Wallace and Philosophy

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> "*It* is a level of psychic pain wholly incompatible with
> human life as we know it. . . . *It* is also lonely on a level that
> cannot be conveyed. There is no way Kate Gompert could
> ever even begin to make someone else understand what
> clinical depression feels like . . . because a person in such a
> state is incapable of empathy with any other living thing."
> —Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

While David Foster Wallace's writing has a clearly philosophical dimension, its exploration of philosophical themes, rather than being conceptual or theoretical, is driven by a clear desire to express, and thereby allow the reader to experience, some of the most existentially urgent and painful aspects of contemporary human existence. The possibility of conveying these problems in this way is what motivated Wallace's occupational switch from philosophy to literature. In Wallace's work, longstanding philosophical debates—Does language describe the world accurately? Can I explain myself to others? What are the values and dangers of self-consciousness? How can I lead a meaningful life?—are shown to be pressing existential concerns that haunt the texts and their characters, such as *Infinite Jest*'s Kate Gompert. As expressed in the above quotation, for Kate, words like "*clinical depression*" or "*unipolar dysphoria*" do not signify anything: Kate, "down in the trenches with the thing itself," knows her pain only as "*It*"; and she can't convey what this pain is to anyone else (she cannot even see those others as "independent of the universal pain that is digesting her"); she is locked into the terror that is her own consciousness; for Kate, the indescribable pain is the "essence" of her existence, to which "there is no solution" (695–96).

These philosophical themes of Wallace's work—that is, the medium of language (as a bridge to the world and to others), the role of consciousness and the question of meaningful existence—and affinities with specific thinkers have been widely recognized in Wallace scholarship. Some studies (including my own) even take the analysis of this philosophical dimension as their main focus in understanding Wallace's oeuvre. It follows that such philosophical perspectives also constitute a fruitful, perhaps even indispensable approach to teaching Wallace's works.[1]

Wallace himself studied philosophy from 1980 to 1985, focusing on mathematical logic and philosophy of language, and writing his undergraduate thesis on the problem of fatalism (Ryerson 3–5). But Wallace subsequently abandoned philosophy—at least, in its conventional, academic form, and as his primary pursuit—and decided to focus on literature. Wallace later explained that he had no longer felt the "click" he initially experienced in technical philosophy, but had found it again in fiction (McCaffery, "Conversation" 139): literature "felt like it

was using 97 percent of me," compared to philosophy using only "50 percent," Wallace said (Lipsky 261).

This statement by Wallace about literature and philosophy raises the question of the relation between the two and, specifically, how his work might be seen to combine them. His writings display an affinity with thinkers who blur the lines between literature and philosophy, as in the aphoristic style of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later writings, Søren Kierkegaard's literary portrayals of different life-views, the oft-praised literary qualities of William James's writings, and Jean-Paul Sartre's expression of philosophical ideas via novels and plays. Additionally, these thinkers all ascribe to literature an inherently philosophical dimension. The ideas that philosophy and literature are partially overlapping activities, and that some philosophical problems are best approached through literature, underlie Wallace's work—and could be seen to underlie his abandonment of technical philosophy—and inform the approaches to teaching Wallace and philosophy offered in this chapter.

Below I will offer outlines for teaching Wallace's work in the light of the three above-mentioned philosophical themes: language (specifically the issues of solipsism and skepticism, in relation to Wittgenstein), consciousness (contrasting excessive self-consciousness with awareness directed toward the world, by way of Sartre), and meaningful existence (opposing attention and even boredom to alienation and despair, in the light of James and Kierkegaard). For each theme, passages from relevant philosophical texts and from different works by Wallace will be briefly explained and questions offered to guide students toward illuminating comparative readings. Though the themes can be taught separately, I will also briefly point out the connection between them.[2]

The discussion of these themes works well both in courses that focus primarily on one or more Wallace texts (e.g., *Infinite Jest*), integrating the themes along the way, and in courses that take the philosophical themes in Wallace's oeuvre as the organizing structure and match up different texts for comparative reading. What is offered below can be shaped into these different teaching formats.

Language: Wallace and Wittgenstein

The connection between Wallace and Wittgenstein is well documented: Wallace explicitly acknowledged the influence of later[3] Wittgenstein on his own thoughts about language (e.g., McCaffery, "Conversation" 144; Wallace, "Empty Plenum" 218), and it has been an important topic in the Wallace scholarship so far.

One of the best ways to address the connection between Wallace's and Wittgenstein's views of language is through their shared understanding of the problems of skepticism and solipsism. According to Wittgenstein, both problems are rooted in the misguided idea that language acquires meaning by referring to something outside itself (an object, a thought); subsequently, any doubt cast on the possibility of bridging this referential gap leads to skepticism (I do not know

whether what I say actually corresponds to the world) and solipsism (I only have access to my own experience and cannot assume that others think or feel as I do) (see also Hacker 25–26). Wittgenstein shows that this referential failure is actually *irrelevant* to the meaningful functioning of language and instead de-scribes language as always part of a "life-form," as embedded in the communal structures of groups of individuals (*Philosophical Investigations*, 7e). Wittgenstein's later philosophy can be seen as a series of descriptions meant to therapeutically cure us of the thought-habits that lead us to misunderstand language. Wallace's work can be said to do something similar by showing characters who are in the grip of a misguided view of language and of the resulting problems of skepticism and solipsism (e.g., Lenore Beadsman in *The Broom of the System*, most addicts in *Infinite Jest*) and pointing to potential ways out.

To compare Wallace's and Wittgenstein's therapeutic descriptions of these problems, I suggest assigning sections 28 and 293 from Wittgenstein's *Philosoph-ical Investigations* on "ostensive definition" and "private language," respectively. These sections can each be coupled with several readings from Wallace, but below I will elaborate two relatively self-contained examples, namely, the "Eschaton" section from *Infinite Jest* and the story of the woman with the tree toad from *The Broom of the System*.

Skepticism and Ostensive Definition

Through ostensive definition—"giving the meaning of a word by pointing to an exemplar" (McGinn 42)—"we seem to pass beyond the limits of language and to establish a connection with reality itself," Wittgenstein writes (qtd. in Baker and Hacker 36; see also Hacker 99). But in section 28 Wittgenstein shows this is mistaken. In discussing this section with students, it is important to let them gradually bring out its implications: what goes on when we explain a word by pointing to an object? In itself, a word pronounced while pointing at something can mean a lot of things. Doesn't this fundamental possibility of misinterpretation mean that language fails to unequivocally connect to reality, leading us to skepticism? If our attempt to ostensively define a word (moving beyond linguistic description, connecting it directly to the world) requires further supplement (moving back into language, offering explanation), we have to conclude our attempt has failed.

However, students should be encouraged to see that this problematization, above all, serves to reveal a misunderstanding of how language actually functions. What about examples (ask students to provide these) of successfully pointing at something to explain what we mean? How are such explanations possible? Students will readily point to the importance of the specific "context" of each utterance but should be prompted to specify what that means, how such contexts function. For example, is the context in question linguistic or extralinguistic? If it is the latter, we are back at our previous problem (how is it connected to language?); if it is the former, students should try to explain more precisely how language provides a context to itself.

Wittgenstein answers as follows: I have to know how a word is being used, what the grammatical structures are that surround the word, because these structures are responsible for its acquiring its specific meaning. The rules of language are not determined by reality but result from the communal structures of groups of individuals: "language-games" (4e), as Wittgenstein calls specific forms of language use, presuppose a group of people who relate to each other and to the world in a certain way (a life-form). That does not mean that language and the world are unrelated. On the contrary: language-games determine the meaning we confer upon reality as well as how we relate to it. Wittgenstein concludes that language, to acquire meaning, does not seek or need a referential connection to the world; thus the threat of skepticism supposedly resulting from such a (failed) connection is refuted.

This threat of skepticism, of a failure of language (leading to an endless doubting of truth and reality), and the Wittgensteinian response to it, can be seen to be portrayed in the "Eschaton" section of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (321–42). First of all, let students observe that the nuclear war simulation game Eschaton is described to have clear rules and demarcations (see, e.g., 322–24). But when it starts to snow a violent debate breaks out among the participants about the rela-tion between reality and representation—namely, about whether the snow falling on the tennis courts affects the nuclear war simulated thereon. Here it is important to ask students what motivates the debate. The characters initiating the debate might be seen as praiseworthy phil-osophers, doubting unquestioned as-sumptions. However, Wittgenstein is highly critical of the *"theorizing* or *theoretical attitude"* (McGinn 16): according to him, philosophical problems arise when philosophers remove linguistic utterances from their connections to a certain practice in order to scrutinize them, creating situations in which "language *goes on holiday"* (*Philosophical Investigations* 162). So, in *Infinite Jest*, the initiators might also be seen to cast unwarranted doubt on the functioning of the game, fostering skepticism toward it.

The Eschaton debate can be seen to refer to Borges's fable "On Exactitude in Science," about a map that completely coincides with reality, causing reali-ty to gradually dis appear, leaving just the map—a fable that, by way of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, has come to symbolize the skeptical, postmodernist view that reality has dis appeared (is not accessible) and we are left with mere artifice (i.e., language that cannot be connected to the world and therefore might be seen to lack meaning). However, students should be encouraged to question whether this assessment applies to the Eschaton situation. Keeping in mind Wittgenstein's critique of the theorizing attitude, Eschaton's distinction between reality and representation might in fact be seen to be quite clear. As character Michael Pemulis says, "It's snowing on the goddamn *map*, not the *territory* . . . . Real-world snow isn't a factor if it's falling on the fucking map!" (334–35). Invite students to compare the arguments Pemulis uses to counter what he characterizes as "equivocationary horse shit" with Wittgenstein's refutation of skepticism (337). Briefly put: Eschaton presupposes the reali ty in which it is played ("it's like preaxiomatic") and, in order to play the game, participants

have to commit to its rules, which imply a certain relation to reality; it is not possible when "asswipes . . . run roughshod over the delimiting boundaries that are Eschaton's very life blood" (338, 335).

Solipsism and Private Language

Similar to his treatment of ostensive definition, Wittgenstein's "private language arguments" show the impossibility and irrelevance of the suggestion that language acquires meaning through reference to an accompanying mental intention.[4] Of these arguments the "beetle-in-a-box" thought experiment (section 293) is perhaps the most famous.

The beetle-in-a-box thought experiment illustrates that, if we regard the meaning of words as determined by private, mental images (the "beetle'" in "my box"), we admit the possibility that everyone could have very different mental images (for how can I know whether others have the same image in their heads as I do?) for the same word. This might seem to open up the possibility—of which many Wallace characters are convinced—that we all mean different things with our words, and that we are thus not really communicating: if private images determine the meaning of our words, it would seem impossible for us to understand each other, resulting in solipsism.

Subsequently, encourage students to question this conclusion and see that Wittgenstein's point extends further. If private images determine the meaning of our words, what does this mean for my own understanding of my words? The implication of Wittgenstein's beetle in a box is, in fact, that it would also be impossible for me to have a consistent understanding of my own images and therefore of my own words. Why? Because I would not be able to uphold a criterion of correctness to my own words. Against what would I test my definition? My judgment of whether or not the feeling I have right now is pain—Wittgenstein's favorite example, frequently echoed in Wallace's work—depends on the whims of my memory, which decides whether the feeling resembles what I felt before and decided to call pain: "whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'" (78e; see also Hacker 97, 101). In conclusion, private, mental images are irrelevant to the meaningful functioning of language, because an individual could never maintain a private definition of, for instance, pain. Instead, our ability to use a word in a meaningful way presupposes grammatical structures that are already in place in language.

Wallace's *The Broom of the System* takes such solipsistic misunderstandings of language as one of its own main topics. For example, Lenore Beadsman's anxiety that she does not really exist because she is determined by language implies the assumption—an inversion of Wittgenstein's thought experiment—that public language mismatches with what an individual is, internally, privately. This assumption doesn't make any sense, Wittgenstein has shown: a person's self-understanding can never be private.

One of the novel's stories, told to Lenore by her boyfriend, Rick Vigorous, can be read as an explicit variation on the beetle in a box. It tells of a woman who

"has a pale-green tree toad living in a pit at the base of her neck." The woman completely identifies with this anomaly and thereby cuts herself off from the world: "The tree toad is the mechanism of nonconnection and alienation, the symbol and cause of the [woman's isolation]." The story suggests a solipsistic universe in which members of a group (the woman and her f amily) all possess a different creature and define themselves on the basis of this difference: "the mother has a narrow-tailed salamander, one brother has a driver ant, one sister has a wolf spider, another has an axolotl, one of the little children has a sod webworm. Et cetera et cetera." The story symbolizes a situation in which everybody possesses something different (in his or her beetle-box) and thus cannot know what others are experiencing (187–89).

Let students explore how Wallace's story and the rest of his fiction illustrate the solipsistic problems caused by the misguided tendency to regard our so-called internal processes—thoughts, feelings, and so on—as objects and ourselves as the exclusive owners of those objects. One fruitful approach could be to focus on the perception of pain, especially by depressed and addicted characters in Wallace's fiction: for example, "the depressed person" in the eponymous story in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, and Kate Gompert, Geoffrey Day, and Orin Incandenza from *Infinite Jest* (to name just a few) regard their suffering as unique, inaccessible for others, and they are thus locked in a solipsistic worldview. Students could compare these characters to *Infinite Jest's* Mario Incandenza, who is unable to feel pain (and therefore cannot misunderstand his own conception of it as based on some private sample) but nevertheless understands it and is always perceptive of other people's suffering.[5]

Consciousness: Wallace and Sartre

Skepticism and solipsism are strongly connected to the theme of consciousness. Wallace's fiction portrays many excessively self-reflective characters: their constant introspection fosters the misunderstanding of the relation between thought, world and language. In its portrayals of processes of consciousness Wallace's work displays a clear affinity with Sartre's phenomenological view: for both, conscious-ness should always be directed outward (see, e.g., Smith 264–68; Ramal 179–80).

Wallace's and Sartre's shared critique of self-consciousness and emphasis on awareness directed toward the world can be fruitfully examined by reading Sartre's early essay *The Transcendence of the Ego*[6] in combination with, for exam-ple, the Erdedy section from *Infinite Jest* (17–27) and the story "B.I. #20" from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

The title of Sartre's essay makes for a good opening question: what does it mean? Sartre means that the ego, or self, does not reside in consciousness but transcends—is constituted beyond—it, in the world.[7] The essay starts with this specific claim. But the underlying notion that students need to grasp first is that of intentionality. According to Sartre, consciousness has no substance; it is solely

a relation, an awareness of something other than itself—in other words, it is sheer intentionality. And Sartre goes on to claim that it is this intentionality (not some sort of internal self or ego) that unifies consciousness. What does Sartre mean by this assertion, that through intentionality, by "going outside itself," consciousness "unifies itself" (6)? He means that consciousness unifies and identifies itself by not being its objects. From this relational, nonsubstantial nature of consciousness Sartre concludes that there is no self (ego) internal to consciousness, unifying it.

Sartre goes on to argue that, when we look at everyday situations that constitute the majority of our conscious states, we can see there is no I present in these experiences. Instead, our consciousness is immersed in the world, focused on the objects of consciousness (and not on consciousness itself). Sartre writes: "there is no I on the unreflected level. When I run after a tram, . . . there is no I. There is a consciousness of the tram-needing-to-be-caught, etc." (13). Let students exchange experiences of situations like this, in order for this idea to sink in. Sartre subsequently offers a progression of the levels of consciousness, up to self-reflection, in which consciousness explicitly directs its attention to the I. But what is this I, then, if it is not an immanent structure of consciousness itself? Sartre acknowledges that we exist as individuals and ascribe an I to ourselves. He holds, however, that this is not the result of something that inhabits, and resides over, consciousness. On the contrary: he regards the I, the self, as a secondary phenomenon that we derive from our experience of "the unity of our representations" (3).

Sartre concludes that self-reflective introspection, aimed at the discovery of a core self at the heart of consciousness, is "a perpetually deceptive mirage" (39). Self-reflection tries to turn consciousness into an object that has a certain essence (an inherent self), while, according to Sartre, consciousness is sheer intentionality and thus has no substance or essence. Such self-reflective objectification is the basic dynamic that underlies bad faith behavior, which consists of trying to give oneself an essence (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 70–95). In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre describes that such forms of self-reflection—remaining in an objectifying (as if external) perspective on one's own consciousness—can even lead to psychological disorder, to "various types of psychasthenia" (47).

Excessive Self-Consciousness

Wallace's work is filled with excessively self-conscious characters, many of whom suffer from addiction, depression, or both, and the above can thus be related to almost all of his writings. The Erdedy section from *Infinite Jest* portrays its character's hyperreflexive mind as it spirals to the point of his actual psychological breakdown. Students can be invited to map out the different motifs that are tied to Erdedy's self-consciousness and eventual self-destruction, for example: addiction (marijuana, which simultaneously feeds and is meant to shut down Erdedy's

self-consciousness), obsession (most obviously, with the woman who said she would bring marijuana), paralysis/passivity (Erdedy cannot phone the woman, cannot put his mind to rest by checking the color of his bong, because of the possible counterproductive effects his mind can think up for each act), secrecy (no one can know he is an addict, because he does not want to see himself as such; self-reflection is an internalization of the external gaze), self-deception (Erdedy has used the same "grueling final debauch" strategy countless times already [27]), and self-disgust (he recognizes his own dependence on something of which the pleasure has become questionable). All these motifs are produced by an objectifying, self-reflective stance, an internalized look that, in Sartre's words, distances itself from the "spontaneity" of experience and "poisons" it through the attribution of conflicting motives to actions: "it is the point of view I have adopted towards them that has poisoned them" (20). Slowly, this leads to an alienation from one's own thoughts and feelings: "[Erdedy] thought very broadly of desires and ideas being watched but not acted upon, he thought of impulses being starved of expression and drying out and floating dryly away, and felt on some level that this had something to do with him and his circumstances and . . . would surely have to be called his problem" (26–27). Other passages on Ennet House and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) illustrate that this hyperreflexivity leads to a total alienation from the self, where "the cliché 'I don't know who I am' unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché" (204).

Awareness Directed toward the World

Sartre's suggestion that, instead of inward self-objectification, consciousness should be directed outward, can also be found throughout Wallace's fiction. An interesting, complicated case is provided by the story "B.I. #20." In it, a highly self-conscious, manipulative interviewee narrates how he was affected (moved to change) by an "anecdote," told by a woman whom he had seduced, about how she had avoided being murdered by a sexual psychopath through "self-forgetful," empathetic attention (*Brief Interviews* 245, 252). The woman's "anecdote" clearly contains elements that are to be taken as positive, virtues we might see as being supported by Wallace's fiction in general. But, in reading the story as a whole, it is important to evaluate with students how the role of the narrator complicates a straightforward interpretation of the story as expressing the virtue of attention. After all, it is framed by the narrator, and students could track the many cues to doubt the reliability of his retelling of the "anecdote."

   In line with Sartre, "B.I. #20" makes clear that we should not see attention in the way its narrator—at least initially—sees it, namely as a naïve attitude that uncritically ignores information about the world. In the story, we are told to "envision" the woman's focused, empathetic awareness as an "intense concentration further sharpened and intensified to a single sharp point, to envision a kind of needle of concentrated attention whose extreme thinness and fragility were also, of course, its capacity to penetrate" (257). This fragile, single-point attention has

a clearly critical and ethical dimension. Likewise, students should respond to the story's request to pay careful attention to its characters and ideas. The need for ethical attention that the story presents to us via the woman is not realized in the narrator's supposed retelling, which is in fact emblematic of the hyperreflexive objectification critiqued above. Instead, the story might be seen to work as an appeal to the reader to realize such attention in the act of reading the story.

This reading of the need for outward-directed awareness can be supplemented with passages from *Infinite Jest*, such as the section detailing Mario's empathetic behavior (312–17) or the AA section portraying "Identification" with other addicts as vital to recovery (343–75), or from *The Pale King*, such as the long section in which Chris Fogle narrates his conversion from self-reflective ("wastoid") absorption to ethical attention (154–252).[8]

Meaningful Existence: Wallace, James, and Kierkegaard

Examining alienating self-reflection and the subsequent need for outward-directed awareness leads to the theme of meaningful existence. Most of Wallace's characters suffer from alienation and despair, and some of them find a way out, through attention and choice, to meaningful existence. These philosophical trajectories can be fruitfully discussed in relation to Søren Kierkegaard and William James. Marshall Boswell's essay in this volume characterizes Kierkegaard's critique of the aesthetic life view as a model for Wallace's portrayal of irony and addiction, and the novel's descriptions of recovery by surrender to AA's Higher Power as based on James's descriptions of religious experience. I offer James's discussion of "The Sick Soul" and "The Divided Self" (lectures 6–8 from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*) as an additional influence underlying Wallace's portrayal of addiction and depression (including his use of the term *anhedonia*) and connect Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* with Wallace's recurring emphasis on enduring boredom (and the importance of attention) in *The Pale King*. These discussions will also provide an opportunity to return to the question raised in the introduction, of how literature and philosophy relate to each other.

Wallace and James: The Sick Soul

Before students read the three above-mentioned lectures from *Varieties*, explain to them James's distinction between "once-born" and "twice-born" individuals (introduced in lecture 5 and taken up throughout lectures 6–8). According to James, the once-born have "no metaphysical tendencies" and are "not distressed by their own imperfections" but cannot be called "self-righteous," because "they hardly think of themselves at all." James ascribes to such individuals a "childlike quality" (79) and a sort of "congenital anaesthesia" that seems to cut them off from "even a transient sadness" (82). Based on this, students should be able to explore the parallels with Wallace characters such as Mario Incandenza and Shane Drinion. Most importantly, invite students to critically compare the function

of such characters (often criticized as too unrealistic to provide a model for meaningful existence) in relation to most other Wallace characters (all prone to addiction and depression), with the existential function James ascribes to the once-born: that while the source of their happiness is congenital, and thus inaccessible for the twice-born, their behavior constitutes an exemplar, a reminder of "grace" for all others—"It is to be hoped that we all have some friend . . . whose soul is of this sky-blue tint," James writes (79).

James describes the twice-born—the more common type of individual—as experiencing a "certain discordancy or heterogeneity" in his or her existence (156). James quotes the poet Louise Ackermann (1813–90), whose realization that her existence is "by accident" and the "globe" without purpose leads her to experience her life as "being in a dream" (64). This realization of meaninglessness is the basic constituent of the postmodern world portrayed in Wallace's work: the critical strategies internalized by contemporary Western culture reveal the world as an unreality. Let students trace this connection in one of the AA / Ennet House sections from *Infinite Jest* (689–98): therein, the "sophisticat[ion]" of the "millennial U.S.A." is equated with "'world-weariness" and is described as a loss of meaning, of "being really human" (694–95). Additionally, let students reflect on the dreamlike quality of this section—for example, how the narration weaves together different locales and characters—and of the novel in general.

James describes "morbid melancholy" (depression) as an exacerbation of "this sense of the unreality of things" (64). He describes the "peculiar form of consciousness" of these "sick souls" as a "prison house" (128)—compare the imagery of imprisonment and cages associated with addiction and depression in *Infinite Jest*. Moreover, the assigned section from *Infinite Jest* distinguishes between the same "kinds of pathological depression" listed by James; namely, "anhedonia"—described as "mere passive joylessness" (136) by James and as "low grade," "simple melancholy" in *Infinite Jest* (692)—and the "worst kind of melancholy," that is "panic fear" (James 149), or "the Great White Shark of pain" in *Infinite Jest* (695). Moreover, Wallace also includes, in slightly paraphrased form, some of the patient descriptions that James quotes of these different kinds of melancholic experience. For example, consider the description of anhedonia James presents from Father Gratry, a Catholic philosopher:

> Happiness, joy, light, affection, love—all these words were now devoid of sense. Without doubt I could still have talked of all these things, but I had become incapable of feeling anything in them, of understanding anything about them, of hoping anything from them, or of believing them to exist. (138)

Compare this description with the following passage from *Infinite Jest*:

> . . . *happiness, joie de vivre, preference, love*—are stripped to their skeletons and reduced to abstract ideas . . . The anhedonic can still speak about

happiness and meaning et al., but she has become incapable of feeling any-
thing in them, of understanding anything about them, of hoping anything
about them, or of believing them to exist as anything more than concepts.
(692–93)

James illustrates "panic fear" with a description he later admitted came from his
own experience: gripped by "horrible fear" he had a vision of a patient, a "black-
haired youth with greenish skin," "knees drawn up against his chin," "moving
nothing," and had felt: "*That shape am I*" (149–50). *Infinite Jest's* description of
Kate Gompert evokes this "panic fear" passage: a doctor observes Kate with "her
knees drawn up to her abdomen," "fingers laced around her knees," her "black
bangs [visible]" and the other half of "her face obscured by the either green or
yellow case on the plastic pillow" (68; see also Evans 187–88).

Given these parallels, let students discuss the connections between James's
and Wallace's respective philosophical and literary approaches. For example, note
that James quotes extensive examples, in effect offering ministories, in different
voices, an aspect comparable to *Infinite Jest*. Furthermore, let students reflect
on the highly personal nature of both authors' writing. Above all, compare the
ways in which James and Wallace insist their audiences try to imagine the expe-
rience of depression—see the "burning high-rise" and "electric current" exam-
ples in *Infinite Jest* (696–97).

James also asserts that "happiness" can follow this "radical pessimism" (135),
as "the normal evolution of character chiefly consist[s] in the straightening out
and unifying of the inner self" after such dividedness (158). This, in turn, might
be connected to *Infinite Jest's* portrayal of recovery through AA, which is also
described as the establishing of (or return to) a self (694–95, 860).

Wallace and Kierkegaard: Boredom as Bliss

How to become such a coherent self and realize a meaningful existence, amid
the fragmented plurality of the contemporary Western world, is one of the main
themes of Wallace's work. The connection between enduring boredom and
meaningful life, raised most explicitly in *The Pale King*, can best be understood
in the light of Kierkegaard, in particular "Rotation of Crops" from *Either/Or,
Part I* (281–300).

It is important to let students note that in "Rotation of Crops" it is the aes-
thete A who is speaking—a narrator embodying the life view Kierkegaard
criticizes—and who famously states, "Boredom is the root of all evil" (285). The
aesthete is only interested in pleasure—in letting himself be led by fantasy and
desire—and, therefore, boredom is the "[evil that] must be held off" (289).
This is also what is expressed in the passage from *Either/Or* quoted in *The Pale
King*: "*Strange that boredom, in itself so staid and solid, should have such
power to set in motion*" (385).[9] In *Either/Or*, this line is followed by: "The effect
that boredom brings about is absolutely magical, but this effect is one not of

attraction but of repulsion" (285). Let students discuss the meaning of these lines. Kierkegaard's aesthete is constantly looking for ways to distract himself (from possible boredom); boredom has "power to set in motion" because the aesthete is repulsed by even the idea of being bored. Invite students to connect this to the different addictions in *Infinite Jest* symbolizing a deep need for distraction from potentially difficult, existential issues.

Subsequently, ask students how the story of Lane Dean, Jr., in *The Pale King* can be read in contrast. In "Rotation of Crops," the aesthete A advises readers to "[n]ever become involved in *marriage*," because "one falls into a very deadly continuity with custom," and to "[n]ever take any *official post*," as one becomes a "little cog in the machine of the body politic" (296–98). Lane, as part of his redemption, can be seen to go directly against this advice. Let students discuss Lane's initial anxiety (36–43) and his subsequent decision to take responsibility through marriage and employment, thus accepting boredom, instead of fleeing from it. Subsequently, let students discuss Lane's situation and possible fate. His job with the IRS is characterized by extreme tedium. How can this possibly constitute meaning, or "bliss" for that matter? Isn't Lane in fact driven to madness and suicide? For Kierkegaard, meaningful existence is not readily achieved: it is subject to uncertainty and requires sustained, endless commitment. That a ghost appears to Lane might be read as a (negative, hallucinatory) result of the boredom he experiences. At the same time, the ghost could also be seen to direct Lane toward the ethical dimension of boredom, that "[*boring*] meant something that drilled in and made a hole" (378). Lane initially interprets this as boredom creating a hole inside, "hollowing out" (384). However, it also points to what elsewhere in *The Pale King* is called "single-point concentration" (293): attending to something and understanding, entering into it (students could potentially connect this back to "B.I. #20"). This latter reading is supported by Lane subsequently thinking of the "Frenchman pushing that uphill stone throughout eternity" (384), a reference to Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Students are likely to be repulsed by Lane's situation and conclude that it constitutes a negative portrayal. But invite them to reflect on how this might constitute an aesthetic response. The text does not describe Lane's fate, so the reader has to imagine it, and the reference to Camus might prompt us to remember the final line from *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (111).[10]

The inconclusive presentation of Lane's fate (and that of Wallace's other characters) could be compared with Kierkegaard's "indirect communication" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 252). Kierkegaard uses pseudonyms and fictional narrators to philosophically express different life-views from within. Students could explore how this approach to philosophy compares to (Wallace's) literary fiction, and specifically to Wallace's regular use of *exformation*—leaving out crucial information in the course or at the end of a narrative. Most importantly, students should bring out the affinity between Wallace and Kierkegaard, and the other philosophers discussed in this essay, in their requirement that the

reader work "put in her share of the [work]" to acquire an understanding of the texts and work through the philosophical problems presented therein (McCaffery, "Conversation" 138). According to Kierkegaard, the reader, in order to reach self-understanding, has to confront the different perspectives offered in the philosopher's writings, which cannot directly present the truth of that self-understanding, as this can only be reached, subjectively, by the reader. Wallace's fiction, too, is aimed at generating such self-understanding in its readers, and not so much at offering conclusive truths about its characters (cf. Baskin 143–44, 146). In that sense, Wallace has never ceased doing philosophy, and his work requires that, as readers, neither do we.

NOTES

[1] This chapter therefore derives part of its content from some of my previous publications on Wallace, most importantly from *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer*.

[2] As becomes clear from this overview, several philosophical themes and thinkers potentially relevant to Wallace's work have been left out (e.g., issues of religion and gender; and thinkers such as Albert Camus, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty). This is due to the inevitable limitations of an essay like this (in which I have chosen to include elements that can be taught both separately and in coherence) and to the fact that some of these issues and perspectives are addressed elsewhere in this collection. The topic of Wallace's thesis (fatalism) is not included in this essay, because the technical type of philosophy of which it is an expression has little connection to Wallace's later writing; however, the implications of the topic of fatalism (free will, meaningful action, et cetera) are covered.

[3] Wittgenstein's early philosophy is based on his so-called picture theory of language, which sees, in Wallace's words, "the paradigmatic function of language as mirroring or 'picturing' the world" ("The Empty Plenum" [*Review*] 224)—a theory that Wittgenstein in his later philosophy critiques as offering a much too narrow understanding of the many different ways in which language might be seen to function meaningfully.

[4] Sections 243–315 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (see also Hacker 19). To help students interpret Wittgenstein's description of the impossibility of private language, the instructor can provide them with Wallace's own explanation thereof, as offered in Wallace's essay "Authority and American Usage" (*"Consider"* 87–88n32).

[5] Another key section from *Philosophical Investigations* on private language is section 258. The "many exotic new facts" section in *Infinite Jest* (200–10) connects addiction to solipsism and skepticism. As to secondary texts, Baker and Hacker's *Understanding and Meaning* (163–205) and Hacker's *Meaning and Mind* (15–30, 206–08, 224–53) offer highly illuminating essays on Wittgenstein's refutation of skepticism and solipsism; also see Jon Baskin on Wallace's fiction as Wittgensteinian therapeutic project and Patrick Horn on Wallace and solipsism (Horn claims Wallace partly misunderstood Wittgenstein's refutation of solipsism, while his fiction still successfully illustrates this refutation), including the suggestion that the ending of "Good Old Neon" ("Not another word" [181]) constitutes a "moral rebuke" (255).

[6] Sartre's fifty-page essay offers a relatively clear and succinct presentation of the ideas that are most relevant to Wallace's work (and that are elaborated in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*).

[7] Interestingly, on the face of it, students might take the phrase to refer to overcoming the ego. Although this is not precisely what Sartre has in mind (he wants to indicate the location where the self is constituted—beyond consciousness—not to reject this constitution outright), there is an element of selflessness to Sartre's conception of the self: he conceives of it as a public (not private) entity that is subject to (in need of) constant change as a result of the constantly shifting relations between consciousness and the world (and thereby, philosophically, Sartre in fact transcends more traditional conceptions of the self or ego).

[8] Suggestions for further reading: the brief but difficult section "The Ontological Proof" (16–18) from the introduction to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and the chapter titled "Bad Faith" (70–95) could serve to deepen discussion based on *The Transcendence of the Ego* and to further connect "bad faith" and addiction. Wallace's short story "Good Old Neon" offers a philosophically very interesting portrayal of paralyzing, objectifying self-consciousness, and "The Devil Is a Busy Man" offers an example of self-reflective poisoning of experience. Recommended secondary texts include Richmond's introduction to *The Transcendence of the Ego*, the sections from Catalano's *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's* Being and Nothingness (39–41, 78–91) on the above-mentioned selections from Sartre's text, Zadie Smith's essay on Wallace, and the essays by both Boswell ("Constant Monologue") and Burn ("Paradigm") on the portrayal of consciousness in Wallace's work.

[9] This quotation in *The Pale King* refers to an older translation of *Either/Or*, by Walter Lowrie; for a more recent translation, see the Hong and Hong edition used throughout this section (285).

[10] Students can further explore the role of saintly characters in Wallace by reading James's lectures 14 and 15 ("The Value of Saintliness") and the description of prayer in lecture 19, "Other Characteristics" (415–28). Another AA / Ennet House section from *Infinite Jest* (for example, 343–74) could further illustrate the affinity between Wallace's description of his addict characters and James's "sick souls." The "Diapsalmata" from Kierkegaard's *Either/Or, Part I* (17–43) could be read to further explore the aesthete's dreadful awareness that the flight from boredom is unsuccessful. "Boredom as bliss" in *The Pale King* can be studied in the long Chris Fogle chapter (154–252). Recommended secondary texts include insightful essays by David Evans and by Thomas Tracey on the influence of James (and pragmatism) in Wallace's work as well as my own articles on the affinities between Wallace and Kierkegaard with regard to irony and boredom ("Beyond"; "Boredom"). My book *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer* also deals with these themes, including language, consciousness and the relevance of Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Sartre.