is only by way of its symbolic enactment in the present can the history of past desire, its objects and scenarios of fulfilment, be made known, become manifest in the present discourse (10).

In a more abstract account of the Freudian talking-cure, the transference refers to the literal through unconscious repetition, that is, in “symbolic enactments” of “past desire, its objects and scenarios of fulfilment.” It is on this basis that the analyst, or the literary critic, may attempt to “help the analysand construct a narrative discourse whose syntax and rhetoric are more plausible, more convincing, more adequate to give an account of the story of the past” than the “symptomatic” rhetorics of the analysand (10). In this sense, Brooks suggests that the hermeneutic work of the critic – specifically, their reconstruction and retransmission of the text through the act of criticism – is something literally akin to the work of the analyst, helping substantiate a more dynamic sense of the relationship between scholarship and the analytic work. “The advantage of such a transferential model,” he writes, “is that it illuminates the difficult and productive encounter of the speaker and the listener, the text and the reader” (12). But to this literalistic concern, Brooks also highlights the hypothetical extremes to which literary dialogue “takes
place in an ‘artificial’ space – a symbolic and semiotic medium – that is none the less the place of real investments of desire” (12-13). This is part of what this study highlights in relation to Wallace: the dynamic activity of transference in Wallace’s rhetorics of the ‘reader’, which certainly appear to partake of Brooks-ian ideas about the relative reality/unreality of the literary dialogue. A further advantage of this approach is its capacities to consider various forms of uncritical psychoanalytic reading in Wallace’s texts and reception.

Whilst recognising the semiotic and rhetorical depths of psychoanalytic criticism, Brooks’ transferential model is most notable for its treatment of critical abstraction, of a kind suggested in the relationship between literary criticism “and” psychoanalytic method. We can note again that Brooks is concerned with convergence or literal coincidence of “literary and psychic process”, of the psychoanalytic theory of mind with “aesthetic structure and form, including literary tropes”. If this convergence is to succeed, however, it must first traverse the literalistic and imaginative dimensions of discourse, a necessity reflected in Brooks’ extended critique of criticism in the 80’s:

One can in general indict Anglo-American ‘New Criticism’ for being too quick to leap from the level of formal explication to that of moral and psychological interpretation, *neglecting the trajectory through linguistics and poetics* that needs to stand between. [...] The more recent – rhetorical and deconstructive – kind understands the formalist imperative, but I fear that it may too often remain content with formal operations, simply *bracketing the human realm* from which psychoanalysis derives [...] It is not willing to make the crossover between rhetoric and reference that interests me – and ought to be the *raison d’etre* for the recourse to psychoanalysis in the first place” (4-5, emphasis mine)
Brooks’ *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* is largely based on this abstract “crossover” between rhetoric and reference, particularly in light of structuralist narratology – for example distinguishing between a narrated fact and narrative fact (that is, between fabula and sjuzet in formalist terms), and considering the curious “double logic” at stake in this distinction (1992: 28). This second logic, the turn inwards to the “results that we know” rather than “givens” of a pre-textual reality, is borne out by our readings of Wallace scholarship and suspicious hermeneutics (See Chapter 1). By observing this conflict between rhetoric and reference, between the narrated worlds of the text and the narrated realities ‘beyond’ it, my study bears out Brooks’ suggestion that both logics might apply: “the contradiction may be in the very nature of narrative, which not only uses but is a double logic” (29).

Brooks’ model, which attentively observes this kind of fraught reader-presentation and provides a vocabulary for discussing it, thus points the way to a more abstract appreciation of the ‘reader’ in Wallace. Conversely, the psychoanalytically-aware and maximally self-reflexive nature of Wallace’s texts arguably provide us new extensions to this approach, which can help us identify the more forward-thinking or prescient aspects of Brooks’ discussions of the psychoanalytic interpretive dialogue. In *Reading for the Plot*, for example, these discussions tend to centre on the movement between re-imagination and re-abstraction, which cannily takes into account the self-conscious treatment of this movement in the *avant-garde* fiction of the 1980s. Moreover, Brooks provides some canonical and accessible examples of this movement from earlier modernist narratives:
The translations of narrative, its slidings-across in the transformatory process of its plot, its movements forward that recover markings from past in the play of anticipation and retrospection, lead to a final situation where the claim to understanding is incorporate with the claim to transmissibility. One could find some of the most telling illustrations of this claim in the 19th century’s frequent use of the framed tale which, dramatizing the relations of tellers and listeners, narrators and narratees, regularly enacts the problematic of transmission, looking for the sign of recognition and the promise to carry on, revealing, too, a deep anxiety about the possibility of transmission, as in Marlow’s words to his auditors in Heart of Darkness: ‘Do you see the story? Do you see anything?’ (28)

Brooks’ affinity for the framed tale, and for the strange detective-works of the reader in relation thereto, help indicate the pertinent fact that some of the literary anxieties in Wallace’s texts are not new. In fact, from this abstract hermeneutic standpoint, virtually all authors are concerned with the claim, problematics and possibility of their text’s transmission, a transmissibility which is ultimately coincident (or “incorporate”) with the kinds of understanding made possible by literary criticism.

The difference here, I think, is that this concern has been made explicit and is in fact routinely exposed by the Wallace text, particularly through its treatment of themes such as literary abstraction. I view this exposure as a kind of re-abstraction, related to the repetition readers who narrate in Wallace’s essayistic and autobiographical works (See Chapter 5).

Nevertheless, like Brooks’ Conrad’s Marlow, the anxiety in Wallace’s texts seems explicable on the basis of a familiar set of questions: “Do you see the story? Do you see anything?” This self-reflexive anxiety about transmission is, of course, a characteristic feature of Wallace’s work (See Chapter 1). In response, this study provides a new take on this anxiety by considering themes
such as “anticipation of retrospection”, rhetoric and reference in Freudian narratology, particularly as these themes relate to literal and imaginative forms of repetition (See Chapter 6). In this respect at least, Brooks’ works remain an invaluable resource for the present study, and for readers looking to understand the complexities of psychoanalytic criticism in the 20th (and arguably the 21st) century.

**Repetition and Negation with Shoshanna Felman**

In the works of Shoshanna Felman (2012), the theme of “acting-out” takes on a particularly relevance to the present study, as it is specifically applied to the paradigm-building activities of literary critics, what we have termed critical rhetoric. In Felman’s reading, the psychoanalytic author-reader relationship is thrown into complete disarray by certain texts’ grasp of the transference as reading-effect. The text in question is Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, which tells a vivid tale of a haunted Victorian estate, mostly narrated from the perspective of a young, unnamed governess. Notably, Felman’s review does not begin with the text itself, but with that text’s complex critical reception, charting the “impact” of James’ work on writings of reviewers and critics alike, that is, the “exegetic passions and energetic controversies” stirred up by the text’s scandalous narrative of haunting, desire, possession and death (143-144). Surprisingly enough, Felman also discovers this narrative repeated in scholarship::
what is perceived as the most scandalous thing about this
scandalous story is that we are forced to participate in the
scandal, that the reader’s innocence cannot remain intact: there
is no such thing as an innocent reader of this text. In other
words, the scandal is not simply in the text, it resides in our
relation to the text, in the text’s effect on us, its readers: what is
outrageous in the text is not simply that of which the text is
speaking, but that which makes it speak to us (2012: 144, original
emphasis).

For Felman, this sense of critical scandal is amplified by the entry of
psychoanalysis into the debate, most notably in the works of critic Edmund
Wilson, whose work re-imagines James’ ghosts as “figments of the governess’
sick imagination, mere hallucinations and projections symptomatic of the
frustration of her repressed sexual desires” (Felman: 144). Wilson is, in this
sense, one of Brooks’ interventionist psychoanalytic critics concerned with the
intentional workings of the, text as revealed by the psychology of its
characters. On the other side of the debate, however, non- or anti-
psychoanalytic critics such as Robert Heilman are seen to partake in a rhetoric
of moral redemption, in which the text is literally rescued or “saved” from the
clutches of Freudian literalism, in a manner eerily reminiscent of the
governess’ own attempts to protect the virtue of her young Victorian charges
(147-148).

The empirical existence of this literary-psychoanalytic debate helps
Felman to locate the significance of The Turn of the Screw in terms of an
“uncanny” and “inescapable” reading-effect (2012: 149). “The scene of the
critical debate is thus a repetition of scene dramatised in the text,” she writes
of this effect, “The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates
the text but also reproduces it dramatically” (147, emphasis mine). In this
sense, texts such as James’ enable us to effectively perform the transference through the act of reading: “Through its very reading, the text, so to speak, acts itself out [...] whichever way readers turn, they can be turned by the text, they can but perform it by repeating it” (p148, original emphasis). Once again, we find the significance of the literary text described as an acting-out, both in the text’s various espousals of delusion and intention, and the critic’s various repetitions of these discourses in the act of interpretation.

These textual and critical performances enable something like Brooks’ “transferential” narrative rhetoric, when we consider the extent to which literary inquiry repeats its own object, espousing and working-through the various delusional systems at stake in the text itself. In a similar vein, Felman distinguishes her approach from that of Wilson, whose diagnoses of sexual frustration are said to contribute to a kind of “vulgar” Freudianism, a reductive and literalistic idea of psychoanalysis as a direct “answer” to the questions posed by the literary text (p149-153). In response, Felman’s model exploits the kinds of disengagement, isolation and derealization imagined by Ricoeur (1978: 417), in order to imagine a self-reflexive psychoanalytic criticism which can accomplish both “a reading of the text which will at the same time be articulated with a reading of its readings” (Felman: 149). By engaging with this interpretive space, we remain concerned with the idea of literary transference, whose performative significance has at this point become clear:

Freud’s discovery of the unconscious is the outcome of his reading of the hysterical discourse of his patients, i.e., of his being capable of reading in this hysterical discourse his own unconscious. The discovery of the unconscious is therefore
Freud’s discovery, within the discourse of the other, of what was actively reading in himself: his discovery, in other words, of what was reading – in what was being read (164)

Through the literary transference, reading is a kind of self-consciously negative performance, in which the exegetical and hypothetical tensions of the text are repeated, re-imagined, re-abstracted and ultimately worked-through by the reader. But like its antecedents in the Freudian clinic, this literary transference is rhetorically unstable – it depends on a complex parsing of both the intentions of the text (which are always in some way hidden) as well as in the various re-workings and re-voicing of these intentions within the paradigmatic field of Wallace Studies. Conversely, the transference-neurosis may thus represent a rhetoric of instability, highlighting the disruptive and controversial stakes of the psychoanalytic literary encounter by implicating the reader’s own intentions with those of the text.

Throughout this chapter, we have found that the Freudian transference-neurosis provides a versatile theoretical model for understanding the ways in which a text repeats, re-imagines and re-abstracts its own reception. Like the complex term ‘reader’, the concept of transference-neurosis can thus potentially help us parse the unique difficulties of the metafictional dialogue, whilst alerting us to the unique kinds of reader-performance at stake in Wallace’s works. In Freud’s metapsychology, we discovered the idea of acting-out as literal repetition – often, in Wallace, the suggestion of particular interpersonal or dialogic scenarios, or the imagining of literal ‘readers’ in the text (See Chapter 3). In Brooks, we discovered the bases of a textual and rhetorical psychoanalytic criticism, which helps us
elaborate the essentially self-conscious tenor of Wallace’s approach, through the idea of the “framed tale” and its various elaborations of identity and agency (1986). Finally, in Felman, we can also begin to observe the estranging impact of such tales on contemporary paradigms of interpretation, best evidenced in the bizarre theatricality of Henry James scholarship, and the kinds of interpretive *acting-out* revealed through close attention to the transference in criticism.

This sense of estrangement, again indexed by the term *acting-out*, can help us understand Felman’s post-structural re-imagination of the transference, as in this discussion of the self-conscious (because transferential) narrative ‘frame’:

A narrative frame that thus incarnates the very principle of repetition of the story it contains, and, through that repetition, situates both the loss of the story’s origin and the story’s origin as its own loss [...] constitutes rather a complication, a problematization of the relationship itself between the inside and outside of the textual space [...] the frame indeed leaves no one out: it pulls the outside of the story into its inside by enclosing in it what is usually outside it: its own readers. But the frame at the same time does the very opposite, pulling the inside outside: for in passing through the echoing chain of the multiple, repetitive narrative voices, it is the very content, the interior of the story that becomes somehow exterior to itself, reported as it is by a voice inherently alien to it [...] a voice whose otherness violates the story’s presence to itself (168-169)

Through this kind of reasoning, the present study has already indicated certain essential movement from the literal (gesturing ‘beyond’ the text to real readers), to the imagined (highlighting the various ‘readers’ repeated in Wallace’s fiction) to the abstract or implied ‘readers’ of Wallace’s fiction.
From a literalistic concern with literary love (See Chapter 3) to an ironized sense of metafictional “performance” (See Chapter 4), Wallace’s texts present an array of unclear consequences for contemporary scholarship, particularly in a field is still coming to terms with the dramatic, dramaturgical and theatrical impact of Wallace’s literary project as a whole. These consequences, I think, are explicable in terms of a psychoanalytic hermeneutics, which affirms and embodies the simple enough principle: observe repetition. Beyond literal repetition, we are thus led to considered more utile concepts like re-imagination and re-abstraction, which are often conveyed at the most self-conscious or overdetermined junctures of a David Foster Wallace text. In Wallace’s fictions about fiction, this intrusion of “inherently alien” voices and violating or violated “otherness” is nothing if not repeated (See Chapter 1; Chapter 6), yet Felman’s reference to “the echoing chain of multiple, repetitive narrative voices” helps alert us to new, more estranging ways of understanding this repetition in Wallace.

Throughout Wallace’s work, we encounter diverse and creative forms of apparent conflict between interpretations – often presented as a kind of rhetorical uncertainty, a mystery of intentions or a bizarre interpersonal drama. By parsing these kinds of conflict, our model extends understandings of repetition in Wallace, because it begins to account for the ways in which Wallace’s discourse of the ‘reader’ becomes visible and problematized in contemporary Wallace scholarship. This visibility can only be a good thing – for one, it allows us to consider the sheer rhetorical potency of the term
‘reader’ in Wallace’s works, and the sorts of unanswerable questions that the term appears to pose for contemporary Wallace critics.

Conclusion: Performing the ‘Fiction-Writer’s Reader’ (II)

In Chapter 1, the self-reflexive question of the Wallace ‘reader’ provided us with a plausible basis for observing repetition – whether taken literally, viewed imaginatively or considered abstractly, we saw that Wallace’s ‘reader’ repeats, suggesting something like a rhetorical or exegetical imperative at the margins; an insistence, a claim, perhaps even a demand. On one level, we were compelled to read the Wallace ‘reader’ literally, to fix our gaze firmly and squarely beyond the text and towards ourselves as readers. After all, how hard is it to take Wallace at face value when he describes the literary encounter as “an act of communication between one human being and another” (Wallace 1997: 144), really? Isn’t this exactly the point of Wallace’s fiction, especially when considered against the alleged improprieties or excesses of his literary peers (Bret Easton Ellis, Jonathan Franzen et al)? Yet despite this weight of common-sense, we were also taken to reading Wallace’s ‘reader’ imaginatively, particularly when considering the value of suspicious hermeneutics in the author's life and work. Through this, we were led to ask: how do we distinguish ourselves from the suspicious ‘reader(s)’ imagined within Wallace's fictions, and avoid falling into the narcissistic interpretive traps which those fictions inarguably devise?
On this basis, I think that the theme of transference-neurosis – particularly in the literal, imaginative and abstract senses we have outlined thus far – can help us arrive at a new perspective on repetition in Wallace. This perspective exposes the sense of performance or “acting-out” represented in the metafictional text, the fiction about fiction, whilst drawing upon such performances to understand why metafiction continues to confound us, continues to provide new and often quite explicit accounts of who readers are and how readers read. But the ‘fourth reader’ position also asks: Does literary criticism do the same? And if so, why? The outward/inward dialectic suggested by Wallace’s text’s self-reflexivity – those texts’ specific games with the literalistic and the imaginative – has formed a major basis for contemporary studies of Wallace and his works, as suggested by the theorising of naiveté/cynicism (Boswell), sincerity/authenticity/New Sincerity (Kelly), empathy/narcissism (Holland), identification/suspicion (Hayes-Brady) and, finally, of author and reader (Staes). Yet even here, we find the estranging stamp of a self-concerned author, as evidenced by the complex play of intentions and abstract self-presentation in Wallace’s essays and interviews (See Chapter 5). We have already caught a glimpse of this in Wallace’s interview with Matthew Gilbert, where he asserted that he had “at least fifty-three” different responses to a single question, and in fact gave four.

Who is our fourth ‘reader’, then? The ‘reader who negates’ is, quite simply, a reader who observes textual repetition, in the form of acting-out, before locating their own response to the dynamics being repeated. This is what this study is trying to do – observe the effective repetition of the term
‘reader’ across multiple semantic and rhetorical registers, and provide a psychoanalytically-informed account of that repetition. But to my mind, this fourth ‘reader’ does bear many of the hallmark characteristics of an archetypal Freudian analyst, not least in their tendency to view repetition as a force for both dialogue and cure. In this sense, we might begin to imagine the Wallace text as sort of analysable discourse, explicable in terms of its most estranging repetitions of particular psychoanalytic reading-tropes. The key to this reading is the recognition that Wallace’s self-aware relationship to classical psychoanalysis does not preclude a more thorough application of psychoanalytic methodology to his fictions. As my reading of the transference-neurosis suggests, self-awareness about psychoanalysis is in fact a necessary condition of both the Freudian talking-cure and its counterparts in literary theory, and worth considering further in Wallace’s fictions.

Finally, our reading of psychoanalytic reading needs to take into account the methodological juxtaposition of psychoanalysis and critical rhetoric, particularly given the rich history of such juxtapositions in contemporary Wallace Studies. A noted example of psychoanalytic exegesis is Mary Holland’s theorisation of cultural narcissism in *Infinite Jest* (2006) – this study proceeded to consider the imagination of irony and narcissism in Wallace’s major works, particularly as re-imagined within those works (See Chapter 1). Elsewhere, Boswell has provided paradigm readings of Freud and Jacques Lacan in *Infinite Jest*, which are notable for strong critique of Lacanian ethics in fiction (on what I would call literalistic grounds):
Lacanian thinking [...] is not a truth reported but a truth constructed, and what these sophisticated, poststructuralist depressives have really ‘constructed’ are their own cages, cages in which they hide the ‘hideous interior self’ where un-hip truth and sentiment reside (2003: 156).

As these readings have highlighted, Wallace’s metafictional treatment of psychoanalytic thought are primarily self-reflexive – in stories such as ‘Here and There’ (1989), ‘The Depressed Person’ (1999) and ‘Good Old Neon’ (2004), the role of psychoanalysis is both teased and thwarted by the self-conscious activities of Wallace’s characters, who see themselves as both adjacent and anterior to their respective treatments. Nevertheless, I think this particular antagonism can be effectively investigated in terms of the author’s respective treatments of readers who identify (that is, his literalistic repetition of ‘readers’), readers who critique (his re-imagination of suspicious reading), and readers who narrate (his re-abstracting of ideas like authorial intentionality and literary self-presentation). In these kinds of texts, and especially in collections such as Oblivion (2004), we can see the oblique (yet inarguably characteristic) emergence of primal psychoanalytic themes in Wallace, something I consider further in Chapter 6.

For now, suffice it to say that the value of psychoanalytic hermeneutics in Wallace’s work is bound up in the macro-claim that “Wallace negates the reader” – following the schema set up in Chapter 1, I argue that Wallace’s works are negatively concerned with the reader, they effect a kind of critical or rhetorical negation ‘of’ that reader. When we take up this idea, we are stepping beyond the parameters laid out by Wallace in his “act of communication” thesis, that is, we are no longer inclined to view literary dialogue as
communication between “human being[s]”, because this definition of the ‘reader’ is itself part of the schema, due to its second-order placement alongside literal, imagined and abstract ‘reader(s) of Wallace’. Put simply, Wallace recalls the idea of the ‘reader’ so often that this idea becomes unconsciously over-determined in his fictions, more often than not resulting in interpretive paradox.

By exposing these questions, and traversing their impact on contemporary readings of Wallace, the present study highlights the extent to which Wallace’s fictions effect and undermine their own conception of the ‘reader’, an effect arguably exemplified in Wallace’s late short fictions, as per Oblivion and its treatments of Freudian psychodrama. To confront these estranging limits and proximities in Wallace’s self-reflexive rhetoric of the ‘reader’, the present study has provided a novel account of repetition (in the form of acting-out), which can help us understand significant Freudian and post-Freudian anxieties in Wallace’s broader literary project. Let us begin, then, by considering the most overt of these anxieties: the fact that Wallace’s fiction, for all of its antagonistic complexity, remains empathetically and erotically concerned with the activities of readers who identify. From here, and in subsequent chapters, the idea of the ‘implied reader’ as transferential-neurotic discourse is in play. Having outlined the relationships between self-reflexivity and repetition at stake in the term ‘acting-out’, we may now press the case that Wallace’s fictions perform their ‘reader’, through the negative (because transferential-neurotic) mechanisms of repetition, re-imagination and re-abstraction.
CHAPTER 3
Readers who Identify

For whom?
You are loved.

(Wallace 1989: 373)

Introduction: “the part of yourself that can love”

When considering the kinds of dialogue and communication made possible by David Foster Wallace’s literary project, we cannot overlook the centrality of identification – particularly empathetic identification – to that project, and to the author’s expansive statements on fictional and metafictional practice at the turn of the 21st century. From the outset of his literary career, with the early publications of The Broom of the System and short story collection Girl with Curious Hair, Wallace set forth articulating a literary program founded on empathetic communication, dialogue between living “human beings”, a dialogue set in vital contrast to the kinds of ironic disavowal and self-reference at stake in the author’s own diagnoses of
postmodernity and avant-garde fiction. In one of many celebrated statements from the author's interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993, Wallace reacts to the idea of “conventionally political or social-action-type solutions” in contemporary fiction:

That’s not what fiction’s about. Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being. [...] What’s engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn’t have a price? And can these capacities be made to thrive? And if so, how, and if not, why not? (2012: 26–27).

As a proxy for the kinds of “joy, charity [and] genuine connections” at stake in Wallace’s own texts, the theme of empathetic identification remains crucial to our understandings of the author and his legacy. From the idea of Wallace’s works as an “intimate zone of communication, of subjective interaction” (Boswell 2003: 19), to the oblique glimpses of “the truly valuable in human life – traits such as love, trust, faith and responsibility” effected therein (Kelly 2012: 139), Wallace’s legacy remains predicated on the idea of fiction as a significant “act of communication between one human being and another” (Wallace 1997: 144) – most overtly, an act of identification.

As we are well aware, these complex gestures towards empathetic dialogue are both unique and crucial to Wallace’s literary legacy as a whole. But having theorised these kinds of gestures in terms of literality (See Chapters 1-2), it remains for us to observe the repetitive nature of this literality in Wallace’s fiction – when and why do Wallace’s texts repeat the literal? When do they make a claim about the literalistic nature of reading? Having situated our own approach a step removed from literality, I think we can
observe the extent to which Wallace’s texts not only repeat, but re-imagine and re-abstract this idea of literal reading as a matter of high significance. The most telling indicator of this significance is Wallace’s idiosyncratic definition of literary love, which provides an erotic (albeit ambivalent or antagonistic) capacity to “talk out the part of yourself that can love” – as opposed to, of course, “the part of yourself that just wants to be loved”. Whilst scholars have certainly modelled this literal sense of love in Wallace’s fiction (C.f. Hayes-Brady, 2016), I want to explore the strange term “talk out” as well. How does this talking-out manifest itself in Wallace’s short fictions, and how does it impact on the kinds of claims we make about those fictions, for example in the idea that Wallace identifies (with) the reader?

This claim is the subject of the present chapter, examining the centrality of empathetic identification to paradigmatic accounts of Wallace and his literary legacy. By reviewing the avowedly empathetic parameters of Wallace’s literary project, this chapter examines the ways in which the author’s early fiction – in this case the short fictions collected in Girl with Curious Hair – repeat and re-imagine the theme of literary identification through sophisticated narratives of readers, writers, critics and texts. These narratives are decidedly self-reflexive, both in their overt pastiches of modern and postmodern style, and in their insistent fascination with the assumptions and expectations of readers who identify. In texts such as ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’, Wallace’s narrator routinely interrupts the story to recant such expectations directly to the reader, at one point detailing the follies of so-called “Realist” writers as expressions of
The ‘illusion’ of a windowed access to a ‘reality’ isomorphic with ours but possessed of and yielding up higher truths to which all authentically human persons stand in the relation of applicand (1989: 265)

Considering the rhetoric surrounding empathy and identification in Wallace’s works – and the kinds of “higher truths” and “authentically human persons” professed by the author – we begin to grasp the uniquely self-referential significance of the term identification within those works, and its bearing on our contemporary conversation with the author and his legacy. At the same time, however, Wallace’s preoccupation with the reader, and their status as “applicand” to the complex claims of the “Realist” (read: pre-metafictional) author, reminds us that this conversation is a kind of self-reflexive performance, explicitly pitched towards the whims and attitudes of Wallace’s own postmodern audience. Nevertheless, the surfeit of claims about ‘readers’ is already apparent in texts like ‘Westward’, which will go on to claim its own love for the reader in a literalistic way (See Chapter 1).

But if we are to claim that Wallace’s texts successfully identify and identify with this audience, then we must also negotiate with the kinds of self-referential readers who identify performed within these texts. In the case of Girl with Curious Hair, this sense of performance is surprisingly literalistic, as texts such as ‘Little Expressionless Animals’, ‘Here and There’, ‘Say Never’ and ‘Everything is Green’ identify a range of empathetic and non-empathetic readers, whilst openly questioning these readers’ capacities for empathy, dialogue, trust and – especially – for love. Whilst many of the characters in Girl are writers – such as Bruce in ‘Here and There’, whose “honors thesis is an
epic poem about variable systems of information- and energy-transfer” (155) – virtually everyone in *Girl* is a ‘reader’, whose reactions to respective unfolding narratives self-reflexively shape our own understandings and appreciations of those narratives. In this sense, they begin to sound like Peter Brooks’ “framed tales”, which figured their own significance via the repetition of respondents, interlocutors and narratees (See Chapter 2).

However, Wallace arguably extends this framing of the ‘reader’ to newer, more estranging places. From the conflicting array of perspectives canvassed in ‘Say Never’, to the anhedonic and anti-empathetic dialogues canvassed in ‘My Appearance’, ‘Westward’ and the titular ‘Girl with Curious Hair’, Wallace’s debut collection offers a substantially complex account of the reader as a kind of performer, literally “acting-out” the stakes of the narratives in which they appear. For example, in the hyper-minimal story ‘Everything is Green’, Wallace imagines his narrator gazing at a girl named Mayfly, herself transfixed on the morning light outside her window:

> Everything is green, she is saying. She is whispering it and the whisper is not to me no more I know [...] She is looking outside, from where she is sitting, and I look at her, and there is something in me that can not close up, in that looking. Mayfly has a body. And she is my morning. Say her name. (230)

At the concluding limit of the text, openly entreating the reader to ‘speak with’ its speaker and say the name “Mayfly”, the narrator of ‘Everything is Green’ works to evoke a sense of expansive empathy, in a kind of literalised compression of the apparent gesture ‘behind’ the text (which is, of course, to provide the reader with a means of getting ‘beyond’ the text). Thus the reader is invited to empathise with, indeed to see through Mayfly’s unique
perspective, a perspective which can only be revealed through the externalised discourse of the narrator. This multi-focal and highly self-referential form of literary empathy – which plays on the literal body and gaze of Mayfly herself, and her own insistence that ‘Everything is green’ – helps us to understand the sentimental complexity of Wallace’s earliest works, and their overriding (albeit self-conscious and self-reflexive) concern for the reader’s empathetic sensibilities.

Meanwhile, the elaboration of this strategy in Girl provides some of the clearest evidence as to the performative ambit of Wallace’s fiction more broadly. In his attempts to speak with and see through his own postmodern “audience”, Wallace effectively recreates that audience within the text, leveraging the presence of readers who identify against his own explorations of modernist and postmodern form. However, this performance of the reader inevitably complicates our contemporary conversations with texts such as Girl with Curious Hair, to the extent that we potentially fail to distinguish between the kinds of catharsis anticipated within those texts and our own appreciations thereof. Whilst contemporary readings assume authority on the part of Wallace’s reader-protagonists, citing the latter’s complex predilection for moral virtue and “really human” forms of communication, these readings arguably repeat the same tensions canvassed in and by Wallace’s texts (See Chapter 1). By speaking with or through these readers, and uncannily evoking Wallace’s own rhetoric around readership and dialogue, contemporary scholars remain caught up in the broader transferential schemes acted-out or performed within Wallace’s own texts. The most telling expression of this
game comes from Wallace, who makes the following distinction between two kinds of literary identification:

But that’s just the first level, because the idea of a mental or emotional intimacy with a character is a delusion or a contrivance set up through art by the writer. *There’s another level that a piece of fiction is a conversation.* There’s a relationship set up between the reader and the text that’s very strange and complicated and hard to talk about (62, emphasis mine)

As an open claim for a “very strange and complicated” conversation with the reader, Wallace’s texts inevitably repeat and act-outact-out their own stakes as texts – yet at times, I think, we struggle to identify the level of “delusion or contrivance” involved in this performance. This strategy forms much of the basis for Wallace’s claim that the distinction between “great art and so-so art” has something to do with “the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text – it’s got something to do with love, with having the discipline to talk out the part of yourself that can love, instead of the part that just wants to be loved” (1993).

By reviewing the persistence of readers who identify in *Girl with Curious Hair*, we can thus place Wallace’s own performative strategies back into question, highlighting for example the elaborative discourses of literary love and empathetic identification in Wallace’s earliest fictions, and their bearing on our conversations with the author’s works today. To wit, we may ask: what is it to “talk out of the part of yourself that can love” in texts such as *Girl with Curious Hair*? Is this talking-out in fact a kind of acting-out? To what extent do the ideas of literary love and empathetic identification shape our contemporary conversations with Wallace and his texts?
Performing Postmodernity: Girl with Curious Hair

Originally published in 1989, Girl with Curious Hair is a virtuosic literary performance, bringing together the diverse stylistic and rhetorical strains of Wallace’s own literary inheritance, and deftly parroting the styles of 20th century authors such as John Barth, Bret Easton Ellis, Robert Coover and Phillip Roth (Boswell 2003: 65-70). Through these overt parodies and stylistic re-imaginings of postmodernity, Girl lays the foundations for many of the author’s signature concerns, including the role of irony in modern “television culture” (See Chapter 1), and the capacities of the contemporary reader to empathise and identify therein. In this latter sense, we encounter once more the moralistic imperatives of Wallace’s broader fictional project, recollected in a 1993 interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk:

But anyway, one of the things I was doing in Girl with Curious Hair was to write a very traditionally moral book. This is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values, and it’s our job to make them up, and we’re not doing it. And we’re being told, by the systems that the Sixties were so right to fear, that we needn’t worry about making up moral systems: you know, that there isn’t more to being alive than being pretty, having intercourse a lot, and having a lot of possessions. But the darkly delicious thing is that these systems that are telling us this are using the techniques that the Sixties guys had used – by that I mean postmodern techniques like black irony, metafictional involutions, the whole literature of self-consciousness. We are heirs to it. (2012: 18)

Situated in direct conversation with “the Sixties guys” of high postmodernism, and the “whole literature of self-consciousness” bequeathed thereby, Girl with Curious Hair offers several defining performances of the author’s relationship to contemporary culture, and to his contemporary postmodern audience. Wallace is quick to note that this moral and cultural inheritance is shared, not
only by fiction writers, but by readers and television watchers across America and the Western world: “I mean, TV is so good now”, he declares, “So you’ve got us kids, aged twenty to thirty-five, right on the edge, and all the kids coming after us really getting sucked into that stuff” (17). Wallace’s famously meta-generational anxieties – here expressed in the form of TV Guide-esque exclamations (“TV is so good now”) and demographics (“kids, aged twenty to thirty-five”) – help inform the self-reflexive stakes of Girl, in which simple stories of love and loss are mediated through complex narratives of readers, writers and texts. In his seminal review of Wallace’s early fiction, titled ‘The Panic of Influence’, A.O. Scott makes these stakes clear when he writes that: “It’s hard to think of another writer of any generation [...] who has lampooned the self-dramatizing frustrations of the creative process with such inexhaustible, maniacal conviction” (2000).

In texts such as Girl with Curious Hair, these frustrations become an engine for narrative meaning, an “inexhaustible” and “maniacal” source of inspiration for both the author and his audience. Meanwhile, as Scott correctly observes, the text remains a “virtuoso compendium of tried and true avant-garde techniques” (2000), through which the author effectively repeats and reworks the stakes of his own literary and metafictional inheritance. Underpinned by these performative tensions, Girl with Curious Hair thus provides a prodigious account of the author’s relationship to contemporary postmodern culture, which is reflected in the author’s references to hypothetical postmodern ‘readers’.
This account is perhaps most overt in the celebrated novella which concludes the collection, titled ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’. As Boswell notes, this story sets itself in a kind of generational juxtaposition with the postmodern style of John Barth, whose ‘Lost in the Funhouse’ has proved a formative influence on Wallace’s early works more broadly (2003: 103). Moreover, Boswell declares ‘Westward’ to be “one of the most important texts in Wallace’s oeuvre,” which, taken as a prelude to Wallace’s later works such as *Infinite Jest*, stands as “an astonishingly confident preface to a masterpiece he hadn’t written yet” (103). The prefatory significance of the text comes down to the voice of Wallace’s narrator, which routinely interrupts the text’s narrative to address the reader directly, as in one section subtitled “A REALLY BLATANT AND INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION” (Wallace 1989: 264). In this particular interruption, the narrator declares that

If this were a piece of metafiction, which it’s NOT, the exact number of typeset lines between this reference and the prenominal referent would very probably be mentioned [...] in metafiction it would, nay needs be mentioned, a required postmodern convention drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that the narrative bought and paid for and now under time-consuming scrutiny is not in fact a barely-there window onto a different and truly diverting world, but rather in fact an ‘artifact’, an object (264-265). In this sense, ‘Westward’ attempts to distinguish itself from a “piece of metafiction”, whilst nevertheless alerting the reader to the artificiality and provisionality of its own textual operations, and reflecting on the metafictional text as a kind of “opaque forgery of a transfiguring window” (265). As a modality of “time-consuming scrutiny”, Wallace’s account of
metafiction is also an account of the reader's expectations of metafiction, specifically the expectation of “this self-conscious explicitness and deconstructed disclosure *supposedly* making said metafiction ‘realer’ than a piece of pre-postmodern ‘Realism’” (265, emphasis mine).

To these self-reflexive assumptions, Wallace's narrator imagines the formation of a “New Realism”, which would ultimately demonstrate “that metafiction [...] opens a fetid closetful of gratuitous cleverness, jazzing around, no-hands-ism”, and that such techniques are “the ultimate odium for any would-be passionate virtuoso” (265). Caught between the de-realising realism of metafiction, and the “certain antiqued techniques” of earlier Realist forms, ‘Westward’ imagines a fiction which “diverges, in its slowness, from the really real only in its extreme economy [...] its grim proximity to its own horizon” (267). As Boswell's work has indicated (See Chapter 1), this highly self-referential account of fictional practice, which hints at possibilities beyond even the Newest of Realisms, remains highly significant in our own accounts of Wallace's legacy.

Meanwhile, as we negotiate the opaque forgeries, extreme economies and grim proximities at stake in *Girl with Curious Hair*, we are also invited to negotiate our own role as ‘readers’, and to consider the possibilities for identification through the literary text. Fittingly, ‘Westward’ elects to conclude on a literal declaration of love to the reader, performed by the narrator in one final interruption to the preceding narrative. Reflecting on the silence of a stalled car, the narrator addresses the reader directly:

For whom?

You are loved. (373)

As Boswell writes, ‘Westward’ fulfils Wallace’s apparent desire to “build a text that treats its reader like a lover” (2003: 113), and to become, in his own words, an “architect who could hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetrate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict” (in Boswell: 114). Indeed, the silent limit “behind the engine’s noise” of the text appears to be an actual “love song” for the reader; meanwhile, this limit is also expressed in the rhythmic, indeed hypnotic, repetition of phrases such as “Lie back” and “Relax”. Yet this song, as put by Wallace and Boswell, is downright creepy, as the narrator commands the reader to “Lie back”, “Open”, and “Face Directions”, to “Look” and to “Listen” – the anaesthetic tone effected by this narrator alerts us a peculiar kind of risk, that of the “reader/lover” (Boswell: 114) in relation to the metafictional author. Negotiating the apparent “cruelty” of Wallace’s “love song” for the reader, Boswell finds relief in the outside of the text, imagining this lover “still inside the text with the Exit finally in view” (114) – the text’s silence is thus “an indicator of the novella’s respect for the real world to which all worthwhile literature must finally return us” (115).

However, this rhetorical appeal beyond the text elides the complex relationships principally established within the text, particularly between its narrator and reader. Boswell’s immediate metaleptic move towards the “real
world” in this instance perhaps undermines the hypothetical significance of Wallace’s literal declarations of love and identification in ‘Westward’, and in *Girl with Curious Hair* more broadly. Our conversations with Wallace hinge on a shared sense of a world beyond the text, and yet this world appears largely predicated on sexual metaphor – for Boswell at least, the implied reality of reading a text like ‘Westward’ is akin to sex, or at the very least involves an encounter between the text and its imagined “reader/lover”. So much, then, for the idea of Wallace’s works as an “intimate zone of communication, of subjective interaction” (Boswell: 17). But how do we arrive at such claims? By following the scripts laid out by Wallace, retracing the assumptions and expectations writ large in Wallace’s texts, and their estranging statements of intent with regards to the reader. This sense of rhetorical intentionality is made literal in the final passage of ‘Westward’, as the narrator lays claim to the reader’s very senses, instructing them to “Use ears I’d be proud to call our own” (373). Co-opting the eyes, ears and head movements of the reader, Wallace presents a striking portrait of the narrator ‘seeing through’ that reader’s perspective, into a supposed real world of literary expectations and judgments.

Yet these responses are themselves written into Wallace’s texts – the repetition of the reader’s identifications with the text forms the basis for Wallace’s constant “interruptions” in ‘Westward’, and for the text’s hyper-intimate accounts of the literary dialogue as a kind of uncanny “love song”. By echoing these judgments – joining the choir, so to speak – we are entering into a decidedly personal kind of dialogue with the author and his texts, a dialogue
which is nevertheless beset by its own sense of forgery, economy and proximity. Against these hypothetical limits, we can restate the essential claim that Wallace identifies (with) the reader, that his texts succeed in both identifying and identifying with an empirical reader. This claim, as we have seen, rests on a concomitant identification of the “audience” within Wallace’s texts, an imagining of that audience’s capacities for empathy, identification and communication (See Chapter 1). Yet as we have also seen, this claim to identification also remains bound up in the diverse discourses of reading and readership already performed by texts such as *Girl with Curious Hair*; by retracing the figures of readers who identify in *Girl*, we may thus further understand the cathartic (and with Boswell, erotic) dimensions of Wallace’s hypothetical conversation with the ‘reader’.

“a line of distraction without origin or end”

Wallace’s debut short story collection thus concludes with a love song, or at the very least a declaration of love towards the reader of ‘Westward’. What does this mean for the theme of identification in Wallace’s work more broadly? Returning to the texts which precede ‘Westward’, we find this theme reshaped by Wallace’s overdetermined sense of the reader, and his paradoxical attempts to situate the reader both within and without the space of the text. This gesture is primarily accomplished through the imagining of various hypothetical ‘readers’ within the text, and the creative juxtaposition of these readers and their actions against the operations of the text itself. In this sense,
Wallace’s readers are themselves performers – from Jeopardy! contestant Julie Smith in ‘Little Expressionless Animals’, to actress and David Letterman guest Edilyn in ‘My Appearance’, Wallace juxtaposes the discerning act of reading with the kinds of ironic and televisual performance he would later diagnose in ‘E Unibus Pluram’ (1997). Julie Smith is a troubled young woman with an encyclopaedic memory, gleaned from time spent with actual encyclopedias in her youth; on the Jeopardy! set, however, Julie becomes (according to one TV executive) a “lens, a filter for the great unorganized force that some in the [television] industry have spent their whole lives trying to locate and focus” (24), that is, “the capacity of facts to transcend their internal factual limitations and become, in and of themselves, meaning, feeling” (24-25).

Edilyn, meanwhile, is an actress “whose face and attitudes are known to over half of the measurable population of the United States”; yet according to her own account, she is also a woman “whose heart’s heart is invisible, and unapproachably hidden” (175). In these kinds of stories, Wallace presents two sides of the conundrum that is identification, against a self-reflexively postmodern backdrop of fake SNL commercials, Triscuit advertisements and serialised television tapings.

Julie’s arc as reigning champion of Jeopardy! in the mid-eighties is shaped by the interventions of the show’s executives, whose attempts to “locate and focus” her performance culminate in Julie’s defeat at the hands of her estranged and autistic brother. As a treatise on “Total Data”, and the re-emergence of traumatic memories over time, ‘Little Expressionless Animals’ highlights the idea of identification as reference (See Chapter 1), ultimately
hinging on its protagonist’s inability to correctly answer certain types of question. Meanwhile, Edilyn’s ironic dilemma – as to how to seem to appear on *Late Night with David Letterman* – highlights the complex idea of identifying with, that is, of identification as empathetic “act” on the part of the hypothetical Wallace reader. Following copious review and discussion of David Letterman and his show, Edilyn embarks on a risky performance of ironic transparency – revealing to the host and his audience that she is mundane and self-effacing, Edilyn becomes a kind of “anti-Guest”, to the raucous approval of virtually everyone except her husband. Both of these stories hinge on a conflation of identification and performance, mediated through diverse spheres of televisual production and reception.

Our recognition of such performances thus shapes our own identifications with and within the text. However, both of these stories end badly for those concerned – both women face the loss of their respective loves as a result of their performances in front of the camera. As figures of identification and empathy, Wallace’s *readers who identify* present special problems for our contemporary conversations with the author and his works. To examine this effect in more detail, it pays to recall that we are dealing with ‘meta-fictions’ here – from generic pastiche to postmodern self-reference, each story in *Girl with Curious Hair* comments on its own operations as text, ever focalising these strategies through the figure of the reader, and the latter’s supposed response to the text.
We see these tensions writ large in the story ‘Here and There’, within which Wallace pursues a pseudo-autobiographical form of “fiction therapy” (Boswell, 2003, 89), and in which the Wallace-esque “Bruce” recounts a failed relationship to an unnamed therapist-figure. This text highlights the decided intimacy of Wallace’s early fiction, with its detailed account of a relationship gone wrong, and the puzzled remnants of that relationship in the voices of its three principal characters. Bruce, a mechanical engineer, is preoccupied with a specific kind of love, a kind of contrived longing for his ex-girlfriend’s photograph: “I kiss her bitter photo. It’s cloudy from kisses. I know the outline of my mouth from the image. She continues to teach me without knowing” (152). Notably, the therapist-figure offers explicit advice to Bruce in response, voicing the formal stakes of the therapeutic relationship:

> “Bruce here I feel compelled to remind you that fiction therapy in order to be at all effective must locate itself and operate within a strenuously yes some might say harshly limited defined structured space. It must be confronted as a text which is to say fiction which is to say project. Sense one’s unease as you establish a line of distraction without either origin or end [...] Yes but remember we decided to construct an instance in which for once your interests are subordinate to those of another.”

> “So she’s to be reader, as well as object?”

> “See above for evidence that here she is so constructed as to be for once subject as well.” (153, emphasis mine)

The therapist’s advice already serves as a sort of self-reflexive statement on the text’s fantasies of objectivity, circumscribing the analytic relationship as a kind of “harshly limited defined structured space” and inviting Bruce to “construct an instance in which for once your interests are subordinate to those of another”. However, it is telling that the text connects this therapeutic
imperative to the idea of a ‘reader’, constructed as both the “object” of Bruce’s narrative and a “subject” within Wallace’s narrative. To wit, the story is punctuated throughout by the voice of Bruce’s former lover (also unnamed), who provides a sort of quotidian critique of Bruce’s idealism: “He just works all the time on well-formed formulas and poems and their rules. They’re the things that are important to him. He’d tell me he missed me and then stay away” (152). The interposition of these various “subjects” – with Bruce, his ex-partner and therapist all implicated within the same fiction-therapy space – helps us highlight the complex tensions at stake in Girl with Curious Hair, particularly when it comes to the idea of identification. The object of Bruce’s affections is “so constructed to be for once subject as well”, an expansive strategy which also enables the point-counterpoint nature of the text’s subsequent recollections. Yet at the outset, it is clear that we are contending with multiple perspectives, diverse and divergent readers of the same relationship – with the additional interventions of the analyst figure, we may thus ready ourselves to encounter a highly contested retelling of key narrative events.

This multifocal strategy thus enables and problematises the idea of literary empathy as identification, presenting multiple distinct perspectives to identify and identify with; moreover, each of these narrative personae go on to inhabit different roles within the text, in turn refuting, expanding and collapsing the claims preceding their own. This strategy is most visible in the text’s accounts of Bruce’s own aesthetic program, which, recalling ‘Westward’, is a model of both “extreme economy” and “grim proximity”. Bruce sees
himself at the vanguard of a “crystalline renaissance”, in which creative expression takes on a certain mathematical form and precision – “No more qualities. No more metaphors. Gödel numbers, context-free grammars, finite automata, correlation functions and spectra” (1989: 155). Privileging pure form, Bruce sees the future of art as a kind of “impending upheaval”, a cathartic “great cleaning” (155), and yet this sense of catharsis is undercut by the quotidian account of Bruce’s ‘reader’, who highlights the more obvious narcissistic motivations behind his formal idealism. “His honors thesis is an epic poem about variable systems of information- and energy-transfer” she recounts, “He wants to be the first really great poet of technology” (155). The text weaves these accounts together, framing Bruce’s discourse of literary beauty in terms of self-conscious conflict with the ‘reader’:

“Words as fullfillers of the function of signification in artistic communication will wither like the rules of form between them. No, she says? Assuming she cares enough to even try to understand? Then say that art necessarily exists in a state of tension with its own standards. That the clumsy and superfluous logos of all yesterdays gives way to the crisp and proper and satisfactory of any age. That poetry, like everything organized and understood under the rubric of Life, is dynamic. The superfluous always exists to have its ass kicked.” (155, emphasis mine)

Through self-conscious anticipation of his own ‘reader/lover’ (“No, she says?”) coupled with antagonism (“Assuming she cares enough to even try to understand?”) Bruce puts forth his manifesto for the “crisp and proper and satisfactory”, which he describes as a necessary effect of progress. But alongside this parodically teleological model of meaning, ‘Here and There’ continues to weave its multifocal fiction-therapy game, leveraging Bruce’s own stated ambivalence towards his ex and to the therapeutic situation itself.
Time and time again, the voice of the therapist interjects to remind Bruce of the matter at hand, having already declared such talk as “a line of distraction without either origin or end” (153). Despite these reminders, ‘Here and There’ recounts itself in a digressive and dissimilatory way, playing off of the conflicting perspectives of its narrators, and the various repetitions of loss effected therein. In this sense, Bruce’s “crystalline renaissance” soon begins to sound more like Shoshanna Felman’s take on the literary transference, itself a repetition which “situates both the loss of the story's origin and the story’s origin as its own loss” (2003: 169; See Chapter 2).

In this play of origins, ‘Here and There’ offers up a more self-reflexive take on the idea of literary identification as such, whilst continually framing this idea through obliquely psychoanalytic stagings of the text and its narrative. The apogee of this strategy occurs in the text’s final pages, in which Bruce, recovering with family after the breakup, is tasked with repairing an old stove in his Aunt’s kitchen. We are given an explicit portrait of this task, by way of the stovetop mechanism itself, described thus:

The burner controls determine temperature level at the selected point through straightforward contact and conduction of AC to the relevant burner's heating unit, each of which units is simply a crudely grounded high-resistance transformer circuit that conducts heat, again through simple contact, into the black iron spiral of the burner (Wallace 1989: 168-169).

However, Bruce's schematism is undermined by the decrepit status of the stove itself, with wires “so old and worn and be-gooed that I can’t possibly tell which bundle of wires corresponds to which outflow jack on the circuit” (169).
Schematic certainty is quickly subsumed by mystery, as Bruce’s crude attempts at rewiring the stove irrevocably complicate the stove-fixing process:

I am unsure what to do. I could attach the main oven’s own conduction bundle to a burner’s outflow jack on the distributor circuit, but I have no idea how hot the resultant surge would render the burner. There is no way to know without data on the resistance ratios in the metal composition of the burners. The current used to heat a large oven even to warm could melt a burner down. It’s not impossible. I begin almost to cry (170-171, original emphasis).

This thermodynamic dilemma bleeds out into the text, as the final pages of ‘Here and There’ effectively overheat in tandem with the Bruce’s meltdown. As the text reintroduces the competing voices of the therapist and the ex-‘reader’, Bruce becomes convinced that his efforts have “broken the stove”, and becomes “so scared behind the dirty stove that I can’t breathe” (171). The mysteries of the stove top are compounded by the shifting tone of the therapist. “Is it that you love this pretty old woman and fear you’ve harmed the stove she’s had since before Kennedy?” he interjects, later issuing the oblique challenges “Whom else have you harmed.”, “What are you afraid of.” (171) and so forth. In this dramatically receding narrative frame, the story’s subject becomes unclear – it appears to no longer be the “reader” imagined by Bruce and his therapist, nor the relationship between Bruce and the so-called “subject” of his recollections. The meaning of the scene appears to come from the sheer absurdity of the scene itself, the overdetermined sense of risk and exposure at stake in Bruce’s talk of “resistance ratios” and “high-resistance transformer circuit[s]” (169, 170).
The sense of compounding mystery – and indeed of literal (albeit electrical) “resistance” – informs Bruce’s obsessive performance behind the stove top, undermining the text’s pretensions to epistemic closure through an increasingly transferential-neurotic narrative set-piece. As Bruce opines, there is “no way to know” how he has harmed or will harm the stove, nor how he has harmed those around him. At the apex of this scene, Bruce is reduced to a figure of confused impotence, trapped inside a womblike mechanical space: “I point at the filthy distributor with my screwdriver and do not say anything,” he says, “I prod it with the tool.” (171). The image of a “filthy distributor”, poked and prodded inside the “tidied black hollow of the stove” (171), presents the reader with a perverse kind of ‘primal scene’, a scene which echoes throughout Bruce’s recollections of his lover and his art. This psychological undercurrent helps us make sense of Bruce’s initial fixation with his ex-girlfriend’s image, which is built on an almost phobic apprehension towards kissing her: “kissing someone is actually sucking on a long tube the other end of which is full of excrement” (151). Bruce’s fear of abjection, of a “long tube” leading to “excrement”, motivates his desire to create “a line of distraction without either origin or end” within the therapeutic dialogue. Yet the insistent demands of the therapeutic narrative drive Bruce to an abject state, boxed up inside the “black hollow” of his own neuroses. Early in the text, Bruce proudly recalls his love life: “I could unlock her like a differential, work her like an engine. Only when I was forced to be away at school did things mysteriously ‘change’” (152).
However, as the narrative progresses, the power dynamic between Bruce and his ‘reader’ begins to shift and change, becoming more ambivalent the further Bruce gets from his ex-love:

“I have one slow dream in which she is bagging leaves in my family’s yard in Indiana and I am pleading with her to magically present with amnesia, to be for me again, and she tells me to ask my mother, and I go into the house, and when I come out again, with permission, she is gone; the yard knee-deep in leaves. In this dream I am afraid of the sky: she has pointed at it with her rake handle and it is full of clouds which, seen from the ground, form themselves into variegated symbols of the calculus and begin to undergo manipulations I neither cause nor understand. In all my dreams the world is windy, disordered, gray” (165)

Following the dream, Bruce begins to vividly imagine the presence of an “outside voice”, explicitly distinguishing this voice from that of his ex-girlfriend. “I begin to realize that she might never have existed,” he declaims, “That I might feel this way now for a different – maybe even no – reason”.

Bruce’s subsequent disavowals of the ‘reader/lover’ cast his interpretations in a more paranoid, narcissistic light: “I begin to feel as though my thoughts and voice here are in some way the creative products of something outside me, not in my control, and yet this shaping, determining influence outside is still me.” (165, emphasis mine). Under the pressures of the therapeutic situation, Bruce begins to hallucinate his own voice, externalised as a ‘shaping, determining influence outside’ that is nevertheless him, a part of his own discourse and recollection.

In this decidedly neurotic narrative turn, Wallace’s story thus repeats and replays its narrative of loss as a kind of Freudian farce, in tune with the author’s engagements with psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic thought more
broadly. But while the “mock-Freudian” elements of Wallace’s work have been appreciated by Boswell (2003: 127) and others, there is no ignoring the productive fact of the transference in texts such as ‘Here and There’. The therapeutic framing of the text is particularly significant, as Bruce is instructed to imagine the object of his loss as a “subject”, a gesture which inaugurates the fragmentary recollections and interpretive voicings performed within the text’s final scene.

In fact, there is no real way to know whether the voices canvassed in ‘Here and There’ speak from distinct vantage-points, or whether they are simply voicings of Bruce’s own obsessive neuroses. We cannot forget that this subject is initially misapprehended by Bruce as a kind of ‘reader’, whilst remaining a definitive “object” in his own recollections – indeed, it is only through the interposition of the therapist (yet another kind of reader) that we can even begin to distinguish between the supposed vantage-points canvassed within the text. And yet, ‘Here and There’ remains, according to Boswell, “a love story, of sorts” (89), to the extent that it destabilises these precise boundaries within the text:

The lover whose memory [Bruce] is trying to exorcize, moreover, becomes in this ‘defined structural space’ at once reader (of Bruce’s justifications), object (of Bruce’s narrative) and subject (of her own narrative). The story therefore creates a ‘space’ that contains and ultimately collapses such dichotomies as reader versus text, self versus other, and here versus there – the very dichotomies that the text is in fact exploring (91).

Again, we locate the destabilising nature of Wallace’s texts alongside the imagination (or re-imagination) of the reader, the subject of “her own narrative” in Boswell’s words. Yet no matter where we locate this reader – in
Bruce’s fantasies, in Wallace’s therapeutic frame, or in Boswell’s anodyne readings of both – we remain attentive to the fact that this reader must be hypothesised for the story to take place. Boswell concludes that the story reflects the author’s awareness of desire “as an insistent urge that must be reconciled with the fact that we cannot contain or finally possess the things that we desire” (93). Yet on this basis, we might also observe that Wallace’s text appears to desires its own reader, distinct from Bruce’s own lover. The thwarted re-imagination of this reader as yet another ex-lover effectively complicates our own attempts to identify with and through the text.

Repeating Readers: ‘Say Never’, ‘Girl with Curious Hair’ and ‘Everything is Green’

Under our transferential-neurotic model, identification (in the forms of either love or empathy) involves the incorporation of another’s expectations into one’s own identity (See Introduction). The extent to which texts such as ‘Here and There’ repeat, re-imagine and re-abstract their own empathetic stakes indicates this hypothetical sense of reader-construction in Wallace’s texts more broadly. While it is one thing to acknowledge that the role of the reader is unstable in Wallace’s work, it is another to ignore the effects of this instability on our contemporary conversations with Wallace, or to judge this instability as a function of pseudo-empirical, psycho-sexual dynamics. This is particularly true when it comes to the theme of empathetic identification – are we so lacking in analogues for empathy that we must read Girl with Curious
Hair as a kind of literal love affair, a love song, a love story between ourselves as readers and the text itself? It appears increasingly apt to speak of Wallace’s fictions through the lens of the transference-neurosis, as a metafictional acting out of certain empathetic author-reader relationships. In the transference, meanwhile, we also encounter the kinds of opaque forgeries, extreme economies and grim proximities predicted by Wallace in ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’, alongside overt performances of these and other limits in texts such as ‘Here and There’, ‘My Appearance’ and ‘Little Expressionless Animals’. As always, the key mechanism of this effect is the performance of the ‘reader’, the repetition and overt literalisation of that ‘reader’ within the text. The sheer proliferation of readers who identify in Girl with Curious Hair is enough to indicate the complexity of our contemporary conversations with Wallace, and the sorts of assumptions and expectations we are to deal with therein. As a series of “framed tales” (Brooks, 1986), expanded with methamphetamine zeal, Girl with Curious Hair embodies the maximalist aspirations of the early Wallace, as well as his complex relationship to the idea of identification as such.

The resultant effects are once again reminiscent of Henry James’ transferential games in The Turn of the Screw, as read by Shoshanna Felman (See Chapter 2). It is pertinent to recall the idea of the narrative frame itself, and its bearing on the dynamic significance of the literary dialogue. Through his mis-placings of narrative authority and voice, James is remembered by Felman as the curator of a peculiarly transferential sense of narrative, expressed in the text’s creative framing of its core contents. As Felman has
suggested in Chapter 2, these kinds of texts enact a drama in which “the very content, the interior of the story that becomes somehow exterior to itself, reported as it is by a voice inherently alien to it [...] a voice whose otherness violates the story’s presence to itself (Felman 2012: 169). We have already had cause to observe this effect in ‘Westward’ and ‘Here and There’ – more than anything else, Wallace’s performances of readership and identification in *Girl with Curious Hair* highlight the essential exteriority or “otherness” of their reader, an idea very often grasped in the proliferations of sexual metaphors and moralistic substitutions within contemporary Wallace Studies.

Yet for a reader like Boswell, this game is most notable for its moments of synthesis, its beats of “gooey sentiment” – the idea of Wallace’s works as a vehicle for sentimental identification with and of the reader is, for Boswell, Wallace’s “work’s ultimate mode, and what the work ‘really means’, a mode that Wallace equates with the ‘really human’” (2003: 17). Nevertheless, in Wallace’s defiant and multifaceted performances of literary love, do we not also encounter the “echoing chain of [...] multiple, repetitive narrative voices”, each contending with the hypothetical and empirical “otherness” of their subject? Through their proliferation and sheer manic difference, these subjects are made into proxies for the diverse kinds of identification and empathetic engagement sought by Wallace’s own texts. Like *The Turn of the Screw*, Wallace’s texts are also notable for the tenor of their reception, and the strange ways in which critics “repeat unwittingly – with a spectacular regularity – all the main lexical motifs of the text” (Felman 2012: 145).
If we can consider the idea of the ‘reader’ to be one such “lexical motif”, then the repetition of readers who identify within Wallace scholarship – already demonstrated through Boswell’s imaginings of the reader in relation to Wallace’s texts – has its own spectacular regularity. However, as I’ve suggested in this chapter, these kinds of repetitions remain crucial to our contemporary understandings of Wallace’s works, laying the essential foundations for our understanding of what makes these works unique – namely, their overt concern with the theme of identification. The apparent exhaustions and resuscitations of ironic culture come and go; what has become essential in the wake of David Foster Wallace’s works is the anterior question of empathy, of empathetic identification “between one human being and another” (1997: 144). Thus it’s no surprise for us to imagine ourselves in the shoes of Wallace’s ‘readers’, to recognise their actions as part of the text’s broader overtures towards us, the supposed actual reader of that text. Through these exhaustively self-reflexive games with the reader’s own identifications, elaborated within and with regard to the texts in which they appear, Wallace’s texts irrevocably complexify and over-determine the response of their own reader. And yet, as repetition, Wallace’s performances of readers who identify would thus alert us to the properly transferential dimensions of the literary exchange, adapted for the whims of an assumed postmodern audience. By placing this audience within and without the narrative frame, Wallace effectively squares the circle of postmodern self-reference, allowing for a more overtly self-conscious identification with the theme of identification as such. We see this hyperbolic imperative at work in
texts such as ‘Everything is Green’ and ‘Say Never’, two texts which once again place the idea of the reader who identifies centre-stage.

All of the texts in Girl with Curious Hair privilege the theme of love, with each of Wallace’s narratives drawing on specific kinds of love to motivate the thoughts, judgments and performances of their characters. The shortest story in the collection, ‘Everything is Green’, runs for two pages, and presents a characteristically condensed portrait of the transferential relationships at stake in Wallace’s broader literary project (see above). The relationship between “Mayfly” and the story’s narrator is predicated on an intimate (albeit shifting) sense of trust, and a complex transfer of investments between interlocutors:

She says I do not care if you believe me or not, it is the truth, so go on and believe what you want to. So it is for sure that she is lying. When it is the truth she will go crazy trying to get you to believe her. So I feel like I know. (229)

I say Mayfly I can not feel what to do or say or believe you any more. But there is things I know. I know I am older and you are not. And I give to you all that I got to give you, with my hands and my heart both. Everything that is inside me I have gave you [...] I have made you the reason I got for what I always do. (229)

Meanwhile, Mayfly also presents a characteristically postmodern sensibility, telling the narrator to “believe what you want to”; the narrator, meanwhile, declares that he has exhausted himself for Mayfly’s benefit, elevating her to a kind of symbol, “the reason I got for what I always do”. This strangely co-dependent relationship between the narrator and Mayfly arguably mirrors the broader author-reader relationships at stake in Girl, as Wallace’s authorial personae justify themselves against the expectations of individual and
collective ‘readers’. And yet, the narrator opines that this relationship is falling apart, on the grounds that “I am feeling like there is all of me going into you and nothing of you is coming back anymore” (230). This odd ambivalence, a sense of transaction or transference, shapes the relationships reproduced in Girl, as Wallace’s narrators self-consciously grapple with the expectations of the ‘reader’, and the kinds of “full human relationship” achievable through the literary dialogue (McCaffery). Nevertheless, Mayfly is a site of cathartic fascination for the narrator – “Her hair is up with a barret and pins and her chin is in her hand,” Wallace writes, “she looks like she is dreaming out at the clean light through the wet window over my sofa lounger” (230).

In Wallace’s idiom, literary identification involves a positive assertion of the relationship between reader and author, an assertion which is complicated by the self-referential and inward-looking structures through which this assertion takes place. ‘Everything is Green’ stages this assertion as a kind of transference, in which the narrator ambivalently justifies his love for Mayfly, metaphorising her as “my morning” (1989: 230). And yet, this “morning” is in the eye of beholder Mayfly, and it is only by beholding her that the narrator can properly see the dawn. Notably, the image of morning, particularly a grey and cloudy “dawn”, is repeated and reproduced throughout Girl, typically serving as the stage for traumatic and oneiric encounters between narrative actors and their pasts (See Chapter 6). In the final paragraph of ‘Green’, Wallace frames love as a kind of ‘looking-out’, with the narrator transfixed by Mayfly staring out the window: “and there is something in me that can not close up, in that looking. Mayfly has a body. And she is my
morning. Say her name” (230). Finally, the imperative to “say her name” is
directed towards the reader, imploring the latter to identify and name Mayfly
as the narrator’s love-subject, a self-avowed “reason I got for what I always
do”.

Wallace’s literary project, meanwhile, is made up of attempts to talk
out the perspective of named figures like Mayfly, to detail their assumptions
and expectations. By self-consciously sketching the horizons of the ‘reader’,
and framing themselves through staged encounters with such hypothetical
readers, texts such as ‘Everything is Green’ effectively act-outact-out their own
reception; through this performance, these texts invite the reader to expose
their own assumptions to the self-conscious judgments canvassed in the text
itself. We see this process at work in the various performer figures canvassed
in Girl with Curious Hair, and in the relationship between Wallace’s narratives
and the textual ‘performances’ staged therein. In texts such as ‘My
Appearance’ and ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’, key
characters are framed by their role as a cipher for audience expectations.
Edilyn in ‘My Appearance’ is referenced by David Letterman as “a woman who
acts in television” (194). Drew-Lynn Eberhart in ‘Westward’ is someone “who
actually went around calling herself a postmodernist” and who “honestly, it
seemed to us, couldn’t see far enough past her infatuation with her own
crafted cleverness to separate posture from pose, desire from supplication”
(234).
Each of these performer-figures is explicitly connected to the expectations of a broader audience, whilst their in-text performances repeat and reinforce the self-reflexive themes of their respective texts. For example, Edilyn’s self-effacing performance on ‘Letterman’ upends the ironic expectations of the television audience, whilst stoking the insecurities of her husband, Rudy. ‘My Appearance’ concludes on a note of loss, as Edilyn asks her husband “just what way he thought he and I really were, then, did he think”, before declaring that question “the mistake” that presumably cost her marriage (201). Nevertheless, Edilyn pulls through by virtue of her performance – “I’d come through something by being in its center,” she narrates, “survived in the stillness created by the disturbance from which I, as cause, perfectly circled, was exempt” (200-201).

Wallace’s performers serve as a focalising thematic centre in Girl with Curious Hair, a position somehow exempted, yet implicated as “cause”, for the narratives which unfold around them. In this sense, Wallace’s performers function as thematic proxies for the ‘reader’, to the extent that Wallace’s texts routinely frame the reader as an explosion engulfing the performer, a hyperbolised “cause” for the text’s efforts at centring the ‘reader’. Yet this self-conscious valorisation of performance remains caught up in Wallace’s concern the ‘reader’ as a kind of empathetic ideal, itself offset by the ambivalent discourse of “love” through which both figures are constructed in Wallace’s work. For better or worse, Wallace’s narratives retain an over-determined fascination within feminine performance, casting his performer-figures as mysterious ciphers for both the expectations of the audience and
operations of his own texts. Clare Hayes Brady writes that “Wallace’s
treatment of gender evokes Slavoj Zizek’s account of contemporary
incarnations of courtly love themes, in which the female is disembodied and
idealized out of potency” (2013: 132).

Brady argues that Wallace’s texts work to accommodate, rather than
resolve, the conflicts posed by this disembodied and idealised feminine image,
creating a fictional space in which “the competing vocabularies employed by
masculine and feminine voices enact a powerful dynamic struggle between
Self and Other” (132). These tensions undoubtedly frame Wallace’s discourse
of the reader, specifically when it comes to love and identification. Wallace’s
account of the literary dialogue as a denial and affirmation of distinct
“agendas” on the part of author and reader is a case in point (McCaffery), as
are the gendered performances of texts such as ‘Everything is Green’, ‘Here
and There’, ‘My Appearance’ and ‘Little Expressionless Animals’.

Each of these texts are structured around the interplay of distinct
voices and perspectives, with feminine performers serving as a focalising point
for the conflicting desires and expectations of both the text and its presumed
audience. In a less endearing sense, however, Wallace’s most hyper-aware
early fictions attempt to make a virtue of the author’s estranging issues with
women, and thus offer excruciating insights into the fetishistic impulses
underpinning many of the collection’s best performances. The
overdetermination of feminine ‘mystery’ is taken to parodic extremes in ‘Say
‘Say Never’, wherein Romantic scholar Lenny Targus unleashes an almost salivating appraisal of his muse, Carlina:

Carlina Rentaria-Cruz, secretarial aide at North Side offices of Chicago Park District. Twenty, lovely, light and dark, hair sticky with gin, our lady of wet rings on album covers, Spanish lilt, pointed boots, a dairy sheen to redly white skin, lips that gleam, shine a light – shine without aid of tongue – they manufacture their own moisture. (213)

Meanwhile, the titular story ‘Girl with Curious Hair’, Wallace presents the “curious hair” in question as a kind of fetish object par excellence:

Gimlet stated that the girl’s curious hair represented radioactive chemical waste product anti-immolation mojo and that if Gimlet could cut it off and place it in her vagina beneath the porch of her stepfather’s house in Deming, New Mexico, she could be burned and burned and never feel pain or discomfort (63-64)

The weirdly abject image of the curious hair, in the context of Gimlet’s sadomasochistic relationship to narrator “Sick Puppy”, presents an explicit desire to idealise and disembodied the fetish image, a desire set in tension with the anhedonic and nihilistic contexts of Sick Puppy and his punkrocker friends. In both ‘Say Never’ and ‘Girl with Curious Hair’, performance is fetishised to an absurd degree, providing the reader with a certain informed scepticism regarding the text’s broader discourse of “love” and identification.

In their over-identifications with (and absurd objectifications of) their respective love-objects, Wallace’s male protagonists both solicit and ironically foreclose the reader’s own engagement with the text. These texts serve as timely reminders that over-identification with Wallace’s texts is indeed possible, and that we ought to continue to distinguish between the kinds of love and identification pursued within Wallace’s texts.
Conclusion: Performing the Reader who Identifies

What does it mean to say that Wallace identifies (with) the reader? As this chapter has suggested, the empathetic tenor of Wallace’s early fiction suggests a kind of rhetorical and hypothetical integrity to his project as a whole. Whether taken as a plain-language argument for literary love, or considered through the erotic and literalistic discourses at stake in *Girl with Curious Hair*, the question of empathy remains a decisive point of reference for Wallace’s work and reception. Nevertheless, actual references to empathy and love in Wallace’s early fiction have provided a more estranging take on these dynamics, which appears to conflate self-reflexive statements about the ‘reader’ with particular transferential-neurotic relationships. When parsing the various love songs, love stories and declarations of love at stake in these fictions, we are led to assume particular dispositions towards the Wallace text – that these texts are speaking directly to us, that they solicit our identifications and question the capacity of ‘readers’ to respond to such solicitations. But despite the evident self-reflexivity of this strategy, Wallace’s return to transferential-neurotic ideas about reading – particularly in ‘Here and There’ and its aforementioned experiments with fiction therapy – present distinct challenges for *readers who identify*, and complicate the interpretive positions that such ‘readers’ may assume. These challenges reflect the concerns with literality and repetition outlined in previous chapters – in this sense, to posit ourselves as an empirical reader beyond the text is to repeat aspects of the author’s own literalistic rhetoric about love and identification,
even as this rhetoric retains an estranging proximity to Freudian ideas about performance and transference.

However, these challenges do not emerge from the simple fact that Wallace incorporates psychoanalytic discourse into his works - rather, it is the fact that these works appear conditioned by the production of second-order responses to such discourse, that they repeat their own transferential overtures by locating their significance in the identities and agencies of ‘readers’. Wallace’s repeated insistence on empathetic identification, as both a moral imperative and a literary principle, continues to resonate throughout the field. Nevertheless, to insist on the idea that Wallace identifies (with) the reader is to insist on the significance of readers who identify within Wallace’s texts. Even accepting the notion of a non-figural, literalistic or actual ‘reader’ (as Wallace’s rhetoric arguably does), the sheer extent to which this early rhetoric figures the literal cannot be overlooked, even in the parodic and experimental contexts of Wallace’s early fictions. When Wallace’s Bruce asks “So she’s to be reader, as well as object?”, his therapist replies “See above for evidence that she is here constructed as to be for once subject as well” (1989: 153). But the erotic objectification and indeed subject-ification of ‘readers’ – as lovers, as performers, as analysts or analysands – is a curious effect of Wallace’s early writings, even (or especially) when those writings return to the question of empathetic dialogue “between one human being and another” (Wallace 1997: 144). In other words, texts like Girl with Curious Hair indicate a particular and powerful rhetorical vector for Wallace’s literary project as a whole – the idea of erotic reading, or what Boswell calls “subjective
interaction” with the metafictional text (2003: 17) – whilst alerting us to the strangely performative and transferential-neurotic dynamics of this rhetoric.

As we shall see, Wallace’s subsequent short fictions take up the question of identification, and of literalistic and eroticised reading, in particularly estranging ways. But this study's focus on 'acting-out' has already allowed us to observe the impact of repetition, re-imagination and re-abstraction within Wallace’s early rhetoric of readers who identify, whilst alerting us to the interpretive challenges which surround themes like love, reading and performance in our readings of Wallace. Having investigated these dynamics here, and provided a theoretical account of their escalation in Wallace’s work and reception, it is now pertinent to consider the kinds of transference-neurosis at stake in a text like Brief Interviews with Hideous Men. Through this approach, we may thus consider the difference between (literalistic) readers who identify and (imaginative) readers who critique across Wallace’s short fiction collections, and in contemporary discussions of suspicious reading in relation to Wallace. By distinguishing the effect of re-imagination in Wallace’s middle-period fictions, and considering the kinds of transferential naivété or repetition hypothesised within those fictions (as opposed to ‘beyond’ them), we may thus gain a better understanding of self-reflexivity and repetition in Wallace’s fictional project more broadly.
CHAPTER 4

Readers who Critique

Can we talk about it before you react? Can you promise?

(Wallace 1999: 83)

Introduction: Repetition and Re-Imagination

Wallace’s early metafictional works have been characterised by their self-reflexive (albeit estranging) repetitions of readers who identify, as evidenced by the author’s return to literalistic ideas about the relationship between empathetic identification and the author-reader relationship. In my reading of Girl with Curious Hair, I highlighted particular parallels between this strategy (which saw ‘readers’ repeated across a range of narrative and characterological contexts) and Wallace’s transferential-neurotic take on love – in his words, on “talking out of the part of yourself that can love, instead of the part that just wants to be loved” (in McCaffery 2012: 50). The key to this reading was recognising the extent to which acting-out, performance, dictated the terms of Wallace’s response to the empathetic and erotic dilemmas of late postmodernity. Through their essentially self-reflexive disposition towards
the ‘reader’, texts such as ‘Here and There’ and ‘Westward’ were shown to repeat Freudian ideas about transference and transference-neurosis, signalling the psychoanalytically-aware nature of the author’s literary project more broadly.

However, it remains to be seen whether these early insights into ‘literal literary love’ persist in the more sophisticated rhetorical contexts suggested by later Wallace texts, such as Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (1999). This short fiction collection boasts some of the author’s most challenging statements about erotic reading, particularly when considered against the kinds of reading-positions suggested in Girl. With the text’s obsessive shift towards the theme of male anxiety, and towards the fraught discourse of “hideous men”, it becomes particularly difficult to square the idea of love (erotic, empathetic or otherwise) with the more antagonistic rhetorical dimensions of these statements. In fact, Brief Interviews appears to have radically overhauled some of the author’s plain-language ideas on love, and by extension empathy and identification. The text openly and exhaustively details the psychological stakes for ‘fiction writers’ and ‘readers’ who engage with texts erotically.

The chapter highlights a particular aspect of this strategy – the insistent return to suspicious reading-tropes in Brief Interviews – to consider whether Wallace’s texts anticipate the work of a psychoanalytically-engaged interpreter, following the exposure-centric questions established in Chapters 2 and 3. As we have seen in the introduction, the transference-neurosis, as a
discursive performance or acting-out, re-imagines the stakes of analytic encounter. But isn’t this exactly what Wallace’s texts do as well? Beyond superficial similarities to the clinical Freudian dialogue, isn’t there something familiar about the way that Wallace’s texts respond to the charge that they are operating under transference, despite their repeated insistence that they are motivated by love? When I read Wallace’s rhetorically-fraught narratives of rapists, misogynists and fiction-writers, I am almost forced to recall the sorts of questions asked by Freud in the transference-neurosis, particularly “See what happens when I give way to such things. Was I not right to consign them to repression?” (See Chapter 2). And indeed, through his radically over-exposed portraits of male anxiety, Wallace appears to invite us to “see what happens” when readers read erotically. Nevertheless, this increasingly critical treatment of erotic ‘readers’ is worth exploring further, to the extent that it reprises and responds to the transference-neurotic dynamics canvassed in Wallace’s earlier works. We have already seen that these works manifest a kind of second-order response to their own erotic exigencies, by invoking specific transference and neurotic tropes which complicate the ideas of ‘reading’ and indeed loving.

These tropes are certainly on display in Brief Interviews – the collection is widely recognised for its self-reflexive treatment of ‘hideous’ male voices, whose extreme and often rhetorically-bizarre views on gender politics invite the reader’s more suspicious critical faculties. But while contemporary scholars may differ on the merits or significance of this strategy, the extent to which Wallace re-imagines particular suspicious tropes – specifically, the
extent to which his texts figure suspicious reading through narratives about suspicious ‘readers’ – remains a point of concern for this scholarship, particularly when situating Wallace’s work within theoretically-inclined or exposure-oriented interpretive frameworks (See Chapter 2). Our modelling of the transference-neurosis is one such framework – while recognising the kinds of erotic common-sense at stake in Wallace’s fiction, the study aims at clarifying and distinguishing between different ‘types’ of ‘reader’ that this common sense discloses. But Wallace’s sophisticated treatment of psychoanalytic reading would appear to pre-empt such a model, and in fact does so, to such an extent that we might begin to discern a new reading-position within Wallace’s texts – one which recognises and accounts for its own exposure-oriented and suspicious tendencies, particularly when faced with themes such as ‘literal literary love’ and empathetic identification.

And yet, this escalation of stakes – the movement to increasingly complex reading-positions in relation to Wallace – is precisely what the transference-neurotic model identifies. As the narratological and characterological dilemmas of Wallace’s fiction begin to multiply exponentially, and the question of erotic reading becomes increasingly antagonised, the sense of estrangement remains – after all, the most vivid indicator of this escalation is more ‘readers’, more narratives about ‘reading’ and ‘loving’ and ‘narrating’ and ‘fucking’ and so forth... While Wallace’s views on literary love may have evolved over time, the estranging extent to which that evolution plays out in the negative – that is, through almost anti-empathetic rhetorical strategies – remains a point of concern for contemporary scholarship, a point which I
engage with further in this chapter with Kelly (2010), Holland (2013) and Hayes-Brady (2013). By distinguishing a second type of ‘reader’ in Brief Interviews, a ‘reader who critiques’ – and highlighting the text’s own fraught mechanisms of distinction and re-imagination in the process – this chapter considers the impact of transference-neurosis and suspicious critique in Wallace’s middle-period fictions.

The first time we investigated this dynamic, we found that texts such as Girl with Curious Hair inhabit and exploit the tensions between two kinds of identification, that is, between the avowed need for empathetic dialogue “between one human being and another” (1997, p144), and the imperative to literally refer to these very same dialogues as a matter of narrative, thematic and characterological substance. But if Wallace’s subject matter appears to have changed, it is because the stakes of his transferential-neurotic game have escalated. With a shift in focus towards readers who critique, and towards exposure-centric or suspicious modes of reading, this chapter seeks to situate Wallace’s middle period fiction within the more substantive critical dimensions of the question: Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace?

Whilst the question of literary love is certainly on display in texts such as Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (1999), this question has been refracted through critical satires of male performance. As a result, Brief Interviews is a claustral and claustrophobic text, which once again highlights the author’s ability to craft psychologically-vivid, formally complex and linguistically dense portraits of (male) ‘reader/lovers’. However, the text also evokes what Clare
Hayes-Brady has called “an almost-pathological consciousness of gender politics” on the part of Wallace (2013: 132), through which the author’s concerns for empathy and identification become entangled in much broader questions regarding sex, gender and language in contemporary life and culture. These sorts of questions animate the work of Mary K Holland (2004; 2013), who leverages the insights of classical psychoanalysis and contemporary feminist theory to address Wallace’s “unflinching critique of narcissism as an impediment to empathy and sincerity” in Brief Interviews, “most often as wielded by men in ‘solipsistic’ relationship to women” (2013: 107). In such readings, which remain productively sceptical of the author’s own discourses on literary love and identification, we are engaged with the more diagnostic and prescriptive dimensions of Wallace’s fiction, which are also reflected in the author’s vocal engagements with postmodernity and avant-garde fiction in essays such as ‘Pluram’ and ‘Joseph Frank’s Dostoyevsky’ (See Chapter 1).

This chapter leverages the metafictional dynamics of Wallace’s texts – their performative repetitions, re-imaginations and re-abstractions of the ‘reader’ – to explore the various ways in which Wallace performs the critical or suspicious ‘reader’ in Brief Interviews. Having reviewed Wallace’s relationship to postmodernity and critical theory in Chapter 1, we saw that his texts manifest a somewhat tortured view of the contemporary suspicious reader, often diagnosing such perspectives alongside those of the “postmodern rhetorician” in ‘Octet’ or the self-conscious “lurkers and starers” in ‘E Unibus Pluram’ (1997). The significance of readers who critique in our readings of Wallace enables Boswell, for example, to speak to the “impact on
our collective consciousness of therapeutic discourse writ large” in Brief Interviews (2003: 182). Yet more importantly, this chapter finds these diagnostic stakes re-imagined in Wallace’s own fictions, as the author extends his various critiques of love, reading and performance into the realms of extreme self-consciousness and metafictional complexity. In the sophisticated rhetoric of Brief Interviews’ various narrators, interviewees, fictionalised authors and audiences, we have cause to encounter the imaginative dimensions of Wallace’s metafictional project.

Given the alarming insistence on suspicion in Brief Interviews – conveyed through hideous voices which demand our attention to sex and gendered language in particular (Holland, 2013) – I think there is room to consider the way in which Wallace-ian empathy gets translated in the more “anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally arrested, borderlinish parts” of his writing as well (Wallace 1997: 166). These audaciously Freudian elements are borrowed from Wallace’s own take on director David Lynch, whose films would appear to be a major influence on the kinds of hideous or monstrous male psyches depicted in Brief Interviews – as I explore much further in Chapter 5, the Lynchian psycho-dramatics averred by Wallace can helps us make sense of the interpretive ambivalence at stake in Wallace’s own fictions. For now, suffice it to say that Wallace’s treatment of suspicion – that is, his effective repetition, re-imagination and re-abstraction of suspicious reading in texts like Brief Interviews – can help us understand the escalation of hermeneutic stakes in Wallace’s middle-phase fiction, particularly when measured against the empathetic or literalistic parameters laid out in earlier
works. On this basis, it is unsurprising to find that the question of suspicion remains caught up in the question of performance – the metafictional centrepiece of *Brief Interviews* is, I think, the text ‘Octet’, which continues to inspire the present study with its exhaustions of possibility with regards to the Wallace ‘reader’ (See Introduction). Here again we discover the significance of repetition in Wallace’s works – to the extent that *readers who critique* repeat in Wallace’s works, we may continue to observe the fraught dynamics of *suspicious re-imagination* at stake in those works as well.

**Performing Suspicion: *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men***

Throughout *Brief Interviews*, Wallace reframes the idea of empathetic dialogue through the verbal performances of “Hideous Men”, a rogue’s gallery of narcissists, perverts, psychotics, solipsists and rapists, whose various performances exemplify the text’s critical engagements with themes such as toxic masculinity and sexual violence. This strategy is most overt in the titular *‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men’*, a series of formally-inventive dialogues between such men and a female interviewer whose questions are deliberately effaced from the text itself, replaced with various iterations of the letter “Q”. Rather, we find these questions indirectly presented within the one-sided discourse of Wallace’s ‘hideous’ male speakers, who are often highly suspicious of the interviewer’s own motivations. For example, the speaker of the celebrated ‘Interview 20’ recounts his response to a lover’s traumatic anecdote, in which she (the former lover) survived a brutal rape at the hands
of a psychotic killer; in Holland’s synopsis, the woman survives due to her empathic ability to “create and sustain [...] a powerful connection with the attacker that will not allow him to dehumanize and kill her” (119-120).

Whilst this narrative is indeed well-canvassed within the field, it is worth noting again the text’s subtle escalation of hostility towards the text’s ‘interviewer’, and indeed towards the kinds of critical readers the interviewer is taken to represent. As the interviewee considers the broader psychological and rhetorical significance of his lover’s story, he becomes increasingly agitated about the questions being posed, as in this exchange:

Q.
‘And please be aware that I’m quite familiar with the typology behind these bland little expressions of yours, the affectless little questions. I know what an excursus is and I know what a dry wit is. Do not think you are getting out of me admissions I’m unaware of. Just consider the possibility that I understand more than you think.’ (260, emphasis mine)

The speaker’s injunction, specifically against very the notion that his discourse merits suspicion – that it contains “admissions I’m unaware of”, hidden depths or anxieties – is here juxtaposed with a passive-aggressive dismissal of the interviewers’ “bland little expressions” and “affectless little questions”. In these less-than-subtle jibes on the kinds of theoretical jargon deployed by contemporary critical readers, texts such as ‘Interview 20’ define themselves against the kinds of suspicious readership they presuppose, particularly critical feminist thought – best evidenced in the speaker’s fear that the interviewer will “turn this into a Narcissistic Male Wants Woman’s Gaze On Him At Climax” (269), and, again, his anxious insistence that “I
understand more than you think” (260). From their expansive discourses on love and sexual violence, to their conflicted accounting of the respondent’s own (supposed) suspicions, texts such as ‘Interview 20’ self-consciously highlight their own suspicious stakes as texts.

Meanwhile, the dialogic and therapeutic staging of these discourses as literal ‘interviews’ recalls Wallace’s earlier experiments with ‘fiction-therapy’ – elaborating on techniques developed in texts such as ‘Here and There’, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men often reads like an open transcription of its characters’ transferential obsessions, their verbal compulsions to repeat and control the dialogues in which they find themselves. In the tortured discourse of Wallace’s hideous men, we are thus led to reconsider the kinds of empathetic identification and “love” imagined in texts such as Girl with Curious Hair. If there are indeed love songs in Wallace’s second short story collection, they are of a decidedly different key and genre – virtually every text in Brief Interviews grapples with the idea of love as a kind of conflict, elaborating on this notion through the increasingly self-conscious and deluded performances of its male protagonists. In this vein, Holland defines the collection through its “brazen solicitations of empathy for all kinds of mental, physical, and emotional disfigurements through likewise discomforting generic disfigurements” (2013: 107).

In her critique of the author’s concern for empathetic dialogue in fiction, Holland’s research details “the degree to which men’s sexual desire for women taints and often prevents any attempts by men to extend empathy
[...] to women” in Wallace’s work, and the extent to which this dynamic is shaped by “the fraught interplay of language, desire and power” (Holland: 108). We see such games in a text like ‘Interview 76’, which presents an eerily upbeat account of its narrator’s “love” for women, extending this account ad nauseam until its insincerities and suspicious nature become clear:

I love women. I really do. I love them. Everything about them. I can’t even describe it. Short ones, tall ones, fat ones, thin. From drop-dead to plain. To me, hey; all women are beautiful. Can’t get enough of them. Some of my best friends are women. I love to watch them move. I love how different they all are. I love how you can never understand them. I love love love them. (Wallace 1999: 191-192)

This monotonic recycling of clichéd sexist tropes – through a speaker who just “love love love(s)” himself some women, no matter “how different they all are” or how little he can “understand them” – helps set the stage for Brief Interview’s broader re-imaginings of sexuality and suspicion, particularly as the interviewee keeps going, keeps on voicing his love in iterative, almost microscopic, detail. The speaker describes “the different little sounds” that women make, “that little look” they sometimes give you, their “dainty little unmentionables” and “special little womanly products at the store” (192), sounding more and more like a Brett Easton Ellis character, collapsed into neat repetitions of the word “little” beneath a micro-thin veneer of civility. In this claustrophobic discursive space, the idea of identification becomes fraught with ironic significance; the speaker’s discourse of “love” appears calibrated to please precisely no one, defined instead by its rote repetitions of chauvinist rhetoric, and a literally micro-aggressive pandering to “little” women everywhere.
In this antipathetic and anti-empathetic rhetoric on gender, *Brief Interviews* presents considerable challenges for the contemporary empathetic reader of Wallace. Whereas *Girl with Curious Hair* imagined a reader capable of empathetic identification, particularly with the kinds of “love” appealed to and evoked by the text, *Brief Interviews* is pre-eminently concerned with the rejection of such overtures, and with the suspicious strategies of readership through which these rejections are performed. In the respective conclusions of ‘Interviews’ 20 and 76, we find our attentions displaced onto the figure of the interviewer, whose response to the discourse at hand is presented as a primary motivator for the speakers’ anxious recollections. ‘Interview 76’ presents this dynamic ironically, as both the speaker and the interview itself are interrupted by the sudden appearance of some monstrous presence: “What would the world be without women? It’d – oh no not again behind you look out!” (192, original emphasis). This jarring displacement of attention away from the speaker – literally telling the interviewer “Look out behind you!” – serves as a kind of punchline to the speaker’s maximally insincere rhetoric, alerting us to the kinds of toxic assumptions lurking beneath such rhetorics in a strangely overt way. This pantomime display of suspicion is subtly pre-empted by the speaker when he says “When it comes to women I’m helpless” (192, emphasis mine); read literally, it seems like the speaker is trying to warn us about the return of something monstrous, a return which is finally played out when the speaker exclaims “oh no not again behind you look out!”.
Interview 20 ends on a similarly explosive note, as its speaker, frustrated by the interviewer's suspicions, attempts to declare his love for the woman identified in the preceding narrative. “I know how this sounds,” he announces,

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

In this passage, we see an apotheosis of Wallace’s suspicious strategy more broadly – recapitulating a series of ironic commands to the interviewer (“Ask it now”, “Ask me now”, “Say it”, “Judge me”) alongside a vitriolic display of gendered insults and dismissals, the speaker’s discourse is at once maximally suspect and maximally suspicious. Meanwhile, this performance is uncannily reminiscent of the rhetoric in a text like ‘Westward’, which represented its reader through staged directions (“Relax”, “Lie back”, “Look”, “Listen” et al) and cathartic declarations of intent (“It’s a love song”, “For whom?” “You are loved”).

And yet in performing the repetition of such strategies, Brief Interviews appears to situate itself against a new kind of reader, one predisposed to critique the text’s explicit declarations of love. To wit, the speaker overtly distinguishes the suspicious interviewer, a “chilly cunt” borne out by judgement, from his re-imagined anecdote-teller, a woman with extreme capacities for empathy, sincerity and love. This kind of failure is at stake in Clare Hayes-Brady’s The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster
Wallace (2016), which recapitulates key arguments for critical theory and suspicious hermeneutics from her essays ‘Philosophical Groundings in The Broom of the System’ (2010) and ‘Language, Gender and Modes of Power’ (2013, See Chapter 1). Again, I’d like to opt for complementarity between these studies and my own, because of the sheer significance of suspicion and suspicious hermeneutics in Wallace, and the complex representation of exposure-oriented and suspicious hermeneutics effected thereby. Building on this renewed critical approach, my study is also concerned with the impact of such representations upon critical rhetorics about Wallace today, particularly in light of the literalistic concerns canvassed already. Specifically, our reading leads us to wonder: If Wallace’s rhetorics about women and sex fail so dramatically in *Brief Interviews*, where are we to find the kinds of plain-language author-reader relationship promised and presaged in *Girl with Curious Hair*?

This ambivalent tension operates throughout *Brief Interviews*, as the conflicts between empathy and suspicion produce a litany of failed relationships, suspicious judgements and uncomfortable confrontations between Wallace’s narrators and readers who critique. We also find such readers at stake within contemporary Wallace scholarship, as critics grapple with the suspicious dynamics of Wallace’s avowed relationship to the reader in *Brief Interviews* and beyond (See Chapter 1). For Boswell, the overtly one-sided nature of the ‘Brief Interviews’ suggests an interpretive dialogue in which “the questions actually being posed must be deduced by the reader based on the nature of answer” (2003: 188). In at least one sense, then, this
reader is invited to become a dynamic “participant in the narrative’s construction” (188), to critically deduce the text’s missing ‘questions’ from the self-conscious and suspicious nature of the interviewee’s ‘answers’. Yet in order to do so, the reader must directly confront the “sexist, self-protective, self-absorbed, objectifying, and [...] cruel” dynamics of such answers (189).

Meanwhile, in a slightly different critical vein, Hayes-Brady questions whether Wallace’s “hyperawareness of gender difference [...] paralyses his authorial capacity for empathy” (132). This suspicious tension enables Hayes-Brady to characterise *Brief Interviews* as a text in which

the competing vocabularies employed by masculine and feminine voices enact a powerful dynamic struggle between Self and Other whose conflict cannot be resolved but must instead be accommodated (2013: p132).

Hayes-Brady proceeds to outline the ambivalent taxonomy of gender in texts such as *Brief Interviews*, noting in particular Wallace's constructions of “successful feminine identity” as a play of “absent centrality, disembodiment or disguise, linguistic fluidity, and manipulation” (142). Meanwhile, we find such rhetoric extended beyond *Brief Interviews*, most notably in the “undertones of conflict” present in the author's own discussions of feminist discourse – pertinently, Hayes-Brady also highlights the curious fact that “Wallace’s references to his imagined readers always – to the point of affectation – envisaged the reader as female” (133).

It is here that we re-encounter Wallace's more performative discourses on reading, his various re-imagineings of the literary dialogue as a place for empathy and identification “between one human being and
another” (1997: 144) – except we must now also contend with the suspiciously gendered and often affectatious dimensions of this discourse. For while a great deal of authors may refer to their reader in the feminine, very few have articulated such an overt desire to “get inside” that reader’s “head” as Wallace (See Chapter 5). We might recall here Boswell’s readings of intimacy and “subjective interaction” in Wallace (2003: 17), imagined by Boswell as pseudo-literal erotic encounters between Wallace and his so-called “reader/lover” (144). Boswell’s sense of Wallace as erotic “architect”, who in the author’s own words could “hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetrate the special kind of cruelty that only lovers can inflict” (in Boswell: 114), feels now suspicious, particularly in its ambivalent conflations of love, hate and feeling, and its erotic imagination of “cruelty” inflicted upon the reader (See Chapter 3). In these critical conversations, we thus encounter two parallel modes of conversing with Wallace’s texts, the erotic and the diagnostic, each revealing new sides to our contemporary conversation with Wallace and his legacy.

On the one hand, Wallace’s games with the respective insides and outsides of the text represent an extension of his earlier erotic strategies, aimed at complex identification with and of the reader; on the other hand, we find this identification displaced through the suspicious rhetorics of texts such as Brief Interviews, alongside manifold critical discourses on love, sex and gender. The relationship between these modes of reading, the kinds of readers imagined or implied therein, has long been a site of concern for critics such as Holland. In her essay ‘Mediated Immediacy’ (2013), we see these relationships expressed in a kind of ‘yes/and’ conjunction, with a dual claim
for the significance of identification and critique in Wallace's works. Holland also notes the one-sided nature of *Brief Interviews*, whilst reviving the Wallace-ian notion that “the idea of the interview [...] needs to be, or is, part of a larger *conversation*” (109, emphasis mine):

The consistent structural monovocality [in *Brief Interviews*] enacts exactly the interior solipsism and resulting communicative barriers that Wallace’s fiction aims to diagnose and overcome. At the same time, the interrogatory format [of the text] creates a mechanism for eliciting and examining characters’ and readers’ understanding of their beliefs, values, and selves, thus structurally insisting that the linguistically experimental stories be, as Wallace proposed in his 1993 interview, ‘for the *sake* for something’ (109, original emphasis).

At once “a return to earnestness via ironized irony” and an attempt, through various forms of intentional and empirical critique of language, to “remind the reader that [...] that she and the fiction are constructing empathy together through language” (108), Wallace’s interrogations of the reader, and of “characters’ and readers’ understanding of their beliefs, values and selves”, thus becomes an interpretive hinge for both empathy and critique in texts such as *Brief Interviews*. Holland insists that this interrogation is a kind of “conversation”, a sophisticated act of communication on the part of Wallace, whilst reframing this conversation through the critical reconstruction of “beliefs, values and selves” in Wallace’s texts.

We see a similar movement in the thought of Adam Kelly, for whom Wallace’s texts are indicative of an “ethical undecidability”, “which opens up a space for the reader to inhabit and challenges the investment in writerly mastery that characterises most modern and postmodern literature” (2010). For Kelly, undecidable rhetorics of a text like *Brief Interviews* are an attempt
at a “New Sincerity”, deployed ‘for the sake of’ the reader, and “thus structured and informed” by a sophisticated rhetorical “appeal to the reader’s attestation and judgment” (2012: 145). Nevertheless, this appeal remains predicated on the maximally suspicious parameters of such texts, described as a “weak appeal to the reader to look beyond the text’s self-conscious pre-empting of its own reception” (144). In this dynamic play of beliefs, values and selves, the tensions between empathetic identification and suspicious critique become an engine for new kinds of dialogue with the author and his works.

**Suspicious Re-Imagination in ‘Think’ and ‘Octet’ (I)**

At once suspicious and sincere, critically interrogative and empathetically insistent, Wallace’s texts are thus set in complex relation to readers who critique – particularly Brief Interviews, which as we have seen is treated as a kind of threshold test (or negative example) for the author’s claims for empathy and identification in fiction. Yet it remains for us to see the transferential-neurotic extent to which this critical dynamic – the claim that Wallace critiques the reader, that his fictions are a vehicle for the “beliefs, values and selves” at stake in the literary dialogue – is itself performed within Wallace’s texts. To wit, we may reconsider the essentially therapeutic staging of the reader’s conversation with Brief Interviews, their repeated encounters with discursive ambivalence, exemplified in the coded and conflicted confessions of Wallace’s ‘Hideous Men’. To the extent that
these performances predicate themselves on the ‘silent’ (though heavily anticipated) response of the interviewer, they are decidedly transferential. Throughout the interviews, Wallace leverages his insights into the psychologies of masculinity to craft uniquely suspicious dialogic scenarios. These scenarios enable Holland’s observation that “the collection’s ability to compel the reader to do this logicking work, and to manufacture the compulsion from its faint logical promise [...] provides its ultimate integrity” (110).

This self-reflexive logicking work recalls Peter Brooks’ modelling of the literary dialogue in terms of transference, noting the critical reader’s entry into “agonistic dialogue” with the text (1986: 12), and elaborating on this dialogue as a kind of therapeutic endeavour – a translating “back into the terms of the past” of the text’s “words and symbolic acts”, effectively working with the text to “construct a narrative discourse whose syntax and rhetoric are more plausible, more convincing, more adequate to give an account of the story of the past that those that are originally presented, in symptomatic form, by the analysand” (10). The suspicious performances of Wallace’s ‘Hideous Men’ openly invite this kind of reconstruction, compelling the reader to recognise the shallow depths of their discourses on love, sex and gender. Yet to the extent that these performances are suspicious of their respondent, they reconstruct themselves, scrambling to provide “plausible”, “convincing” and “adequate” accounts of their own performative nature. In this proliferation of symptoms, texts such as Brief Interviews work to diagnose and cure their own discourses, inevitably repeating, re-imagining and re-
abstracting their own suspicious stakes as texts. Nevertheless, this self-referential and metafictional performance remains predicated on the imagined judgments of readers who critique in Wallace’s texts. By interrogating ‘these readers’ and their construction, we may further understand the tensions between identification and critique in Wallace’s works. We see these tensions writ large in texts such as ‘Think’ and ‘Octet’, which stage elaborate and hyper-specific dialogues between “human beings”. In the first of these texts, an intimate sexual encounter is interrupted by a strange compulsion, while in the second a “fiction-writer” grapples with their own evident failures to communicate with the reader.

In the two-page story ‘Think’, Wallace again stages the relationship between reader and text as an intimate encounter between two lovers, recalling the overtly stage-like direction of perspectives in texts such as ‘Everything is Green’ (See Chapter 3). But in ‘Think’, this process is disrupted by the man’s unexpected compulsion to “kneel” in before his lover – “It’s not even that he decides to kneel,” reports the narrator, “he simply feels the weight against his knees” (61). In ‘Think’, Wallace’s pornographic romance devolves into a scenic or even filmic staging of the speaker’s choice to kneel – the man’s compulsion interrupts the narrative’s pornographic reporting of the scene, which recalls the “smoky”, “Page 18 of the Victoria’s Secret dialogue” muses in ‘Say Never’:

The sister with the breasts by the bed has a level gaze and a slight smile, slight and smoky, media-taught. [...] We see these things a dozen times a day in entertainment but imagine we ourselves, our own imaginations, are mad. [...] The languid half-turn and
push of the door are tumid with some sort of significance; he realizes she’s replaying a scene from some movie she loves. (61).

Wallace’s oblique shift to the third-person inclusive implicates the reader’s response to the scene in an artfully self-conscious way: “We [...] imagine we ourselves, our own imaginations, are mad”. Wallace specifically implicates the reader’s sense of cliché, the idea that “We see these things a dozen times a day in entertainment” – an idea which is ironically embodied in the man’s realisation that his lover is “replaying a scene from some movie she loves”.

Kneeling in prayer, however, the man turns away from the “level gaze” or “media-taught” smile of his lover – an expression critically described as “a combination of seductive and aroused, with an overlay of slight amusement meant to convey sophistication, the loss of all illusions long ago” (62). Overwhelmed, the man has fixed his “gaze” away from his lover, in a “supplicatory” kind of prayer: “His eyes never leave the distance between the ceiling and themselves” (62). She, in response, has turned her attention inward: “She’s now aware of just how she’s standing, how silly it might look through a window” (p62). The repetition of the window, as a focaliser for the text’s narrative perspectives and impressions, is at least as theatrical as ‘Everything is Green’, but whereas the latter saw ‘through’ the eyes of the mysterious character “Mayfly”, here we are compelled to note divergence, conflict, anticipation. The narrative effectively positions the reader between a male gaze turned upward and a female gaze turned inward, and explicitly invites the ‘reader’ to inhabit the spaces between.
Yet Wallace has also staged this choice within another highly-charged field of assumptions and expectations, evidenced in the text’s self-reflexive obsession with perspective, imagination and literal lines of sight. The text opens with the man convinced of “what she might think if he kneels” – this unstated expectation compounds the narrative tension of the piece, culminating in the man exclaiming “It’s not what you think,” to his increasingly alienated lover (1999: 61-62). These tensions are compressed into the latter half of the story, as the narrator pulls the ‘reader’ into the action of the text itself, enjoining the reader to imagine an ending where the two lovers unite in prayer:

She could try, just for a moment, to imagine what is happening in his head […] Even for an instant, to try to put herself in his place.

The question she asks makes his forehead pucker as he winces. She has crossed her arms. It’s a three-word question.

[…]

He says “It’s not what you think I’m afraid of”.

And what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way. (62)

But troublingly enough, this ending is mediated by the narrator’s casual shift in tense – “just like this”, “just this way” (62) – which maintains an uneasy authority around what is represented and when it happens. By disarraying the perspectives of its two principal characters, ‘Think’ stages their encounter as a field of conflict, overdetermined by the narrator’s anxieties towards the encounter itself. These anxieties are unsurprisingly expressed in the form of gendered hostility, towards the female lover for failing to empathise with their self-conscious male counterpart. Tellingly, the narrator shifts tone to
declare that “She could try, for just a moment, to imagine what is happening in his head [...] Even for an instant, trying to put herself in his place” (62). In the final lines of the text, Wallace effectively invites the reader to stage the two lovers themselves, whilst implicating both author and reader within the same ambiguous space: “And what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way.” (62).

Yet we are left wondering whether the inwardly-focused woman will join the supplicant man on the floor; we are also left wondering precisely why the man has knelt in the first place. In this undecidability, we find that looking through the other’s perspective becomes impossible, as both reader and character are left with an empty kind of ‘looking-at’, which registers no intentions, and can summon no enduring extensions. A kind of disruptive impotence permeates texts such as ‘Think’, as the narrator routinely deflects his desires onto anxious observations and denials; yet this impotence appears partly displaced towards the supposed insincerity of his companion, her apparent detachment from the scene at hand. While the man’s eyes stare out into the “middle distance between the ceiling and themselves”, the woman sees herself from outside of the window, ironically considering how “silly” she must look (62). In this fraught (non-)intersection of perspectives, Wallace presents yet another narrative of failed identification, through which the abstract suspicions of the “human beings” involved are subject to scrutiny, alongside those of the suspicious reader. Wallace’s narrator dares to suggest a moment of complicity between the two figures, with the two kneeling and
staring at the same fixed distance, yet it is clear that such a moment is precluded by the self-conscious conflicts which have preceded it.

Regardless of this gesture’s abstract metafictional significance, this is a strangely and overtly gendered narrative, which bears out the kinds of pathological hyperawareness diagnosed by Hayes-Brady and Holland (see above). Nevertheless, for the reader of texts like ‘Think’, the relationships between empathetic identification (with the text and its imagined moments of empathy and love) and suspicious critique (of the prolific and conflicting perspectives which that moment implies) turns out to retain its significance, even when refracted through Wallace’s parapractic and overdetermined sense of his female ‘reader’. Accordingly, we can begin to see the ways in which Wallace repeated and re-imagined his own approach to the ‘reader’, subjecting the literalistic approach of a text like Girl with Curious Hair to abject scrutiny in his subsequent major collection. Again, this movement towards literality has sought to define itself as a move beyond or away from the text; the benefits of a more imaginative approach, it would seem, is that it highlights those elements of the David Foster Wallace text that one might be, in fact, more than willing to look beyond or get away from.

We see this significance written into metafictional works such as ‘Octet’, which engage openly with the idea of the literary dialogue as a kind of transferential relationship between text and reader. Here, of course, we have come full circle – ‘Octet’ forms the basis for many of the observations collected here, in its complex parsing of the literary dialogue as such and its
concomitant imaginations of the ‘fiction writer’s reader’ (See Introduction). But in this context, it is also helpful to view ‘Octet’ as an evolution of the author’s signature style, as the text recapitulates key strategies from his earlier works towards an increasingly self-aware and critical narrative frame. Read in light of texts such as ‘Here and There’, ‘Octet’ places the idea of the narrative contract into question, as a proxy for the kinds of dialogue and communication at stake in Wallace’s project more broadly. Whereas ‘Here and There’ explored the idea of the text as a “harshly limited defined structured space” (1989: 153) – in which the text’s implied other was “to be both reader and object”, “constructed so as to be for once subject as well” (153) – ‘Octet’ creates spaces of maximal undecidability, in which the ideas of reader, object and subject are placed into dramatic question.

We see an early indication of this strategy in the section titled ‘Pop Quiz 9’, when Wallace distinguishes the activities of the narrative’s “fiction writer” from the performances of so-called “postmodern rhetoricians”, through an extended footnote on the nature of literary performance as such:

> With the now-tired S.O.P. ‘meta’ stuff it’s more like the dramatist coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what’s going on is artificial and that the artificer is him (the dramatist) and but that he’s at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the fact that he’s back there pulling the strings, an “honesty” which personally you’ve always had the feeling was actually a highly-rhetorical sham-honesty that’s designed to get you to like him and approve of him (i.e. of the ‘meta’-type writer)[…] (Wallace 1999: 125, FN)

This description of “sham-honesty”, a strategy designed to “get you to like” and “approve” of Wallace’s fictionalised “‘meta’-type writer’, is appended by a more open foray into the assumptions and expectations underpinning
“honest” and “highly-rhetorical” dialogue as such. As the passage concludes, or rather collapses under its own recursive weight, Wallace’s narrator effuses wildly about the needs and aptitude of the ‘reader who critiques’, veering into another suspicious recollection of same:

and feel flattered that he apparently thinks you’re enough of a grownup to handle being reminded that what you’re in the middle of is artificial (like you didn’t know that already, like you needed to be reminded of it like a myopic child who couldn’t see what was right in front of you) […] viz not interrogating you or [having] any sort of interchange or even really talking to you but rather just *performing* in some highly-self-conscious and manipulative way (125, FN, emphasis original)

Wallace’s suspicious model of dialogue as “highly self-conscious and manipulative” performance, is distinguished within the text for “interchange” or “really talking to you” (the reader) – in yet another footnote, this suspect performance is imagined as a kind of “dancing”, “formally unimpeachable and wholly self-serving” (125). In this sense, ‘Octet’ addresses itself to the idea of performance in metafiction, whilst alerting us once more to the possibilities for dialogue and empathetic communication in fiction more broadly. In making these tensions explicit, and moreover leveraging these tensions as a vehicle for dramatic action and narrative, ‘Octet’ exemplifies the complex metafictional stakes of Wallace’s literary project as a whole – with the idea of performance made into kind of discursive limit, ‘Octet’ struggles to assert its own claims for love, “urgent sameness”, to its own re-imagined ‘reader’.

At the same time, however, this meta-fictional dialogue is itself suspect, repeating many of the suspicious dynamics canvassed in companion texts. Through their suspicious account of the contemporary metafictionalist,
Wallace’s narrator also posits a “myopic” and childlike reader, for whom the text’s revelations of artificiality are both a baseline expectation (“Like you didn’t know that already”) and a kind of unassailable need (“like you needed to be reminded of it”). Yet on the surface at least, ‘Octet’ readily caters to such needs, delivering an extraordinarily self-conscious account of its own artificialities and dialogic strategies – a key example of this is the text’s staging of the reader in the second person, speaking to the latter as the “fiction writer” responsible for a text named “Octet”. “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer” writes Wallace at the beginning of ‘Pop Quiz 9’, “[...] attempting a cycle of very short bellettristic pieces”, all of which are “supposed to compose a sort of ‘interrogation’ of the person reading them, somehow” (123). These interrogative pieces (including the formally diverse ‘Pop Quizzes’ preceding number ‘9’) thus become the subject for the fiction writer’s own anxieties – as it turns out, their text is a “total fiasco” (124), in which “Five of the eight pieces don’t work at all – meaning they don’t interrogate or palpate what you want them to” (124). In a way, the ensuing narrative presents itself as a substitute for the incomplete and problematic text “Octet”, which is itself presented as a fictionalised version of Wallace’s own text.

This narrative anxiously repeats and literalises the idea of the text as a performance, as Wallace’s fiction writer attempts to solve their interrogative fiasco by addressing the reader directly, for example in the rewritten 6th Quiz, which “start[s] out with some terse unapologetic announcement that that it’s another ‘try’ at whatever you were trying to
palpate into interrogability in the first place” (1999: 124); to wit, ‘Pop Quiz 6(A)’ opens on the terse command to “Try it again” (114). This strategy of “intranarrative acknowledgment” is, the fiction writer knows, decidedly close to the idea of metafictional performance – a fact that the text will ultimately disavow, in its articulations of the fiction writer’s broader strategy:

You were betting the queer emergent urgency of the organically unified whole of the octet’s two-times-two-times-two pieces (which you’d envisioned as a Manichean duality raised to the triune power of a sort of Hegelian synthesis w/r/t issues which both characters and readers were required to ‘decide’) would attenuate the initial appearance of postclever metaformal hooey and end up (you hoped) actually interrogating the reader’s initial inclination to dismiss the pieces as ‘shallow formal exercises’ [...] forcing the reader to see that such a dismissal would be based precisely on the same sorts of shallow formalistic concerns she was (at least at first) inclined to accuse the octet of (127-129)

In this compressed and extraordinarily self-referential sentence, ‘Octet’ speaks to its supposed reader twice – first, in relation to “issues which both characters and readers were required to ‘decide’” (an effective description of the ‘Pop Quiz’ format), and second, in relation to that reader’s “inclination to dismiss the pieces as ‘shallow formal exercises’”. This idealised and completed version of ‘Octet’ would expose the reader’s own “shallow formalistic concerns”, thus enabling the reader to engage with the “queer emergent urgency” attested to in the text, and to identify themselves in the “revelations of urgent sameness” contained therein. In a final inversion, Wallace imagines the fiction writer at their wit’s end, paralysed by their fear of the suspicious reader, becoming “more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us” (136).
Same-ness, Like-ness and ‘Blind Faith’: Octet (II)

Yet as we can already see, this account is itself a kind of self-reflexive repetition writ large, which openly engages with the idea that ‘Octet’ the text, and its fictionalised and idealised proxies, are to be read in terms of literal same-ness, a form of identification between the text and its reader. In the obliquely self-referential account that follows, ‘Octet’s fiction writer grapples with the decision to compose a “ninth” quiz – i.e. ‘Pop Quiz 9’ itself – and to include that quiz within their finished text. “In other words”, writes Wallace,

What you could do is now you could construct an additional Pop Quiz [...] less a Quiz than (ulp) a kind of metaQuiz – in which you try your naked best to describe the conundrum and potential fiasco of the semiworkable pieces all seem to be trying to demonstrate* some sort of weird ambient sameness in different kinds of human relationships*, some nameless but inescapable ‘price’ that all humans are faced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly ‘to be with’* another person instead of just using that person somehow (1999: 131-132, original emphasis)

The proliferation of footnotes from this passage, each of which a play on terms such as ‘demonstrate’, ‘palpate’, ‘relationship’, ‘parent, ‘share’, ‘be’, ‘be with’ and ‘be there’, add uncanny echoes to the “weird ambient sameness” attested by the fiction writer, as they imagine this sameness to be a kind of “nameless but inescapable ‘price’”. This ‘price’, the text suggests, “can actually sometimes equal death itself”, or rather involves

your giving up something (either a thing or a person or a precious long-held ‘feeling’* some certain idea of yourself and your own virtue/worth/identity) whose loss will feel, in a true and urgent way, like a kind of death (132-133).
This anxiety around “giving up something” speaks to the metafiction writer’s desire to abdicate authority, to become “more like a reader, in other words”; yet this anxiety reads like a kind of castration, conflating the loss of “some certain idea of yourself” with the loss of a “precious long-held ‘feeling’”. In this ambivalent sense, the fiction writer is caught between their urgent and honest ambitions towards the reader, and their anxious fears about same, as the reader is warned that “there are right and fruitful ways to try to ‘empathize’ with the reader, but having to imagine yourself as the reader is not one of them” (129). But this is exactly what the fiction writer does, attempting not only to analogise and realise their own expectations of the reader, but to imagine that reader’s own response to the text. In this sophisticated performance, Wallace refracts the idea of identification through a range of empathetic and formalistic lenses, which are in turn mediated through the fiction writer’s ambivalent concern for their reader – to wit, this concern is described as “perilously close to the dreaded trap of trying to anticipate whether the reader will ‘like’ something you’re working on” (p129, original emphasis).

As empathy, as anxiety, as abstract analogy and erotic anticipation, ‘Octet’ presents its key idea of same-ness in manifold ways. But as we have seen, all of these approaches presuppose the agency of the suspicious reader, and in fact define their own rhetorical overtures as a critique of that reader’s “shallow formalistic concerns”. Moreover, the fiction writer’s anxieties of authority, embodied in their decision to “address the reader directly and ask
her straight out whether she's feeling anything like what you feel” (1999: 131), help us to locate the relationship between ‘Octet’ and its reader in the realm of suspicion. Whilst lacking the more vivid descriptors of their ‘Hideous’ counterparts, the fiction writer can be defined by the kinds of narcissistic self-consciousness they appeal to and evoke – terrified of loss and repelled by ‘like’-ness, the fiction writer imagines themselves:

(like for example using that person as just an audience, or an instrument of their own selfish ends, or as some piece of like moral gymnastic equipment on which they can demonstrate their virtuous character [...] or as a narcissistically-cathected projection of themselves, etc.) (132)

Suspicious of its own rhetorical overtures, and their proximity to various forms of “interhuman manipulation and bullshit gamesmanship” (131), ‘Octet’ ruminates furiously on the phrase “Do you like me? Please like me” (131), imagining the fiction writer appearing “like the sort of person who not only goes to a party obsessed about whether he’ll be liked or not, but actually goes around the party [...] and asks them whether they like him or not” (134).

On another level, then, ‘Octet’ repeats the sort of extensional criticisms performed in the ‘Brief Interviews’, re-imagining the author-reader relationship through a range of sexually-fraught encounters between “human beings” and “Hideous Men”. Except in this case, Wallace’s hideous man is a rote metafictionalist, caught up in a decidedly self-referential dialogue with their imagined reader – whence the fiction writer's anxiety that they’ll simply “look like a self-consciously inbent schmuck, or like just another manipulative pseudopomo Bullshit Artist, trying to salvage a fiasco” (135).
Meanwhile, this salvage operation is, in fact, functionally identical to the performance of the metafictional dramatist, to the extent that it relies on “dropping back to a metadimension and commenting on the fiasco itself” (135). “Even under the most charitable interpretation” Wallace writes (without necessarily presuming such an interpretation), “it’s going to look desperate. Possibly pathetic” (135).

In anticipating such dismissals, the text both invites and forecloses upon its own suspicious reading, particularly to the extent that the text continues to produce new reading-narratives, which hinge on the re-imagination of particular suspicious reading tropes. In turn anticipating the reader as an “audience”, a “piece of like moral gymnastic equipment”, and a “narcissistically-cathected projection of themselves”, the fiction writer’s discourse reveals them to be a true inbent schmuck, every bit as shallow as their supposed suspicious reader.

Yet even this ambivalence is itself projected back onto the reader, as the fiction writer reconsiders whether to “come onstage naked […] and say all this stuff right to a person who doesn’t know you or particularly give a shit about you one way or another” (1999: 133). Tellingly, the fiction writer’s frustrations are also displaced onto the idea of “cultural politics” (133, FN14), as the fiction writer imagines a reader “who probably wanted to […] unwind in one of the very few safe and innocuous ways of unwinding left anymore*” (133). In response, and in yet another intranarrative acknowledgment, Wallace’s narrator tenders the following observation:
Yes things have come to such a pass that belles-lettres fiction is now considered *safe* and *innocuous* (the former predicate probably entailed or comprised by the latter predicate, if you think about it), but I’d opt to keep cultural politics out of it if I were you (133, FN14, original emphasis)

In this striking interjection, the distance between the text’s narrator and its fiction writer is made suspiciously visible, staging a kind of meta-intrusion in the latter’s dilemmas of same-ness, like-ness and such; this gesture is also punctuated by the ironic repetition of phrases like “if you think about it” and “if I were you”. Meanwhile, this passage appears to reprise the text’s suspicions towards metafictional performance, the idea of the fiction writer as a “dramatist,” dispensing trite postmodern observations to a mollified “reader/audience” (125, FN2). Despite its overt repetitions of this rhetorical strategy, the text’s anxieties towards critical thought ultimately foreclose upon the reader’s suspicious judgment, implicating such judgments within the “safe” and “innocuous” confines of orthodox metafiction. In this sense, the message is clear: to deny the text’s sense of “urgent sameness” is to opt for “cultural politics” writ large, and to deny oneself the possibilities for genuine dialogue afforded by the text. Yet to identify with ‘Octet’s idea of sameness, and thus to recognise oneself amongst the readers “down here quivering in the mud of the trench” with the fiction writer, is to risk co-implication in the text’s ambivalent ideas about dialogue, performance and, in particular, suspicious critique.

By repeating these tensions across numerous levels – in the staging of the reader as fiction writer, the imagining of fiction writer as “like a reader”, the fraught re-imaginings of same-ness and like-ness, and the occasional
very-odd gesture towards cultural politics and critique – ‘Octet’ reads like a savage critique of an erotic text like *Girl with Curious Hair*. In this dialogue, the ideas of identification and critique form an impossible and inexhaustible point of tension, as characters such as the fiction writer (and Wallace’s narrator) attempt to distinguish between competing attitudes and expectations on the part of the contemporary reader. On this basis, the text’s collapsing of roles and responsibilities into literal “sameness” raises specific questions for the text itself – as a narrative of a text named “Octet”, does ‘Octet’ purport to be self-reflexive, that is, to repeat and yet perform its own activities as text? Despite the text’s anxieties around metafictional performance, and the kinds of ‘readers’ inevitably purported thereby, the answer would appear to be yes. In multiple instances, the ironic return of Wallace’s narrative voice signals an attempt at avoiding erasure, of negotiating the text’s meaning with and from the reader. In a final, vigorous summation of his approach, footnoting the loss of a “precious long-held ‘feeling’” in the passage quoted above, Wallace’s narrator engages the reader thus:

*Ibid footnotes 8 and 9 on feeling/feelings too – look, nobody said this was going to be painless, or free. It’s a desperate last-ditch salvage operation. It’s not unrisks. Having to use words like feeling or relationship might simply make things worse. There are no guarantees. All I can do is be honest and lay out some of the more ghastly prices and risks for you and urge you to consider them very carefully before you decide. I honestly don’t see what else I can do (1999: 133, FN11)*

As such, despite painful and overwrought arguments to the contrary, ‘Octet’ reveals its own “100% honest” appeal to the reader’s judgment, predicated on
the “not unrisky” acceptance of sincere terms such as “feeling or relationship”. The exhaustive exclamation of the narrator – “I honestly don’t see what else I can do” – signals a kind of alternate ending to the text, whilst ‘Octet’ continues to prepare its fiction writer to decide on the fate of ‘Pop Quiz 9’ itself. Of course, in our version of ‘Octet’, this question has already been decided – the section is included within the text – and yet the fiction writer is called upon to once more “construct an additional Pop Quiz”, and thus to re-imagine their reader and their reception. This perpetual reinscription of the “fiction writer’s reader” thus represents a threshold point in ‘Octet’ as text – as a tale of perpetual and recursive origins, the idea of the “fiction writer’s reader” opens up a near-infinite array of possibilities as to the text and its eventual reception.

Nevertheless, as the narrator makes clear, this dialogue is indefinitely constrained by its own “ghastly prices and risks”, that is, by the avowedly suspicious dynamics of the literary exchange at hand. These risks inform the work of critic Adam Kelly, whose essay ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction’ explores the inherently insincere potentials of Wallace’s fiction. For Kelly, Wallace’s work responds to postmodern anomie by “returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity, not seen since modernism shifted the ground so fundamentally almost a century before” (133). However, the transferential-neurotic nature of Wallace’s texts complicate this approach. These concerns amplify and clarify the stakes of contemporary literary sincerity, whilst highlighting the historical
connections between this concept and “its theatrical connections to a notion of performance” (135). This latter notion is particularly significant in Kelly’s own reading of ‘Octet’, in which Wallace ostensibly breaks with metafictional orthodoxy to perform a “weak appeal to the reader to look beyond the text’s self-conscious pre-empting of its own reception” (144).

But in attempting to look beyond this effect, Kelly’s work raises key questions about the “good intentions of the artist as a communicator of truth” (135), here leveraging the author’s own rhetoric on fiction as “an act of communication between one human being and another” (Wallace, 1997). Kelly has indeed anticipated many contemporary readings of Wallace in his attempt to move beyond suspicious hermeneutics, that is, beyond reading “that emphasizes what it sees as the blindesses caused by ideological investment, historical ignorance, and psychological repression” (p138). Elsewhere, Kelly himself has noted “the implicit agreement among so many critics with Wallace’s professed premise that fiction should act as both ‘diagnosis and cure,’” and – building once more on the idea of conversation – “that [fiction] should be viewed not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention” (2010). Again, the paradoxical hermeneutics underpinning this “implicit agreement” – that however they work, Wallace’s texts work the way they’re supposed to – is of interest as a response to the suspicious dynamics canvassed in this chapter.

For Kelly, the ultimate “guarantee of the writer’s sincere intentions” is impossible, predicated as it is upon the futurity of the reader’s response. This
is because of the New Sincerity’s implication in a dialectic between conditionality (overdetermination, say, or narcissism) and “the unconditional” - “sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must always break with representation” (143), that is, it must be conveyed somewhere anterior to the representational work, possibly in the hearts and minds of readers who identify. As a surface-oriented “secrecy hiding no knowledge that can be exposed” (143), Kelly’s idea of sincerity is a testament to the author’s own ideologically-invested approach to the literary conversation. And yet, even Kelly notes that this sincerity comprises power, given its “structural similarity to Fascism” (143) and what the author calls “an almost classic sort of Blind Faith in the older guys” (in Kelly: 144).

Nevertheless, the suspicious stakes of Brief Interviews with Hideous Men complicate this view quite a great deal, as we have already seen. Wallace’s self-reflexive literary cure seems to involve the repetition of particular diagnoses, and it is these diagnoses which self-reflexively define the more erotic and therapeutic dimensions of such a cure in Wallace’s texts (See Chapter 3). But in Wallace’s second-order response to this kind of reading-position, there appear to be several estranging versions of the ‘reader’ at stake as well. Wallace’s hideous ‘speakers’ imply suspicious ‘readers’ – they solicit more than empathy, they self-reflexively solicit judgment, ironic appreciation, even contestation. In Kelly’s reading, the response of the reader is conceived as a kind of anterior threshold act, providing both “uncertainty” and an effective sense of “futurity” to Wallace’s texts (145). Of course, Kelly’s
articulation of Wallace’s work in terms of “the reader’s choice” does imply a reader who might reject the text’s claims upon their attention and investment, thus suggesting the persistence of readers who critique within Wallace’s texts. Nevertheless, following the sincerity thesis (See Chapter 1), Kelly views this dialogue as a kind of paradoxical Derridean “transaction”, in which an impossible “element of genius” slips in, “a secret beyond representation, beyond theoretical definition, tied as it is to the very excess of writing itself” (2010: 146). In a similar vein, Boswell presents Wallace’s conversations with the reader thus: “ultimately, truly, deeply expressive of what is unknowable and unsayable” (2003: 209). The stakes of Wallace’s literary legacy are thus conceived in dialogic terms, as expressions of an intimate, transactional and highly-uncertain conversation between the text and its reader – one again, a literal “act of communication”.

By arbitrating Wallace’s legacy in favour of readers who identify, critics such as Kelly and Boswell thus help us to recover the mystified (and erotic) dimensions of texts such as Brief Interviews, their thresholds of “love” and empathetic identification which inhere despite (or perhaps because of) their suspicious re-imaginings by Wallace. In Boswell and Kelly, we see the idea of readers who identify aligned with Wallace’s own diagnostic relationship to postmodernity, with the paradoxical Wallace text posited as “diagnosis and cure” for society’s ills (Boswell: 17), and chiefly accomplished through mysterious mediations of themes such as “love, trust, faith and responsibility” (Kelly: 139). As we have also seen, though, these mysteries are often
confrontingly straightforward at times – their potential decipherment is conveyed in repetitive and estranging ways, and they appear to remain caught up in particular, ‘hideous’ notions about performance, love and erotic ‘reading’.

**Conclusion: Performing the Reader who Critiques**

What is it to say that Wallace critiques (with) the reader? Given the author’s myriad theoretical, philosophical and cultural engagements, it is no surprise to encounter divergent views on the topic of *suspicious critique* in Wallace. For some readers, *Brief Interviews* is a fraught critique of male narcissism and violence, for others, it is loophole-ridden treatise on the vagaries of postmodernity. But the author’s insistent return to transferential-neurotic ideas about reading, and about psychoanalytically-informed *readers who critique*, has allowed us to consider the term *re-imagination* in a more demonstrative context. Wallace’s suspicious treatment of erotic reading has provided a kind of second-order response to the claim that his texts are, in effect, transferential and neurotic objects. This response is at once self-reflexive (as in the myriad layerings of narrative self-conscious at stake in ‘Octet’) and transferential-neurotic (to the extent that it pathologizes erotic reading), but it remains dependent on the re-imagination of ‘readers’. Discussions about gendered language and metafictional paradox have both highlighted, to differing extents, the role that *readers who critique* play in the construction or co-construction of literary meaning, However, in an extension of the transferential model explored in Chapter 2, we have seen
texts such as *Brief Interviews act-out* such ‘readers’, most notably in their antagonizing accounts of suspicious reading tropes. A great deal of these tropes turned out to be psychoanalytic in nature – the dissembling awareness of “admissions I’m unaware of” in the ‘Brief Interviews’, the self-reflexive declarations of “urgent sameness” in ‘Octet’ – while others reflected a tendency to present feminist thought antagonistically, that is, through its co-optation and conditioning by hideous interviewees. But the transferential-neurotic impact of this strategy can be measured in relation to the erotic reading strategies canvassed in Wallace’s earlier fictions, that is, through the extent to which literalistic ideas about love, reading and performance are re-imagined by suspicious ‘readers’ in *Brief Interviews*. In this sense, we can begin to understand Boswell’s claim that Wallace’s works “to embody and to explode” (2003, 17) the “queerly persistent U.S. myth that cynicism and naivete are mutually exclusive” (Wallace, in Boswell: 16).

This approach to reader-construction presents a substantial evolution on the strategies explored in Wallace’s earlier works, as we witness a decided shift in the author’s empathetic rhetoric, towards confrontation and conflict with *readers who critique*, and the repetition of this conflict through characteristically hyperaware discourse on sex, gender and identity politics. Strangely enough, the kinds of love imagined in *Girl with Curious Hair* are distorted through estranging discourses of violence and sexual metaphor, alerting us to the more suspicious dynamics of our broader conversation with Wallace and his legacy. Stranger still, we are led to imagine, with Boswell and
Kelly, that these suspicious textual dialogues are themselves a clever reversal, in fact enabling new kinds of intentional understanding and identification with the text. In this collision of the erotic and the diagnostic, we see readers who identify set into self-conscious conflict with suspicious readers who critique, a conflict repeated throughout the author’s empathetic and erotic accounts of readership at the turn of the century. How is this conversation possible, given the suspicious proliferation of “hideous” voices and rhetorics within the text? And, moreover, how can suspicious critique provide answers to a text which suspects itself, yet insists on its own sincerity?

By repeating these questions, texts such as *Brief Interviews* function as a self-conscious corrective to the kinds of empathetic strategies explored in *Girl*, offering a more sophisticated and ironic account of those strategies and their psychologically-vivid significance. On the one hand, exemplary texts such as ‘Octet’ promise an empathetic encounter, a “queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness”, a terrifying “price” paid by reader and fiction writer alike. On the other hand, the terms of this price are ultimately dictated by whims of the suspicious ‘reader’, or, as Wallace characteristically puts it in ‘Octet’, “any of the things readers usually want to pretend they believe the literary artist who wrote what they’re reading is”. In other words, Wallace proceeds from or arrives at a claustral and compact accounting of the reader’s own assumptions and expectations, specifically what they “want to pretend they believe” about the literary artist.
Now we are caught between two equally compelling performances of that ‘reader’, and the ambivalent juxtaposition of such performances throughout Wallace’s work. In its fraught admissions of cultural politics, critical discourse and suspicion, *Brief Interviews* critiques the contemporary suspicious reader, against their more idealised capacities for empathy and communication. Yet this critique remains, by design, susceptible to critical reconstruction, particularly as the author goes on to provide some compelling accounts of toxic male narcissism. In the rhetorical performances of “Hideous Men” and “fiction writer(s)” alike, we are left to negotiate the spaces between empathetic identification and suspicious critique, and to encounter ourselves within those spaces. Hence the uncertainty surrounding “the reader’s choice whether or not to place trust and Blind Faith” in the literary text (Kelly 2010) – in order to perform such a judgment, we must first negotiate with the kinds of judgments presupposed by the text, and the significance of this very gesture of presupposition. Again, it is the notion of the ‘implied reader’ that carries us through, enabling a unique admixture of empathetic and anti-empathetic rhetoric in relation to Wallace’s texts. In engaging with Wallace’s performances of readership, we are thus led to consider the essentially ambivalent stakes of the author’s relationship to the reader, and to the postmodern “audience” to whom so much of his work is overtly addressed.

But in our model, the game has changed – in fact, it has often been pertinent to speak of Wallace’s ‘reader’ not simply as diagnoses, or even
cures, but as a kind of sickness. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we can see two possible articulations of this sickness in Wallace's own writings on erotic and transferential-neurotic ‘reading’, which inform the contents of the following two chapters. By exploring two marginal discourses on performance and readership, in the essays ‘David Lynch Keeps his Head’ and ‘How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart’, we can observe the extent to which Wallace imagines himself (or his narrative persona) in the role of reader, offering theatrical and autobiographical accounts of “David Foster Wallace” the “author”, in conversation with both anterior text and ‘reader’ (See Chapter 5).

Meanwhile, by turning our attention to Wallace’s later works, specifically the short stories collected in Oblivion, we see the idea of the ‘reader’ repeated beyond repair, in the author's dynamic imaginings of the literary dialogue and, crucially, of the transference-neurosis (See Chapter 6). In both of these readings, the idea of acting-out is demonstrated as both a characteristic theme and an estranging literary effect in Wallace’s texts. By distinguishing between Wallace’s self-reflexive and repetitive responses to the transference in fiction, through the elaboration of (abstract) readers who narrate and (performative) readers who negate, we will be better situated to relate the estranging effects discussed here with the more specific technical question of this study: Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace?
CHAPTER 5  

Readers who Narrate  

“As, to be honest, is a part of us, the audience. Excited, I mean. And Lynch clearly sets the rape scene up to be both horrifying and exciting. This is why the colors are so lush and the mise en scene so detailed and sensual, why the camera lingers on the rape, fetishizes it: not because Lynch is sickly or naively excited by the scene but because he – like us – is humanly, complexly excited by the scene. The camera’s ogling is designed to implicate Frank and Jeffrey and the director and the audience all at the same time”

(Wallace 1997: 206, FN56)

Introduction: Re-Abstraction and Reading-Positions

Chapters 3 and 4 have helped us distinguish between two different types of Wallace ‘reader’, a literalistic reader who identifies and an imaginative reader who critiques. The basis for this distinction was a particular sense of escalation between Wallace’s first and second short fiction collections – an escalation of interpretive stakes, evidenced by the author’s increasingly self-reflexive deployment of suspicious reading-tropes in his middle-period fictions. This comparative reading allowed us to situate the more exposure-oriented dynamics of the present study, whilst continuing to investigate the
impact of transference-neurosis and ‘psychoanalytic reading’ within Wallace’s work and reception. Through this framework, we read *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* as a second attempt at reconciling the tensions between self-reflexivity and repetition that Wallace had identified in his earlier works – most notably, through the themes of love, talking-out and performance (See Chapter 3). But whereas these works repeated literalistic ideas about ‘reading’, *Brief Interviews* also provided an imaginative (that is, narratological and characterological) account of the psychologies underpinning such ideas, engaging directly with the kinds of suspicious psychoanalytic tropes canvassed in Chapter 2 – distorted speech, intervention, resistance, *acting-out* and the like. By tracing this escalation, we saw how certain generalist erotic concerns in Wallace are translated into self-reflexive interpretive models in Wallace scholarship, whilst noting the extent to which particular suspicious tensions repeat themselves in fictions such as ‘Octet’, ‘Think’ and the ‘Brief Interviews’.

However, the end result of this investigation was a familiar kind of estrangement – the assertion of two apparently contradictory vantage-points on a particular trope in Wallace’s work, and the suggestion that both viewpoints (in this case, the perspectives of readers who identify and readers who critique) made sense of that work. However, though we have built on our preliminary investigation of empathetic love in *Girl with Curious Hair*, and extended these insights into the psychoanalytically-aware narrative contexts of *Brief Interviews*, we have yet to fully distinguish the more abstract permutations of this reader-rhetoric in Wallace. In other words, we have yet
to see how Wallace's broader writings take up the subject of psychoanalytic reading as such, and whether such writings give us an indication of the author's own response to the transferential-neurotic dilemmas identified in his fictions thus far. This chapter takes up two Wallace essays in which the idea of transference-neurosis is certainly in play – the 1995 essay ‘David Lynch Keeps his Head’ (collected in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* [1997]) and ‘How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart’ (in *Consider the Lobster* [2005]). These journalistic essays are linked through their concerns with “audience”, alongside the repetition of particular reading-scenarios and tropes (such as the cognate concepts of literary inspiration and ironic diagnosis). As my reading in this chapter demonstrates, the most pertinent audience-member in these scenarios is none other than “David Foster Wallace”.

Following the works of scholars such as Toon Staes, we have had cause to consider the literalistic and imaginative connotations of a figure like the ‘implied author’ in Wallace’s works (See Chapter 1). However, we have yet to consider the extent to which authorial dispositions imply particular interpretive positions in Wallace’s writings, or conversely, the extent to which self-reflexive statements about ‘readers’ connect with repetitive and re-imaginative portrayals of ‘authors’ in Wallace’s body of work. When Wallace asks “himself” about this dynamic, we find that the theme of transference-neurosis returns almost instantly – the two essays considered appear to be concerned with specific transferential motifs, the strangest of which is a desire to literally “get inside the head” of other human beings. When Wallace reads Lynch, he speaks to the overtly Freudian stakes of interpreting Lynch’s films,
the strange fact of “expressions presented with very little inhibition or semiotic layering” in Lynch, “presented with something like a child’s ingenious (and sociopathic) lack of self-consciousness” (1997: 166).

Meanwhile, when Wallace reads Austin, he describes the memoirs of sportspeople as “written invitations inside their lives and their skulls”, and outlines a definitive reading-position which takes into account the reader’s desire for “the (we want, expect, only one, the master narrative, the key) Story” (2005: 144). This positioning is the subject of the present chapter, which distinguish a third Wallace ‘reader’ by considering particular instances of Wallace reading. This approach builds on existing studies of the ‘implied author’ (See Chapter 1) by considering the extent to which that author is under- and over-determined by their status as critical reader in Wallace’s para-literary writings.

Given our interest in transference-neurosis and performance, it is no surprise to find “David Foster Wallace” returning to particular erotic and psychodynamic tropes in his readings of Lynch and Austin, particularly when these readings place such onerous stakes on the psycho-biographical stakes of ‘reading’ and criticism. Of course, close attention to psychoanalytic literary theory has led us to question such stakes – Brooks in particular has warned against the conflation of erotic reading and psychobiography, the displacement of interpretive attentions onto the inaccessible intentionality of authors, characters and empirical readers (See Chapter 2). Nevertheless, we see a version of this displacement in Wallace’s own writings on the subject – whilst invoking the more abstract idea of psychoanalytic reading, Wallace is
quick to posit new ‘readers’, new audiences, new narratives of reading to account for his own peculiar relationship to the texts in question. At this third, abstract level, we thus encounter an ‘author’ obsessed with the activities of readers who narrate – interpreters, including Wallace himself, who engage with and repeat particular critical narratives about the relationship between readers and texts. When these narratives occur outside of a fictional context, when they appear to define the very identity of the ‘author’ who presents them, we can begin to explore the claim that Wallace narrates (with) the reader in its properly abstract dimensions. In the following chapter, however, the question of psychoanalytic intentionality – the question of whether authors, characters or readers represent the true ‘subject’ of a post-Freudian aesthetic – will be taken up much further.

Wallace’s essayistic narratives are distinct from those canvassed in texts like Girl and Brief Interviews, because they represent another escalation of stakes on the part of Wallace’s writing, a third-order response to the kinds of transference-neurosis uncovered in previous chapters. This response has been anticipated by our own model – it involves a complex re-imagination of the critical work, an effective re-abstraction of specific critical stakes, including the formulation or construction of ‘readers’ in contemporary discourses about reading and interpretation. Again, it appears as if Wallace has anticipated this move, through the self-reflexive positioning of “himself” as a Freudian reader. This formulation would of course allow us to reconsider the erotic and diagnostic stakes of essays like ‘David Lynch’ and ‘Tracy Austin’, and perhaps to reconcile the tensions between empathetic identification and
suspicious critique investigated thus far. However, this study maintains that Wallace’s psychoanalytically-aware authorial persona is simply not enough to resolve the issue of transference-neurosis in his works, particularly later works such as Oblivion (See Chapter 6). This chapter’s expanded study of readers who narrate justifies this reticence – whilst presenting himself as an authoritative critical reader, particularly around concepts like the transference-neurosis in fiction, Wallace’s essayistic writings remain caught up in the symptomatic project of repeating, re-imagining and re-abstracting ‘readers’, and thus remain susceptible to the exposure-oriented dynamics of the present study.

“you might want to keep all of this in mind”: Narrative Persona and Ambivalence in ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’ (1999)

Wallace’s essay ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’ presents an “Expressionistic” account of the relationship between the narrative text and its audience, that is, the kinds of hypothetical contract made possible by the narrative exchange. It also presents an exemplary performance on the part of “David Foster Wallace”, in his lauded role as journalistic interlocutor and cultural essayist. This latter performance inflects and informs Wallace’s self-referential take on the narrative “contract”, as the author situates “himself” as a dynamic participant in just such a contract with the films of David Lynch. In so doing, Wallace’s essay highlights the psychological stakes of Lynch’s works, inviting vital comparisons between these works and Wallace’s own. Tellingly,
as Wallace exposes the “agenda” of Lynch, he inevitably provides evidence of such an agenda at work within his own essay, through a series of sophisticated rhetorical appeals to the reader’s own sensibilities and sensitivities. By reconstructing these appeals, and exploring the distance between Lynch’s diagnosis of “evil” and Wallace’s diagnosis of Lynch, we arrive at a better picture of Wallace’s meta-literary agenda in ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, especially in relation to themes such as narrative identity, inspiration and critical diagnosis.

Wallace makes no secret of his admiration for the work of David Lynch, the latter of whom has spent nearly four decades intriguing and offending audiences with films including Blue Velvet (1986), Mulholland Drive (2001) and the hyper-experimental INLAND EMPIRE (2006). In the middle of ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, collected in 1997’s A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again, Wallace relates the “epiphanic” experience of seeing Blue Velvet in cinemas, writing that “the movie helped us realize that first-rate experimentalism was a way not to ‘transcend’ or ‘rebel against’ the truth but actually to honor it.” (201, original emphasis). In one of the more evocative passages of this relatively marginal text, Wallace writes enthusiastically about David Lynch’s commitment to “getting inside” his audience, which the author defines as a kind of Expressionistic approach to art:

I felt like [David Lynch] showed me something genuine and important on 3/30/86. And he couldn’t have done it if he hadn’t been thoroughly, nakedly, unpretentiously, unsophisticatedly himself, a self that primarily communicates itself — an Expressionist. Whether he is an Expressionist naively or ultrapomo-sophisticatedly is of little importance to me. What is
On the set of Lynch’s *Lost Highway* in 1997, in his role as pop-culture journalist for *PREMIERE* magazine, Wallace explores the full extent of the director’s so-called Expressionist agenda, whilst wondering aloud at the effect of Lynch “himself” on the American cinema-going public. While reporting on the complex machinations of filming, and canvassing an array of entertaining opinions on Lynch, Wallace struggles with the idea that “Most of Lynch’s film’s don’t really have much of a point [...] nor are they seductive, though, at least in the commercial sense of being comfortable or linear or High-Concept or ‘feel good’” (171).

In this interlude, Wallace concludes that the transformative importance of David Lynch has a whole lot to do with ambivalence, which is on display as the author refuses judgment on the director’s works. “This may, in fact, be Lynch’s true and only agenda”, writes Wallace, “just to get inside your head. He sure seems to care more about penetrating your head than about what he does once he’s in there. *Is this ‘good’ art? It’s hard to say. It seems – once again – it’s either ingenious or sociopathic.*” (171). This ambivalent take on the ultimate ‘meaning’ of Lynch’s works nevertheless stresses the importance of the artist “himself”, or rather “a self that primarily communicates itself – an Expressionist”. In revisiting Wallace’s essay on Lynch, we are forced to think on the connections between this kind of filmic Expressionism and the author’s own literary agenda. Given that we search for the “genuine and important” in Wallace’s works, and place our bets on a
literary figure who is supposed to be “thoroughly, nakedly, unpretentiously, unsophisticatedly himself”, hasn’t David Foster Wallace already gotten inside our heads? Before answering that question, it pays to review the author’s own assessment of this strategy, which oscillates between inspired (as per the enthusiastic passages above) and diagnostic, that is, sceptical of the director’s filmic project as a whole.

In examining this movement, we can better understand the ambivalence around our own discourse on Wallace, particularly around the question of narrative personae, the artist “himself”. Throughout the essay, Wallace positions “himself” as a vocal authority on the attitudes and expectations of American cinema-goers. This is particularly evident as the author assesses Lynch’s relationship to contemporary postmodern audiences, and seeks to justify his observations in a series of illustrative ways. Recalling the thrilling scene in Blue Velvet in which villain Frank (Dennis Hopper) appears to address the audience – saying, quite literally, “You’re like me” to that audience – Wallace writes of feeling “exceedingly uncomfortable indeed” (209). “In the film’s audience,” writes Wallace, “I, to whom Frank has also just claimed kinship, have no such luxury of violent release; I pretty much have to sit there and be uncomfortable.” In the passage that follows, Wallace begins to outline the ambivalent sense of “bothness” conveyed in and by Lynch’s films (211, original emphasis), whilst also appearing to violently reject this ambivalence in his role as American cinema-goer:

And I emphatically do not like to be made uncomfortable when I go to see a movie. I like my heroes virtuous and my victims
pathetic and my villains’ villainy clearly established and primly disapproved by both plot and camera. I like to have my own fundamental difference from sadists and fascists and voyeurs and psychos and Bad People unambiguously confirmed and assured by those movies. I like to judge. I like to be allowed to root for Justice to Be Done without the slight squirmy suspicion (so prevalent and depressing in real moral life) that Justice probably wouldn’t be all that keen on certain parts of my character, either. (207-208)

The clincher to this passage is the following paragraph, in which Wallace loudly states his credentials in terms of “the characterizations and moral structures in the U.S. movies that do well at the box office”, from which Wallace deduces “that there must be rather a lot of Americans who are exactly like me” (p208). In this move to position “himself” as reader of, and authority on, the films of David Lynch, Wallace reproduces his own highly-ambivalent account of the cinema-going experience, here figured through the impossible moral demands of a hypothetical American audience. For this supposed audience, movies are meant to confer a sense of “epistemological privilege”, as blockbusters apparently unearth and compartmentalise the moral complexity of contemporary life: “knowledge is power, and we (I, anyway) like to feel powerful” (p208). But we are also left with the haunting extent to which Wallace attempts to imagine himself as this kind of cinema-goer, and the fraught identifications and likenesses which appear as a result of these attempts.

The absence of this knowledge in Lynch’s films – indeed, the “absence of point or recognizable agenda” in Lynch’s work as a whole (171) – is presented by Wallace as a kind of “Betrayal” (211), a betrayal of the fact that “We as an audience have certain core certainties about sowing and reaping, and these
certainties need to be affirmed and massaged.” (209). In the accompanying footnote, Wallace doubles down, stating “This is inarguable, axiomatic.” (209, FN60). Moreover, Lynch’s failure to affirm and massage the certainties of Wallace’s audience is presented by the latter as an actual violation of these “moral certainties”. “When a filmmaker fails to wrap his product up in the appropriate verity-confirming fashion,” Wallace writes, “we feel not disinterest nor even anger but a sense of betrayal – we feel that an unspoken but very important covenant has been violated” (FN60, emphasis mine). This apparent outright rejection of Lynch’s moral agenda (or indeed of the absence thereof) positions the author in a much more ambivalent relationship to the director, an effect which is no doubt amplified by the author in his maximalist appeal to the cinema-going public.

Nevertheless, I think there is room to wonder to what extent Wallace saw his own refusals of epistemological and ontological certainty as a kind of effective betrayal, the violation of an “important covenant”. Whether through a return to literality (in breach of postmodernity’s ironic contract) or a concomitant turn towards suspicious imagination (in apparent breach of his own empathetic agenda), Wallace’s fiction tends to define itself in terms of the rules it breaks, and the “certain core certainties” which get repeated and upended in the process. Nevertheless, this rule-breaking bears striking affinities to the capital-E Expressionist of David Lynch, especially given the extent to which Wallace connects the breaking of abstract rules with the emergence of scandalous, traumatic or hyper-sexualised events within his narratives (See Chapter 6).
Wallace's reflections on this ambivalence, and on the relative of merit of Lynch's films in general, comes back to the question of performance, and to concomitant questions about the abstract stakes of artistic contracts and exchanges. To the issue of Lynch's “sickness”, that is, the extent to which his films portray a “sick” mind at work, Wallace suggests that

Lynch's movies are inarguably creepy, and part of their creepiness is that they seem so personal. A kind way to put it is that Lynch seems to be one of those people with unusual access to their own unconscious. A less kind way to put it would be that Lynch's movies seem to be expressions of certain anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally-arrested, borderlinish parts of the director's psyche, expressions presented with very little inhibition or semiotic layering i.e. presented with something like a child's ingenuous (and sociopathic) lack of self-consciousness.

Or, the text continues:

It's the psychic intimacy of the work that makes it hard to sort out what you are feeling about one of David Lynch's movies and what you are feeling about David Lynch. (p166)

This sense of “psychic intimacy” - redolent of Boswell's claims to “a special, surprisingly intimate zone of communication, of subjective interaction” in Wallace's works (2003: 19) - brings Wallace's ambivalence about Lynch back to the question of authorial performance, and the fraught relationships between “what you are feeling” about author and text respectively. Meanwhile, Wallace's evocative renderings of the “unconscious”, and the “anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally-arrested, borderlinish” dynamics at stake in Lynch's films, continues to underline the author's transferential conception of the director's work (168). “His best films tend to be his sickest,” writes Wallace, “And they tend to derive a lot of their emotional power from their ability to make us feel complicit in their sickness” (168). At this point,
Wallace makes the David Lynch film sound an awful lot like transferential discourse. For the time being, we may observe the extent to which sickness and pathology figure into Wallace’s own “Expressionistic” works – from the therapeutic dialogue of ‘Here and There’ to the hideous discourse of the ‘Brief Interviews’, there is nothing definitively separating the author from his narrative self-presentations, but for the sense that these various authorial personae serve some anterior purpose, some attempt at talking through a cure for the more literal and imaginative sicknesses that we have seen inhabiting Wallace’s fiction.

Are these approaches convergent with one another? I would simply point out that paying attention to Wallace’s writings on Lynch has already yielded some startling and weird insights – allowing us to reconsider, for example, the prevalence of Expressionistic metaphor in a text like Brief Interviews or the symptomatic accounts of literary love in Girl with Curious Hair. Wallace seizes on the director’s literalistic commitment to character, writing of his films that “Most of them (the best) have devoted quite a lot of energy to character I.e. they’ve had human beings in them” (168). Beyond Blue Velvet’s Frank and Jeffrey (Kyle McLachlan), Wallace offers up two characterological examples to support his claim. In an extended sideline discussion, Wallace stakes out the ambivalent, yet electrifying nature of the Lynchian villain:

Lynch is not interested in the devolution of responsibility, and he’s not interested in moral judgments of characters. Rather, he’s interested in the psychic spaces in which people are capable of evil. He is interested in Darkness. And Darkness, in Lynch’s
movies, *always wears more than one face*. Recall, for example, how *Blue Velvet’s* Frank Booth is both Frank Booth and the ‘well-dressed man’ [...] How in both TV’s *Twin Peaks* and cinema’s *Fire Walk With Me*, ‘Bob’ is also Leland Palmer, how they are, ‘spiritually’, both two and one [...] Characters are not themselves evil in Lynch’s films; evil wears them. (203-204, original emphasis).

In the grip of “Darkness”, Wallace writes, Lynch’s villains are “literally inspired” – that is (Wallace footnotes), they are “‘in-spired’ = ‘affected, guided, aroused by divine influence’, from the Latin *inspirare*, ‘breathed into’” (204). These inspired villains, in their most cinematic moments, have “yielded themselves to a darkness way bigger than any one person”, and Lynch, according to Wallace, is “diagnosing” the stakes of this transformation, which involves acknowledging the “fact” that “evil [is] hideously vital and robust and usually impossible to look away from” (204).

Given what we know of Wallace’s own *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, this identified tension between inspiration and the ‘hideous’ diagnoses of evil no doubt rings true for most. Nevertheless, the ambivalent tenor of Wallace’s account – right down to the essential doubling and ‘double-ness’ of Lynch’s villains – again highlights the transferential stakes of the author’s relationship with Lynch’s works, and the complex discourse of psychoanalytic interpretation at play therein. In the following chapter, I explore more fully what a Lynchian reading of Wallace might entail – given the author’s almost counter-obsessive obsession with popular culture, and his affinities for authors such as Franz Kafka (Staes 2009) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (Miley 2016), it should come as no surprise that the hideous, ironic and yet strangely redemptive films of David Lynch serve as reference-point Wallace’s texts. In
either case, this sense of sickness serves as Wallace’s final critical-interpretive hinge, allowing the author to highlight the performative merits of Lynch’s work as a whole.

Wallace’s second example again attempts to manage the author’s ambivalence towards Lynch’s filmic approach, through the figure of Twin Peaks’ Laura Palmer (played by Sheryl Lee). Eulogising Lee’s performance in both the TV Series and film prequel, Fire Walk with Me, Wallace describes Laura Palmer as a figure of maximal “bothness”, confounding viewers with a multi-faceted portrayal of American culture’s more fractured desires:

In [FWWM], Laura was no longer “an enigma” or “the password to an inner sanctum of horror.” She now embodied, in full view, all the Dark Secrets that on the series had been the stuff of significant glances and delicious whispers.

This transformation of Laura from object/occasion to subject/person was actually the most morally ambitious thing a Lynch movie has ever tried to do [...] and it required complex and contradictory and probably impossible things from Ms. Lee, who in my opinion deserves an Oscar nomination for just showing up and trying. (210)

Despite his accolades for “Ms. Lee”, Wallace’s Laura Palmer remains a target for the vicissitudes of his audience. To reviewer Steve Erickson, who notes that Palmer's behaviour in FWWM might signal “an act of innocence or damnation [...] or both” (201), Wallace fires back in characteristic fashion:

Or both? Of course both! This is what Lynch is about in this movie: both innocence and damnation, both sinned-against and sinning. Laura Palmer in Fire Walk with Me is both ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and yet also neither: she’s complex, contradictory, real. And we hate this possibility in our movies; we hate this ‘both’ shit. (211, original emphasis)
In his challenge to Erickson, Wallace makes a rousing call for such “bothness”, figured through the “complex, contradictory, real” figure of Cheryl Lee’s Laura Palmer. And yet, this performance remains the site of Wallace’s most palpable literary anxieties, as Laura’s “bothness” flirts with the discomfort of the author’s self-constructed audience – indeed, Wallace casts this performance as “a bothness we go to the movies to get a couple hours’ fucking relief from”, quoting the words “overwrought”, “incoherent” and “too much” from contemporary reviews (211, FN61). With the equivocal energies of a semiotician, Wallace’s diagnosis of Laura Palmer as “both ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and also neither” simply reinforces the central dilemma of the author “himself”, who appears both transfixed and repulsed by the performances cultivated in Lynch’s work. Nevertheless, we might also highlight how this effect repeats and replays some of the less-appealing dynamics canvassed in a text like Brief Interviews (See Chapter 3).

**Between “Darkness” and “Bothness”:**

**An Expressionistic Reading-Position**

Given Wallace’s complex affinities for Lynch, way may return to our question: is David Foster Wallace looking to “get inside our heads” in his own work? In ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, the answer definitely appears to be yes – from his self-referential attempts to construct an audience for Lynch, to the text’s final passage, which literally exhorts the reader to “try to keep all of this in mind” (p212), Wallace is certainly making some kind of game out of the
connection between Lynch’s approach and his own. The author’s thorough critique of Lynch stakes out the conditions of a radically Expressionistic style, built on “making real” the ambivalent, indeed hideous and contradictory, contents of one’s own psyche for public consumption. From comparisons with Lynch’s “hideously vital” portrayals of darkness and evil, to both artists’ attraction to the idea of performance (particularly the feminine performer-figure), the influence of Lynch upon Wallace cannot be understated. When discussing Lynch’s ‘contract’ with the viewer, however, Wallace offers up one more significant distinction between the director’s work and his own:

It may be that Jeffery, [Elephant Man’s] Merrick, Laura et al. function for Lynch as they do for audiences, as nodes of identification and engines of emotional pain. The extent (large) to which Lynch seems to identify with his movies’ main characters is one more thing that makes the films so disturbingly ‘personal’. The fact that he doesn’t seem to identify much with his audience is what makes the movies ‘cold’, though the detachment has some advantages as well. (168)

In the final diagnosis, Wallace conflates Lynch’s lack of observable agenda with a “cold” disinterest in the “audience”, the very same audience that has shored up Wallace’s own claims for critical authority. Despite the author’s ambivalent conclusions about Lynch – characteristically presented as conclusions about the director’s own ambivalence – Wallace’s recurrent appeal to the audience of Lost Highway, and to the ‘reader’ of ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, continues to secure our understandings of both artists. Nevertheless, this essayistic performance does little to assuage the evident tensions at stake throughout the text – in his role as ‘reader who narrates’, the ambivalent “David Foster Wallace” continues to struggle with Lynch’s
“ingenious or sociopathic” agenda, his answers seemingly caught between “Darkness” and “bothness’. Meanwhile, doesn’t Wallace appear familiar with the “advantages” of such an approach in the preceding quote?

To the extent that we too remain caught up in this extra-literary performance, I think we continue to struggle with the transferential stakes of Wallace’s texts, with all the “anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally-arrested, borderlinish parts” of those texts alive and intact. Is this what Wallace meant when he referred to the “self’s heart’s special tangle” (C.f. Boswell), or perhaps to the Expressionist “self that primarily communicates itself”? One thing is clear – the tensions which animate Wallace’s reading of Lynch are themselves at stake in Wallace’s relationship to the reader. Whilst this supposed ‘contract’ between reader and author remains unclear, we have seen Wallace insist on the merits of an artist who remains “thoroughly, nakedly, unpretentiously, unsophisticatedly himself” in their dialogue with audience – not unlike the “fiction writer” in ‘Octet’ (1999), who attempts their own kind of “obscenely naked direct interrogation of someone else” (131). Yet both Wallace and his “fiction writer” remain fixated on that audience, that “someone else”, attempting to ward off the charge of ‘coldness’ or “S.O.P metafiction” through their fixations. As we have seen in Girl and Brief Interviews, this strategy can play out any number of ways, from Romantic idealisation to hyperbolic self-critique. But Wallace’s complex focus on the ‘reader’ remains palpable every step of the way.
In Wallace’s second Expressionist essay, ‘How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart’ (collected in 2005’s Consider the Lobster), we can see this focus repeated and refracted through the lens of autobiography and, again, through the strange dynamics of expression propounded by “David Foster Wallace” the author. From his cultural journalism to essays on sports, politics and American life, Wallace consistently positions the reader in a kind of living dialogue with the text, typically figured as a sort of complex and self-referential contract between author and reader. In cultivating this dialogue, one of the author’s most effective approaches is, as we have already seen, to position “himself” as the de facto ‘reader’ of another text, effectively inviting the reader to engage and identify with this latter performance of readership canvassed within the text. And yet, this textual performance remains haunted by the hypothesised presence of actual empirical readers, whose attitudes and expectations inevitably inform the author’s presentation of “himself” as reader, interpreter, and audience.

In the essay ‘Tracy Austin’, Wallace grapples with the idea of the commercial sports memoir, roundly declaring that Austin’s own book has “finally broken my jones for the genre” (141). The piece is a somewhat marginal text within Wallace’s writings on sports, sportspeople and athletic performance, which include seminal pieces such as ‘Derivative Sports in Tornado Alley’ (1997), ‘Federer Both Flesh and Not’ (2012) and the (well?)-titled essay ‘Tennis Player Michael Joyce’s Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie and Human Completeness’ (1997). When it comes to the mathematical challenges
of modern sports, or the Olympian prowess of the modern sports star, Wallace has already exhaustively detailed his views in these more well-known texts, often interposing his own memoir-like recollections of playing junior-grade professional tennis as a young man. In ‘Tracy Austin’, however, Wallace appears to take a different approach, focusing less on athletic performance (though the piece distils many of his key observations on such), and zeroing in on the literary and emotional stakes of the autobiographical text itself. As we shall see, this focus illuminates the author’s complex take on the idea of narrative persona, and the extent to which autobiographical narratives can both inspire and diagnose the whims of their own contemporary audience. Moreover, the essay makes for an illuminating pair with ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, given both essays’ focus on expression, inspiration and diagnosis.

‘Tracy Austin’ shares some remarkable similarities with ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, which alert us to the self-referential stakes explored by Wallace across different texts and different subject matters. It should also be noted that ‘Tracy Austin’ was in originally published around the same time as the PREMIERE essay, in 1994. At one point in ‘Tracy Austin’, Wallace decries the “ad-cliché sense” of the word “inspirational”, and dusts off his definition of “inspire” for the reader: “to animate the mind or emotions of; to communicate by divine influence” (2005: 150). This sense of inspiration, once embodied by the hideous villains of Lynch’s films, is here presented as “precisely what a great athlete becomes when she’s in the arena performing, sharing the particular divinity she’s given her life for” (p150). Wallace is referring to the performative spectacle of the young Tracy Austin herself, the
“first real child star in women’s tennis”, whose “incongruously adult genius” on the court inspired a 15-year-old Wallace to reflect on “the differences that kept this girl and me on our respective sides of the TV screen” (144). However, this sense of inspiration is nowhere to be found in Austin’s memoir – “the book is inanimate”, Wallace writes, “because it communicates no real feeling and so gives us no sense of a conscious person. There’s nobody at the other end of the line” (151). Wallace’s appeals towards athletic inspiration, coupled with his sharp critique of the memoir itself, reflect an ongoing concern with the nature of the literary contract. From the idea of the text as a “line” to another person, to the ambivalent questions of “genius” and “difference” evoked thereby, Wallace effectively returns to the critical concerns raised in ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, whilst repurposing these concerns to the more commercial contexts of autobiography and memoir.

Wallace’s continuity of purpose is best demonstrated by the avowed “promise” of the sports memoir, which again reveals the author’s self-defined Expressionistic bent. Despite the “breathtakingly insipid” (2005: 142) object of his essay, Wallace places great stock in the potentials of the autobiographical text to provide a window into the profundity and grace of athletic achievement. “Because top athletes are profound”, he writes, because they make a certain type of genius as carnally discernible as it can ever get, these ghost-written invitations inside their lives and their skulls are terribly seductive for book-buyers. Explicitly or not, the memoirs make a promise – to let us penetrate the indefinable mystery of what makes some persons geniuses, semidivine, to share with us the secret and so both to reveal the difference between us and them and to erase it, a little, that
The author’s overdetermined sense of the capital-S “Story” – notably premised on the desires and expectations of the audience for a singular “master narrative” – reflects the impossible promise of the autobiographical text, the desire to understand and “erase” the difference between reader and subject, or perhaps the capital-S Subject waiting at the other end of the text. At the same time, however, Wallace casts the seductive appeal of such texts within another familiar framework – the autobiography promises readers the chance to get “penetrate the indefinable mystery” of their subject, to get “inside their lives and their skulls”. But in this instance, it is the reader “getting inside” the life and skull of the autobiographical author, as opposed to something like the agenda of David Lynch, premised on “getting inside your head [...] penetrating your head” (1997: 171).

Whilst the roles appear reversed in this scheme, the central dynamic mechanism described by Wallace – put simply, the abstraction of the movement of one consciousness ‘into’ another – remains at stake in ‘Tracy Austin’, replete with penetrative metaphor and a fixation on similarity and difference. But how does this shift in focus impact the author’s presentation of “himself” within the text? In contrast to Lynch’s Expressionism and Austin’s ghost-written opacity, the figure of “David Foster Wallace” seems to adhere to the kind of autobiographical contract -outlined by Toon Staes:

According to the autobiographical contract, the author guarantees that the name on the cover of the book matches the identity of the person who witnessed the events within. Readers feel shocked and betrayed when it doesn’t [...] These feelings of
betrayal ostensibly stem from the belief that the reader has been empathizing with a narrative that is untrue, despite being told otherwise (2014: 37).

This reading is consistent with Wallace's writings on his own autobiographical contracts with Lynch and Austin – like Wallace, are driven to such texts for the thrill of relating to “genius”, that is, the sense that we are in some way inside the head of the author himself. This “head” is nevertheless a narrative persona on the part of Wallace – a character, hiding his sports memoirs from the cashier (2005: 141), watching David Lynch pee on a tree (1999: 147), and generally conforming to “a certain persona created, that’s a little stupider and schmuckier that I am” (in Lipsky 2010: 41). Yet this persona appears real or true enough to solicit our empathy, allowing us access to the consciousness of the text while opening our own minds to the agendas expressed therein.

Still, given what we know of Wallace’s relationship to reader, and his ambivalence towards the contemporary postmodern reader in particular, it pays to examine the distance between this autobiographical “David Foster Wallace” and the more overtly textual “author himself” in more detail. Wallace's ambivalence towards David Lynch was bolstered by a complex appeal to the average American cinema-goer; in ‘How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart’, Wallace routinely shifts into a more generalistic appeal to “book buyers” (2005: 144). In both instances, these appeals deflect attention away from the speaker (Wallace or “Wallace”), towards the freighted and ambivalent expectations of the contemporary reader themselves. And yet these expectations remain an intrinsic part of the speaker's own ostensive “point”, particularly in terms of staking out the cultural, interpretive and
psychological dynamics surrounding the text(s) in question. Consider this justification for the banality of sport broadcasting:

The baritones in network blazers keep coming up after games, demanding of physical geniuses these recombinant strings of dead clichés, strings that after a while start to sound like a lullaby, and which of course no network would solicit and broadcast again and again if there weren't a large and serious audience out here who find the banalities right and good. As if the emptiness in these athletes’ descriptions of their feelings confirmed something we need to believe (152, emphasis mine).

Once again it is our beliefs, as part of “a large and serious audience out here”, which form the basis for “David Foster Wallace’s” ambivalence towards the text. It is we who share the author’s “twin fascinations with competitive superiority and hard data” (142), whilst also sharing in “some deep compulsion to both experience genius in the concrete and universalize genius in the abstract” (153). Once again, the attitudes and expectations of the audience are called upon (repeated, inscribed, literalised) to inform the rhetorical authority of “David Foster Wallace”; our supposedly banal or moralistic narratives form the basis for the author’s critique of both Lynch and Austin.

But at the end of the day, we are not presently concerned with comparative American cinema or the optics of American sporting spectacle – we are concerned with our own relationship as ‘readers’ of Wallace’s sporting memoirs. To the extent that Wallace ghost-writes this relationship into his own contracts with various texts and authors, we are again led to reconsider the function of the author “himself” within the text. Recall that the figure of “David Foster Wallace” has been served up to account for the complexities and contradictions of Wallace’s literary project as a whole, through a body of work
that seeks “both to embody and to explode” the notion that “cynicism and naivete are mutually exclusive” (Boswell, pp. 16-17). The core mechanism of this project is the complex figure of the author “himself”, a narrative and autobiographical proxy for the irreconcilable tensions canvassed by this project, and the infuriating “bothness” of his rhetoric on fiction and culture. The essential ambivalence of Wallace’s fiction (seen in his radically different constructions of the ‘reader’ in Girl and Brief Interviews) is effectively displaced onto ambivalent questions about “David Foster Wallace” the author, furthered and raised anew by Wallace’s strategies of in- and over-determination (Staes). But in order to create this sense of the author “himself”, Wallace’s texts inevitably refer back to the attitudes and expectations of the contemporary reader, repeating and re-imagining this ‘reader’ as part of their sophisticated rhetorical construction of said author within the literary exchange. In so doing, Wallace’s texts inevitably recreate the same kinds of ambivalence that the figure of “David Foster Wallace” is meant to ‘stand-in’ and account for, albeit at a more overtly metafictional or meta-rhetorical level.

Whether inviting himself inside our heads or inviting us into the heads of others, Wallace’s approach to narrative persona and autobiographical contract is haunted by this ambivalence, chiefly expressed as affinity/hostility towards the “audience” (of Lynch’s films, of Austin’s memoir) and towards the constructed ‘reader’ (of Wallace’s texts). The final passage of ‘How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart’ settles on this ambivalence, as Wallace attempts to reconcile both the failure of the sports memoir as such and the inspirational promise he can’t help but see:
As is so often SOP with the truth, there's a cruel paradox involved. It may be that we spectators, who are not divinely gifted athletes, are the only ones able truly to see, articulate, and animate the experience of the gift we are denied. And that those who receive and act-out the gift of athletic genius must, perforce, be blind and dumb about it – and not because blindness and dumbness are the price of the gift, but because they are its essence. (155)

Wallace’s “cruel paradox” – that “The real secret behind top athlete’s genius [...] may be as dull and profound as silence itself” (154) – raises an array of questions as to our own relationship with the Wallace’s own literary “genius”. Whilst neither Wallace nor his authorial proxies can ever be described as approaching silent, it may yet be that the figure of “David Foster Wallace” remains effectively blind to his rhetorical dependence on “spectators”, “book-buyers”, “cinema-goers”, “audience” and so forth (even if the author himself was assuredly not). To effectively act-out or perform his particular blend of genius, then, it would appear crucial to downplay this dependence on the ‘reader’ or ‘readers’, despite this dependence informing virtually every aspect of “David Foster Wallace’s” extra-literary rhetoric canvassed thus far. In other words, the ambivalent avowal/disavowal of the reader who narrates underpins Wallace’s extra-literary performance of “himself”. Whether approaching Lynchian fullness or Austin-esque silence, Wallace’s hypothetical authorial self remains overdetermined by its relationship with the attitudes and expectations of this textual ‘reader’.
“cruel paradox”: Expressionism, Abstraction and the ‘Reader’

The persistence of Expressionistic tropes in Wallace – that is, of transfers between consciousness, of arrested and borderlinish speech, of re-imagined and re-abstracted narratives about communication between human beings – helps indicate a new response to the problem of interpretive ambivalence in Wallace scholarship. This response might even be described as “Lynchian”, to the extent that Wallace’s work routinely delivers on the author’s compelling definition of that term: like Lynch’s films, Wallace’s fiction “refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter” (1997: 161). Whilst this dialectic of perpetual “containment” recalls earlier positioning of Wallace’s literary project (See Chapter 1), I am more interested here in the ideas of the macabre and mundane, given the extent to which both ideas remain consistently overdetermined in Wallace’s rhetorics of the ‘reader’. Wallace’s pitch to “those of us civilians who know in our gut that fiction is an act of communication between one human being and another” (1997: 144) is striking precisely because it is mundane. And yet, when the writer turns his imaginative attentions towards the author-relationship, the result is more often than not macabre, ambivalent, even hideous. And whilst this “particular kind of irony” can be understood in terms of the author’s reference to it, perhaps even his awareness or command of it, it is also indelibly connected with a vast range of unchecked psychoanalytic and Freudian ideas. Accordingly, Wallace describes “Lynchianism” as a kind of unbound or un-framed transference, the
act of an artist getting inside the head of his 'audience', literally *acting-out* their own symptoms and sicknesses without the epistemological security of a particular narrative contract. Moreover, in ‘Austin’, Wallace imagines an audience that wants exactly the same thing, an audience in pursuit of a master “Story” which would see them located somewhere inside the skull of an inspiring memoir’s ‘author’. In other words, we are not simply concerned with the potential abstract similarities between Lynch and Wallace – pursuant to the aims of this study, we are concerned with how Lynch’s works allow Wallace to repeat, re-imagine and re-abstract the question of psychoanalytic reading ‘as such’. With this in mind, it is prudent at this juncture to connect our discussions of Lynch, Wallace and the ‘reader’ to the broader question of critical rhetoric, and the way we talk about fictions about fictions in particular.

Mike Miley’s essay ‘...And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself: Performance and Persona in *The Pale King*’ points to new ways forward on these kinds of questions, which explicitly take up Toon Staes’ theorising of the authorial contract as a point of departure (2016: 191). To this concern with authorship and abstraction, Miley adds a concern with the conflicted iconographies we develop around authors like Wallace, for example in the conflict between modernist and postmodernist intentionality (191):

One would be hard-pressed to think of a contemporary writer more emblematic of this conflict than David Foster Wallace, whose image and persona have unleashed a torrent of iconic imagery, and whose work becomes increasingly preoccupied with, resistant to, and absorbed by this kind of iconography. Wallace feared that having that iconic status conferred on himself would negatively affect his fiction because, as he claims in ‘Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,’ “to make someone an icon is to make him an
abstraction, and abstractions are incapable of vital communication with living people”. (191)

I think that Miley’s work captures, in an effective and abstract manner, the extent to which performative self-consciousness plays out, or is indeed acted-out, in Wallace’s literary project. Miley writes about the “double-bind” facing Wallace as a writer. “He must inhabit an artistically toxic literary universe that is consumed by performance and the construction of personas,” writes Miley, “and yet he must still create work that expresses something honest and true. He must be an honest performer” (193). As Miley immediately points out, honest performance is an oxymoron in Wallace’s work, yet it appears to have taken on the status of a “true cliché” for Wallace as well. I highly recommend Miley’s work for its forensic discussions of abstraction and annotation in Wallace, particularly in light of the author’s “Paradoxical” hermeneutics and the more abstracted accounts of scholars like Staes.

In the essay’s conclusion, Miley compares reads Wallace with essayist Jonathan Lethem, through the idea of a performative trap: “Where Lethem makes his peace with this inevitable trap the best he can, Wallace (and perhaps also his readers) becomes permanently ensnared in his search for a way out” (204). In this subtle rewriting of the sincerity thesis – which repeats, of course, the uncertain postulation of “perhaps also [Wallace’s] readers” – Miley highlights the extent to which performance overdetermines abstraction in Wallace’s fiction, ironically concluding with Lethem that “there is no way out of performance [...] so the best thing to do is to stop wringing your hands and start learning your lines” (204). This is the kind of claim I wish to explore
further in Chapter 6 – the idea that both Wallace and his reader are capable of learning lines, reciting and repeating, performing one another in some indeterminate or overdetermined way.

I would say that my work complements Miley’s because it provides a basis for distinguishing between different layers of performance in Wallace’s fiction, particularly when it comes to the ‘implied reader’ of those fictions. From the overtly literal performances captured in Girl with Curious Hair, to the hyperbolic critique of such performances in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, we have seen that Wallace’s texts inevitably repeat, re-imagine and re-abstract their own stakes as texts. And yet, the sheer differences in scope and approach between these two texts reveals an array of tensions, no doubt familiar to the contemporary reader of Wallace. These tensions go to the heart of the author’s literary project, and its avowed attempts to represent the contemporary ‘reader’ within the text, that is, to authentically capture the attitudes and expectations of a decidedly postmodern audience. On the one hand, Girl with Curious Hair allowed us to explore the author’s self-conscious pastiche of the contemporary postmodern audience, which contrasted the cathartic promise of so-called “entertainment” with a more complex, idiosyncratic performance of literary empathy and dialogue. Wallace’s rendering of the sincere performer, whose narratives repeat and inscribe the operation of the text itself, remains the central feature of Girl’s metafictional dialogue with its reader – by inviting the reader to identify with the performance of and within the text, Wallace stakes a unique claim on what we have called the reader who identifies.
It is in this first sense, then, that Wallace’s texts enact the author’s belief that “fiction is an act of communication between one human being and another” (1997: 144). On the other hand, however, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* confronts the narcissistic and transferential stakes of this act, this metafictional appeal to any number of ‘other’ readers. The claustrophobic narrative experiments in *Brief Interviews* confront the reader with a critical discourse of misogyny and authorship, through warped tales of “hideous men” enmeshed with highly self-referential accounts of the literary dialogue itself. These narratives inevitably repeat and re-imagine the stakes of Wallace’s own literary performance for the reader, which is recast as a more ambivalent demand upon the latter’s attention and investment, reflected, for example, in the obsessively self-referential overtures of ‘Octet’ (1999). Wallace’s performance of the ‘author’ in *Brief Interviews* presents the reader with a second critical challenge, that is, to confront the self-referential stakes of the author’s “critique of critique” (Levey 2010) and to arrive at one’s own critical judgment of same. In this second sense, Wallace’s “act of communication” thesis is approached from a substantially different vantage-point, predicated on the self-referential figure of the *reader who critiques*.

Through these distinct approaches to representing the reader, Wallace’s texts invite an array of now-familiar responses, which are themselves fraught with the author’s characteristic ambivalence. These responses position the author in terms of “legacy”, particularly the legacies of modern and postmodern form re-imagined within his texts. Marshall Boswell situates Wallace thus:
Wallace is doing much more than simply diagnosing a peculiar form of alienation that haunts contemporary culture. Rather [...] this strategy stands as Wallace’s solution to the apparently indissoluble dilemma that sits at the center of his historical situation as a serious literary artist: how to follow postmodernism without merely rejecting it and returning to the mode of the prepostmodern, or even the premodern. (18)

Boswell’s critical narrative, repeated in different ways throughout Wallace Studies, is here tied to the author’s characteristic moral ambivalence, particularly regarding “that queerly persistent U.S. myth that cynicism and naivete are mutually exclusive” (16-17). The contents of this myth provide, for Boswell, a “thorough explanation of what Wallace had in mind when he speaks of this ‘delusion’ [...] a delusion, obviously, that his work seeks both to embody and to explode” (emphasis mine). Here we can see the transferential stakes of Wallace’s literary project writ large, as Boswell writes of the author’s paranoid relationship with “hip irony” and “gooey sentiment”:

Wallace’s work, in its attempt to prove that cynicism and naivete are mutually compatible, treats the culture’s hip fear of sentiment with the same sort of ironic self-awareness with which sophisticates in the culture portray ‘gooey’ sentimentality; the result is that hip irony is itself ironized in such a way that the opposite of hip irony – that is, gooey sentiment – can emerge as the work’s indirectly intended mode. (17)

Boswell’s passing reference to “sophisticates in the culture” gives us a sense of Wallace’s paranoid, fractured relationship with the literary avant-garde, and his self-imposed distance from all kinds of ‘postmodern’, ‘prepostmodern’ and ‘premodern’ approaches to fiction. Meanwhile, “gooey sentiment”, “the work’s indirectly intended mode”, itself emerges out of a characteristic inversion, an effective ‘ironising of irony’ performed within Wallace’s texts. The recursive and ambivalent terms in which Wallace’s legacy is sketched, by Boswell and
by others, reflect and repeat the freighted ambivalence of the author in relation to his own literary legacy.

The full meaning of this legacy, however, remains difficult to define. In an almost textbook case of critical negation, Boswell ultimately defines Wallace’s work in terms of “an attempt to invoke indirectly the very things that it is not addressing” (209). “Wallace’s argumentative and self-reflexive work,” he writes, “is ultimately, truly, deeply expressive of what is unknowable and unsayable” (2003: 209). But this appeal remains haunted – and not only by the baleful strings of Savage Garden’s ‘Truly Madly Deeply’ – but in its insistence on repeating the author’s own emotive gestures beyond the literary dialogue, towards the negative:

Though these heartfelt utterances present themselves as assuasive or argumentative, what they really are are – truly, deeply – expressive – expressive of a self’s heart’s special tangle, of a knowing and verbal self’s particular tortured relationship to what is unknow-and-sayable. (Wallace, in Boswell: 209).

In other words, Wallace’s texts express “a self’s heart’s special tangle”, reminiscent of the author's claims that fiction “has something to do with love” (See Chapter 3). This gesture beyond ambivalence – and, significantly, away from the very things that Wallace’s works are directly addressing – places the figure of Wallace “himself” centre-stage, as a necessary and literal proxy for the reader’s attention and investment. And yet, in the author’s own words, this “self’s heart” is itself a figure of ambivalence, that “of a knowing and verbal self’s particular tortured relationship” with a radically negative horizon. This latter horizon, I think, also informs Kelly’s critical appeals to “Blind Faith”, and an indeterminate “secret beyond representation” (2010). But given what we
know of the author’s fictional response to such questions, we may ask after the effects of this “expressive” performance, particularly upon our understanding of the ‘reader’ in relation to Wallace’s literary project more broadly. How do Wallace’s texts work to secure the reader’s empathetic and critical engagement? And what is the role of “David Foster Wallace”, the indeterminate and yet overdetermined image of the author “himself”, in securing these investments? How does Wallace’s performance of “himself” affect and effect our own retransmissions of the author's literary legacy?

**Conclusion: Performing the Reader who Narrates**

What is it to say that Wallace narrates (with) the reader? This chapter has continued to locate the transferential and neurotic substance of Wallace’s writings about literary criticism, and investigated the extent to which these writings respond to the Freudian dimensions of Wallace’s short fictions. Whilst recognising the increasingly sophisticated treatment of psychoanalytic reading-tropes in Wallace’s essays on Lynch and Austin, and their bearing on concepts such as the ‘implied author’, empathetic identification and critical suspicion in Wallace’s works, we also saw the extent to which these essays over-determine particular types of audience. The insistent parallels drawn in these essays – between cinema-goers, book-buyers, critical readers and ‘authors’ – provide ample evidence of this over-determination in Wallace’s own works, particularly when we consider the similarities between this self-reflexive essayistic style and the more literalistic and imaginative strategies
pursued in *Girl with Curious Hair* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (See Chapters 3-4). However, the self-reflexivity of this strategy – indicated by the extent to which Wallace imagines “himself” as a critical reader – remains arguably dependent on the formulation of *other* critical ‘readers’, that is, the representation of specific and distinct reading-positions in relation to particular texts or authors.

While this strategy is stylistically similar to the kinds of suspicious re-imagination canvassed in *Brief Interviews*, it also represents a more sophisticated response to idea of psychoanalytic reading on the part of Wallace. A striking thing about this response is the extent to which Wallace, narrating the activities of *readers who narrate* (himself included), returns to specific and at times divergent ideas about erotic or psychoanalytic ‘reading’. The notions of *inspiration* (“exultant, orgasmic, most fully present [...] not only actuated by evil but literally inspired” [1997: 204]) and of the *diagnosis of inspiration* (“creating a narrative space where this idea can be worked out in its fullest detail and to its most uncomfortable consequences” [205]) have proven particularly relevant here, for their abstract reprisal of various literalistic and imaginative reading-positions. In attempting to mediate these positionings, through the interposition a third ‘reader’ – himself – Wallace’s essays have thus presented us with a third-order response to the kinds of rhetorical ambivalence identified in previous chapters, directly addressing the apparent conflicts between *readers who identify* and *readers who critique* that we have seen in Wallace’s fiction already.
Yet despite this escalation of stakes, Wallace’s writings seem determined to return to transferential-neurotic tropes in their response. Whether claiming moral fidelity with Lynchian ‘readers’ in ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, or actively deploying this kind of ‘reading’ in ‘How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart’, Wallace’s definition of Expressionist art remains framed the peculiar notion of getting inside someone’s head. By investigating this notion, and relating it to the more extreme reader-rhetorics at stake in Wallace’s short fictions and essays, we have seen the extent to which Wallace figures the relationship between ‘reader’ and ‘text’ in psychoanalytic terms. The author’s apparent enthusiasm for “anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally arrested, borderlinish” reading has been a case in point for this chapter (1997: 166), and it is perhaps worth giving Wallace the final say on his own Freudian reading of Lynch:

They’ve noted this, the critics all have, and they’ve noted how, despite its heaviness, the Freudian stuff tends to give Lynch’s movies an enormous psychological power; and yet they don’t seem to make the obvious point that these very heavy Freudian riffs are powerful instead of ridiculous because they’re deployed Expressionistically, which among other things means they’re deployed in an old-fashioned, pre-postmodern way, i.e., nakedly, sincerely, without postmodernism’s abstraction or irony (198). Then again, given all that we have learned about Wallace’s fictions thus far, we might pause at this conflation of (Freudian) ‘reading’ with old-fashioned, pre-postmodern, naked and sincere modes of expression. Because even in this sophisticated critique of what critics already supposedly know, Wallace is clearly repeating himself, re-imagining himself and re-abstraction his own transferential-neurotic anxieties through the hypothesised positions of “the
critics”. In other words, his texts are still performing ‘readers’, even when speaking in the more abstract voice of the author “himself”. In this sense, it is difficult to read statements like these as a solution to our own interpretive dilemmas, because their net effect is to suggest more ‘readers’, more reading-positions or abstract narratives of reading. In other words, Wallace’s discussions of symptomatic discourse, of pathological or pathologised texts, are themselves symptomatic – they remain caught up in the confusions canvassed thus far, whose chief symptom has been the return to and repetition of ‘readers’.

Having now considered the limits of such a response, it remains for us to consider whether this kind of author-rhetoric truly accounts for the psychological power of Wallace’s short fictions, that is, whether an estranging metaphor about head-penetration and psycho-biographical performance really exhausts the post-Freudian possibilities suggested in and by those fictions. Strangely enough, I think that it does, particularly when we consider the kinds of transferential-neurotic acting-out at stake in Wallace’s late-period metafictions. By turning our attentions to texts such as Oblivion (2004), we will see that the questions of erotic, diagnostic and transferential-neurotic ‘reading’ have almost completely superseded the author’s own plain-language ideas about empathy, suspicion and performance. Yet given what we know about this escalation, and its self-reflexive and repetitive dimensions, we are now situated to provide a decidedly post-Freudian account of the Wallace ‘reader’, in which the full textual and rhetorical consequences of the transference-neurosis may yet be made explicit.
CHAPTER 6

Readers who Negate

And the mind of those stories is nearly always a mind that lives in and through books. This is because Borges the writer is, fundamentally, a reader. The dense, obscure allusiveness of his fiction is not a tic, or even really a style; and it is no accident that his best stories are often fake essays, or reviews of fictitious books [...] Whether for seminal artistic reasons or neurotic personal ones or both, Borges collapses reader and writer into a new kind of aesthetic agent, one who makes stories out of stories, one for whom reading is essentially - consciously - a creative act. This is not, however, because Borges is a metafictionist or cleverly disguised critic. It is because he knows that there's finally no difference - that murderer and victim, detective and fugitive, performer and audience are the same.

(Wallace, 2012: 293-294, emphasis mine)

Introduction: Post-Freudian 'Reading' and Oblivion

The psychoanalytic concept of transferential-neurotic performance – acting-out – has thus far allowed us to distinguish between a series of escalating reading-positions – 'readers' – in Wallace's short fictions and essays. Each escalation of this scheme has been dictated by a particular self-reflexive innovation within those writings – the author's early confluences of reading and erotic love, his narratological and characterological critiques of 'readers'
and ‘lovers’ in subsequent fictions, and his overt attempt at positioning the metafictional author as ‘reader’ in essays and interviews. In Wallace’s first response to the idea of psychoanalytic reading, we saw how ideas such as reading, performance and love implied a sense of repetition – a return to the literalistic idea of fiction as an “act of communication between one human being and another” (Wallace 1997: 144; See Chapter 3). However, the re-imagination of psychoanalytic reading in subsequent Wallace texts complicated this scheme, alerting us to fraught distinctions between literalistic readers who identify and psychoanalytically-aware readers who critique within texts such as Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (See Chapter 4). Moreover, the re-abstraction of particular reading-positions – best evidenced by the author’s treatment of “himself” as a psychoanalytic reader amongst ‘readers’ – has proven to be yet another abstract escalation of the same problem, whose chief symptom now appears to involve the rampant profiling and pathologising of readers who narrate (including, of course, the author himself) (See Chapter 5). The strangest thing about these strategies, from the perspective of this study, has been their proximity to self-reflexive ideas about the psychoanalytic interpretation of texts, which appear to have coalesced around the author’s anticipatory concerns with and responses to such an interpretation being performed upon his own writings.

Nevertheless, the innovation of this study has been to read these self-reflexive responses as transferential-neurotic effects, brought on by the increasingly-fraught treatment of ‘reading’, ‘readers’ and reading-positions within Wallace’s texts. In Chapter 2, we described these effects through the
terminology of psychoanalytic literary theory, highlighting the extent to which acting-out (repeating, re-imagining, re-abstracting the ‘subject’ of one’s speech) dictated particular modes of Freudian and post-Freudian interpretation for theorists such as Paul Ricoeur, Peter Brooks and Shoshanna Felman. The performative dynamics of the transference, evidenced by the transferential-neurotic production of new identifications, new suspicions and new discursive abstractions in the course of the psychoanalytic treatment, have been shown to provide a working heuristic model for the relationship between literary criticism and Freudian dialogue in Wallace’s metafictional texts. However, this modelling has also consistently highlighted the estranging dimensions of Wallace’s psychoanalytically-aware approach. On this reading, Wallace’s text’s overt self-consciousness about and towards their own analysis (and indeed their respective ‘analysts’) continues to read as symptomatic, due the difficulties and escalation of difficulty that this self-consciousness tends to evoke in Wallace’s texts, and due to the fact that ‘being aware of psychoanalysis’ is a clinical and literary-theoretical phenomenon unto itself. Before metafiction, and indeed before most modernist fiction for that matter, Freud had recognised that the role of the analyst required a specific engaged awareness of the analysand’s verbal and self-conscious relationship to their own treatment, that is, the negotiation of idealised and/or distorted discourse through dialogue and interpretation (See Chapter 2). The productive adaptation of this insight in psychoanalytic literary criticism has been established already; the idiosyncratic or symptomatic presentation of this claim in Wallace’s fictions remains to be fully determined.
In this final demonstrative chapter, I investigate the kinds of transferential-neurotic reading made possible by texts such as Wallace’s final short story collection, *Oblivion* (2004). In various ways, this collection has been described by critics as Wallace’s most estranging text, the most difficult texts to ‘read’ in the Wallace corpus. Boswell, in his 2013 reading, describes *Oblivion* as Wallace’s “bleakest” work, pointing to the “ponderous intensity of the prose and the hermetic isolation Wallace places on his protagonists” as a case in point (151). Notably, Boswell’s analysis highlights the significance of early texts such as ‘Here and There’ (1989) for the more estranging performances pursued in *Oblivion*:

In his conviction that something ‘outside’ of him is controlling his thoughts and voice, Bruce […] anticipates *Oblivion’s* paralyzed isolates, and yet Bruce holds out hope for a way out, namely by sharing this sense of a divided self with others via Wittgensteinian ‘community of signs’, a key concept in Wallace’s apprentice fiction. Early in his career, Wallace went so far as to deem Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, which posits language as a ‘game’ requiring a community of players, as “the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that’s ever been made”. As we shall see, for the Wallace of *Oblivion*, Wittgenstein’s solution might not be enough (155)

As we have already seen, this game-like solution was already not enough to account for the erotic and empathetic stakes of a text like *Girl with Curious Hair* – the solution itself depended on eroticised assumptions about ‘readers’, and a curious proximity to the kinds of language-game suggested by the transference-neurosis. Nevertheless, Boswell is correct to describe *Oblivion* through the phrase “nightmare of consciousness” – in an apposite comparison with Nabokov, Boswell writes that:
The characters in these late-period fever dreams rattle desperately at that Nabokovian window only to discover, upon successfully springing the lock, not a sunlit landscape but rather another enclosure. In that sense, Nabokov’s ‘night of non-being’ is just a lovely alliterative way to describe *Oblivion*. (168)

With this bleakness duly noted, and the estranging discovery of “rather another enclosure” in mind, I wish to provide an alternative take on the Wallace-ian author-reader relationship, which dives headlong into the possibilities afforded by psychoanalytic literary theory. With the Freudian vectors of Wallace’s reader-rhetoric well-established, we are thus poised to consider what a truly post-Freudian reading of Wallace would look like, and to properly take into account Wallace’s matured writings on psychoanalytic interpretive method.

As this chapter’s positive post-Freudian readings of *Oblivion* indicate, there is a lot more to this play of dynamic reading-tropes and reader-positions than a cursory reading of character (or worse, a superficial reading of psycho-biographical intentionality) might suggest. As Peter Brooks argued as early as 1986, the psychoanalytic ‘intentionality’ of a text does not necessarily reside with the figuration of psycho-biographical ‘authors’, fictional characters or empirical ‘readers’ – more often than not, it involves the *complex inter-positioning of these figures* within a given text, relative to that text’s unfolding or activation through the transferential-neurotic act of ‘reading’ (See Chapter 2). The strength of this approach has been to dispense with or displace certain pre-theoretical (even pre-Freudian) ideas about such a ‘reading’, in favour of more textual and rhetorical reader-response model. In the previous chapter, we have also highlighted Wallace’s strange predilection for “prepostmodern”
(because Freudian) expression in David Lynch, and the transferential-neurotic stakes of what Wallace calls Expressionist art.

At the same time, however, we noted the persistence of what we might call a category error in Wallace’s account of Expressionistic and Freudian reading – Brooks diagnoses this error as a “methodologically disquieting [...] use of Freudian analytic tools in a wholly thematic way”, especially when dealing with particular characters or relationships in particular texts, “as if the identification and labelling of human relations in a psychoanalytic vocabulary were the task of criticism” (1986: 2). As I have sought to make clear throughout this study, this is not the task of a contemporary psychoanalytic criticism, despite claims to the contrary in Wallace’s erotic fiction about readers who identify, readers who critique and readers who narrate. Rather, it is the escalation of stakes, the various stylistic and rhetorical strategies by which that escalation occurs and repeats within Wallace’s texts, that interests us here. We have elected to embrace the game-like nature of these texts before – the love songs in Girl with Curious Hair, the fraught victimology of Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, and the truly estranging idea of getting inside someone’s head, have all helped us locate the rhetorical limits of Wallace’s early-middle writings, and to distinguish our perspective from those of the Wallace text (and its various characters, authors or readers) when necessary.

The epigraph to this chapter, from the 2004 essay ‘Borges on the Couch’ (2012), also provides several positive indicators for such an approach, whilst decisively calling into question the merits of a psycho-biographical (that is,
author-centric and intentional) approach to criticism. The occasion for
Wallace’s critique is a literary biography of the South American author by
Edwin Williamson, titled *Borges: A Life*. In Wallace’s view, Williamson is an
“atrocious” reader of Borges, whose psychologically-determined approach to
interpretation “is a pronounced case of the syndrome that seems common to
literary biographies, so common that it might point to a design flaw in the
whole enterprise” (287). Wallace’s diagnosis of this interpretive “syndrome” is
of particular interest here, not least for its reprisal of familiar critical themes:

The idea is that we can’t correctly interpret a piece of verbal art
unless we know the personal and/or psychological circumstances
surrounding its creation. That this is simply assumed as an axiom
by many biographers is one problem; another is that the approach
works a lot better on some writers than on others. It works well
on Kafka [...] because Kafka’s fictions are *expressionist, projective,
and personal*; they make sense only as manifestations of Kafka’s
psyche. But Borges’ stories are very different. They are designed
primarily as metaphysical arguments; they are *dense, self-
enclosed, with their own deviant logics*. (287-288, emphasis mine)

In characteristic fashion, Wallace’s respective engagements with Borges and
Kafka depend on the formulation of distinct reading-positions – in our terms,
they suggest a (literalistic) ‘reader’ for whom texts are “expressionist,
projective, and personal” on the one hand, and an (imaginative) ‘reader’ for
whom texts are “dense, self-enclosed, with their own deviant logics” on the
other. Wallace’s alternative model, that of a “mind that lives in and through
books”, involves somehow “[collapsing] reader and writer into a new kind of
aesthetic agent, one who makes stories out of stories”. Of course, Wallace
justifies this reading through the characteristic third-order claim that “Borges
the writer is, fundamentally, a reader” (293). But given what we already know
about the “deviant logics” at stake in Wallace’s own work, and the abstract Expressionist manner in which the author tends to account for the relationship between ‘authors’ and ‘readers’ (See Chapter 5), this description of the ‘reader’ as a “new kind of aesthetic agent” arguably alerts us to a new kind of self-reflexivity in Wallace’s late works.

This fourth-order response continues to respond to the idea of “[making] stories out of stories” – in this sense, Wallace’s fourth-order aesthetic agent is a kind of transferential-neurotic ‘reader’, whose agency hinges on their capacities to repeat, re-imagine and re-abstract particular elements of the discourses they encounter. In the transferential-neurotic “nightmare” that is Oblivion, we can observe the extent to which Wallace’s late-period fiction displaces pre-theoretical ideas like empathy/“literal literary love”, suspicion/“performance” and reader/“audience” into new, hyper-Freudian dimensions. Put simply, Oblivion appears to dispense of particular anxieties around “labelling […] human relations in psychoanalytic terms” (as per Brooks), and/or being a “cleverly disguised critic” (as per Wallace’s Borges). Rather, Oblivion sees Wallace embracing the transferential-neurotic potentials of his own fiction, perhaps even working-through the idea of a metafiction estranged from its ‘reader’. Having dealt with this kind of rhetoric before – and investigated its literalistic, imaginative and abstract tropes to their limits – we can square Wallace’s idea of a “new kind of aesthetic agent” quite effectively at this point.
But Wallace’s subsequent claims about such agents, once more displaced onto what we now know to be Freudian reading tropes, might give us pause: “[Borges] knows that there’s finally no difference - that murderer and victim, detective and fugitive, performer and audience are the same” (294, emphasis mine). This sort of conflation has signified a lot of things for Wallace’s short fictions – more often than not, it has signalled the discursive interplay of ‘reader/lovers’, ‘performers’, ‘audiences’, ‘detectives’ and, strangely enough at times, ‘victims’, ‘fugitives’ and ‘murderers’. On this basis, it is no surprise to find that particular modes of estrangement are reprised in Wallace’s final collection – Oblivion boasts bizarre love stories, traumatic re-imaginations and thoroughgoing intertextual abstractions, all of which we have had cause to discover in the author’s early-middle fictions and essays.

Yet through this precise form of acting-out strategies from across his literary career, Wallace arguably succeeds in correcting the category errors which have attended his treatment of ‘readers’ in prior works. In this reading, Oblivion’s self-reflexive account of repetition, re-imagination and re-abstraction (and of the estranging significance of these themes in his early metafictonal works) finally avoids the trap of “[displacing] the object of analysis from the text to some person, some other psychodynamic structure” (Brooks 1986: 2), a displacement whose repetition we have observed, in various forms and intensities, throughout this study. These readings justify the interposition of a fourth reading-position – that of a performative ‘reader who negates’ – and the concomitant claim that Wallace, in his mature (though
no less escalatory) treatment of the transference-neurosis, succeeds in negating the ‘psychoanalytic reader’ as a utile rhetorical concept.

In this fourth-order response to the psychoanalytically-engaged interpreter, Wallace effectively cedes the point – or rather, he *throws the entire game* into question, through psychologically-powerful and inherently self-reflexive reprisals of erotic, diagnostic and transferential-neurotic ‘readers’ from his earlier works. In ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’, the question of erotic love is refracted through parallels with the films of Hitchcock and, I subsequently argue, one David Lynch. In this text, the literalistic assumptions of *readers who identify* are subject to an extreme and estranging case study, which sees a spider-keeping man (who is also an ‘accidental’ child-murderer) and his cosmetically-disfigured mother riding the bus together. This sort of empathetic estrangement escalates in ‘The Soul is Not A Smithy’, whose narrator speaks at estranging lengths of his capacities to re-imagine particular ways of ‘reading’ (whilst re-imagining a host of bizarre and erotically-overdetermined memories in the process). Finally, in the titular short story ‘Oblivion’, we discover nothing less than an abstract Freudian psychodrama. In the maximally-estranging tale of Randall and his wife Hope, and their somnambulistic (indeed nightmarish) marital troubles, we arguably discover Wallace’s most successful re-abstractions of anxious, obsessive, fetishistic, Oedipally-arrested, borderline forms of authorship, leading me to read the text as a kind of Lynchian sitcom. This reading marks the culmination of my close readings of Wallace’s fictions, as it appears to represent the point at which *acting-out*, performance, definitively supersedes the idea of the text as
a literalistic, imaginative or abstract “act of communication” between text and reader. Through these readings, we can effectively respond to Boswell’s claim that *Oblivion* represents “dense description without redemption” (168) – through their own sustained negotiations of the transference-neurosis, and their challenge to the sorts of “redemption” that readers may expect from metafiction (including Wallace’s own), texts such as *Oblivion* do in fact perform their ‘reader’ to the fullest possible extent.

The whole point of this performance, in *Oblivion* at least, is to alert the reader to the Expressionistic risks involved in becoming a ‘reader’ of Wallace’s fiction – regardless of which reading-position one may choose to assume. In the transferential, neurotic and borderline-oneiric games which follow, we are thus poised to discover an alternative way of presenting these risks, which continues to recognise the diverse ‘readers’ at stake in contemporary Wallace scholarship. At the limits and margins of such a model, we will have resolved our estrangement from Wallace’s texts by transforming that estrangement into a motive for a post-Freudian reading of those texts, through which the idea of a Wallace ‘reader’ – though no doubt a repetition – also represents a kind of remembering, an effective working-through of the author’s own psychoanalytically-determined rhetoric about love, performance, reading and, perhaps most importantly, *readers who negate*. 
‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’:

David Lynch, Pastiche and Performance

In ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’, Oblivion appears to return to the kinds of performative pastiche first explored in Girl with Curious Hair, inviting the reader to empathise with a David Lynch-ian narrative of interpersonal woe. Wallace’s narrator outlines the bizarre plight of his mother, awarded a modest product liability settlement, whose “botched” cosmetic surgeries have transformed her face into an “insanely frightened” caricature of a real human face:

No doubt you know the way an individual’s face can look in the split second before it screams. That was now Mother. It turns out that it only takes a miniscule slip of the knife one way or the other in this procedure and you now look like someone in the shower scene of Hitchcock. (2004: 182)

These framing utterances reveal the text’s indebtedness to American film, particularly referring to Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho and “the 1935 classic of the studio system Bride of Frankenstein” as points of reference for the reader.

She asked for my candid reaction and I felt our relation demanded nothing less. Her crow’s feet indeed were things of the past but now her face was a chronic mask of insane terror. Now she looked more like Elsa Lanchester when Elsa Lanchester first lays eyes on her prospective mate in the 1935 classic of the studio system Bride of Frankenstein. (182, original emphasis)

Moreover, the text’s uncanny deployments of italics, here evidenced in the narrator’s “candid reaction” to his mother’s face, is at once claustrophobic and estranging, an effect which informs his increasingly fraught descriptions of said face:
even dark glasses were no longer of much help as there was still the matter of the gaping mouth and mandibular distention and protrudent tendons and so forth. (182)

In a weird discursive synthesis, Wallace evokes the American film industry and Franz Kafka in the disfigured face of the narrator's mother, and in the increasingly hyperbolic narrative ensured thereby. Wallace's italicisations also evoke the short fictional style of William S Burroughs, to the extent that key words and phrases are estranged from the body of the text – in his more elaborate use of the strategy, Wallace appears to play on his affinities for the 'Lynchian' effect. Meanwhile, the text's more formal estrangements create an atmosphere of heightened tension, inviting a kind of claustrophobic suspicion around the actions, motivations and overall reliability of the narrator.

As the narrator goes on to implicate himself in the sudden death of a local child, this suspicion takes on an almost diagnostic fervour. How are we to parse the exculpatory and fantastic elements of the narrator's discourse, and his Lynchian fascination with “the phylum anthropodae” – spiders – as well as with deaths caused by “widow bites” and “neurotoxins”? In full italics, the narrator cites a physician from 1935 as to the excruciating nature of death by spider bite:

*I do not recall having seen more abject pain manifested in any other medical or surgical condition* whereas the painless loxoceles or recluse toxin only causes necrosis and a severe sloughing of the area. Recluses however exhibiting a native aggression which widow species never share unless actively disturbed. Which he did. (185, emphasis original)

This ambivalence towards an unnamed disturber of widow spiders is crucial and overt – a moment ago, we have seen that the narrator is somehow culpable
for the death of a nine-year old boy, “he was only nine which was repeatedly stressed as if his age in any way strengthened any charge of negligence on my part” (p184). It is clear from these utterances that this child has died in “abject pain” from a widow bite, from the narrator’s own widow spider, and the narrator overtly blames the child for disturbing the spider. Meanwhile, the Kafka-esque description of his mother’s “mandibular distention” and “protrudent tendons” reflects a kind guilty ambivalence, as the narrator attempts to care for his (presumably widowed) mother in the wake of both her surgery and his “charge of negligence”. As we shall see, this paranoid, even arachnoid, disposition towards judgement – and the kinds of suspicion presented in and amplified by the text – frame the entirety of Wallace’s narrative, at least when it comes to the literalistic concern with empathy that we might have come to expect from Wallace’s earlier fictions.

Wallace’s hyperbolic presentation of the ‘reader’ in ‘Philosophy’ helps us understand the paranoid stakes of the narrator’s discourse with and to the reader. Unlike the “loxoceles or recluse” spider, whose “native aggression” makes them culpable, the narrator and his “widow” mother are positioned as unlikely victims of circumstance, such that the external world – from plastic surgeons and dead children to unfortunate on-lookers on the bus – become perpetrators of such aggression. Whence the narrator’s maximally passive-aggressive denunciation of the now-dead child, for effectively disturbing his web and paying the price:

To say nothing of him trespassing and having no business up there anyhow. In the deposition. To say nothing of claiming that not
foreseeing a trespasser falling through a portion of a garage roof and wholesale wrecking a complex and expensive tempered-glass container complex and crushing or otherwise disturbing a great many specimens and inevitably, due to the mishap, leading to some partial decontainment and penetration of the surrounding neighborhood amounts to my failing due exercise and caution. (186)

Pointedly, the Lynchian narrator embeds this arachnoid narrative within references to classic American cinema, particularly “primitive special effects” and “the classics of older film terror” (186). The narrator blames his lawyers for lack of due diligence, their inability to “translate this reasoning into effective legal language in legal briefs and arguments in camera” (186). This ambivalence certifies the narrator’s paranoid disposition:

But the reality is counsel proves to be abundant if you are the aggressor but not if you are merely prey, they’re parasites, daytime TV is infested with these commercials urging the viewer to wait patiently for the opportunity to attack, handled on a percentage basis, no fee of any kind of you are the aggressor! (186)

This oblique reference to the “viewer” of daytime TV, and the spider-like patience demanded of that viewer, again recapitulates the paranoid and arachnoid stakes of Wallace’s narrative. The author’s open letter to Lynch, Kafka and Hitchcock is thus struck through by this “infestation” of the “audience” – despite the culpability of our spider-keeping narrator, we are challenged to accept his claims to be “merely prey”, and to turn our aggression towards the parasitic percentage bases of the narrator’s “counsel”. Yet the web-like interlacing of film criticism, legal/moral argumentation and ambivalent self-presentation in the text both invites and disrupts our investment as empathetic readers – to what extent can we possibly judge the narrator’s discourse as true, whole or deserving of sympathies?
Yet this narrative is itself a site of arachnoid Lynchian ambivalence. In the pastiche present of ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’, our paranoid narrator busies himself by hiding his mother’s face from the “gasps” of fellow bus travellers, paying close attention to the sight-lines and vectors of the bus itself. Like a film director, the narrator actively frames the visibility of his mother’s twisted visage, optimally seating her behind the driver’s seat so that:

The sole exposure to liability of Mother’s placement here is that any individual in the opposing seat hence will have the vantage of gazing frontally at us throughout the ride. And on select occasions such a specimen will, if predisposed by environment conditioning or instinctive temperament, appear to assume that the stimulus causing her expression is me. (188)

In a pseudo-corporate way, the narrator justifies this placement against its “sole exposure to liability” – as this “liability” is cashed out further, the narrator identifies their fear of the potential on-looker’s judgment, predicated on the idea that the narrator is to blame for his mother’s expression. This covert fear is the locus of the narrator’s arachnoid obsession – as the latter reveals towards the text’s end, his mother’s face was initially scarred by “backward”-facing nozzle on a “common household spray”, namely pesticide, containing “a great deal of trans-d allethin” (188-189). The narrator blames a worker at the manufacturing plant for the mishap: “I submit a clear-cut case of failing to exercise due care” (188). However, the narrator declines to identify the company named in his mother’s liability suit – her case effectively censures the narrator, invoking a silence “which I am resolved to honor on her behalf, the law is the law” (189).
The unstated implication, however, is that the narrator's spider-keeping habits are to blame for the pesticide being kept in the house, which has triggered the chain of events leading to his mother's progressive disfigurement. Nevertheless, our narrator remains compelled to keep an actual briefcase full of spiders with him on the bus – he notes that his mother's expression now would not change, “Even if I opened up the entire case right here on my lap and tipped it out into the central aisle allowing rapid spread out and penetration of the contained environs” (189). In the closing sentence of the text, Wallace loosely resolves the fractious nature of this relationship between narrator son and mother, presenting the full and strange physicality of the narrator himself: “It is for such a case that I am her sematic accessory or escort, with my imposing size and goggles one can tell beneath the gaping rictus she believe I can protect her which is good” (189, emphasis mine). But for which case – his mother’s liability suit against the cosmetic surgeons, or the unopened case of spiders in his lap? The text juxtaposes an image of a spider leg, poking out from the briefcase, with the “imposing” and phallic image of the narrator – a leg moving “Unseen against the more inorganic black of the briefcase’s side” (189). This ambivalent juxtaposition of the imposing and the inorganic fuels our own ambivalence towards the final scenes of the text. We are not even sure that the relationship between the son and his mother is sound, given the former’s harsh assessments of the latter’s initial product liability case in relation to his own. The narrator is moreover bound to “carry a briefcase with me at all times since my own case” – a case comprising both the death of a child and the destruction of his spider-keeping
equipment – deepening the scope of the narrator’s compulsions, and forestalling our ultimate identification with his discourse. As one final twist in the web, we are drawn to the narrator’s penultimate revelations that two red widow spiders “have not been reacquired” following the incident. “Once conditioned to know what to look for,” he reassures, “They are often observable everywhere hiding in plain sight. Patience being another hallmark” (187).

The narrator’s arachnoid fantasies thus appear to inform and infest the text, with a hyperbolic and paranoid confession, hiding within plain sight of an empathetic author-reader relationship. By openly appealing to the reader’s capacity to empathise with such fantasies, Wallace’s narrative re-imagine and re-abstract the stakes of his earlier literary pastiches, while suspending any final judgments on the “viewer” themselves. From its Hitchcock-ian overtures and obsessive lines of sight, ‘Philosophy’ presents a more estranging generic pastiche of an American avant-garde film, with decidedly Lynchian overtones when it comes to theme, imagery and plot. With Lynch as a vehicle, Wallace’s text installs a series of strange tensions between the imposing and the inorganic, the empathetic and the ambivalent, deepening our complex entanglement with the narrator and his macabre and mundane presentation of events. But by situating this pastiche within a decidedly obsessive, indeed arachnoid narrative, these experiments with empathetic performance effectively belie and forestall such a ‘reader’s capacities to empathise with and through the text.
Faced with a narrator who is a caricature of a cryptic Lynchian villain, whose mother is transformed into a Kafka-esque insect, we can remark that Wallace in ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’ effects a truly borderlinish presentation of literary empathy as such. What is at stake in the narrator’s “case” to the reader, and their performance of that case through and throughout the text? Are we meant to recognise ourselves in this twisted delusional web, to the extent that we remain at once “viewers” and “aggressors”? Or do Wallace’s games with performance and catharsis invite a new kind of reading, which translates the text’s ambivalent constructions of its audience into a more relativised critical space? In tracing the reader who negates, we are largely pursuing the latter question, exploring the extent to which Wallace’s ambivalence towards “audience” gets translated into rhetoric, particularly in relation to the strategies pursued in his earlier works. By turning to another Oblivion story, ‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’, we can explore the extent to which this suspicion is itself re-imagined by Wallace’s fiction.

‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’: A Game of Possession

As with Wallace’s Lynchian pastiche in ‘Philosophy’, ‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’ at first reads like a treatise on the Lynchian ideas of inspiration (taken in Wallace’s sense of ‘possession or exultation’) and of suspicious diagnosis. However, Wallace situates these themes within a bizarre coming of age story, built on conflicted recollections of childhood trauma and adulthood angst, as our protagonist/narrator attempts to relate:
The story of how Frank Caldwell, Chris DeMatteis, Mandy Blemm, and I became, in the city newspaper’s words, the 4 Unwitting Hostages, and of how our strange and special alliance and the trauma surrounding its origin bore on our subsequent lives and careers as adults later on (67, original emphasis).

In the inciting trauma of the story, the narrator witnesses the psychotic breakdown of his substitute teacher, Mr Richard Allen Johnson, who for unknown reasons begins writing “KILL THEM KILL THEM ALL over and over again on the chalkboard” during a 4th grade Civics class (91). The main focus of the story, however, is the delayed recognition of and reaction to these events by the narrator and his “Unwitting” student cohort. The cited paragraph continues:

The repeated thrust of the Dispatch articles was that it was we four, all classified as slow or problem pupils, who had not had the presence of mind to flee the civics classroom, thereby creating the hostage circumstance that justified the taking of life (67, original emphasis).

As ‘Smithy’ unfolds into myriad and overlapping lines of narrative enquiry – as to the origins of Johnson’s psychotic ‘possession’, the narrator’s “Unwitting” implication in his death, and the impact of this trauma on the present-day narrator and his family – Wallace places the reader in a position of critical and moral judgment, inviting the latter to critically assess the protagonist’s plight. However, the self-conscious re-presentation of such judgments within ‘Smithy’, and the text’s ambivalent presentation of reading and attention as such, invite the reader into a kind of diagnostic game with the text. It is never entirely clear what we are diagnosing in ‘Smithy’, except for that text’s repetition of response, and its marked attempts to cultivate its own response to that response. With Wallace’s predilection for self-conscious digression and
paratactic juxtaposition, the text reads like a perverse transference-neurosis, primarily conveyed through second-order anticipations and re-imagining of readers who critique.

From spectacular and fragmented displays of narration and recollection, to the embedding of crucial narrative details at the periphery of the reader’s awareness, Wallace reprises the diagnostic style first developed in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, with a more overt focus the game-like nature of the literary transference. Crucially, this narrative is also presented by the text as a kind of entry into language, as the narrator describes his own peculiar brand of inattention thus:

At the time of the inciting trauma, I was still nine years old; my tenth birthday would be April 8\textsuperscript{th}. Ages seven to nearly ten were also the troubling and upsetting period where I could not, in any strictly accepted sense, read. [...] Much to everyone’s relief, this reading problem reversed itself, almost as mysteriously as it had first appeared, somewhere around my tenth birthday (73). The narrator’s inability to read – or specifically to “internalize or communicate in any very satisfactory way what the words and their various combinations were meant to mean” (72) – is reversed suddenly and “mysteriously” around the young protagonist’s tenth birthday in April. The text makes it clear (albeit indirectly) that the text’s inciting trauma has occurred in March that year:

It was during the cold and seemingly endless period in March when our regular Civics teacher was absent that we had our Constitution unit and perused the American Constitution and its various drafts and amendments under the supervision of Mr. Richard A. Johnson, a long-term sub (68). The possession and death of his substitute teacher, and the narrator’s sudden capacities to read, internalise and communicate, are part of the same narrative
game – ‘Smithy’ makes it clear that the protagonist’s entry into language, the mysterious reversal of his reading problem, are intimately bound up with the events of the Civics classroom. By returning to and reconstructing this scenario, and its transferential impacts on the ‘present-day’ situation of our narrator, Wallace thus presents a game-like ‘origin story’ (a birthday story) for the literary transference itself. This game even evokes a (pseudo-)Lacanian dimension, stressing the protagonist’s movement into the Symbolic register of reading, internalisation and communication; however, this game must negotiate with the Imaginary and overdetermined figure of “Mr Johnson”, and the traumatic recollections performed within and by the text (See Chapter 2).

In recollecting the events of the Civics classroom, ‘Smithy’ repeats and inscribes the transferential stakes of the narrator's traumatic experience. The transferential theme of possession – embodied by Mr Johnson, “frozen and transported” at the chalkboard (p112) – is explored by Thomas Tracey in the essay ‘Representations of Trauma in David Foster Wallace’s Oblivion’ (2010). In particular, the narrator’s oblique reference to classic horror film The Exorcist, and to its “significance for the story” of the “4 Unwitting Hostages” (Wallace, p97, emphasis original), is read as an appositely ironic cultural reference, since it humorously invites us to wonder whether the substitute teacher may be in some ways demonically possessed – when in fact it is more likely to be a psychotic episode, all the more terrifying because conventionally truer to life. More generally, though, the narrator’s celebration of imagination over scholastic drudgery or administrative tedium asks us to consider what it might mean to be ordinarily ‘possessed’ of anything: that is, why one thing rather than another should ‘possess’ our individual attention. (Tracey 2010: 179)
Following from this, I would say that ‘Smithy’ repeats and re-imagines myriad narratives of attention and peripheral awareness to an estranging degree, from the narrator’s present-day fixations on the face of Mr Johnson to the peripheral narratives constructed around the events of the Civics classroom. Capitalising on the ironic and psychic imagination of the narrator, these peripheral narratives confound and complicate the text’s recollections of trauma with layered discourses of spectacle, fixation and possession. ‘Smithy’ provides a metafictional smorgasbord of view- and vantage-points in relation to the traumatic spectacle – those of the invested present-day narrator, his inattentive childhood counterpart, the city newspaper, the police, the school and the children, as well as their respective families.

This interplay of narrative perspective, through the narrator’s own fraught manner of recollection, helps drive the traumatic impact of ‘Smithy’ as a text. As Tracey notes more broadly, “the active (if subconscious) censoring of seemingly peripheral though emotionally seminal aspects of their lives comes to haunt most of the principal actors [in Oblivion]” (2012: 180). And yet, the net effect of these viewpoints is to over-determine the narrator’s own response to his traumatic situation – in many ways possessed by the events of his childhood, and in turn fixated on the mechanism of ‘possession’ as such, the narrator of ‘Smithy’ nevertheless flees into “whole, linear, discretely organized narrative fantasies, many of which unfolded in considerable detail” (71).
So if the text is indeed about possession – by trauma, by transference, by narrative – then we must also consider the fantastic and fantasmatic dimensions of the text itself, and the extent to which it performs this possession as a kind of literary game. This metafictional strategy is best embodied in the peripheral narratives imagined within ‘Smithy’ – as Tracey puts it, the narrator of ‘Smithy’ is “quite absorbed in his imaginations of various narrative tableaux, in layout similar to cartoon strips, in the squares of the classroom’s meshed windows” (2012: 177). These cartoonish and eventually nightmarish narratives – concerning the fates of a blind girl named Ruth Simmons, her family and several anthropomorphic dogs – are ironically juxtaposed with the scene of the Civics classroom, including the image of two actual dogs copulating outside the window (77). In this particular juxtaposition, the theme of possession is made graphic and borderline perverse – the narrator describes the view beyond the window thus:

The conjoined dogs were too distant to ascertain whether they had collars or tags, yet close enough that I could make out the expression on the face of the dominant dog above. It was blank and at the same time fervid – the same type of expression as on a human being’s face when he is doing something that he feels compulsively driven to do and yet does not understand just why he wants to do it […] The unhappy but stoic expression on the face of the brindle-colored dog beneath was harder to characterize. Perhaps it was less distinct, or obscured by the window’s protective mesh (Wallace 2004: 74).

As to the latter dog, the narrator eventually settles on “long suffering” as a description (p74, original emphasis). In the narrative fantasy that follows from this image, the text re-imagines the story of Cuffie the dog, who is led astray by two larger, feral dogs. Cuffie is left at the mercy of the blank and fervid
older dog; as this embedded narrative concludes, Wallace describes “the actual field through the classroom window”, and the two dogs “miming the position and expressions of mating”, the possessed dog “exhorting the defenseless, long suffering whelp to sit still and endure it or else something really terrible would happen” (99).

In this fantasy narrative, then, the theme of possession comes to take on a vivid and subterranean significance. Consider further the narrator’s otherwise anodyne reference to his own father’s “lifeless and dead” expression and routine upon coming home from work, and its gripping impression upon the young protagonist: “There was something about this routine that cast shadows deep down in parts of me I couldn’t access on my own” (105). This routine involves the divestment of hats and briefcases, and the consumption of alcohol – the narrator describes in detail:

His arrival was always between 5:42 and 5:45, and it was usually I who was the first to see him come through the front door. What occurred was almost choreographic in its routine. He came in already turning to press the door closed behind him. He removed his hat and topcoat and hung the coat in the foyer closet; he clawed his necktie loose with two fingers, took the green rubber band off the Dispatch, entered the living room, greeted my brother, and sat down with the newspaper to wait for my mother to bring him a highball (103, emphasis mine).

In the young protagonist’s narrative fantasy, the image of the “highball” is repeated, albeit obliquely, in relation to one of the anthropomorphic feral dogs. Operating at the extreme periphery of ‘Smithy’s narrative, this repetition triggers a lengthy divestment of violent, densely-coded images, and evokes a much darker take on the ‘homecoming routine’ of that dog’s owner:
I did not, though, initially recall the window’s narrative including any explanation of what fate befell the smaller, subordinate feral dog, whose name was Scraps, with the sores, and had run away from home because of the way its owner had mistreated it when the tedium and despair of his lower-level administrative job made him come home empty-eyed and angry and drink several highballs without any ice or even a lime, and later always found some excuse to be cruel to Scraps (90).

The passage continues at length, citing the violence inflicted on the innocent Scraps by his white-collar, highball-consuming owner, to the point where even the narrator’s maximalist imagination suddenly gives way – “the backstory cut off abruptly,” he reports, “after the second time the man kicked Scraps in the stomach so hard that Scraps couldn’t stop coughing” (90). This candid, and seemingly tangential account of abuse is directly linked to the narrator’s own father, re-imagined as a violent and abusive alcoholic.

Meanwhile, this narrative makes for a particularly dark juxtaposition with the fate of Cuffie the dog, as well as the ultimate possession and death of Mr Johnson – in each narrative, the text advances an abject image of possession and dominance, the remnants or ‘scraps’ of a largely forgotten trauma within the text.

These ambivalent accounts, their complex positioning within the text’s multiple narrative layers, and their curious relationship with the figure of the narrator’s own highball-drinking father, inform a range of mis-recollections, substitutions and reversals within the text. As to the actual fate of Scraps – devoured by giant insects inside a sewage pipe – Wallace paints a grisly tableau, replete with Kafka-esque imagery and a cinematic, indeed Lynchian, sense of the grotesque:
The tableaux, complete with the unfortunate piebald dog’s mouth open in agony, a rat or mutated roach abdomen protruding from his eyesocket as the predator’s anterior half consumed his eye and inner brain, was so traumatic that this narrative line was immediately stopped and replaced with a neutral view of the pipe’s exterior (94).

From the curiously negative manner of the narrator – “I did not though, initially, recall” – to the numerous vague references to his own older brother, (who has suffered an array of mental problems in early adolescence) Wallace’s narrative dances obsessively around the implications revealed in the narrator’s fantasies. Meanwhile the strangely self-censorious reporting of the tableaux itself, “immediately stopped and replaced” in the narrator’s account, indicates a broader focus beyond trauma, towards a kind of literalised narrative repression. Yet by excluding or eliding this narrative of familial abuse, the text generates an array of suspicious and indeed unconscious associations within the text, bringing together such narrative strands as the protagonist’s extensive eulogising of his father; his fixations on “the Father’s transfigured face” in *The Exorcist* and its bearings on his early courtship (94-95); an early narrative of a dog and piano stand; and finally, the “nightmares about the reality of adult life” recollected alongside these narratives.

All of these narratives imply possession, at least in the sense of ownership (of memory, of meaning, of one’s own white-collar fate). And yet each is subordinated to the estrangingly passive and static narrative of Mr Richard Allen Johnson, described thus: “his head was now cocked curiously over to the side, not unlike a dog’s when it hears a certain type of high sound” (86, emphasis mine). Wallace’s command of narrative ‘dog-whistling’, that is,
the embedding of crucial narrative detail inside actual textual aporia, here reaches its peak – the intrusive narrative of Mr Johnson interrupts the recollection of vital narrative details, leading to the creation of disparate, ambivalent narrative substitutions. These substitutions again have a Lynchian tenor – the literal penetration of Scraps’ “eye and inner brain” by a giant cockroach, the “predator’s anterior half”, presents the reader with a properly Expressionistic vision of the literary dialogue as such (see Chapter 5).

‘Smithy’, then, presents the reader with a game of transferential-neurotic substitution, with each strand of the narrator’s recollections borrowing and embedding materials from the other. The text’s decisive ironic gestures towards repression (that is, the self-conscious abandonment of certain plots or images by the narrator), reveals crucial details about the narrator’s fantasies, including the violent and abusive scenarios unearthed thereby. These scenarios are made palpable and vivid within the “narrative tableaux” reproduced within the text, through the interplay of signifiers such as “highball”, “ballpark”, “dog”, “Blind” and “possessed” – at the extreme periphery of the text, Wallace weaves a strange kind of verbal fantasy, which both informs and undermines the text’s tabloid and celluloid takes on the horrific, the marginal, the ambivalent. All of this bears upon the text’s negotiations with its own central thesis, cashed out across multiple interposed narrative streams. This ambivalent and ambiguated claim upon the reader is made visible in another of the text’s reality-show confessions of significance:

Only much later would I understand that the incident at the chalkboard in Civics was likely to be the most dramatic and
exciting event I would ever be involved in in my life. As with the case of my father, I think that I am ultimately grateful not to have been aware of this at the time. (69)

Finally, we should once again take note that this ambivalent tale – both a hyperbolic recollection of childhood trauma and a coded confession of familial abuse – represents a literal learning to read for the protagonist, with the reversal of his “reading problem” a key side-effect of the traumatic events in ‘Smithy’. And yet, the protagonist’s entry into effective and meaningful communication remains predicated on their own fragmented recollection of these events. In fact, the conflicted presentation of key materials in ‘Smithy’ invites our suspicious consideration that the narrator has not overcome his childhood demons, and that the overdetermined narrative of the Civics Classroom is but a prelude to a more cathartic and authentic engagement with the materials presented.

Meanwhile, the literal “substitute” Mr Richard Allen Johnson continues to write “KILL THEM KILL THEM ALL” across the Civics chalkboard, effacing Amendments XIII and X of the U.S. constitution. Wallace’s effusive and overdetermined ‘main narrative’ presents a strikingly literal yet monstrous portrait of literary production, and the possessive compulsions effected thereby – Wallace writes:

(as my own eyes would register just moments later) in capital letters that got bigger and bigger with every letter, and the handwriting less and less like the sub’s customary fluid script and more and more frightening and ultimately not even human looking, not seeming to realize what he was doing or stopping to give any kind of explanation but only cocking his already oddly cocked head and further over to the side, like somebody struggling might and main against some terrible type of evil or alien force
that was ahold of him at the chalkboard and *compelling him to write things against his will* (91, emphasis mine)

In literalising the transferential stakes of the (critical) literary dialogue, through the scenario of the writer and text “struggling might and main against some terrible type of evil or alien force”, Wallace grants the reader a crucial and honest insight into their own activities as readers of ‘Smithy’. By inviting our suspicious re-viewing, the text arguably makes a language game out of “frightening and ultimately not even human looking script”, without explanation but for the “evil or alien force” possessing the writer “against his will”. The text’s rampant dog-whistling of trauma, and its command of indirect recollection and narrative aporia, results in a narrative discourse which is ambiguous, ambivalent and perversely confessional, and marked by self-referential demands that the reader look ‘beyond’ the stated confines of the text.

While this approach does reflect the traumatic imperatives explored by Tracey (2010), it also invites a more transferential consideration of the themes of reading, narration and possession within the text, as our readings above have demonstrated. We may say that the text itself is possessed by ambivalence – towards the suspicious reader, and towards the literary dialogue as such. To wit, the text’s overarching appeal to the tabloid media – particularly the city *Dispatch* newspaper – makes a frightening and scandalous game of the text’s multiple central traumas:

Mr Johnson’s face’s character and expression were indescribable. I will never forget it. This was the part I fully saw of the incident the *Dispatch* first called *Deranged Substitute’s Classroom Terror – Mentally Unbalanced Instructor Stricken at Blackboard*,
Appears ‘Possessed’, Threatens Mass Murder, Several Pupils Hospitalized, Unit 4 Board Calls Emergency Session, Bainbridge Under Gun (at that time, Dr. Bainbridge was Superintendent of Schools for Unit 4) (100)

The theme of possession, and the indescribable (though often described) face of Mr Johnson, are both explicitly gifted to us by the Dispatch’s tale of the “Deranged Substitute”, with its over-the-top implications of mass murder, violence, emergency and “Classroom Terror”. The interposition of these reports effectively overdetermines the narrative at stake in ‘Smithy’, clouding the narrator’s recollections with sensationalistic jargon and an overriding sense of guilt – recall that the narrator’s implication in the death of Mr Johnson is the “repeated thrust” of Dispatch reporting on the “Unwitting 4” (p67). This guilt haunts virtually every level of the narrator’s recollections, yet it emerges from outside of the trauma itself. Possessed by these mediated vision of his own trauma, our protagonist is caught in a transferential game of recollection and substitution with this outside, “alien” force. Between Wallace’s transferential vision of literary production (that of a writer possessed by an unknown and unconscious force) and his game-like presentation of the traumatic dialogue as such, a game of possession, ‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’ elaborates upon the strategies pursued in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, with a renewed focus on the transferential-neurotic mechanics of the literary exchange.

‘Oblivion’: Love and the Lynchian Sitcom

Oblivion’s self-referential take on the theme of transference – as seen in ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’s Lynchian repetitions of empathy,
and ‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’s games with critical and traumatic re-
re-imagination – places considerable and estranging emphasis on the roles of
‘readers’ in the literary dialogue. In both texts, Wallace posed open questions
around the ontological status of his narrators, the reliability and authenticity
of their discourse, and the almost-impossible nature of the events represented
thereby. These questions are often obscured by Wallace’s pretensions towards
the bizarre, the overt – from the literal Spider-man to the meta-phallic figure
of Mr Richard Allen Johnson, Wallace’s texts present the reader with a
cinematic array of villains and neuroses, each conveying their own Lynchian
sense of un- or dis-ease. The titular short story ‘Oblivion’ develops these
questions even further, repeating, re-imaging and re-abstracting the role of
the idea of an author-reader relationship to the point of metafictional
exhaustion, at least from the vantage-point of the present study. Like ‘Octet’,
‘Oblivion’ conceals its readers through overdetermination, but having
escalated this overdetermined sense of the ‘reader’ as far as it might honestly
go, Wallace arrives once more at perverse Lynchian strangeness.

This textual performance hinges on an ambivalent conflict between a
husband and a wife, and the text’s reprisals and reversals of the TV situation
comedy (sitcom) form. Through bold and literal distortions of this form,
Wallace creates an atmosphere of impossible doubt and uncertainty around
the conflict between effusive narrator “Randall” and his beleaguered wife
“Hope”. The dream-like presentation of this conflict, replete with literal
hallucinations and Lynchian subtexts, invites the reader to inspect and
suspect everything, including the reliability of the text and its narrator. This
dream-like game is ultimately punctured by ‘Oblivion’s brazen reversals of form in its closing pages – the text effectively ‘wakes up’ onto an indistinct, minimalist dialogue, in which one person has woken up from a terrible dream (and into what appears to be an unhappily literalised reality; trigger warnings should accompany the reading that follows).

This sudden reversal, and its decidedly estranging impact upon the reader, helps to highlight the transferential stakes of Wallace’s work more broadly, as the actual reader is left to piece together the disparate possibilities of the text, without full knowledge of the interlocutors involved. Wallace’s hyperbolic parody of the American sitcom thus explodes the possibilities of the format, responding to the possibilities offered by Lynch and others. In its oneiric game with the reader, though, ‘Oblivion’ also creates a characteristically Wallace-ian space, positing an abstract waking nightmare of textual possibilities.

To recount, ‘Oblivion’ centers on a peculiar and specific marital conflict, as nominally recounted by husband Randall Napier. Randy has not slept in several months, following a protracted conflict with his wife Hope – she is being kept awake at night by his supposed snoring, while he maintains that he cannot fall asleep in the first place, as he is routinely roused to consciousness by his wife’s sudden, shocked complaints. This ambivalent scenario is repeated and returned to throughout the text:

After some further time had passed, however, and all attempts to discuss the conflict rationally or induce Hope to consider even the mere possibility that it was she, not myself, who was in reality asleep when the alleged ‘snoring’ problem manifested itself led
only to a further entrenchment or ‘hardening’ in her own position – the essence of her position being that I myself was being irrationally ‘stubborn’ and ‘untrusting’ of what she could plainly hear with her own two ears – (203)

If David Foster Wallace were to have written a situation comedy, this would be it – the story of an aging couple, whose daughter having left for college, become trapped in an intractable battle of wits, replete with parodic ‘horror’ effects:

I essentially ceased, then, to do or say anything in the way of ‘in situ’ response or objection when she would suddenly sit violently up in the bed across the room (her face often inhuman and spectral in the bedroom’s faint light because of the white emollient cream she wore to bed during the cold, dry months of the year, and distorted unpleasantly by vexation and choler) to accuse me of ‘snoring horribly’ and demanding that I roll over at once or be exiled once again to Audrey’s former bed (203, emphasis mine)

‘Oblivion’ carves out a claustrophobic and claustral atmosphere of dread around the plight of Hope and Randall, culminating in the couple’s commitment to sleep therapy and medical intervention. This dread is built on iterative conflict, and premised on the impossible bedtime ritual of the couple in question – by posing this empathetic and interpersonal paradox at the heart of the text, Wallace leverages the uncanny sitcom-dimensions of marital conflict to heightened metafictional effect.

As Wallace deepens and distorts the central conflict of the text, ‘Oblivion’ expands its ontological treatise on sleep, waking and dreaming, most vividly captured in the dream-like presentation of its narrative and narrator. Having not slept for months, Randall experiences vivid hallucinations throughout the text, unearthing an array of shifting and oblique narrative signifiers. Recalling ‘Smithy’, one of these hallucinations is
described as an “associative tableau”, “the whole brief tableau an interior ‘vision’ or shot so rapid and incongruous it can only be truly, as it were, ‘seen’ in retrospect” (197). These insistent visions incorporate the various main characters around Randall and Hope, including Hope’s step-father (variously named as “Father”, “Greatfather”, “Edmund”, and “Dr Sipe”) and Randall’s step-daughter Audrey, who has recently left the Napier home for college:

Then an extremely brief and strobe-like associative tableau in which Hope’s stepfather and herself, at some past or distantly prior point in time, are seated together, in an unfamiliar coupe or sports car which is speeding along a rural or markedly under-maintained inland State route [...] and of a younger and noticeably more lissome and voluptuous Hope applying facial products in the small, inset mirror of the sun shade or visor as ‘Father’, posture erect and distinguished and gazing stolidly ahead at the road, insists that it isn’t so much dislike or ‘disapproval’ of the fellow per se [...] (197)

Elaborating on this tableau, Randall’s testimony betrays deep-seated ambivalence towards Dr Edmund Sipe, which is also on vivid display in ‘Oblivion’s opening scenes, where our narrator attempts to divest himself to the Dr at a local golf course. Randall’s hallucinations are on vivid display as well, as the narrator reports that the “19th Hole’s respective colors seemed suddenly to brighten uncontrollably and become over-saturant” (191), described variously as a “pulse or throb” in the visual field, a paradoxical recession from and zeroing-in on “individual objects” (191). This effect is repeated throughout the text itself, for example through Randall’s obsequious ‘scare-quoting’ of names and phrases and his hyper-specific accounts of various interpersonal and transferential conflicts.
As in ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Smithy’, Wallace embeds crucial narrative details at the periphery of the text, including the narrator’s vivid desire for his step-daughter “Audrey”, whilst withholding any resolution to these narrative threads or their implications. In these accounts, the figure of stepdaughter Audrey plays a complex and uneasy role – her “leaving the nest” (p203) for college is nominated as a potential cause of Randall and Hope’s ongoing conflict. Yet ‘Oblivion’s narrative exposes a more troubling array of subtexts at stake, particularly in terms of the relationship between narrator Randall and his stepdaughter. Inside the sleep technician’s studio, Randall avers to the reader:

My heart had, as it were, sunk several inches; I missed our Audrey terribly; I wanted now to go alone to help her pack and withdraw and be borne back home [notwithstanding my foot’s by now being almost numb or ‘asleep’, I could not and would not uncross my legs] [...] to storm the out-of-State dormitory or ‘castle’ or ‘enceinte’ or machicolated banishment’s donjon’s fortification and to pound, smite or ring its massive, oaken front door’s bell [...] (231)

As the hallucinatory, confessional interlude plays out, Randall envisions himself rescuing his stepdaughter from college, and his plans to "loudly say, avow or cry aloud what may and must never even be remotely thought or ‘dreamt of’ [unlike, it went without saying, ‘Father’]. (231). This ambivalent unannounceable, once more reprising the kinds of dark contexts witnessed in ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Smithy’, with more than a little Twin Peaks thrown into the mix. In a nod to Lynch’s Fire Walk with Me, Wallace embeds an almost pornographic, Laura Palmer-esque character, aptly named ‘Audrey’, at the periphery of the text, playing on his narrator’s overt desire to possess and
“Withdraw” his own stepdaughter (recalling the vivid performances of Ray Wise as Frank Silva as ‘BOB’). This desire, exposed inside Wallace’s hyper-ironic sitcom framework, again betrays the key influence of David Lynch on Wallace’s storytelling, touching everything from themes and their presentation to the anodyne—but-not naming of characters – “Randy”, “Hope”, “Audrey”, “Dr Edmund Sipe” and so forth. Taken to its extreme, this influence becomes an engine for ironic and parodic extensions of the Lynchian aesthetic – in another of many telling hallucination, Randall reports to a colleague that “our Audrey’s chest on Parent’s Weekend at Bryn Mawr’s two breasts will go up and down in her sweater like pistons and her head is surrounded by a halo or, as it were, ‘nimbus’ of animated Disney characters” (p212).

Buoyed by the narrator’s hypnagogically Lynchian accounts, ‘Oblivion’ implicates the reader in a narrative space which is at once incestuous and aporetic. Randall’s uneasy apprehension of his own desires comes towards the end of his ‘sleep therapy’:

At this juncture, the Somnologist – [...] averred (meaning the sleep specialist now averred) that, yes, technically speaking, my wife’s accusations as to ‘snoring’, while based on (in his terms) ‘interior, dreamed experience’ as opposed to ‘exterior sensory output’, nonetheless were, in a Medical or scientific sense, correct (232, 233)

This jargonistic non-answer to the text’s central narrative question – who is asleep and who isn’t? – is quickly expanded into farce, as the technicians proceed to play video tapes from the sleep therapy sessions themselves, in order to “empirically verify the Somnologist’s diagnosis of Hope’s accusations ultimately unreal, oneiric or ‘Paradoxical’ content” (234). At this point the text
begins to unravel. Randall’s narrative is punctuated by parenthetic, fragmented voices – exclaiming things like “only hurt a tiny”, “Please!”, “dreaming” and “or hurt you if” (pp. 234-236) – while the scene inside the sleep therapy office become distorted and hallucinatory.

The net result of this strategy is an uncanny synthesis of the mundane and the downright bizarre, particularly in the text’s final decompressive moments, as our narrator (who may in fact be Randall’s wife Hope) appears to ‘wake’ from their own narrative, and into a highly-ambiguated situation indeed. Randall and Hope watch “in rigid fascination” (236) as a sleeping Randy mouths “involuntary” words and noises on the video. As he reports:

Signifying or ‘meaning’, in other words, that the distinctive, alternating shapes of my image’s mouth’s slack lips [...] signified undeniably that sounds and noises of which I had no voluntary awareness were in fact escaping my mouth and throat (236)

This revelation triggers an almost literal meltdown of the protagonist’s situation – the unearthly whispers of our sleeping narrator, their “involuntary” and involuted presentation within the text, inform the text’s sudden turn towards the nightmarish, borrowing once more from the author’s Expressionistic toolkit. As with the various whispers and moans canvassed above, ‘Oblivion’s spectacular stylistic meltdown is delivered parenthetically.

as the video’s camera’s focus tightened or closed further on my wholly unfamiliar, inhuman, unconscious visage, I either way saw, hallucinated, ‘imagined’ (Hope at this juncture still rigidly or foetally ‘frozen’, open mouthed and saucer eyed, as both the forbidding technician and Latin executive began to peel their respective faces off in a ‘top down’ fashion or manner, beginning at each temple and pulling downwards with sharp, emphatic, peeling or ‘tugging’ motions, the Cuban’s foreign wristwatch and hands a mass of amber lesions) (236-237)
From the ‘open mouthed and saucer-eyed’ sitcom wife to the image of the “Cuban’s foreign wristwatch”, Wallace’s tableau reprises his estranging performances of David Lynch, William Burroughs and the like throughout his work, and mirrors the chaotic and nightmarish atmosphere created throughout ‘Oblivion’. As the text itself continues to confess to ambiguous crimes, the words on the lips of our narrator are presented as a kind of unreal, oneiric or paradoxical content, resulting in the text's literal performance of a rude awakening.

The text's final image is that of Randall’s own recorded face, beginning “to distend in a ‘grinningly’ familiar and sensual or even predatory facial ex” (p237) – pression, the text appears to say... except we have literally ‘woken’ onto a peculiar narrative horizon. The text’s final, withheld revelation of Randall’s ex-pression – the look on his face, the words on his lips – is interrupted by a minimalist series of spoken lines, seemingly part of a conversation yet ambiguously juxtaposed with one another. This concluding section is worth quoting in its entirety, as it represents one of Wallace’s crowning bait-and-switch reversals of generic expectation:

“up. Wake up for the love of.”
“God. My god I was having.”
“Wake up.”
“Having the worst dream.”
“I should certainly say that you were.”
“It was awful. It just went on and on.”
“I shook you and shook you and.”
“Time is it.”
“It’s nearly – almost 2:04. I was afraid I might hurt you if I prodded or shook any harder. I couldn’t seem to rouse you.”

“Is that thunder? Did it rain?”

“I was beginning to really worry. Hope, this cannot go on. When are we going to make that appointment?”

“Wait – am I even married?”

“Please don’t start all this again.”

“And who’s this Audrey?”

“Just go on back to sleep now.”

“And what’s that – Daddy?”

“Just lie back down.”

“What’s wrong with your mouth?”

“You are my wife.”

“None of this is real.”

“It’s all all right.” (237)

This insane reversal of scope on the part of the text – from the hyperbolic equivocation of ‘Randy’ to an ambiguated almost-dialogue between two indistinct interlocutors – echoes the parenthetic exclamations and oneiric explosions preceding it, creating an atmosphere of maximal ontological ambiguity within the text.

From its obsessions with time, to its clipped and uncertain delivery, this script is a thoroughly Lynchian invention, eerily prefiguring or borrowing from the narrative experiments in films such as *Inland Empire* (vis the leaden, ambiguated discourse of the ‘rabbit room’) and *Mulholland Drive* (in the literalistic ‘waking’ from one text to another). At the same time, Wallace’s self-reflexive reversal has all the hallmarks of a classic network sitcom –
namely *Newhart*, whose 1990 television finale saw actor Bob Newhart awake from a “dream”, that dream being, of course, the preceding sitcom *Newhart*.

Building on the text’s own disavowals of authority (in the conflict between Randall and Hope) and Lynchian obsession with the sitcom form, ‘Oblivion’s ending explodes the possibilities set up by its narrative of psychoanalytic reading. Are we to assume that ‘Hope’ has woken from a horrible dream, without knowledge of her daughter, the “wife” of someone she calls “Daddy?” Or are these dull, sitcom-esque lines perhaps spoken aloud by Randall himself, captured on the sleep technicians’ recordings? The script, a substitute for the narrator’s own distended, predatory “ex-pressure”, calls the entire ontological basis of the text into question. To paraphrase comedian and fellow sitcom-writer Jerry Seinfeld: “Who are these people?” And who are they within the textual and generic conflicts which precede them? Without a doubt, this ending accomplishes the effect of what Wallace deemed capital-L Lynchian:

> Refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former’s perpetual containment within the latter (1997: 161)

From the sitcom narrative of snoring to the more unconscious and incestuous ironies unleashed thereby, ‘Oblivion’ harnesses this Lynchian mode to full effect, creating maximal uncertainty around the roles and authority of narrator, speaker and reader. Meanwhile, ‘Oblivion’s closing script plays like credits over an oblique end to a bizarre family show. In this dream-like textual game, Wallace’s reversal of generic expectations leads us to wonder aloud: Who is dreaming here? And what is being dreamt?
Conclusion: Performing the Negation and Enclosure of the ‘Reader’

In *Oblivion*, the idea of fiction as “an act of communication between one human being and another” (Wallace 1997: 144) becomes a truly estranging proposition. The psychologically-fraught and stylistically-freighted dimensions of such acts, and the estrangement they provoke, have been examined to some detail in the preceding chapters of this study. In these readings, we have seen the repetition, re-imagination and re-abstraction of ‘readers’ as an estranging case in point for Wallace’s work and reception, whilst providing our own case studies (close readings) of ‘readers’ who identify, critique and narrate in Wallace’s early-middle fictions and essays. In each of these readings, the concept of *acting-out* retained a unique and productive significance, representing, at different points: a return to literalistic ideas about ‘reading erotically’ (Chapter 3), the re-imaginative diagnoses of such ‘reading’ in Wallace’s own fictions (Chapter 4), and the abstract typologies and pathologies of the ‘reader’ canvassed in his essays on Expressionism, David Lynch and psychobiography (Chapter 5; See Above). In *Oblivion*, moreover, we have discovered the extent to which post-Freudian reading, specifically a post-Freudian reading of the transference-neurosis as textual performance, *acting-out*, figures productively into Wallace’s later metafictional works. As demonstrated in this chapter, Wallace’s final collection of short stories presents a circumspect revival of the author’s key literary, thematic and aesthetic concerns, through sophisticated games with the ‘reader’s empathies, critical reconstructions, abstracted intentions, and so forth. Nevertheless, with the full admission of Wallace’s transferential-
neurotic style, we have seen the extent to which acting-out (repeating, re-imagining and re-abstracting the ‘reader’) displaces the idea of “another” human being onto the idea of another text, another response, another layer of difficulty and complication.

In this sense, Oblivion makes a complex game out of an essentially transferential-neurotic author-reader relationship, successfully drawing on the breadth of Wallace’s own stylistic engagements with ‘reading’ and ‘readers’ in the process. And yet, in Oblivion, the transferential (because repetitive) and neurotic (because self-reflexive) dimensions of this discourse become visible as discourse. By exhausting and displacing these early-career strategies onto bizarre and hyperbolised Freudian reading-tropes, Wallace effects one final escalation of his metafictional problematic, bringing the ‘reader’ of Oblivion into fraught negative contact with themes such as empathetic identification, suspicious critique and critical abstraction. We can see this sort of contact occur towards the conclusion of ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’, which contains this collapsed and estranged account of its narrator’s guilt (vis a vis that narrator’s culpability in his mother’s disfigurement):

That with my size and distinctive mark that I have kidnapped this horror-stricken middle-aged female or behaved in a somehow threatening manner toward her saying, Ma’am is there some problem or, Why don’t you just leave the lady alone as she sinks lower in her knitted scarf in the self-discomfort over their reaction but my own evolved response is to calmly smile and raise my gloves in puzzled bemusement as if to say, Why who knows for certain why anyone wears the face they do my good fellow let us not leap to conclusions based on incomplete data! (2004: 188, emphasis original)
This characteristic and estranging return to Freud – to the “puzzled bemusement” and “evolved response” of a psychoanalytic interpreter – is a sound enough point at which to conclude our investigations of the Wallace ‘reader’. As we can see, this sort of sentence represents a kind of interpretive game, whose chief symptom remains the fraught repetition of ‘readers’, ‘readings’ and reading-positions. This game began when Wallace’s early texts declared their love for readers who identify, yet quickly escalated to encompass new layers of self-reflexivity and rhetorical complexity: between antagonistic narratives of readers who critique and mediating narratives of readers who narrate, we have witnessed peculiar evolutions and deviations in Wallace’ writings about reading, which have consistently brought us back to the idea of transferential-neurotic acting-out.

Meanwhile, in the italicised and an almost totally ironic voice of a classical Freudian analyst, Wallace’s narrator declares: “Why who knows for certain why anyone wears the face they do my good fellow let us not leap to conclusions based on incomplete data!” Yet as we know, Wallace’s texts do leap to such conclusions – about the respective intentions of readers, writers, critics and texts – as a matter of principle. The distinguishing thing about Oblivion is that it appears to recognise the risks of such an approach. At the margins of the texts considered here, we have witnessed the estranging consequences of such a performance of narration, and the extent to which Wallace appears to refute (or at least drastically reconfigure) his earlier sentiments about love, reading and “human beings”. To posit the ‘reader’ as lacking empathy, desiring suspicion and suffering abstraction is, in the
transferential-neurotic terms set by *Oblivion*, to engage in a kind of *acting-out* – it is to attribute intentionality to “some person, some other psychodynamic structure” (Brooks 1986: 2).

Yet by incorporating this level of transferential-neurotic self-awareness, and indeed applying it to his own early-middle works, Wallace appears to have effectively worked-through the rhetorical caveats that he had set for himself within those works. *Oblivion* is no longer beholden to baggage-claims about real human beings, talking-out, loving, reading and so forth, because these claims (and the readers, characters, authors or texts that make them) have themselves become the transferential-neurotic subject of the text. In this sense, Wallace’s idea of a “new kind of aesthetic agent, who makes stories out of stories” is not, as the author suggests, simply a collapsed distinction between author and reader (2004; see above). From the perspective of a psychoanalytically-informed reader who negates, Wallace’s dense, obscure and allusive ideas about ‘reading’ are the game which his transferential-neurotic texts perform.

Having distinguished between and negotiated the first, second, third and fourth-order responses that this game might entail, we have thus been able to tender our own response to the question: Who is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace? But as we have also seen, Wallace’s texts are not simply a game – they are also objects of decisive erotic significance, puzzles for the suspiciously-minded interpreter, and complex arguments for the status of ‘readers’ in the wake of postmodernity. Nevertheless, it is precisely these
qualities that make reading the Wallace text such an estranging experience, and the question of the Wallace ‘reader’ all the more pertinent, particularly in relation to his late-phase metafictional works.
Conclusion

Reading in the Fourth-Person

It was only after Himself’s death that critics and theorists started to treat this question seriously. A woman at U. Cal-Irvine had earned tenure with an essay arguing that the reason-versus-no-reason debate about what was entertaining in Himself’s work illuminated the central conundra of millennial après-garde film, most of which, in the teleputer age of home entertainment, involved the question why so much aesthetically ambitious film was so boring and why so much shitty reductive commercial entertainment was so much fun. The essay was turgid to the point of being unreadable, besides using reference as a verb and pluralizing conundrum as conundra.*

(Wallace 1996: 947)

Of all the possible reading-positions suggested in Wallace’s psychoanalytically-aware fictions, and adopted in influential interpretations of that work, certain ‘readers’ repeat. As we have seen, this repetition is no simple affair. Strangely enough, it appears to be predicated on an estranging performative rhetoric, which posits ‘readers’ in order to engage with questions about ‘reading’. Our close engagements with Wallace Studies and psychoanalytic literary theory have borne out the self-reflexive and repetitive dimensions of such a rhetoric, whilst allowing us to translate particular
difficulties at the margins texts such as *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and *Oblivion* (2004). This analysis wedded seemingly disparate aspects of Wallace’s fiction – that fiction’s propensity to declare love for the ‘reader’ (Chapter 3), its simultaneous problematising of erotic ‘reading’ (Chapter 4), and its oblique recovery of particular Freudian and post-Freudian reading strategies (Chapters 5-6) – through a psychoanalytically-informed reader-response theory, whose operative terms were repetition, re-imagination, re-abstraction and, collectively, *acting-out* (performance). This model allowed us to apply a more critical and exposure-oriented perspective to the question of the ‘reader’ in Wallace’s short metafictions, which located that question’s significance in the author’s consistent, perhaps unconscious, return to classical metapsychological ideas about ‘readers’ and ‘reading’ within his short fictions.

Who, then, is the ‘reader’ of David Foster Wallace? As is so often the case, we asked ourselves this question because Wallace’s fiction asked it of us. Nevertheless, it remains strange to observe how Wallace’s texts repeat this question in such precise terms. In a literalistic sense, it is of course pertinent to ask ‘who’ the empirical reader of Wallace might be, and whether they might simply be us. In his own search for common-sense and erotic definitions of reading, the author certainly appears to be doing to same thing. In an imaginative sense, however, we have also seen why the term ‘reader’ might appear in indefinite quotation marks. Put simply, Wallace’s texts define the author-reader relationship along so many narrative and characterological vectors that a return to ideal or common-sense ideas about ‘readers’ becomes,
if not impossible, then fraught with transferenceal-neurotic risks. Having negotiated these risks, we have even witnessed the extent to which Wallace frames the question in the third person – communication, in the terms Wallace set for it, is an act which tends to consist of the author, his reader, and a semi-acknowledged ‘other’ reader (of which we have encountered multiple estranging variations).

But in repeating this question ourselves, and devising a language for its expression in Wallace’s most estranging short writings, we have discovered a fourth dimension to it – namely, we have exposed the performative relationship between this question and the activities of a psychoanalytically-engaged interpreter, out of which a properly counter-transferenceal response has been formulated and exhausted at the margins of Wallace’s short fiction collections. In these first, second, third and fourth order responses to the question of ‘implied readership’ in Wallace’s texts, we have thus set the stage for a more psychoanalytically- and rhetorically-engaged reading of the author’s broader literary project.

As our close engagements with and estrangements from Wallace’s fiction have shown, ‘reading’ is no simple exercise – in fact, the strangest thing about this exercise may simply be its tendency to operate in the fourth-person, hinting, in other words, at the relevant intersection between at least four structurally-significant perspectives, four reading-positions. This intersection can appear quite convoluted at times, particularly in the works considered in this study – as we have seen, Wallace’s concern for the ‘reader’ is conveyed
across numerous self-reflexive vectors, which repeat that ‘reader’ to varying (though at times startlingly consistent) degrees. Nevertheless, this unique attempt at fourth-person address has been investigated and even productively returned to throughout this study. The peculiarity of this address – the strange fact of a statement which implies an author (me), a reader (you), the activities of a ‘fiction writer’ and, finally, a ‘fiction writer’s reader’ to whom those activities are openly addressed – has been modelled as a term of transferential-neurotic (because self-reflexive and self-repetitive) discourse, and observed the operations of this discourse throughout Wallace’s short fictions, essays, interviews and critical reception.

While the consequences of such discourse are manifold in Wallace’s works, they are nevertheless describable as a kind of estranging textual performance. Under our psychoanalytic reader-response model, Wallace’s anodyne definition of fiction as “an act of communication between one human being and another” (1997: 144) began to take on strange new connotations, a strangeness which we have sought to reconstruct through a series of ‘close encounters’ with the author’s early, middle and late-period short fictions. These fictions identify and identify with ‘readers’; more to the point, they often appear in search of non-pathological or non-figurative way of expressing love towards their reader. But these expressions ultimately veer pathological. In escalating the stakes of their own erotic reading, and accommodating multiple suspicious and abstract trajectories for such ‘reading’ within a complex metafictional frame, Wallace’s texts read like a peculiar kind of transference-neurosis, whose object (or ‘subject’, if one prefers) is “not author
or reader, but reading, including of course the transferential-imperative operations that belong to reading” (Brooks 1986: 13-14).

If there are particular transferential-imperative operations implied in Wallace’s fictions, then they are arguably indicated in that fiction’s treatment of the psychoanalytic ‘reader’, and the proliferative strategies by which Wallace repeats, re-imagines and re-abstractions his own post-Freudian inheritance. This marginal (yet strangely persistent) aspect of Wallace’s work may also provide an effective response to the neurological and narratological dimensions of Wallace’s novels, and to engage more directly with these dimensions in the works of Stephen J Burn. Again, without pre-empting this analysis, I think it pertinent to raise this kind of novelistic reading of Wallace as part of this study’s conclusion:

one way that Infinite Jest might function (in Wallace’s words) as an “anodyne against loneliness” – a loneliness that stems from our entrapment in the mind – is by simultaneously presenting the reader with two puzzles [...] The emphasis on connection that underlies the puzzle reprises the web-like vision that underlies the book’s other obsessions – the endless links to earlier works, the biological pathways between the ‘webs and nerves’ that embody the self – and Infinite Jest’s thematic and narrative energies insistently foreground connection, even as the book can locate, but cannot replace, what the novel calls the “interior jigsaw’s missing piece” (Burn 2013: 80-81)

Having canvassed the “endless” links between key texts in the Wallace corpus – whilst critiquing the idea of a book that “can locate, but cannot replace” the hypothetical reader – this study has put paid to the idea that Wallace’s metafictions connect with the science of mind in various, complex ways. I have simply pursued a different science of mind in this study, enthralled and estranged as I have been by the specifically transferential-neurotic aspects of
Wallace’s works, and the strategies by which those aspects are acted-out in those works. By engaging with these strategies, we have thus engaged with the broader question of a psychoanalytically-engaged metafiction, whilst locating the various ‘readers’ and reading-positions that such a metafiction might imply.

This critical narrative, and its sophisticated elaboration in Wallace’s fictions and essays, provided the basis for our investigations of and with the Wallace text. We discovered it first in Wallace’s conflation of erotic love and “talk[ing] out the part of yourself that can love”, but soon found ourselves estranged by innumerable narratives of the transference-neurosis in action – whether through eroticised portraits of feminine performance or suspicious re-imaginations of a male anxiety, or the subsequent falsification and exhaustion of Freudian reading-positions in essays such as ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’ and fictions such as ‘Here and There’, ‘Octet’ and ‘Oblivion’, Wallace’s fictions remain caught up in highly-specific ideas about acting-out, which we have reconstructed in literalistic, imaginative, abstract and performative terms. As we have also seen, this repetition is a key source of difficulty within Wallace’s short fictions.

Whilst those texts’ return to particular ideas about ‘reading’ and ‘readers’ have helped secure the author’s case for an empathetically-engaged metafiction, they inevitably presented us with a kind of pathological hyperbole, whose chief weapon (or symptom) was escalation – escalation of stakes, particularly when it comes to ideas about empathetic and erotic love,
critical and post-critical theories about erotic love, narratological and characterological accounts of ‘reader/lovers’, ‘true other[s]’, speakers, narrators, performers, et al etc. In our reading, this escalation happens for a reason – Wallace’s texts are specifically attuned to the activities of the engaged psychoanalytic interpreter, and return to precise ideas about ‘reading’ and transference-neurosis in order to estrange such an interpreter. This effect may be deliberate; it may be entirely inadvertent. Nevertheless, it reads like a transferential-neurotic performance – an acting-out of ‘readers’, a return to hyperbolic and symptomatic expressions of particular reading-positions.

By tracing these positions at the margins of Wallace’s short fictions and essays, we gained a stronger sense of the estranging difficulty that such texts pose for empirical and hypothetical ‘readers’. Moreover, we have discovered the extent to which such difficulties escalate into one another, both within Wallace’s texts and across influential works within Wallace scholarship. Though we have provided an effective terminology for such difficulties, and a theoretical narrative through which to understand them, I do not claim to have exhausted the kinds of reading strategy implied by or even idealised within Wallace’s fiction. The wealth of scholarly material produced around novels such as Infinite Jest and The Pale King indicates the virtual inexhaustibility of such strategies in the author’s major works, and potentially invite further elaborations of the ‘four readers’ model canvassed in this study. Without pre-empting this further analysis, I would simply say that the intersection of particular reading-strategies in Jest is a topic of note in the work of Greg Carlisle – his work Elegant Complexity models this intersection
thematically, through the interplay of the psychologically-inflected terms ‘between’, ‘around’, ‘under’ and ‘away’ (2007: 23). Given our structurally-similar treatment of readers who identify, readers who critique, readers who narrate and readers who negate in Wallace’s short fiction, and the almost overtly psychoanalytic markers in Carlisle’s own expansive study, there is certainly a case to be made for new marginal readings of Infinite Jest, which would perhaps take a closer look at the ‘family Incandenza’ in Freudian and post-Freudian terms.

But our point is not that such reader-positioning should occur, but rather simply that it does. Wallace scholarship to date appears to have organised itself around the assumption of between one and four reading-positions, positions which repeat key reception-tropes from the author’s own statements about ‘reading’ and ‘readers’. The extent of this situation in relation to the author’s novelistic works is profound, but impossible to capture in the detail that this thesis demands. Nevertheless, with a marginal emphasis on difficulty in Wallace’s short fiction, we have successfully demonstrated how a term like ‘reader’ becomes repeated in our own critical writings about the author and his estranging metafictional works. From the erotic common-sense of Girl with Curious Hair, to the self-reflexive vicissitudes of Brief Interviews, to the expressionistic (because transferential-neurotic) strategies of Oblivion, we have seen how Wallace anticipates particular reading-positions, and investigated the extent to which this self-reflexivity estranged us from a wholesale identification with the Wallace text. While Wallace’s engagements with transference-neurosis appear to resolve neatly in the
analysis provided, this is only because we have distinguished between successive degrees of self-awareness in Wallace’s own psychoanalytically-aware rhetoric. Whilst distinguishing between these different forms of expression in Wallace, we have also been able to provide a working account of themes such as empathy, erotic love, suspicious ‘readers’ and abstract ‘reading’ as those themes appear in Wallace’s texts.

Much of this narrative was hiding in plain sight, in the overt repetition of terms like ‘reader’ in Wallace’s work and reception; but this repetition is a game with the expectations of empirical readers, with the third-person ‘us’ implied in virtually every study of Wallace published to date. Of course, this hypothetical rhetoric appears mixed up from the start in Wallace’s texts, as do the potential intersections between themes like identification/empathy, critique/suspicion, narration/authorship and negation/readership, to name but a relevant few. While Girl is an empathetic and indeed erotic kind of text, it also questions the existence of readers who identify, and treats this question like a transferential-neurotic game, foreshadowing the strategies pursued in Wallace’s middle and late-period fictions. At the same time, Brief Interviews and Oblivion retain the shockingly-literal impact of Wallace’s early works because they escalate its stakes.

The sheer sophistication of these later texts is enough to warrant further attention to the strange literality of Freud in Wallace. The theatrical, dramaturgical and meta-rhetorical terminologies deployed in this study have also shed light on the author’s relationship to figures such as David Lynch – a
further application of this study's methodology might consider ‘Lynch Studies’ (another heterogeneous field of enquiry) in relation to Wallace’s hyperbolic and expressionistic fictional project, and consider the Lynchian dimensions of texts like *Infinite Jest* in greater detail. Likewise, a characterological study of Lynch — informed by Wallace’s transferential-neurotic discourses of reading, readers and performance – thus remains a viable and relevant course of future enquiry.

Having restricted our study of the ‘reader’ to a defined post-Freudian terminology – and indeed, having defined such a terminology through its utile deployment in Wallace’s metafiction – we have thus gained a better understanding of psychoanalytic ‘reading’ in Wallace’s texts, and traced those texts’ return to and exhaustion of particular transferential-neurotic tropes. Viewed on this basis, the search for the Wallace ‘reader’ and the effort to distinguish between various types of psychoanalytic ‘readers’ in Wallace’s texts are superimposable activities. In our terms, they both presuppose a transferential-neurotic framework, an “artificial illness” or “playground” in which particular ideas about readers, authors, characters, narrators and texts become repeated, re-imagined and re-abstracted.

In reconstructing this discourse, and its pathological (because repetitive) and hyperbolic (because self-reflexive) vectors, we have arrived at something resembling Peter Brooks’ “rhetorical elaboration” of transferential reading:

The text is conceived as a semiotic and fictive medium constituted as the place of affective investments that represent a
situation and a story as both symbolic (given the absence of situation and story except ‘in effigy’) and ‘real’ (given the making-present of situation and story through their repetition). The text conceived as transference should allow us to illuminate and work through that which is at issue in the situation of the speaker, or the story of the narrator – that is, what must be rethought, reordered, interpreted from his discourse. Transference and interpretation are in fact interdependent and we cannot assign priority to one over the other (1986: 13)

If Wallace’s fictions do represent an “act of communication between one human being and another”, they do so in a transferential-neurotic fashion – in Brooks’ terms, they rethink, reorder and interpret this kind of “act”, whilst dramatising the “situation of the speaker” (and the concomitant situation of their respondent) in self-reflexive and repetitive ways. But this acting-out or talking-out of the ‘reader’ has allowed us to refine Brooks’ transferential model somewhat. Wallace’s metafictions have escalated this problem from generalist erotic concerns with transference to a more specified and specialised sense of transference-neurosis, which we have had cause to explore throughout this thesis. Despite strange claims to the contrary, Wallace’s texts do engage in reader-positioning; moreover, this positioning gives itself away through such claims, in the author’s most artfully self-reflexive strategies, to the extent that these strategies neurotically repeat particular reading-positions.

With the benefit of a psychoanalytically-informed reader-response theory, we have thus seen the extent to which Wallace’s short fictions function as “framed tales” of ‘reading’, and effectively described this function in terms of transferential-neurotic performance – acting-out. When we are what we call ‘readers’ of David Foster Wallace, we are at once analyst and object, applicand and figurant, detective and fugitive, performer and performed. The trouble
with all of this, as we have seen, is the fact that Wallace's estranging critical rhetoric supposes that we can inhabit all of these positions all at once.
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