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ARTICLE

## Preferential Consideration: Bartleby, Class, and Genocide in David Foster Wallace's "Consider the Lobster"

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This article presents the case for reading Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" as a key intertext for David Foster Wallace's 2004 essay, "Consider the Lobster". Focusing upon Wallace's assertion that "it may well be that an ability to form preferences is the decisive criterion for real suffering" the piece reads Wallace's work through the lenses of capital, class, political aesthetics, ecology, and genocide. Ultimately, though, this article argues that Wallace's essay ends with ethical stalemate since Wallace is unwilling to commit to a political stance. It is, as I here argue, as though Wallace's essay would "prefer not to" make an actual decision.

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**Keywords:** David Foster Wallace; Herman Melville; lobster; ethics; philosophy; Ludwig Wittgenstein

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In his 2004 essay, "Consider the Lobster", David Foster Wallace [1962–2008] reflects on the ethics of boiling lobsters alive. Wallace had been sent to the Maine Lobster Festival by Jocelyn Zuckerman, on behalf of *Gourmet Magazine*, to write a piece on the happenings (Neyfakh). Given Wallace's track record, it was not supposed that he would write an article that was the publication's typical fare. Even so, *Gourmet Magazine*, as a publication of Condé Nast, was targeted at an upper-middle-class audience interested in "good living" and good food, not in animal rights and philosophies of ethics. When Wallace turned in an 8,000-word article that seemed more in sympathy with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) than with purveyors of gastronomy there was no small degree of trouble. Ruth Reichl, the chief editor of *Gourmet*, was unfamiliar with Wallace's previous work and demanded that he tone down the support for PETA, in particular. Although a compromise was

eventually reached, negotiations were, by all accounts, tough and the piece almost never appeared. Angry letters appeared in the following issue of the magazine asking “what [...] the editorial staff of *Gourmet* [was] thinking when it opted to publish David Foster Wallace’s” piece (Letters 250). What is unclear, though, is whether Reichl, Zuckerman, or anyone else on the staff detected the particularly literary quality of Wallace’s essay and the undercurrents of intertextuality that propel its argument.

Indeed, Wallace’s essay comments on gastronomic ethics using a specific and significant vocabulary: “To my lay mind, the lobster’s behavior in the kettle appears to be the expression of a *preference*; and it may well be that an ability to form preferences is the decisive criterion for real suffering” (251). As I will go on to show, the word “preference” has featured throughout several of Wallace’s works and this is not surprising given the focus bestowed upon agency and attention in his novels.

However, the term “preference” sits within a prominent literary lineage. For, when placed alongside his school essays on *Moby-Dick*, now situated at the Harry Ransom Center, the stress laid upon the term “preference” in Wallace’s mature work clearly summons Herman Melville and particularly the seminal literary work on preference: *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* [1853]. In this work, the semi-mute, ambiguous protagonist is appointed as a Wall Street clerk, given virtually no words by the author except to express his notorious preference “not to” work and eventually wastes to death in prison. While *Bartleby the Scrivener* is most frequently read either in terms of Melville’s biography or as a polyvalent allegory of capitalism, Wallace’s prominent and distinctive use of the most important term from Melville’s text – “preference” – brings with it a set of questions. For one: how much can we read into this potential intertextual resonance, coincidental or not? For another: given that there are potential literary intertexts to this essay, including *Bartleby*, why have critical discussions of Wallace’s essay tended to limit themselves to philosophical and ethical considerations? Finally: moving beyond Melville, what broader range of contexts – literary, philosophical, historical – could inform our readings of Wallace’s essay?

Wallace’s allusions to *Bartleby the Scrivener* have been well tracked by critics working upon his final, unfinished novel, *The Pale King* (2011). Certainly, Tom McCarthy,

Christopher Schaberg, Stephen Shapiro, and Ulfried Reichardt have all already suggested that Melville's text is an "older ghost" haunting that novel about bureaucracy (McCarthy; Schaberg 232; Shapiro 1267; Reichardt). This allusion is treated, by now, as a critical commonplace. I want to propose here, though, that there is a longer train of reference to *Bartleby* running through Wallace's work that is most strongly manifested in the linguistic and thematic choices made in "Consider the Lobster". For those sceptical of reading such literary overtones into Wallace's nonfiction essay, it is worth noting upfront that this piece is situated among a body of Wallace's work that critics term "literary nonfiction" (Thompson 227; Hoffmann 13). Written at a time when Wallace was struggling with his fiction (Hering 180, fn 10), the essay is a darkly humorous take on the ethics of *haute cuisine*. However, just because Wallace turned to non-fiction does not, I would suggest, render his non-fiction any less *literary* in terms of its allusive potential.

For, truly, the essay is atypically rich with allusion. Hence, aside from *Bartleby*, the second key aim of this article is to open a range of readings of the ethical contexts in the lobster piece. While Nancy Frazier has already charted the long history of literary lobsters (2012), this observation first struck me as I realised the degree to which Wallace's essay, as creative or literary non-fiction, uses a structure of intertextual reference, even if unconsciously, as a second layer of ethical signalling. Wallace's essay, for instance, is titled "Consider the Lobster". From the very off, then, the piece indicates that it is working in a mode of literary allusion with its clear reference to M.F.K. Fisher's *Consider the Oyster* [1941], itself a work about food with literary qualities. Taking this as a cue, I propose to take more seriously the potential intertextual resonances of Wallace's work, particularly with respect to Melville's story but also to other contexts such as Beckett's "Dante and the Lobster". From there I will move to think more broadly about the historical and political contexts of the piece with reference to other Wallace essays. The terrains over which this argument will range are: previous readings of Wallace's philosophies and ethics in the essay; the literary intertexts of "Consider the Lobster", most prominently *Bartleby the Scrivener*; Wallace's latent classism; and eco-critical concerns.

By more thoroughly reading the ways in which Wallace's non-fiction interacts with its intertexts and contexts, I will demonstrate the ways in which such references re-enforce a particularly materialist approach to Wallace's lobster-based ethics. Indeed, rather than pursuing the more common Wittgensteinian line, I will here highlight the ways in which the interplay between Melville and Wallace, in particular, can lead to a stronger focus on the historically evolving social status of foodstuffs and the ethics of capital and food that lie within "Consider the Lobster".

### **Existing Philosophical Approaches**

Before delving into any comparative literary reading of Wallace's work, it is necessary to first outline some of the philosophical background that informs "Consider the Lobster". For the philosophical approach has been the mainstay of extant critical material on the essay and, although I wish to think about other ways in which we might read the text, without broaching the philosophical route it is impossible to move beyond such an interpretation.

The essay itself deals with themes of behaviourism and neuro-ethics. This is succinctly laid out by Wallace in a framing of the conditions under which we judge pain in non-human, sentient beings: "There happen to be two main criteria that most ethicists agree on for determining whether a living creature has the capacity to suffer and so has genuine interests that it may or may not be our moral duty to consider [...] One is how much of the neurological hardware required for pain-experience the animal comes equipped with [...] The other criterion is whether the animal demonstrates behavior associated with pain" (Wallace, 'Consider the Lobster' 248). This stance is what might be broadly termed a "behaviourist" approach, a definition that Wallace explicitly acknowledges (252). Rather than adopting philosophies of mind in which it is impossible to know what another is thinking, Wallace here pursues the pragmatic idea that we should base our assumptions on demonstrable, repeatable behaviours of others. The outward manifestation, in other words, is potentially more important for Wallace than any assumption about internal mental states of other beings, a line that he has also followed in other essays such as "Authority and American Usage".

As Robert C. Jones points out, then, the self-proclaimed stakes of Wallace's lobster essay are ethical, but this is not clear cut. While Wallace delves into neuro-physiology and behaviourism to make his point, the fundamental normative claim that rationalises the investigation is that "possession of the capacity for pain and suffering makes the possessor morally considerable" (Jones 88). Following Jones, this raises three potential objections to Wallace's argument. Firstly, one might object to the idea that pain should be the defining criterion for moral considerability; why not empathy or reciprocal behaviour? Secondly, one might object to a projection of human values upon animal species; an anthropomorphism. Finally, and linked to the second objection, one could counter Wallace on the grounds that we have no epistemological access to the minds of animals and so cannot know what the experience of pain is like for animals and/or whether it is analogous to our own (Jones 98–102). Wallace notes, in fact, that "pain is a totally subjective mental experience" and that "we do not have direct access to anyone or anything's pain but our own" (246). Clearly, Wallace's attempt to correlate neurological apparatuses with behavioural preference is designed to militate against the latter two objections while the first is an irresolvable normative value claim.

Further scene-setting with respect to Wallace and philosophy might help here. Philosophically, Wallace is frequently cast in the tradition of late Wittgenstein, primarily through readings of *The Broom of the System* or "Authority and American Usage" among many other pieces (James; Olsen). This is interesting since Wittgenstein explicitly refuted the label of behaviourism. The grounds for the claim that Wittgenstein is only a quasi-behaviourist is bound up with his demonstration of pain-behaviour as a *criterion* of pain. The traditional conception of pain is as what might be termed a "private object". In this way of thinking, an individual experiences pain privately and can tell others about this experience so that they may form their own analogous, but equally private, concepts of what that pain *meant* or was like. After all, goes the most common way of thinking, *you* cannot have *my* pain. This is, though, a 'grammatical fiction', in Wittgenstein's view. In each case, pain is not some private object that one possesses; it is a sensation, an occurrence. If I am suffering and you are suffering,

then we are both suffering; we both have *the same* pain. Wittgenstein's investigation, in other words, is into the *grammatical* relation between the mental and its manifestation. This is only partly behaviourist and depends upon the perspective from which one views it. For instance, when speaking of mathematics, Silvio Pinto claims that Wittgenstein believes that the first-person grasp of mathematics is rooted in a form of practice-based rule-following. On the other hand, according to Pinto, understanding someone else's reasoning requires an interpretation of the behaviour of the speaker from which the rules being followed are deduced (Pinto 269–279). In this sense, mathematics is, for the first-person, practical and experiential, for the third-person, *a priori* derived from behaviourist observations. Certainly, much of Wallace's oeuvre has been read through Wittgenstein. A Wittgensteinian approach to behaviourism in "Consider the Lobster", though, would struggle to find a straightforward correlation.<sup>1</sup> These approaches, though, have formed the main critical commentary on Wallace's lobster essay thus far.

### **The Lobster and its Literary Intertexts**

Aside from the philosophical and ethical concerns of the piece, there is also a prominent literary precedent for writing about lobsters, of which it seems certain that Wallace would have been aware but upon which critics have not yet commented. The first of Samuel Beckett's short stories in the collection *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934) is entitled "Dante and the Lobster" and it features a protagonist who shares Wallace's seeming horror at the way in which lobsters are cooked. Indeed, Beckett's protagonist, Belacqua, exclaims (in reference to the animal's vivacity): "you can't boil it like that". The aunt in the story replies that he should "have sense" because "lobsters are always boiled alive". Most importantly, the unnamed aunt drives straight to the ethical core of Wallace's essay when she asserts, with no evidence whatsoever, that lobsters "feel nothing" during this process, a direct corollary to the erroneous assertions made by the Maine Lobster Festival's organisers that Wallace highlights (Wallace, 'Consider the Lobster' 245). In the face of his horror, powerless to protest and with

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this paragraph is derived from my work in *Pynchon and Philosophy*.



the lobster thirty seconds away from death, Belacqua thinks to himself that, at least, “it’s a quick death”; and, again, the timing of the death is an aspect to which Wallace directly refers (249). The narrator of Beckett’s short story has the very last word here, though, countering with the bleak pronouncement on the quickness of the kill that “it is not” (Beckett 14). In this way, certain literary intertexts can be said to intersect with the philosophical concerns about which others have already written.

However, a part of the ethics of Wallace’s essay that has not been adequately explored is the relationship of bodily ethics to capital. Indeed, it is indisputable that at least part of the ethics of Wallace’s essay – despite its focus on lobster anatomy, psychology and behaviour – derives from a critique of the food-supply chain within capital, a critique that I will go on to assert is strengthened by intertextual reference. On its own terms, the piece opens, for example though, by telling us that not only is its ostensible subject matter, the Maine Lobster Festival, “enormous” and “pungent”, it is also “extremely well-marketed”, thereby instantly focusing the essay on the economics of the event (235). It is, as that same first sentence goes on to proclaim, a veritable “lobster industry”, one of the two “main industries” in the State, with the attendant homophonic pun on “Maine”. We are also told of the official body, “the Maine Lobster Promotion Council” (which Wallace has not fabricated), whose supposed purpose is to “sponsor” the festival, implying, again, a monetary connection (236). The merchandise for the event, as detailed by Wallace, is extensive and includes “lobster T-shirts and lobster bobblehead dolls and inflatable lobster pool toys and clamp-on lobster hats with big scarlet claws that wobble on springs” (236). We can even note here the way in which Wallace connects each of these list items with “and”, rather than commas, to give the impression of an ultra-lengthy list in which finality is promised, only to be deferred, thereby deploying a deliberate rhetorical strategy to stress the extent of the festival’s commercial nature and to situate the event within a capitalist/market framework. As I will return to later, for Wallace the festival is a “teeming commercial demotic event” (240). That said, Wallace does distinguish the lobster industry from other “corporate factory farms” in the “marketing and packaging for sale”, noting that at least in the case of a lobster, it is linguistically labelled as an animal, as opposed to the way in which beef, chicken and pork are framed as

totally discrete from the animals that they once were (247). This forgiveness does not last long, though, as the industrial-military-capitalist frame of reference culminates in an Adorno-Horkheimer-esque moment when Wallace rhetorically compares the lobster festival to the Holocaust, asking whether future generations will compare our “eating practices in much the same way we now view Nero’s entertainments or Mengele’s experiments” (253). Certainly, as I will turn to again at the close of this piece, there is some dialectic of enlightenment at work in Wallace’s presentation.

Moving away from extant philosophical and social readings, I contend that the capitalistic connotations of the lobster essay can be further seen through a reading of at least one of the literary intertexts that Wallace deploys. Indeed, as I noted above, Wallace writes that lobsters “are known to exhibit preferences” (252). It is extremely unlikely that Wallace would have been unaware of Herman Melville’s acclaimed short story, *Bartleby the Scrivener*. The story is, after all, taught prolifically on undergraduate programmes of the type on which Wallace was himself an instructor and there is a substantial body of critical work on the text. For those unfamiliar with Melville’s tale, the story pertains to a new hire at a Wall Street office named Bartleby, who arrives one day and settles in. However, whenever his employer asks him to undertake any form of labour, his immediate response is that he would “prefer not to”. Bartleby’s refusal, always given in the form of a “preference”, is extremely difficult for the employer to deflect. The boss figure would know what to do if an arrogant employee told him “no”, but this expression of a “preference” is very different and he cedes to Bartleby’s preference. “Prefer” is, in Melville’s tale, a “queer word”, one that has “seriously affected” the characters in a “mental way” (Melville 36–7). Eventually, though, when the employer moves offices to try to rid himself of Bartleby and the latter is arrested, preferring not to move (of course) the piece culminates in tragedy when Bartleby is arrested and starves to death in prison.

Predictably, given the ambivalent nature of the text, the critical contexts within which *Bartleby the Scrivener* has been read are many and varied. Among the most prominent, though, are Marxist interpretations, first voiced in 1974 by Louise K. Barnett in her essay, “Bartleby as Alienated Worker” (Barnett). As Naomi C. Reed has pointed out, though, early Marxist readings of the text, such as Barnett’s, have

come under fire (Reed 247–9). In particular, Reed points to the work of Dan McCall who, she contends, has shown that interpreting “the story as a simple parable of the alienated worker cannot account for a number of its aspects, such as Bartleby’s ghost-like presence, the sequel of the Dead Letter Office, and the fact that Bartleby refuses many things other than work” (Reed 248; McCall 61–3, 110–3). Furthermore, in recent years, Marxist readings of Bartleby have now turned to a more rigorous historicism and, in particular, the specific contexts of labour debates in New York City at the time Melville was writing, particularly in the work of David Kuebrich and Barbara Foley (Reed 248; Kuebrich; Foley).

With this in mind, it is vital to point out in advance that I do not mean to suggest here that Wallace’s use of Bartleby is rigorously historicised. It is, however, a fact that Wallace chooses the term “preference” with great deliberation. In fact, he devotes an entire footnote to his specific selection of this word: “‘Preference’ is maybe roughly synonymous with ‘interests,’” he writes, “but it is a better term for our purposes because it’s less abstractly philosophical – ‘preference’ seems more personal, and it’s the whole idea of a living creature’s personal experience that’s at issue” (251). Note that Wallace specifically chooses a term that is pregnant with literary allusive possibilities “because it’s less abstractly philosophical” and more determinately specific. In other words, Wallace seems to signal that readers should move away from the abstracted philosophical ideas that have loomed large in existing critical material. That said, there are many objections one might mount to Wallace’s use of the term preference here, though. Preference implies that the expressed behaviour might be considered and deliberate, whereas a pain response is quite clearly reflexive. Wallace’s version of preference, in other words, is strongly rooted in the present. This is because if one does not know that one is about to experience pain, one cannot prefer not to experience the impending event. In the moment of the pain sensation, of course, one may then prefer to be somewhere, anywhere, else. Wallace’s choice of term is far more intertextual, however.

Before returning to the main thrust of the argument here, it is worth drawing out a few quantitative observations to strengthen the rationale for this comparison, lest a reader think it far fetched. There are, in Wallace’s approximately 8,000-word

piece, eleven instances of the term “prefer” in its stemmed and prefixed varieties. By contrast, in the approximately 15,000-word *Bartleby the Scrivener*, where most readers would recognise the centrality of the term “prefer”, there are forty-seven occurrences. In *Bartleby the Scrivener*, then, an even distribution of the term would lead to its occurrence approximately every 320 words whereas in “Consider the Lobster” it would be approximately every 730 words. Despite the lower occurrence in Wallace’s essay than in Melville’s, the term remains central.

However, even stepping away now from the rationale for comparison, certain parallels on preference are easy to draw between the texts. Regardless of how humane the capitalist boss may be in *Bartleby*, the eponymous character’s protestations of his preference do not allow the clerk to move outside of the system itself. In fact, the only real consequences of *Bartleby*’s ineffectual protestations are firstly to assert his own ability to form preferences; secondly to morally perturb his employer; and thirdly to end with his death.

Two of these preceding literary points lead back towards the ethical contexts within which I situated Wallace’s essay above. Wallace tells us, for instance, that when confronted with the lobster acting as though it is in terrible pain, “some cooks” have to “leave the kitchen altogether” (248). In other words, they are morally perturbed but still, like *Bartleby*’s employer, find that they cannot completely escape. At the same time, at least in one utilitarian reading, the exhibition of such a preference is a futile expression of agency.

To continue this ethico-literary line of inquiry and comparison to Wallace’s essay, vegetarianism is mentioned once in *Bartleby the Scrivener* but rejected as *Bartleby*’s philosophy: “He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts” (Melville 22). Food does, however, play a central role in the text. Two of the already-employed clerks are called “Turkey” and “Ginger Nut” respectively, for instance (Melville 6). The third clerk, “Nippers”, might even be so named for his “nipping” at food, suffering, as he does, from “two evil powers – ambition and indigestion” (Melville 9). It is, though, most prominently in a linkage to death in which food appears. Indeed, the instance of *Bartleby*’s death is heralded by

the arrival of the “grub-man”, asking: “Won’t he dine to-day, either? Or does he live without dining?” “Lives without dining,” says Bartleby’s employer while closing his dead eyes (Melville 62).

### Capital, Class, and Resistance

To live without dining, as an expression for resistance through death, sits at the core of the paradoxical passive resistance in *Bartleby*. Indeed, at the point in the text when Bartleby was fully engaged in work, a time when he was “long *famishing* for something to copy”, a time when he “wrote on silently, palely, mechanically”, Melville writes that “there was no pause for digestion” (Melville 15, my emphasis). To resist the food that will keep him alive to work is also against his own interests here. Indeed, as the narrator of the tale remarks, “nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance” (Melville 22).

This linkage of food, passive resistance and preference, though, is also present in Wallace’s *magnum opus*, *Infinite Jest* [1996]. In that novel, the words “prefer”, “preference” and other variants are most strongly keyed to two characters: Ted Schacht and the wheelchair assassin Rémy. With respect to passivity, even if not resistance, Rémy the assassin coolly and logically accepts his wheelchair: “a wheelchair is a thing which: you prefer it or do not prefer, it is no distance. Difference. You are in the chair even if you do not prefer it. So it is better to prefer, no?” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 774). In many ways, this runs totally counter to Bartleby’s ethic. After all, Bartleby’s situation is not improved by his “preferring not to” and it leads to his death. By contrast, we are told that Teddy Schacht would “probably now describe his desire to win as a preference, nothing more” on account of his chronic Crohn’s disease (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 266). Again broached via the topic of ill-health, this is also a link to digestion and eating, as per “Consider the Lobster” since, in addition to a psychological training regime where he imagines he has “no stomach” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 264): “Schacht suffered from Crohn’s Disease, a bequest from his ulcerative-colitic dad, and had to take carminative medication with every meal, and took a lot of guff about his digestive troubles, and had developed of all things arthritic gout, too, somehow, because of the Crohn’s Disease, which had settled in his right knee and caused him terrible pain

on the court" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 103). Once more, this is chained to a passivity, if not a resistance: "Schacht does not care enough, probably, anymore", Wallace writes, "Schacht always prefers a pleasant match, one way or the other" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 266). Hal, by contrast, has the same preference, "I would on the whole have preferred not to play", but does not act upon it (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 954). Living without dining is not, then, framed as a viable ethical choice in Wallace's worlds, whether in *Infinite Jest* or in "Consider the Lobster". What emerges instead, I will argue, is the connection between the ethical and the capitalist-materialist contexts for reading Wallace's lobster essay.

More specifically, the history of lobster consumption is one of mutations in class affiliation, just as Melville's story is underpinned by class relations. As George H. Lewis has pointed out, early New Englanders perceived lobster to be "cheap, low-status – even poorhouse – fare", a perception that continued until well into the nineteenth century (Lewis 304). It was, indeed, not until after the Civil War that the two requisite societal transformations were in place for the lobster to become a cultural symbol of both the state of Maine and *haute cuisine*. The first, in Lewis's account, was the rise in technological capacity for canning and distribution brought on by the steam age. Maine was well positioned to capitalise on this particular phenomenon given its relative proximity to the new urban centres of demand in Boston, Baltimore, and New York; not coincidentally the new centres of finance with which Bartleby's tale as a legal scrivener is co-joined. The second change was the rise of the Maine tourist industry, in which wealthy elites purchased summer holiday homes in the state and regaled their friends back home with tales of the authenticity and delight found in romanticised, rustic lobster-eating in these exoticised vacation spaces.

The presentation that Wallace gives of the Maine lobster festival is linked to this historical context for class both explicitly and implicitly. Indeed, it seems likely that Wallace had actually read Lewis's authoritative account on this subject, as he points out an almost identical chronology, situating lobster as a lower-class food "up until sometime in the 1800s" (237). On the other hand, Wallace implicitly furthers this reading when he tells us that "lobster is essentially a summer food", a fact that he attributes to the practicalities of trapping and seasonal lobster migration (240).

While there is some element of truth in this, it is also the case that the economics of tourism have created specific incentives for the capture and cooking of lobster during the summer vacation season, an aspect that must also be juxtaposed with the economic-historical development and emergence of Maine's successful lobster industry. It might, in fact, be more accurate to apply Wallace's assertion that "in the autumn, most Maine lobsters migrate out" to the historical swell of tourist tides (241). Furthermore, a subliminal awareness of the historicised change in lobster production and shipment is encoded in Wallace's piece when he notes that "if it's winter or you're buying lobster someplace far from New England, on the other hand, you can almost bet that the lobster is a hard-shell, which for obvious reasons travel better" (241). Through this historical evolution, conjoined with the rise of capitalist finance and the growth of the tourist industry, for Wallace, the lobster festival enacts a partial democratic reversal, moving lobster meat back from the realm of high culture to popular accessibility. As Wallace himself stresses, though, there are limits to the bounds of this market "democracy".

If, in Wallace, framed through Melville and also taking evidence from *Infinite Jest* into account, there might be some correlation with the refusal of food and the refusal of capitalist work, what does this say about the freedom and democracy of Wallace's lobster festival? Firstly, for Wallace, the Maine Lobster Festival somehow ties together capital and democracy. For the festival, in all its gluttony, is certainly not anti-democratic, it is just that Wallace claims that it "comes with all the massed inconvenience and aesthetic compromise of real democracy" (239). Certainly, for Wallace, the MLF is clearly presented almost as a hyper-democratic environment; a space where the failings of democratic systems are replicated in a miniature environment and are thereby amplified. But this phrasing is strange: why "massed inconvenience" and why "*aesthetic compromise*"?

The "massed inconvenience" is probably the easier of the pair to explain. It is, after all, inconvenient that there are other people in a democracy who do not share one's own views as it is inconvenient for Melville's boss that his worker prefers not to work. Wallace represents this through a "constant Disneyland-grade queue" at the end of which are "rows of long institutional tables at which friend and stranger alike

sit cheek by jowl" (239). Yet, there is something unsettling about communal eating – even when Wallace frames it as a form of inhumane killing – being compared to the supposed “mass inconvenience” of democracy. This eventually comes to a head in the classist and exclusionary paradigm that Wallace settles on for the festival: “what the Maine Lobster Festival really is is a midlevel county fair with a culinary hook, and in this respect it’s not unlike Tidewater crab festivals, Midwest corn festivals, Texas chili festivals, etc., and shares with these venues the core paradox of all teeming commercial demotic events: It’s not for everyone” (239–40). In other words, having expected the festival to be a highbrow event, due to the historical mutations in the perception of lobster over time, what Wallace actually finds is an event on par with any other form of “commercial demotic” event (240). The term demotic, here referring to the ordinary, the colloquial (and sharing a root of *demos* with democracy), has something of Wallace’s disdain encoded within, especially when the sentence is footnoted with reference to “working-class Rockland and the heavily populist flavor of its festival” (240).

The second aspect of this sentence, that democracy involves “aesthetic compromise”, is also interesting. Were it purely “compromise”, it would be straightforward and similar to the reading I have presented above of “massed inconvenience”. Democracy must, of course, navigate the treacherous waters of collectivity, sailing between the rocks of self-determination. But why is the compromise “aesthetic”? A first reading might consider Wallace’s scathing remarks upon “what the adjective in a phrase like ‘The Magazine of Good Living’ is really supposed to mean” (254); a link between the aesthetics of pleasure, the “taste for a particular kind of protein” (253) and the ethics of the good life, from Aristotle until the present day. Given the unambiguous preceding statements on class, however, this could become ethically problematic. Is it the aesthetics of the lower classes to which Wallace here objects, the “cracking and chewing and dribbling”, the fact that the event is “loud” and that “a good percentage of the total noise is masticatory” (239)? A more generous reading, however, might situate Wallace’s remarks on “aesthetic compromise” in the context of another essay in the *Consider the Lobster* collection: “Up, Simba”. In this text, Wallace follows the McCain campaign trail in 2000, detailing the extent to which



the candidate's PR team micro-manage events. This is well demonstrated in the fact that the campaign bus is decked out in the styling of the "STRAIGHT TALK EXPRESS", an aspect subsequently undermined since the teams themselves have christened it "Bullshit 1" (Wallace, 'Up, Simba' 171). So, while Wallace does give us instances of aesthetic political compromise – the need for spin and the desire to give the impression of straight talking – it is unclear exactly how this might apply to the Maine Lobster Festival. There may be a loose fit for such a reading in the tension between the highbrow perception of lobster and the marketing campaign that emphasizes that lobster is "only slightly more expensive than supper at McDonald's" but it appears more here that Wallace's remarks are part of an anti-populism, underwritten by classist concerns (238). This undercurrent of class prejudice forms part of the "humour" in other of Wallace's essays. Indeed, the self-assigned "Snoot" label in his essay on descriptivist vs. prescriptivist language ("Authority and American Usage") shares some of these characteristics. Yet, given the resonance with *Bartleby* – and that text's focus on democracy, class capability, and work – the humour here is somewhat undercut.

### **Ecology, Process, and Genocide**

The nuanced convergence of social class, self-determination, resistance and food/animal, achieved by intertextual reference to preference/*Bartleby* and the historical situation of the Maine lobster festival about which Wallace writes is also juxtaposed in "Consider the Lobster" with an especially violent correlation of the lobster festival with ecological damage. Indeed, it seems that, for Wallace, the type of market democratization that the lobster festival provides mirrors the ecological damage of global capitalism to the earth more broadly. For example, as already mentioned, there are forms of noise pollution coming from the festival ("[i]t is also loud") but the notable presence of non-biodegradable containers seems to show a broader lack of ethical concern for the environment: "The suppers come in styrofoam trays, and the soft drinks are iceless and flat, and the coffee is convenience-store coffee in more styrofoam, and the utensils are plastic (there are none of the special long skinny forks for pushing out the tail meat, though a few savvy diners bring their own)" (239).

The ecology of plastics is coupled, in Wallace's piece, with observations on industrialisation; an apt comparison, as we shall see, given that the history of synthetic plastics is bound up with IG Farben, the company that manufactured Zyklon B gas for the Holocaust. The Maine Lobster Festival features, we are told, the "World's Largest Lobster Cooker", a tank of boiling water that "can process over 100 lobsters at a time" (243). The euphemism "process" in this sentence – in parallel to the explicit attention that Wallace draws to the language of "preparation" (247) – is also telling given Wallace's reference to "Mengele's experiments" (253) and the imagery of the Holocaust that it summons. In Hannah Arendt's well-known study of Adolf Eichmann, subtitled *A Report on The Banality of Evil*, she examines Eichmann's claim that he was simply following orders in a Kantian mode of *ethics*. For Arendt, Eichmann's distortion of the categorical imperative is one wherein the principle of extrapolation to general laws is re-ordered into a top-down system of duty: "act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land" (Arendt 136; See also Laustsen and Ugilt). However, one of the core contributions of Eichmann's ability to commit banal evil, an evil that occurs without thinking, is administration, bureaucracy and process. By creating a logical set of steps to follow, which it becomes a duty to follow, the requirement for reflexive moral thinking is abandoned.

Wallace's comparisons of the MLF to the Holocaust are problematic and, as I'll go on to discuss, controversial, but they are present; stemming from ideas of class genocide through work that stemmed from *Bartleby*. Wallace himself writes that his "own initial reaction is that such a comparison is hysterical, extreme" but acknowledges that this is because he believes that "animals are less morally important than human beings" (253). However, again, this phrasing has a particular history. The identity term "untermensch", literally "under man" but usually translated as "sub-human", was the designation that the Nazis gave to those they had selected for extermination. The logic is exactly the same as Wallace's: by specifying a species/classification as "non-human" or "less-than-human" it becomes possible to conceive of them as "less morally important than human beings".

As I touched upon above, though, there are two related controversies that encircle this comparison. The first pertains to Holocaust absolutism while the second is a specific history of appropriation of Holocaust imagery by animal rights groups. In terms of the former, there are a number of Holocaust survivors who argue that the systematic genocide of the Nazi extermination camps was an *epistemologically absolute* event. In such thinking, espoused most prominently by Elie Wiesel, only those who lived through the Holocaust “can possibly transform their experiences into knowledge” (Wiesel 166). This requirement for direct experience forbids metaphorical and metonymic comparison; the Holocaust may not, in such paradigms, be compared to or stand in for any other genocide or act of atrocity. Indeed, if this is true then even if a Holocaust survivor tells of his/her experience, this will fail if the recipient has no experience of the event. In fact, here even the metaphorical transposition inherent in language (that substitutes for experience through abstracted analogy) is inadequate to be re-composed into knowledge (for more, see Eve 30–31). This is the more general, or total, epistemology that forbids Holocaust comparisons and it is one with which Wallace seems to disagree. Indeed, Wallace said, in a 1993 interview, that he felt that “a big part of serious fiction’s purpose is to give the reader [...] imaginative access to other selves” (McCaffery).<sup>2</sup>

The specific epistemological controversies around animal rights and the Holocaust are derived from the more general principle: that metaphorical comparison denigrates the Holocaust. If one believes that killing animals matters less than killing people, regardless of whether or not this is an internally consistent ethical principle, then comparing the industrialised murder of millions of people to industrialised killing of animals will denigrate the former. Furthermore, the motivations of the killers are different in each case. The Final Solution was a deliberate attempt to eradicate groups of people deemed “sub-human” for no purpose other than racial “cleansing”. Even if one believes that vegetarianism or veganism are correct ethical

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<sup>2</sup> Whether “imaginative access” is the same as “knowledge” is something that I will veer away from here. Suffice it to say that there is already a great deal of critical material on solipsism in Wallace’s work.

choices, it is clear that the meat supply chain does not exist to kill animals solely for the sake of their eradication, although the grounds on which they are killed may be as flimsy as those specified by Wallace: "I like to eat certain kinds of animals and want to be able to keep doing it" (253).

Nonetheless, Wallace's lobster essay contains not only the direct reference to medical experimentation by Mengele in the Holocaust but also plays up the industrialised nature of the killing; the bureaucratic banality of the system: "part of the overall spectacle of the Maine Lobster Festival is that you can see actual lobstermen's vessels docking at the wharves along the northeast grounds and unloading fresh-caught product, which is transferred by hand or cart 150 yards to the great clear tanks stacked up around the festival's cooker" (242–3). The systematisation here, coupled with the idea of "tanks" into which lobsters are "unloaded", is clearly supposed to parallel the Holocaust train network, selection process and gas chambers. All done, in banal, Eichmann-esque fashion, Wallace would have us believe, without *consideration*.

### **Does it Matter Whether We Consider the Lobster?**

In the preceding pages I have argued that Wallace's lobster essay is multi-layered and that it plays with structures of allusion. There is a strong emphasis on the term "preference" with respect to behaviourism in the piece. This is coupled with multiple references to the situation of the Maine Lobster Festival, within capital. Both of these elements validate a reading of "Consider the Lobster" through *Bartleby the Scrivener*, although the diversity of the critical response to Melville's piece over its history complicates this. Food is also somehow key to bridging notions of passive resistance and death in both pieces as well as appearing in *Infnite Jest*. Wallace's piece is also concerned with class history as regards the changing status of lobster as a delicacy through to the MLF's "democratization" of the meat. This sometimes comes with overtones of sneering; a type of class prejudice. Finally, Wallace's essay makes multiple direct and indirect references to the Holocaust, a difficult rhetorical gesture under several schools of thought. All of these contexts for reading "Consider the Lobster" can be framed under particular schools of thought, such as the Frankfurt School, that view a melioristic take on industrial capitalism with scepticism.

However, despite the fact that “Consider the Lobster” appears in many ways as a strident ethical (and perhaps liberal/left) tract, I want to close here by building on the remarks of James Santel in the Winter 2014 issue of *The Hudson Review*. In this piece, Santel notes that despite the seemingly liberal tenor of much of Wallace’s oeuvre and the turn towards civics in *The Pale King*, by the end of many of Wallace’s essays “the communal possibilities” for action seem “to evaporate”. For Santel, Wallace “felt that individual choice was the ultimate arbiter of how we lead our lives”, a very conservative take and one that is in productive tension with *Bartleby the Scrivener* (Santel).

Before turning back to “Lobster” for the last time, and in addition to the examples that Santel furnishes, I want to highlight that this conservatism can be seen in Wallace’s essay “Authority and American Usage”. In an aside to the main argument here, Wallace attempts to argue, on the issue of abortion, that the only logical solution is to be both for *and* against, pitting the communal against the individual. Wallace states that: “this reviewer is thus, as a private citizen and an autonomous agent, both Pro-Life and Pro-Choice. It is not an easy or comfortable position to maintain. Every time someone I know decides to terminate a pregnancy, I am required to believe simultaneously that she is doing the wrong thing and that she has every right to do it” (Wallace, ‘Authority and American Usage’ 82–83).<sup>3</sup> The logical contortions required to make this work are fairly staggering and in some ways reverse the conventional political spectrum on the issue, an aspect that no doubt will bolster some critics’ readings of Wallace as anti-feminist (for example, Hungerford). For Wallace, the communal morality against killing (“when in irresolvable doubt about whether something is a human being or not, it is better not to kill it”) apparently leads him to be “Pro-Life” but his belief in individual autonomy and reproductive rights means that this is trumped by “Pro-Choice” (“when in irresolvable doubt about something, I have neither the legal nor the moral right to tell another person what to do about it, especially if that person feels that s/he is *not* in doubt”) (82).

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<sup>3</sup> The terms Pro-Life and Pro-Choice are both politically loaded but I use them here as they are the words that Wallace uses.

A number of criticisms spring to mind here, besides the fact that this is a suspect attempt to avoid actually taking a stance. Firstly, this isn't really a "Pro-Life" stance since, at the resolution of the moral ambiguity when thought becomes action and law, the anti-abortion stance is trumped by personal choice. Secondly, morality is here divorced from action. You can be in doubt and believe something to be morally wrong but, for Wallace, this isn't congruent with how one should act or allow others to act (the law). Finally, this exposes some of the curious political alignments on this particular issue: individual autonomy, so often championed by the right, is subsumed to collective morality in this instance while it is the left that conventionally holds this up as a Pro-Choice rationale.

In any case, each of these critiques is also applicable to "Consider the Lobster". At the end of the day, Wallace does not change his behaviour as a result of his account (in which it is clearly deemed unethical to boil a lobster alive). As Santel also notes, Wallace simply ducks out, stating that "there are limits to what even interested persons can ask of each other" (254). It is in this vein that I close with the question: *why* consider the lobster? Why, in Wallace's oeuvre, should we *think* if thinking cannot translate into determinate action and codes of conduct? What are the contexts within which we might read "Consider the Lobster" good for if, in the end, Wallace's essay-like tracts are nearly as ambiguous as Melville's story? Certainly, even if this does not hold across all of Wallace's work, it is the question that a lobster, if it could speak and, despite Wittgenstein's injunction, if we could understand it, might ask of us.

### Competing Interests

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