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How to Cite: Eve, M P 2020 Equivocatory Horseshit: Post-Correlationist Aesthetics and Post-Critical Ethics in the Works of David Foster Wallace. *Open Library of Humanities*, 6(1): 8, pp. 1–29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.538>

Published: 24 March 2020

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

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ARTICLE

Equivocatory Horseshit: Post-Correlationist Aesthetics and Post-Critical Ethics in the Works of David Foster Wallace

Martin Paul Eve

Birkbeck, University of London, UK
martin.eve@bbk.ac.uk

This article argues that David Foster Wallace's writing can profitably be understood within paradigms of post-critique that show critical thought to be a form of forever-deferred inaction. Beginning with an examination of the histories of critique and post-critique, this article unearths the extent to which a post-correlationist aesthetics appears in *Infinite Jest*, before turning to the ways in which philosophical and literary representations collide in a selection of Wallace's short fiction and essays. In sum, this article seeks to show how reflexive critical approaches to novels allow us to interrogate that very reading model itself while also spotlighting the problematic ethics of Wallace's writing.

I. What is Critique?

Critics have frequently considered David Foster Wallace (1962–2008) to be a novelist with philosophical interests.¹ Stemming, at least in part, from the author's own philosophical writings and educational background, one recent work has noted that the reception of Wallace is no less than that of a "philosopher-novelist" with a "philosophically educated imagination".² Clare Hayes-Brady, as a second example, has called Wallace "a writer who balanced philosophy and literature in unusual and self-conscious ways, using both disciplines in concert to investigate the questions that preoccupied him".³ There has even been, in the near past, a collection on 'David Foster Wallace and Philosophy' that seeks to explore the intersections between philosophical thought and his fiction.⁴ Painting Wallace as the writer of philosophical novels is now a routine manoeuvre, even when this is not the main point of the critics in question.

Wallace himself was more sceptical of such appraisals. In an oft-quoted 2006 interview he disarmingly wrote that "If some people read my fiction and see it as fundamentally about philosophical ideas, what it probably means is that these are pieces where the characters are not as alive and interesting as I meant them to be".⁵ Such a statement constitutes an assault on particular reading methods, while masking

¹ See, for instance, Allard den Dulk and Preben Jordal, 'Subjectivity and Faith in Updike and Wallace: A Comparison of the Interpretation of Kierkegaard in *Rabbit, Run* and *Infinite Jest*', *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, 1.1 (2018), 17–54 and also the 2017 call for papers for a conference entitled 'David Foster Wallace: Between Philosophy and Literature' at <<https://www.dfwociety.org/2017/12/08/call-for-papers-david-foster-wallace-between-philosophy-and-literature-department-of-philosophical-pedagogical-and-economic-quantitative-sciences-g-dannunzio-university-of-chieti-pescara/>> [accessed 10 March 2020].

² Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 3.

³ Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 9.

⁴ *Gesturing toward Reality. David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

⁵ Ostap Karmodi, "A Frightening Time in America": An Interview with David Foster Wallace', *The New York Review of Books*, 2011 <<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2011/06/13/david-foster-wallace-russia-interview/>> [accessed 9 April 2018].

itself as modesty. By claiming that philosophical readings demonstrate a failure of a realist lineage that he (somewhat bizarrely, given the many surreal scenarios of his novels) claims for himself, Wallace issues a pre-joinder to those who would attempt to read his novels philosophically. Specifically, though, this statement takes aim at a particular literary-critical approach that formed over the course of Wallace's life and that, some argue, is now in decline: literary theory and critique.

A key touchstone for Wallace and his contemporaries was the introduction of literary theory, and with it philosophical reading methods, into the mainstream curricula of English degrees in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s. While plenty of work has already highlighted the role that the academy played with respect to creative writing and the MFA programs for an entire generation of writers, including Wallace, less has been written about the tectonic shift that literary theory represented.⁶ Indeed, retrospective studies of events such as the “MacCabe Affair” in the UK – in which Colin MacCabe was denied tenure at Cambridge for his advocacy of theoretical approaches, making front-page news in the *Guardian* – show us the level of disruption that such paradigms brought to previously formalist departments.⁷ As much as the emergence of creative writing programs, the theoretical transformation of the critical scene of literary studies, just as he graduated *summa cum laude* in English from Amherst in 1985, cannot but have been an influence on Wallace's approach to literature.

Key to many strains of theory in literary studies has been the notion of “critique”. However, in recent years there has been a prominent thrust in literary theory towards a project that calls itself “post-critical”. This heterogeneous movement, spearheaded by Rita Felski, asks probing questions of the general interpretative paradigms that have arisen in literary studies over the past half century but also attempts to displace

⁶ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); although see Martin Paul Eve, *Literature Against Criticism: University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016) for some work on this.

⁷ Francis Mulhern, ‘The Cambridge Affair’, *Marxism Today* (March 1981), pp. 27–28; Marcus Morgan and Patrick Baert, *Conflict in the Academy a Study in the Sociology of Intellectuals* (London: Palgrave, 2015).

a strain of ethical and political philosophy that underpinned much of the discipline for most of the twentieth century: Marxism, in its various forms.⁸ The surge in this post-critical movement led Lucas Thompson in 2018 to ask the very question that this article answers: “How, for instance, might the claims of post-critique scholars alter our approach to Wallace’s work?”⁹

Critique, though, comes in several guises that must first be understood. In what must be its most famous incarnation, critique is used in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant to denote “conditions of possibility”. Hence, Kant’s 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason*, for instance, attempts to schematize the conditions under which knowledge and reason are made possible and the conditions by which they are limited. For example, in the “transcendental aesthetic” portion of his first critique (1781), Kant asks whether it is possible for humans to conceive of any object without time or space. He concludes that it is not.¹⁰ Yet from this Kant reasons that sensory perception is ideational, grafting atop objective realities the preconditions of human experience. In other words, for Kant, time and space are not necessarily properties of reality and objects but are, rather, the conditions of their comprehension by humans. This leads to the famous divide in his work between the thing-in-itself (the noumenon) and the way it is presented to us (the phenomenon).

This Kantian lineage of critique is exemplified in the work of Michel Foucault, whose famous innovation was to examine not the *perceptual* conditions of possibility that structure knowledge and reason, but rather the *historically discrete epistemes* that perform the same function. That is, the transcendental critique of Kant is transformed, in Foucault, into historical critique of thought possibility.¹¹ For discrete

⁸ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁹ Lucas Thompson, “Why a Wallace Studies Journal Now?”, *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, 1.1 (2018), pp. 7–10 (p. 9).

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 155–200.

¹¹ See Colin Koopman, “Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages”, *Foucault Studies*, 8 (2010) <<https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i8.2934>> [accessed 22 July 2010]; and Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

environmental and historical conditions are the object of Foucault's famous citation of Borges in the epigraph to *The Order of Things*: the impossibility, within an epoch, of thinking *that*.¹²

In the literary space, however, it is the Althusserian strain of critique that has most strongly inflected contemporary "critical reading" and "literary critique".¹³ Since 1965, most politico-thematic approaches to the study of literature take a historicist perspective that understands literary objects as ideological by-products of their time. In a similar anti-humanist vein to Foucault's epistemic project, textual presuppositions reveal, Althusser claims, what a text *cannot say* as a result of its ideological positioning within its own time. In this way, and although only an explicit articulation of a set of practices that had been building for some time, "symptomatic reading" was born: a model of reading that conceives of texts as ideological creations with spoken and unspoken components – "sights and oversights" – that can be read critically and reflexively.¹⁴ That is, texts exhibit symptoms – usually contradictions or conceptual difficulties – of the unspoken ideological environment in which they were written. These symptoms are the "*absence of a concept behind a word*" and they become the excavation site of most methodologies in literary studies.¹⁵ As these two metaphors of space put it – a concept *behind* a word and a site of *buried* interpretative treasure to be *dug up* – symptomatic reading poses a text-behind-the-text, a presupposition of "the existence of *two texts*" with a "*different text* present as a necessary absence in the first".¹⁶ This epistemology, in other words, is one in which the effect of producing knowledge is conditioned by structures of ideology and empiricism, which can be detected below the surface of any writing.¹⁷

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹³ The account in this paragraph is derived from the author's book: Martin Paul Eve, *Close Reading With Computers: Textual Scholarship, Computational Formalism, and David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹⁴ Louis Althusser and others, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. by Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015), p. 17.

¹⁵ Althusser and others, p. 32.

¹⁶ Althusser and others, p. 27.

¹⁷ Althusser and others, p. 69.

Although Althusser cites Hegel, Engels and Marx, Spinoza, and even Foucault and Canguilhem as his diverse sources for this method, there is also a sense in which symptomatic reading has a root in Kantian critique.¹⁸ For the model of symptomatic reading is itself an analysis of the possibilities for writing and its reception under ideology. It is a quest to examine the way in which knowledge effects and aesthetic effects produce secondary, mediated, and structured outcomes of readerly and writerly processes. It is also built upon a type of (post-)structuralist linguistics in which chains of signification extend indefinitely from one surface to another depth, which is in itself always another surface. As Althusser puts it, though, this is about the “cognitive appropriation of the real object by the object of knowledge”; the noumenon and the phenomenon.¹⁹ It is about the structuring effects of scientific discourse and form on the production of knowledge. It is a form of critique.

In literary studies, this Althusserian project of critique becomes an ethical and political reading project. Althusser *et al.* turn to Marx as a genetic source of symptomatic reading. This had the effect of providing literary studies with a reading method rooted in the social justice of communism, a justification and rationale for reading literature as an ethical and political activity. The ongoing professionalisation of literary studies sought such an ethical epistemic foundation in order to ground the discipline in legitimacy and political efficacy. As such, symptomatic reading became the bedrock for most of contemporary literary criticism's hermeneutic methods, particularly when seeking politicised readings. Hence, when we read politics and ethics out of texts in the early twenty-first century, it is often within the Althusserian lineage of symptomatic reading that we work, in turn itself a mode rooted in critique.²⁰ From such methods it becomes possible to see new and powerful interpretative possibilities – say, for instance, postcolonial approaches – in the texts-behind-the-text.²¹

¹⁸ Althusser and others, pp. 14–15, 25, 45.

¹⁹ Althusser and others, p. 69.

²⁰ An interesting question to which I do not know the answer is the extent to which Roland Barthes was influenced by *Reading Capital* (1965), which pre-dates his *S/Z* (1970) by several years.

²¹ One might only consider, for instance, the ways in which critique underpins a set of postcolonial

Despite the widespread proliferation and success of critique, there have also been longstanding calls for its abandonment over a thirty-year period, most recently led by Felski.²² As I have already noted, this has not gone unremarked upon in the field of Wallace studies. Such a move represents a turn away from what we traditionally consider “political” or “ethical” reading within literary studies. For it is the claimed predictability of such critical against-the-grain interpretative paradigms and politicized unveilings that has provoked the ire of the anti-critique brigade; it seems to be the routinization of critique to which they object. There are also, though, accusations that the critical reading method is paranoid and Felski’s work places Althusserian symptomatic reading under the primacy of Ricœur’s phrase, the “hermeneutics of suspicion”. This is, for Felski, an attitude that combines “vigilance, detachment, and wariness (suspicion) with identifiable conventions of commentary (hermeneutics)—allowing us to see that critique is as much a matter of affect and rhetoric as of philosophy or politics”.²³ The term is profitable, for Felski, rather as “a stimulus to thought” than as a closely historicised phase within Ricœur’s phenomenology.²⁴

Felski’s text was met with significant attention, both positive and negative, upon its publication and now forms an oft-cited touchstone for contemporary literary studies.²⁵ It is, though, only the latest in a long line of thought that has considered the place of structuring possibilities, unearthed shadow-texts, and ideas of what it means to think “critically” about literary works. Indeed, the space of the “post-critical”

readings, such as Spivak’s widely celebrated essay on Jane Eyre: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism’, *Critical Inquiry*, 12.1 (1985), pp. 243–61.

²² See David Stewart, ‘The Hermeneutics of Suspicion’, *Literature and Theology*, 3.3 (1989), pp. 296–307 (p. 303); Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg, ‘Engaging the Humanities’, *Profession*, 2004, pp. 42–62 (p. 45); Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), pp. 1–21 <<https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.1>>; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 59.

²³ Felski, p. 3.

²⁴ Felski, p. 30.

²⁵ Bruce Robbins, ‘Not So Well Attached’, *PMLA*, 132.2 (2017), pp. 371–76 <<https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2017.132.2.371>>.

is large and diverse. How, then, can one deal with this heterogeneous proliferation of what is meant by “post-criticality”? How can one get to grips with the breadth of recent thought that has appropriated such terminology? In the first instance, I would suggest – and in order to now broach some of these contexts with reference to Wallace – we must turn back to Kant, speculatively.

To begin the literary investigation of this specific post-critical stance, I would note that I am not searching for characters discussing Kant, or sly theoretical side-swipes. For instance, that Schtitt, in *Infinite Jest* (1996), “was educated in pre-Unification Gymnasium under the rather Kanto-Hegelian idea that jr. athletics was basically just training for citizenship” yields to us but few insights into how epistemic philosophies of critique operate within Wallace’s fictional worlds.²⁶ Likewise, that Schtitt “was pushing hard for some mix of theology and the very grim ethics of Kant” in his youth-tennis training programme may provoke a laugh, but the line does little more than to flaunt a supposed erudition without ever really showing us anything about the ethical philosophy of Kant.²⁷ Kant has certainly also featured elsewhere in the scholarship on Wallace. As one example, Jeffrey Severs turns to the ways in which, in “The Suffering Channel” (2004), Wallace presents a romanticized Kantian mythology of “the effortless modern artist”, rooted in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790).²⁸ This, also though, is not the route that I will here take. Instead, I will next turn to issues of ontology and epistemology in *Infinite Jest*’s fêted game of Eschaton.

II. *Infinite Jest*, Playing Games, and Kantian Aesthetics

What if philosophy has got almost everything wrong for the past 240 years? One might think that such a broad and generalised proposition would be unlikely to feature in a work of contemporary philosophy.²⁹ Yet, as a succinct summary of Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (2008),

²⁶ David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), p. 82.

²⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 188.

²⁸ Severs, p. 193.

²⁹ Although it is notable that the early Ludwig Wittgenstein also held such radical revisionist views.

one could do worse. It is also impossible to speak of Wallace within a contemporary anti-Kantian turn – a post-critical turn, that is – without reference to this work.

At the risk of more extended and dense background philosophy, Meillassoux seeks to defend the twofold thesis that “the sensible only exists as a subject’s relation to the world” but that, at the same time, “the mathematicizable properties of the object are exempt from the constraint of such a relation”.³⁰ The reason this is such a difficult task is that, as Meillassoux himself notes, “this thesis is almost certain to appear insupportable to a contemporary philosopher [...] because it is resolutely *pre-critical*”; a thesis that claims to discriminate between the innate properties of the world and those that come about in our *relation to* the world has seemed indefensible “not only since Kant, but even since Berkeley”.³¹ It is not possible, this classical *critical* reasoning would go, for us to think a relationship of the world to thought because, the second it is thought, the relation of thought to the world comes into play. For Meillassoux, this reveals that “the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of *correlation*”, by which he means “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other”.³² This correlation also has other forms of linkage, one of which, significantly for literary studies (and previous forms of language philosophy), is the “language-referent” correlation.³³

Let us take the post-critical stance here (note that Meillassoux uses the phrase “post-critical” to mean everything *after* Kant, *not* everything after Kant *that disregards Kant*). Imagine that we do not believe that thought can comprehend objects without the presence of thought; the logical consequence of Kantian critique – correlationism. What then do we make of the fact that “empirical science is capable of producing [credible] statements about events anterior to the advent of life as

³⁰ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 3.

³¹ Meillassoux, p. 3.

³² Meillassoux, p. 5.

³³ Meillassoux, p. 6.

well as consciousness”?³⁴ This pre-conscious epoch, described by empirical science, is what Meillassoux calls “the ancestral” and the described objects that indicate ancestrality are called “arche-fossils”. Such objects are, under post-critical thought, literally unthinkable without the “codicil of modernity” that “event Y occurred X number of years before the emergence of humans – *for humans*”.³⁵

Meillassoux’s argument to refute correlationism is complex and not wholly accepted. Suffice it to say, though, that it consists in asserting that the only thing that can be totally necessary is contingency (non-necessity). For Slavoj Žižek, “what this means is that, if a being is necessary, then it can always not exist. If, however, a being is radically contingent, then something (contingent) *has* to exist”, a point that he calls “wonderful”.³⁶ Yet, in his view, Meillassoux also misses the key point: “the true problem of correlationism”, Žižek asserts, “is not whether we can reach the In-itself the way it is outside of any correlation to the subject (or the way the Old is outside its perception from the standpoint of the New); but the true problem is to think the New itself ‘in becoming’”.³⁷ In a sense, this is a retrospectively historicized future; the question becomes, from the position of ancestrality, how do we project the future birth of subjectivity?

Mark Currie has also worked on Meillassoux’s challenge of contingency, even as he manages to translate this philosophy into terms that can work for literature – relevant for my reading of Wallace. For Currie, the question that Meillassoux surfaces is the difference between an aleatory variability (when a die has not yet been rolled) and epistemic uncertainty (when the die has been rolled but one does not know the outcome), encapsulated in ontological uncertainty (“a condition of absolute unpredictability, in which events are not only unforeseen, but are in principle unforeseeable”, such as throwing a seven on a six-sided die).³⁸ For, if one

³⁴ Meillassoux, p. 9.

³⁵ Meillassoux, p. 13.

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 628.

³⁷ Žižek, p. 644.

³⁸ Mark Currie, ‘Anticipation/Unexpected’, in *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*, ed. by Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 97–110 (p. 106).

takes Currie's reading of Meillassoux's line that "events always, necessarily, could have happened otherwise", then the totally unexpected, in narratological thinking, is the perfect example of a speculatively realist philosophy that is, in this sense, nonetheless post-critical.³⁹ Translating such matters into narrative terms is complex, for when the reader usually approaches a book, uncertainty is epistemic, rather than aleatory, let alone ontological.

These two takes on Meillassoux nonetheless give us a route to the first post-critical approach in terms of Kantian thought that I wish to broach with respect to Wallace. For the question here is: how does Wallace represent our relationship to objects? Are his worlds places in which the supposed overwhelming solipsisms of his characters betray a correlationism that depends on the necessary presence of the subject (and thus are post-critical in Meillassoux's sense)? Or do ontological uncertainties erupt *ex nihilo* in Wallace's writings, events that truly place him within a speculative frame (and, thus, are almost pre-critical, or post-speculative)?

In *Infinite Jest*, Eschaton is the geopolitical, tennis-derivative game played by the denizens of the Enfield Tennis Academy.⁴⁰ The specific game that is shown to the reader takes place on November 8, Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.⁴¹ The game consists of players stationed on a fictional "map" of several geographical regions with suggestive names spread over four tennis courts – AMNAT (Todd Possalthwaite, Kieran McKenna, LaMont Chu), SOVWAR (Tim Peterson, Ann Kittenplan), REDCHI (unknown players), INDPAK (J. J. Penn), SOUTHAF (Josh Gopnik), and IRLIBSYR (Evan Ingersoll) – while Michael Pemulis, Hal Incandenza, Trevor Axford, Jim Troeltsch, and Jim Struck watch. The "Game Master" is Otis P. Lord, who calculates initial "megatonnage" distribution using the "mean-value theorem for integrals" via

³⁹ Currie, p. 107.

⁴⁰ There are some existing commentaries on Eschaton that are worth citing but that take a different tack to the approach here. See, for instance, Daniel Grausam, *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011); and Iain Williams, "'Something Real American': David Foster Wallace and Authenticity" (unpublished Ph.D., The University of Edinburgh, 2016) <<https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/31007>> [accessed 23 September 2018].

⁴¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 321–42.

“Mathpak Unltd.’s Endstat software”, and the derivative formulas known as “Peemster” and “Halsadick”. Predictably, given the complexity of its setup and the breadth of its imaginative range, the game rapidly descends into chaos.

Eschaton is a humorous set piece. The bathetic plunge from its deadly serious subject matter (nuclear annihilation) to its actuality (young men and boys hitting tennis balls at one another), all situated within an earnest rule-based framework, itself undercut by the propeller-head beanies worn by the Game Master, mean that the Eschaton oscillates between the sublime and the ridiculous. Yet, it is precisely these two poles, overlaid atop one another – the map and the territory, the game and the world, geopolitics and the tennis court, the serious and the amusing – that makes Eschaton a good subject for an investigation of a post-critical aesthetic in the novel. For when we are presented with such overlaid and layered modalities, we can investigate whether the text vies for a *correlation* of the two, a metaphorical representation of Meillassoux’s argument.

The above may be a broad description of Eschaton, but some close attention to the way it is presented can also prove instructive. Eschaton is, in fact, a game that draws in “children in the very earliest stages of puberty and really abstract-capable thought, when one’s allergy to the confining realities of the present is just starting to emerge as weird kind of nostalgia for stuff you never even knew”, an aspect that Wallace glosses with an endnote reading: “This basic phenomenon being what more abstraction-capable post-Hegelian adults call ‘Historical Consciousness.’”.⁴² That is, Eschaton draws in those who seek an a-historicizing fantasy game that offers “a complete disassociation from the realities of the present”, all couched in terms of an idealist history: the precise opposite of critique as presented in literary studies environments. This challenging tension on “reality” vs. “game world” recurs throughout the Eschaton. For instance, REDCHI attempts some INDDIR (Infliction of Death, Destruction, and Incapacitation of Response) on INDDIR, the latter of whom

⁴² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 321–22.

disputes the hit. This results in “an uneasy moment” since “a dispute such as this would never occur in the real God’s real world”.⁴³

This separation of one diegetic world from another is framed in the terms of Alfred Korzybski. When J.J. Penn, playing as INDDAK, decides that the falling snow should affect blast area calculations in the game, Pemulis snaps at him that “It’s snowing on the goddamn map, not the territory, you dick!”.⁴⁴ Indeed, Axford decides, in the game, to take further advantage of Pemulis’s bad mood by asking: “Except is the territory the real world, quote unquote, though!” The back-and forth with Pemulis continues (“The real world’s what the map here stands for!”/“Real-world snow isn’t a factor if it’s falling on the fucking map!”) and so far this appears as just the well-known metafictional game-playing for which much American fiction of Wallace’s predecessors was known.⁴⁵ However, given Wallace’s situation of Eschaton within a post-Hegelian philosophy of history, there is more at stake than a puncturing of the text’s own diegetic layers. This is, instead, the very language-referent relation to which Meillassoux gestured; a question of the interdependence of two or more referential systems and our ability to distinguish between these layers, or otherwise.

In one sense, then, Eschaton metonymically represents a world and its subjects in a “post-critical” (that is: Kantian) frame. For the subjects of the world of Eschaton cannot find consensus on whether phenomena belong to the intra-diegetic world of the game or to the “extra-diegetic” (but intra-diegetic for the reader) world of the tennis academy. Indeed, the snow and the players’ arguments around it constitute a philosophical discourse about idealism, perception, and the inter-relatedness of objects and experience; what Wallace calls, “metatheoretical fuss”. The fact that this is the narratological purpose of the Eschaton game is framed by Wallace through the text’s narrative bias towards Hal, who starts and ends the entire novel and therefore has a type of narrative priority.⁴⁶ For Hal finds “the real-snow/unreal-snow snag

⁴³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 333.

⁴⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 333.

⁴⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 334.

⁴⁶ Giuliana Adamo, ‘Twentieth-Century Recent Theories on Beginnings and Endings of Novels’, *Annali d’Italianistica*, 18 (2000), pp. 49–76.

in the Eschaton extremely abstract but somehow way more interesting than the Eschaton itself” and this is, of course, the point.⁴⁷ Indeed this narrative slippage from Hal’s perspective to the general-narrated position becomes clear when the narrator’s own voice tells the reader, after Kittenplan is hit in the head by a tennis ball, that “No Eschaton Combatant has ever intentionally struck another Combatant’s physical person with a 5-megaton thermonuclear weapon”.⁴⁸ Here there is a direct metaleptic violation, straight from the narrator, of the two senses of Eschaton. For players’ “physical person[s]” do not actually exist within the in-game frame to which the “5-megaton thermonuclear weapon” (a tennis ball, in reality) refers.

In one sense, this is just another example of a metafictional practice that Wallace inherited from his near-term forebears, Pynchon, DeLillo, and others.⁴⁹ Metaleptic slippage is one of the alienation techniques that a generation of postmodern writers used to “disturb, to say the least, the distinction between levels” within a narrative.⁵⁰ For instance, in Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, released almost contemporaneously with *Infinite Jest*, a sub-narrative of the “ghastly fop” initially appears as a nested story told by a character in the main level of the text. Mid-way through the tale, however, the main characters re-appear within the *mise en abyme* and the narrative continues, presenting textual slippage.⁵¹ Marie-Laure Ryan separates such metalepsis into two discrete categories: rhetorical (via Genette) and ontological (via Brian McHale), of which it would seem that Wallace would here fall into the former category and Pynchon’s example into the latter.⁵² However, Wallace’s particular violation of the diegetic levels performs both rhetorical and ontological functions.

⁴⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 335.

⁴⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 336.

⁴⁹ For more on this, see Graham Foster, ‘A Deep Insider’s Elegiac Tribute: The Work of Don DeLillo in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*’, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 4.2 (2016) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.127>>.

⁵⁰ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 88.

⁵¹ Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), pp. 511–41.

⁵² Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, *Electronic Mediations*, v. 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 246–48.

This dual function occurs because Eschaton can, in fact, be read as a philosophical discourse on the ability of thought to think reality discretely from thought. The set piece fields two opposing camps against one another: the naïve, pre-critical realists who claim, perhaps in an antagonistic spirit that it “kind of looks like real-world-type snow from here” while Pemulis, the critical voice, notes that “[i]t’s only real-world snow if it’s already in the scenario!”⁵³ In this case, the “scenario” is the interlink between the real world and its representation within game space; it is the cognitive, shaping bridge of thought that makes possible the manifold of the game. For it is the inviolable “delimiting boundaries” that function as “Eschaton’s very life-blood”; the separation of spaces into representation and represented that constitutes the core of the critical spirit.⁵⁴ The violation of the delimitation as a type of post-critical, speculative realism (as in Meillassoux) is viewed by Hal – who nonetheless professes an interest in the *critical* “map-not-territory equivocatory horseshit”, as Pemulis terms it – as a more interesting line of debate. Otis P. Lord, in his role as game master finally enacts the destruction of Eschaton’s critical possibility.

Indeed, Pemulis is the critical (as in post-Kantian) figure *par excellence*. He speaks of the axiomatic and even “preaxiomatic” elements of Eschaton that render its existence possible. Pemulis even worries that Lord’s interventions into the conditions of possibility of the game could “very possibly compromise Eschaton’s map for all time”.⁵⁵ Pemulis is also perceived to have a “power of correction over Lord’s calculations and mandate”, presumably to ensure, as it does, that no instances of naïve, pre-critical realism re-seep into the game. After all, as we are told, the degree of “feel for realism var[ies] from kid to kid”.⁵⁶

The philosophical debates that puncture the critical spirit of the game are not meaningless, though. For, Wallace writes, “it is not a matter of the principle of thing,

⁵³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 334.

⁵⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 335.

⁵⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 338.

⁵⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 327.

ever, in Eschaton”.⁵⁷ It is the “animating realism” here that is crucial to mapping Eschaton’s relationship to a critical spirit.⁵⁸ The “realism” here “depends on buying the artifice of 1300 m.² of composition tennis court representing the whole rectangular projection of the planet earth”.⁵⁹ Yet, what is meant by the term “realism” in this context? It is clearly supposed to refer to the ability of the game’s participants to envisage themselves within the *game* world. That is, “realism” in this context – which is also a literary context – consists of the mind’s ability to structure a space into its own referential coordinates; realism is a critical, not pre-critical, realism.⁶⁰ The philosophical debate in Eschaton is about the ability of a world beyond this mind-construct to penetrate such a realism; the conditions of imaginative (substituting for sensory) possibility. While this only goes one level deep – there is no question, at least not here, of whether the map is also a territory that can be burst – the possibility of recursion is embedded in *Infinite Jest*, seen most clearly in none other than the Eschaton guru, Mike Pemulis’s, answering machine: “This is Mike Pemulis’s answering machine’s answering machine; Mike Pemulis’s answering machine regrets being unavailable to take a first-order message for Mike Pemulis”.⁶¹ In this way, the game of Eschaton at once signals its enclosure within a world shaped by Kantian (transcendental) aesthetics but also rehearses the philosophical debates that have accompanied such thinking and its potential undoing.

⁵⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 328.

⁵⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 333.

⁵⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 333.

⁶⁰ Of course, there is a lengthy debate around Wallace and realism, sparked by James Wood’s controversial labelling of Wallace and others as a ‘hysterical realism’. See James Wood, ‘Human, All Too Inhuman’, *The New Republic*, 24 July 2000 <<https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman>> [accessed 23 September 2018]; Jeffrey Staiger, ‘James Wood’s Case Against “Hysterical Realism” and Thomas Pynchon’, *Antioch Review*, 66.4 (2008), pp. 634–54.

⁶¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 854. For more on recursion in the novel, see Eva Dolo, ‘Too Much Fun – Endnotes in Infinite Jest’, in *Symbolism 15*, ed. by Rüdiger Ahrens and Klaus Stierstorfer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 75–100 (p. 86) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110449075-006>>; D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, First Edition (New York: Viking Adult, 2012), p. 183.

Eschaton is, further, a perfect metafictional representation of *Infinite Jest* as a novel within a critical reading paradigm. Composed of multiple layers of reality, the game-within-a-novel complicates our ability to read the “physical instantiations of metaphysical states” towards which Severs gestures.⁶² The critical reader might here retort, for instance, that the “physical” states that Severs mentions are not actually physical, but literal; they are a representation within an aesthetic form – a well-known existing argument to which I cannot fully do justice here but that might bear additional exploration elsewhere. While this is in some ways an already over-rehearsed point, the critical question is shown by Wallace to be one of infinite regress.

However, is Eschaton post-critical in the sense laid out by Meillassoux? Are there objects that are *really* known within the world of the novel? Certainly, there is a mathematical basis for Wallace’s tennis game (remember: certain mathematical coordinates are the only things that Meillassoux proposes can escape the correlationist circle). Otis P. Lord – the character whom Pemulis accuses of potentially destroying the map-world boundaries – is described as a “calculus phenom”.⁶³ Further, elements of the game are defined with mathematical precision, such as the distribution of “megatonnage” using a “continuous non-negative function on the interval [a,b]”.⁶⁴ It is also the case that, when Possalthwaite bewails the fact that “nothing’s true”, Pemulis comforts him with the advice that “you can trust math”.⁶⁵ These instances within Eschaton, though, do not describe any reality outside of the map. For it is not just any mathematics to which Meillassoux turns, but those that can produce meaningful statements on real-world objects – even those outside of correlationist possibility – and thereby invalidate the arche-fossil argument. Wallace’s mathematics are the *opposite* of the speculative realist mathematical reality descriptions; they describe the fictional (that is, post-critical, non-realist) world. For Wallace, mathematics here describe an ideational reality, not a realist environment. Furthermore, even working

⁶² Severs, p. 16.

⁶³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 322.

⁶⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, n. 122.

⁶⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, n. 324.

within the diegetic “reality” of the novel, the types of description are not usually dimensional coordinates, but rather game rules and variables that are calculated. Certainly, Wallace’s mathematics and their relationship to post-critical philosophies deserve further exploration, but they are not, in *Eschaton*, abundant.

Instead, if we are to find elements of a speculative realist philosophy in *Eschaton*, we need a metaphorical literary analogy that could identify such a stance: that which Andrew Gibson calls a “post-correlationist aesthetics”.⁶⁶ This aesthetic is not concerned, as one might suppose, with undoing the correlationist principles of linguistic and subjective referentiality that have dominated the history of the novel (it is neither Jane Austen quoting Cowper’s “myself creating what I saw” nor Thomas Pynchon questioning whether one should “project a world”).⁶⁷ For Gibson, instead, this aesthetic would privilege object relations within various types of formalism (which Gibson takes to mean networks, patterns, arrangements, repetitions, etc. rather than any reference to Russian Formalism and other extant formalist schools).⁶⁸ There is also, for Gibson’s reading of Tom McCarthy, a type of “mortalism” in this new aesthetic that registers a post-anthropocentric world through a focus on death, even when that world is represented through that most-anthropocentric of media, the novel.

There is a case to be made that Wallace’s *Eschaton* game could fit within such a post-correlationist aesthetic. It is, after all, named for the end of the world; at least as far as humans are concerned. The possibility of nuclear warfare that the game-world depicts is the clearest event-point after which the world might become permanently post-anthropocentric. Certainly, also, with its imagined-community nation state abbreviations and their interrelations, one could make a claim that *Eschaton* embodies the type of formalism to which Gibson gestures.

⁶⁶ Andrew Gibson, ‘New Inhumanisms: Tom McCarthy and Speculative Realism’, in *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays*, ed. by Dennis Duncan (Canterbury: Gylphi, 2016), pp. 227–46 (p. 234).

⁶⁷ Gibson, p. 238; Jane Austen, *Emma* (London: Richard Bentley & Sons, 1882), p. 295; Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 56.

⁶⁸ See also Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Ultimately, though, there is a difficult question at work here when we speak of the representation of complex philosophical arguments within literary works. With Kantian correlationism, it seems clear that Eschaton can be made to fit; the relationship of one level of reality to another via an intermediating scenario is consistent. With arguments about time, the arche fossil, and post-anthropocentrism, though, it seems a push to find Wallace's work moving in this direction, despite its mathematicization. The conversion to narrative seems too "lossy" to accurately reflect the underlying philosophical claim. There is also a historicist challenge here, since the speculative turn had not really reached any prominence at the time of *Infinite Jest's* publication. This is not to say that such ideas were not already circulating in philosophical circles, it is rather to note that if one sought any historicist basis for finding speculative realism within Wallace's work, one is faced with a timeline problem.

As might be expected when grafting this philosophical stance on top of a novel, then, Wallace's congruence with speculative realist philosophies is patchy, but nonetheless present. There is, particularly in the Eschaton game, a sense in which a transcendence of the self – core to critical philosophies – is key: "You seek", Wallace writes, in tennis, "to vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits make the game possible".⁶⁹ The scenario, for Wallace, is at once one in which games – as maps or synecdoches of the world – are defined by limits or conditions of possibility (whether rules or anthropocentric bodily constraints) but in which we seek to violate those constraints, much as various modes of post-critical thought have striven to transcend the correlationist circle through speculative materialist approaches. It is this struggle to transcend the self that leads to a post-critical modality – in the sense of surpassing Kant's critical thought – within Wallace's fiction.

III. From Philosophy to Politics and Ethics

Supposing that we can detect, in Wallace's metaphors, a hint of a post-critical (as in speculative realist) sensibility in the philosophical sense, how far does this correlate with the post-critical mode as it is used in contemporary literary studies?

⁶⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 84.

Certainly, the two spaces are connected by their shared underpinning: “conditions of possibility” and a turn away from examining their buried presence. Yet, Felski’s broadside is aimed more squarely at political and ethical readings within literary studies. In particular, as just one example, Felski tells us, “the Marxist critic warms to the utopian yearnings and subversive stirrings in the depths of bourgeois novels”.⁷⁰ Such a method, for Felski – but also as Adorno put it – reads “out of works that it has invested with an air of concretion nothing but its own theses”.⁷¹

In the final part of this article I turn to the problems of paralysis and (non-) decision-making in Wallace’s non-fiction writing, a core political and ethical concern of the post-critical movement. How might we read critically the instances of literary-political post-critique in Wallace? To put this otherwise: what are the conditions of possibility for political action in Wallace’s texts? (And how do we reconcile Wallace’s own potential personal-political hideousness, particularly with regard to misogyny and sexuality, with such a stance?⁷²) Wallace’s novels are saturated with characters who are unable to *act*; they think, critically, often, to the point of non-action, such as in *Infinite Jest*’s “analysis-paralysis” or in *The Pale King*’s (2011) “kind of paralysis that resulted from Sylvanshine’s reflecting on the logistics of getting to the Peoria 047 REC”.⁷³ The latter of these examples even sits within a sentence that runs to approximately 1,200 words, an aesthetic structure of deferral and near irresolution. Counter-intuitively in Wallace then, given that critical thought is so often branded as political and ethical, such critical thought results in an inability to translate that meta-ethical thought into action.

This stance of inaction can be seen, though, as standing in line with the formal aesthetic of much of Wallace’s oeuvre, which tends towards an overloading and

⁷⁰ Felski, p. 27.

⁷¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 447.

⁷² For more on this, see Hayes-Brady; the forthcoming Edward Jackson, *David Foster Wallace’s Toxic Sexuality: Hideousness, Neoliberalism, Spermatics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); and the chapter in Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now, Post 45* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016) on Wallace.

⁷³ David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (London: Penguin, 2012).

accumulation; that is, a temporal structure of deferral, rather than decision-making. Indeed, confirming the arguments made by others in the *aesthetic* realm, I argue that it seems clear that Wallace's writing project is also one of procrastination against *political* and *ethical* decision, a cumulative temporal unfolding that pushes all final decision making beyond the formal bounds of Wallace's novelistic frames. In a sense, this infinite deferral has been well noted by other critics. Most significantly, Clare Hayes-Brady has made a protracted study of the fact that Wallace's novels all feel, in one way or another, *unfinished*.⁷⁴ That is, in their very authorship, Wallace's texts have been said to exhibit a "resistance to closure" that, for Hayes-Brady, actually presents an instance of generative failure.⁷⁵ This is the "inevitable continuation" of *Infinite Jest*, in which the reader must speculate on the action that takes place after the final pages.⁷⁶

Yet, in another sense, the aleatory variability to which Currie referred, *there is no action after the final pages* of a book. As with the die that has not been rolled, these are the pages that have not – and will not ever have – been written, barring the launch of a Wallace fanfiction community. The action within the non-pages beyond the end of *Infinite Jest* is purely speculative from the readerly perspective, as is the hanging closing non-"word" of *The Broom of the System*.⁷⁷ At the same time, however, this non-space of writing is a *structured non-space*. It is not a space of ontological uncertainty, because the preceding novel determines particular possibilities of its outcome. This is a way of saying that Wallace's novels provide a *critical* frame of possibility for imagined future projections beyond their book-space.

The clearest instance, for me, of Wallace's problematic political and ethical deferrals, though, can be found in the unlikely space of his non-fiction review of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*.⁷⁸ Certainly, Wallace deals

⁷⁴ Hayes-Brady.

⁷⁵ Hayes-Brady, p. 22.

⁷⁶ Hayes-Brady, p. 39.

⁷⁷ David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System*, Contemporary American Fiction (New York, N.Y.: Penguin, 1987), p. 467.

⁷⁸ In this article, I refer throughout to the version of this essay that was published as David Foster Wallace, 'Authority and American Usage', in *Consider the Lobster* (London: Abacus, 2007), pp. 66–127.

explicitly with the complex and cyclical politics of language in this essay, examining variously the prescriptivist and descriptivist perspectives on definition and linguistic evolution, even if critics have found his summary of this aspect lacking.⁷⁹ It is not, though, this matter to which I finally here wish to turn. It is, rather, Wallace's remarks on abortion within this piece that are the most politically problematic.

Wallace's personal politics are tricky to define but recent essays have identified a political conservatism within his life.⁸⁰ Further, D.T. Max has claimed that Wallace voted for Ronald Reagan and supported the independent candidate, Ross Perot, against Bill Clinton and George Bush Sr. in 1992.⁸¹ Yet, the debate rages. Some critics, such as Jeffrey Severs, have sought to salvage Wallace's oeuvre from neoliberal tarnish, while others, such as Edward Jackson, argue that Wallace's political colours were more nailed to the mast in his work than was previously thought.⁸²

Wallace's own political orientation is relevant to a discussion of his treatment of abortion in "Authority and American Usage" since he explicitly states, in that essay, "that [he] has encountered only one serious objection to this Pro Life + Pro Choice position", which concerns "certain facts about [Wallace], the person who's developed and maintained it".⁸³ Notwithstanding, then, the difficult positionality of Wallace, the argument presented in the essay is that a form of simultaneous doublethink is required wherein "the only really coherent" position is to be both "Pro Life" and "Pro Choice", at the same time.⁸⁴ Wallace hinges this thesis on the vitalist tenet that "the question of defining human life *in utero* is hopelessly vexed" and that, under this situation of "irresolvable doubt", "it is better not to kill". At the same time, Wallace resorts to an individualist (or even, one might posit, neoliberal-esque) screed that,

⁷⁹ See Alexis Burgess, 'How We Ought to Do Things with Words', in *Gesturing toward Reality. David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 5–18.

⁸⁰ James Santel, 'On David Foster Wallace's Conservatism', *The Hudson Review*, 2014 <<http://hudsonreview.com/2014/02/on-david-foster-wallaces-conservatism/>> [accessed 14 August 2015].

⁸¹ Max, *passim*.

⁸² Severs; Jackson.

⁸³ Wallace, 'Authority and American Usage', p. 83.

⁸⁴ Wallace, 'Authority and American Usage', p. 82.

under the same situation of doubt, he has “neither the legal nor the moral right to tell another person what to do”. The paragraph ends with one of several of Wallace’s indirect stereotyped attacks on feminisms, in which he interpellates a fictional man-eater who brands him “Just Another Shithead Male”.⁸⁵

There is, of course, a long school of post-structuralist thought from the 1960s onwards that argues against reductivist binary thinking on ethical and political grounds, most notably stemming from Jacques Derrida’s influential work on presence. The holding of two beliefs simultaneously that are opposed to one another indeed seems based on such a premise. Yet, is this not, to some extent, the very “equivocatory horseshit” to which Pemulis referred in the Eschaton game? For, as Derrida claimed, it was his belief that “deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible”.⁸⁶

This is not just an excuse to throw stones at deconstruction from an ethical glass house. Such ideas of non-contradiction run to the core of a post-critical philosophy. Meillassoux notes, for instance, that contemporary correlationist philosophers must take care not to justify “the universality of non-contradiction”.⁸⁷ Yet, this is precisely what Meillassoux goes on to do, arguing that “a contradictory entity is absolutely impossible, because if an entity was contradictory, it would be necessary. But a necessary entity is absolutely impossible; consequently, so too is contradiction”.⁸⁸ Whether a “belief” can be construed as an “entity” in an analogous sense to Meillassoux’s is another matter. However, it remains of interest that both Kantian and speculative realist philosophies adhere to the principle of non-contradiction, which Wallace’s essay violates.

⁸⁵ Contrast this with the more neutral invented slander of the Pro Lifers – “Satan’s Minion” – and the gendered aspect of Wallace’s critique becomes clear.

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, ‘Psyche: Inventions of the Other’, in *Reading De Man Reading*, ed. by Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), LIX, 25–65 (p. 36) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt3t9>> [accessed 23 September 2018].

⁸⁷ Meillassoux, p. 72.

⁸⁸ Meillassoux, p. 110.

It is also clear, though, that Wallace's argument is an *indefinite* deferral of ethical decision making on his part, since the doubt he has is branded as "irresolvable", even while he timestamps this doubt to "[a]s of 4 March 1999". And, indeed, it is "irresolvable doubt" on which Wallace's argument for ethical inaction stands. For, notably, Wallace displaces ethical decision making onto others, "especially if that person feels s/he is *not* in doubt". Doubt, then, but also affect; "feels". Despite the rigorously logical nature of Wallace's argument, non-intervention turns on structures of feeling and the belief, or otherwise, in a vitalist notion of sanctity of life.

Yet, there are also some extremely questionable comparisons made around this affective structure of belief in Wallace's essay. For instance, religious belief is held by Wallace to be as strong a belief as a woman's own belief about her bodily autonomy, the "ideological or religious convictions" that Wallace says "override reason" and lead to a "wacko dogmatic position". Knowing the mind of God here is equated with the embodied ("ideological") knowledge that women might have of their own bodies. In actual fact, though, if Wallace followed his own logic more thoroughly, he might see that his argument for non-intervention on the Pro-Choice side is stronger. For when the argument is reduced to participation within a liberal spirit of "democratic tolerance", the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision gave the outcome of the US's constitutional stance on abortion (which is not to say, of course, that ethics and the law equate to one another).⁸⁹ Since Wallace couches his argument in terms of a democratic spirit, though – and since he also notes that he has not the "legal" authority to override the Pro Choicer's stance (but he does not note that the Pro Lifers' stance has already been democratically, legally denied) – Wallace's argument is, ironically, more in favour of the Pro Life stance, even while it purports a balanced neutrality.

To conclude this article and to move beyond ideas of post-critique in Wallace, in such an argumentative setup, one that attempts forever to defer and displace ethical action, we can see how Wallace has provided only a partial set of the conditions

⁸⁹ For more on the literary contexts of abortion with respect to *Roe vs. Wade*, see the recent Melanie McGovern and Martin Paul Eve article, 'Information Labour and Shame in Farmer and Chevli's *Abortion Eve*', *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 9.1 (2019), 6 <<https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.158>>.

of possibility for decision making within his philosophical and novelistic worlds. Wallace's argumentative frame is only partially critical, non-exhaustively framing the off-the-page conclusion that it is supposed to inspire. This is the same problem, though, that could be seen in the depiction of the Eschaton game in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace's environment never gets beyond the ideational; his critique always remains partial in its deferred framing. And while, in both these cases, there is no real outcome of nuclear war, no true eschaton, David Foster Wallace remains a doubtful moral guide – one I have not here sought to redeem – who structures his advice through conditions of *impossibility*, through partial critique.

Acknowledgements

The work on this article was made possible by a Philip Leverhulme Prize from the Leverhulme Trust, grant number PLP-2019-023.



Competing Interests

The author is an editor and CEO at the Open Library of Humanities. As such, the peer-review process on this article has been handled independently by the OLH's Editorial Officer.

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How to cite this article: Eve, M P 2020 Equivocatory Horseshit: Post-Correlationist Aesthetics and Post-Critical Ethics in the Works of David Foster Wallace. *Open Library of Humanities*, 6(1): 8, pp. 1–29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.538>

Published: 24 March 2020

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