"Quality time" with David Foster Wallace : The Pale King's emotional economy

"Quality Time" with David Foster Wallace: *The Pale King's* Emotional Economy

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David Foster Wallace's posthumous *The Pale King* (2011) is often read as an insightful commentary on the wide-ranging economic and ideological changes felt in the post-Fordist workplace throughout the 1980s, as a novel whose deliberation of bureaucratic structures, civic virtue, and concrete labor may defy capitalism's contemporary emphasis on flexibility. However, the text's interest in the *emotional* complications arising from this process warrants more attention. This chapter brings two disconnected strains of Wallace Studies into dialogue by combining an analysis of the novel's underlying emotional economy with a historicization of Wallace's programmatic "New Sincerity." Throughout *The Pale King*, a palpable authorial persona mandates his readers to labor through the incoherent text. In exchange, he offers a sense of "sincere" compassion and intimacy by addressing his middle-class readership's anxieties about an increasingly contingent labor market. As this chapter argues, *The Pale King* speaks to the intersubjective complexities of its readers' daily lives and offers narrative "quality time" as a form of acknowledgment for their intellectual labor. This perspective firstly helps to explore certain affinities between Wallace's writing and post-Fordist management techniques and, secondly, contextualize its remarkable commercial success and critical acclaim.

Keywords: New Sincerity, post-Fordism, emotion, bureaucracy, David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*

Set in an Internal Revenue Service (IRS) office complex in the spring of 1985, David Foster Wallace's posthumous *The Pale King* (2011; henceforth *TPK*) deliberates on the momentous post-Fordist transformation gripping the U.S. at the time, as well as on the individual and institutional consequences that went along with it. *TPK* emphasizes two socio-economic implications of its setting. On the one side, an ominous "Spackman Initiative" channels the spirit of the bureaucracy-loathing Reagan administration through its propagation of "an increasing anti- or post-bureaucratic mentality" (81 n19); the reader learns that "the question was whether and to what extent the IRS should be operated like a for-profit business" (85). On the other side, advanced computation threatens the job security of the novel's IRS employees. Ranging from dry tax code to confessional narrative, the fragmentary novel conveys both abstract tedium and human contingency in an institutional setting. It is no surprise then that the novel is often read as a commentary on the economic and ideological upheavals throughout the 1980s. Established perspectives on *TPK* interpret its interest in bureaucracy as an artistic statement on neoliberal governance (Godden and Szalay), as recovering a sense of humanism amidst the bureaucratic sublime (Boswell; Severs), or even as outlining the possible shape of a present-day communist novel (Shapiro). Though the criticism is wide-ranging, many scholars understand *TPK's* focus on the potential links between bureaucratic structures, civic virtue, and rewarding labor as resistance to contemporary capitalism's mandate of total flexibility.

While the following argument has an economic focus as well, the emphasis lies on a different and frequently misrepresented exchange system in Wallace's writing. In addition to its exploration of the economic transformation of U.S. American society, the novel shows an acute awareness of the growing instrumentalization of emotions in both private and professional contexts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In fact, *TPK* performatively deliberates the interpersonal adjustments mandated by this process through its careful mediation of the (implied) relationship between reader and author. By combining economic criticism through an analysis of *TPK's* underlying emotional economy with Wallace's reputation as spearheading "New Sincerity," this chapter brings two disconnected strains of Wallace Studies into dialogue. As will be demonstrated, the writer's authorial persona mandates the readers to establish meaning in his incoherent novel.[1] In exchange, he offers a sense of *sincere*

[1] As a posthumous novel, *TPK* begs the question of what it would have looked like if Wallace had finished it. While this can of course only be answered in a speculative fashion,

intimacy by competently acknowledging the anxieties created by an increasingly contingent labor market. Through this narrative form of "emotional labor" (Hochschild), *TPK's* rhetoric evokes and performs certain dynamics of "emotional capitalism" (Illouz). This finding suggests that Wallace's complaints about industrial society's alienating tendencies conceal the fact that his texts excel at navigating this society's communicative challenges.

This chapter first historicizes Wallace's well-known concern with irony and sincerity in the post-Fordist context; it then discusses one of *TPK's* most prominent characters—"David Wallace," who claims to be the author—and eventually analyzes the labor of reading *TPK*. As will be shown, the novel's thematic focus, its formal incoherence, and Wallace's relationship to the reader converge in a rather conservative poetics about the value of tedious work, an insight that troubles interpretations praising *TPK's* subversive potential.

New Sincerity's Emotional Labor

Adam Kelly's seminal argument regarding Wallace and "New Sincerity" helps to explore the writer's emphatic relationship to the reader. Kelly understands Wallace's interest in the time-honored category of sincerity as evolutionary, meaning that his (re)turn to sincerity does not resurrect simple surface/depth models. Instead, it is the outcome of a careful study of postmodernist fiction and a media-saturated society ("Wallace" 134), both of which, according to Wallace, came to be corrupted by hegemonic irony. For Kelly, Wallace reconfigures the "writer-reader relationship" and preserves "a love of truth, a truth now associated with the possibility of a reconceived, and renewed, sincerity" (146) so that author and reader are not merely implied. Instead, "[t]he text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time" ("New Sincerity" 206). But how does one successfully convey sincerity in a culture which, according to Wallace's lament, is dominated by ironic detachment and dishonesty?

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it is clear that Wallace not only left an unfinished novel in the sense that he did not live to finalize it. Much like the works he published during his lifetime, *TPK* mandates its readers to put in their share of work. Wallace's editor, Michael Pietsch, reports in a note preceding the novel how Wallace "referred to the novel as 'tornadic' or having a 'tornado feeling,'" (xii) indicating both force and pace. This guiding imagery helps to explain the text's fragmentation, for its middle is comparatively empty. *TPK* has no clear protagonists, but numerous characters surrounding the IRS. In addition, many characters do not interact but merely orbit the novel's focal point side by side.

New Sincerity writers are often seen as not only conscious of the various economic and cultural structures jeopardizing any attempt at sincerity, but as drawing explicit attention to the effects of these influences on their own writing (Kelly, "New Sincerity"; Konstantinou). Consequently, their artistic success depends on the courage to try nevertheless; to give a persuading *performance*. Conventional definitions frame sincerity as "the performance of an inner state on one's outer surface so that others can witness it" (van Alphen et al. 3), a notion remarkably similar to "emotional labor," which requires one "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild 7).[2] This link helps to explore sincerity's resurgence against the backdrop of changing labor demands in recent decades. When the post-Fordist transformation in the U.S. moved jobs from the factory to offices, shops, and the service sector, demands on the workforce changed accordingly. C. Wright Mills's early prediction of a "shift from skills with things to skills with persons" is borne out by more recent scholarship (182). The influential sociologist Eva Illouz describes the gradual convergence of economic and emotional spheres during the 20th century. This development is exemplified by the tacit job requirement of "emotional competence" (214), meaning the skilled negotiation of the perpetually changing emotional disposition and affective dynamics of oneself and others.[3] When the labor market treats empathy as a valuable soft skill, sincerity becomes a similar asset.

"Quality Time" with the "Author"

In the post-Fordist context, Wallace's grappling with sincerity thus appears as a timely challenge to the emotional chill associated with postmodern aesthetics and industrial modernity's labor regimes. Whereas postmodern irony shares its reliance on cooled-down affect with Fordist

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[2] Arlie Russel Hochschild's groundbreaking *The Managed Heart* assumes the "authentic" self to be gradually lost through estranging emotional labor, a view that must be questioned after countless scholars of the performative turn have stressed the importance of *practice* to the constitution of the self. Both van Alphen et al. and Kelly recognize the problems with this surface/depth dichotomy, but observe a similar, though certainly more complicated, opposition in the lived reality of many—and in Wallace's writing.

[3] Adapting Pierre Bourdieu, Illouz describes "emotional capital" to stratify society by showing how members of the working class are inhibited from rising to management positions in part because they have only restricted access to the therapeutic "field" in which they could develop an instrumental "ability to understand others and to handle human relations in general" (69, 222–235).

labor principles, sincerity's urge to reveal yourself speaks to both emotional capitalism's paradoxical order to *be yourself* at work (Fleming and Sturdy; Illouz) as well as the current valorization of singularity (Reckwitz). Correspondingly, a sense of intimacy can emerge with the promise of mutual understanding and affection when Wallace's reader, the addressee of this sincere rhetoric, perceives "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" in his texts (Trilling 2). Notably, its emphatic emotionality dialectically ties New Sincerity (further) to the control—indeed rationalization—of emotions. Its reflexivization of cooled-down affect might enable a "thawing," but because only a *strategic* rhetoric of emotions can work toward this end, it simultaneously represents a form of instrumentalization. Since this reflexive trap offers no escape, New Sincerity writing cannot be blamed for a failure to achieve the aporia of "pure" emotions. But neither should its self-presentation be taken at face value, as is not unusual within debates about New Sincerity.

Today, the intimacy promised by New Sincerity frequently comes in the form of "quality time." The OED defines this post-Fordist term—its first listed citation dates from 1972—as "time spent in a worthwhile or dedicated manner," for example, time spent with one's family. Quality time's antagonist, "real time," in turn signifies the apparent coincidence of an event with its registration, processing, and representation through information technology. In contrast to such technological velocity, quality time suggests the "intimacy" of "analogue, face-to-face, intersubjective attention" (McGurl 213). The more dominant real time restricts and conditions quality time, but conversely also prompts a growing demand for respite. Although an accelerated society is "hostile to the pleasant longueurs of human intimacy, let alone serious reading" (218), literature offers one way to evade the bustle of real time and indulge in a moment of rest and comfort. Of course, not every kind of literature is geared toward this effect, and Wallace's exacting texts themselves do not appear comforting at first. However, his invitation to "a kind of intimate conversation between two consciences" clearly responds to this transformed demand for intimacy (qtd. in Lipsky 289). As will be shown, the offered quality time is dialectically tied to (an aesthetic rendering of) real time and conditioned by readerly labor.

TPK contains numerous passages intended to evoke intimacy through intricate descriptions of the emotionally charged situations and contradictions that the knowledge workers of the American middle class endure. As is common for Wallace's oeuvre, instrumentalized interiorities, self-conscious feedback loops, and a sense of alienation plague many of the novel's characters, virtually all of whom are IRS bureaucrats and helpless

when it comes to the management of such tensions. The novel offers plenty of (inter)personal breakdowns: before a second character is introduced, the reader observes over twenty-eight pages how personnel manager Claude Sylvanshine's self-consciousness spirals into a nervous breakdown. Conversely, the communicative insecurities of Chris Fogle render his digressive conversion story from young "wastoid" to responsible accountant both incoherent and unreasonably long—at 101 pages, his tale amounts to a self-contained novella full of redundancies; and IRS trainee David Cusk's compulsive mental feedback loops about his fear of sweating only exacerbate his problem.

"David Wallace" has similar communicative problems. Though he can express himself adequately, he is hard-pressed to explain the sublime bureaucratic forces determining every aspect of his life. The character first appears in the novel's ninth chapter, "Author's Foreword," wherein he claims to be "the real author [...] not some abstract persona" (68). As the novel's most prominent character, not only due to his urgent claims of non-fictionality, "Wallace" states that "[t]his book is really true" and maintains that "[t]he only bona fide 'fiction' here is the copyright page's disclaimer" (69–70). In the three supposedly autobiographical chapters about his stint as an IRS rote worker, "Wallace" addresses the reader directly and relies on an intimate rhetoric that sets itself apart from *TPK's* abstract chapters on legal reform and tax codes.

In the conventional understanding, intimacy thrives on the least possible mediation. But "Wallace's" insight that he "obviously need[s] to explain" his paradoxical claim to authorship reflects New Sincerity's self-awareness (69). Advising his readers to "flip back and look at the book's legal disclaimer," he states:

> I need you to read it, the disclaimer, and to understand that its initial 'The characters and events in this book...' includes this very Author's Foreword. In other words, this Foreword is defined by the disclaimer as itself fictional, meaning that it lies within the area of special legal protection established by that disclaimer. I need this legal protection in order to inform you that what follows is, in reality, not fiction at all, but substantially true and accurate. That—*The Pale King* is, in point of fact, more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story. (69)

The intimate appeal of "Wallace's" narrative is facilitated by an acknowledgment of various layers of mediation and the character's request for help. Though "there's always a kind of unspoken contract between a book's author and its reader" (75), "Wallace" seeks to transcend such arrangements. He "need[s] you," the reader, to flip to the

front of the book, and the "special [...] protection" he seeks exceeds mere legal matters. "Wallace" is desperate for the comfort that the earnest reciprocity between reader and "writer" can facilitate. Indeed, he finds "these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome, too" (69) and admits his dependence on, to recall Kelly again, "a particular reader at a particular place and time" ("New Sincerity" 206). Much like the empirical author's nonfiction, the "Wallace" chapters contain numerous lengthy footnotes in which the character emphasizes his lack of autonomy. At one point, he apologizes for a vague sentence, tellingly about his presumed "veracity" and the "mutual contract" between him and the reader, stating that it "is the product of much haggling and compromise with the publisher's legal team" (75, 75 fn. 10). In other similar gestures, "Wallace" seeks to establish his credibility by addressing the misleading qualities of human memory and some of his editorial choices. The description of his commute to the IRS is complemented, for example, by a note attesting to the difficulty of taking "coherent notes in a moving auto" (278 fn. 25).

Through such metafictional play, Wallace—the empirical author—imitates the alienating tendencies and struggles of a writer's work environment during the publishing industry's "Conglomerate Era" (Sinykin). That *TPK's* "Foreword" is not found at the book's beginning, but, due to "yet another spasm of last-minute caution on the part of the publisher," has "been moved seventy-nine pages into the text," underscores his self-presentation as being helplessly controlled by larger powers. When the reader follows "Wallace's" prompt to "see below," the page number varies with each edition but never matches the stated page "seventy-nine" (69 fn. 2). Although the character recounts what he purports to be his life story, he remains ignorant of its layout and page count. Both as low-level IRS employee and writer, "Wallace" occupies what Mills described as the awkward middle position of white-collar workers and, as such, is representative of *TPK's* concern for common employees ruled by sublime regulation. A plot point about his misidentification by the IRS administration with a *second* "David Wallace" is not only another instance of the text's self-referentiality (297 fn. 48), but also demonstrates how "Wallace" is stuck in the middle of bureaucracy's contradictory forces. Even as a renowned author who invested "three years' hard labor (plus an additional fifteen months of legal and editorial futzing)" for his supposed memoir, "Wallace" remains a proverbial cog in the machine—of the publishing industry (84).

"Wallace's" restlessness speaks to the vanishing distinction between play and work under post-Fordism. Befitting Sianne Ngai's theorization

of the "zany," he personifies a hyperactive mode of "incessant activity," frantic adaptation, and emotional intensity in a labor-intensive performance—be it play, work, or indistinguishable (Ngai 185). Ngai observes that, unlike related modes, such as goofy or silly, zaniness connotes a sense of desperation that negates comic relief; the zany subject wants too much and tries too hard: "the unhappily striving wannabe, poser, arriviste. The utter antithesis of ironic cool, the perspiring, overheated zany is a social loser" (189). Indeed, "Wallace" and many of his awkward colleagues try very hard, but their unfocused hyperactivity ultimately prevents them from achieving anything at all. The anxiety-driven zany exemplifies Wallace's aesthetic reaction to what he perceived as postmodernism's aloofness. In its awkwardness, the zany represents a form of pitiable helplessness incompatible with cool detachment. Ngai highlights the affinity of zaniness to *The New Spirit of Capitalism* as theorized by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello. In opposition to earlier formations of capitalism that valued (Weberian) "rational asceticism" or, later on, "responsibility and knowledge," capitalism's current constellation rewards mere activity, be it in professional or private contexts. "To be doing something, to move, to change," Boltanski and Chiapello explain, "this is what enjoys prestige, as against stability, which is often regarded as synonymous with inaction" (155). "Wallace" ambivalently embodies this post-Fordist demand in both form and content. In the narrative's emulation of real time, he undergoes endless communicative efforts to explain his powerlessness—without a chance to overcome it.

Hectic "Wallace" is evidently unable to enjoy, let alone offer the "pleasant longueurs" of quality time. But behind this character, recognizable as such despite his urgent claims to the contrary, not least due to the ghosts and psychics populating his "nonfiction," the reader senses an authorial interlocutor who *does* in fact offer an "intimate conversation." But this dialogue is conditioned on an exchange. To tap the novel's connecting potential, the readers must labor and make sense of its fragmentary form and at times tedious content. Only once they have endured this can they indulge in Wallace's promised intimacy.

The Labor of Reading Wallace

In a similar fashion to how many of the characters draw profound insights from their everyday tedium at the IRS, intellectual labor is central to the reading experience of *TPK*. In a convergence of form and content, the novel formally reinforces its thematic focus on bureaucratic abstraction

through its diverse fragments of varying length and readability. The numerous footnotes of "Wallace's" chapters illustrate this point. Many of them do not only contain helpful information for grasping *TPK's* multiple narrative strands but in turn develop self-contained narratives on their own. Others appear in the middle of the often seemingly endless sentences and force the reader to part ways with one train of thought or miss another, thus fragmenting the reading process itself. Through the footnotes' small size in most editions, *TPK* formally affirms the narrative's wisdom about the value of small print. But it is important to note that these demands on the reader are balanced by intermittent perspectives on the human elements populating the bureaucratic machine. Small talk between shifts and dreadful commutes function as moments of respite in the reading process and receive as much narrative attention as the tedious intricacies of tax legislation (89).

Nevertheless, *TPK* indulges in an aesthetics of excess and, much like Wallace's most lauded fiction, remains a difficult read. Complex plots with countless characters (many mysterious, some nameless), confusing narratives with an overwhelming amount of information, much of it absurd and ostensibly irrelevant or difficult, sometimes impossible to decipher: these are, after all, the well-known and much-admired characteristics of Wallace's fiction. His texts resist easy consumption by focusing on uninteresting or unpleasant themes. Passages discussing the "ACIRHRMSOEAPO Survey/Study" on "syndromes/symptoms associated with Examinations postings in excess of 36 months" (89) surely fit the category of "cruft" in that their only discernible function lies in the masking of other meaningful passages, thus challenging the reader's attentional capacity (Letzler).

Given Wallace's thoughts on the difficulty of creating and consuming meaningful art in an age of alleged hegemonic irony and narcissism, some view such obstacles as serving Wallace's dialogic poetics by defamiliarizing his readers in order to then enable a more meaningful intellectual exchange (Timmer 77; Hering 162). But this understanding overlooks the narrow expectations underlying this exchange. Much like in the contract "Wallace" seeks to escape, the readers cannot engage in a free dialogue; instead, they must meet defined expectations. This might be a peculiar description of reading a novel, but it points to the framework of institutional discipline in Wallace's relationship with the reader. A brief look at how Wallace thought about his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* is informative here. Asked about its apparent lack of an ending, he once replied:

> There is an ending as far as I'm concerned. Certain kind[s] of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an "end" can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book's failed for you. (qtd. in Max 321 n19)

Wallace frames his text as a problem the reader/student solves and then submits to the author/instructor for review, and he barely veils his expectation: if "the book's failed for you," you have in turn not only failed the book, *but also Wallace*. Of course, such "exams" remain metaphorical, but the contractual logic underlying Wallace's writing nevertheless exercises a deep-seated pressure. The readers sense that he "is playing at a high level, that he has thought of everything, and that we'll be playing catch-up (Taranto). After all, this is the author who once stated that some contemporary writers "are involved in transactions requiring genius, but it seems to me to be sort of required on both sides" (qtd. in Kelly, "Wallace" 146). Though Kelly takes note of the statement's economic overtone, "reading is a transaction, an economy like any other in which goods are sold and received," he supposes "the gift of sincerity" to somehow offset this logic (ibid.). Wallace's biographer Daniel T. Max likewise states that *Infinite Jest*, "for all its putative difficulty, cares about the reader, and if it denies him or her a conventional ending, it doesn't do so out of malice; it does it out of concern, to provide a deeper palliative than realistic storytelling can" (215). Advocating a version of the Protestant work ethic, Max argues that "you have to work to get better. The book is redemptive, as modern novels rarely are" (ibid.). An understanding of what Wallace's literature is about—in his oft-quoted words, "what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (qtd. in McCaffery 131, emphasis in original)—appears to be premised on enduring hard work.

Indeed, the readers' effort to fulfill their contract with Wallace and labor through the novel's long stretches of tedious technicalities appears to *be* their reward. Wallace's writes in a note for *TPK*: "It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom" (548). This idiosyncratic insight amounts to *TPK's* central moral: Chris Fogle converts to life as an accountant after an epiphany about the "heroism" and civic virtue of dull and complex work. "Wallace" asserts that the "real reason why U.S. citizens were/are not aware" of the momentous changes in the IRS his "memoir" describes "is that the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull" (85). Even the IRS's fictional motto—"*He is the one doing a difficult, unpopular job*"—confirms the importance of enduring tedium for a greater good (246,

emphasis in original). In a key scene, DeWitt Glendenning, Jr., the novel's only character who is neither seeking the approval of others nor ridiculed by narrative irony, monologizes on the shifting perspective on what citizenship means:

> We've changed the way we think of ourselves as citizens. We don't think of ourselves as citizens in the old sense of being small parts of something larger and infinitely more important to which we have serious responsibilities. We do still think of ourselves as citizens in the sense of being beneficiaries [...] Something has happened where we've decided on a personal level that it's all right to abdicate our individual responsibility to the common good and let government worry about the common good while we all go about our individual self-interested business and struggle to gratify our various appetites. (138)

When his interlocutor remarks how this topic makes for dull conversation, Glendenning responds: "Sometimes what's important is dull. Sometimes it's work. Sometimes the important things aren't works of art for your entertainment" (140). Glendenning's role as the author's literary mouthpiece become obvious here, not least because Wallace promoted such virtues in almost identical terms (*This is Water* 120). Constructing a suitable analogy through taxes, the novel renders the endurance of tedious or inconvenient labor as serving both the individual as well as the collective good. In line with its apotheosis of strenuous work, *TPK* demands resilience against boredom and abstraction from its readers.

Such demands beg the question why so many accept the challenge of this often overwhelming and confusing literature. Encounters between text and reader are contingent and not all of Wallace's readers partake in the afore described exam logic (Finn 171). But as the numerous reading circles and fandom websites devoted to Wallace attest, his celebration of hard work still appeals. As a towering literary figure, he emphasized the open dialectic between text and reader while simultaneously carefully shaping the exchange. In contrast to his clumsy characters, Wallace conveyed his message about the merits of discipline and endurance with success. John Holliday's understanding of "authorial connectedness" illustrates how style and reception converge in this respect. Once it succeeds, authorial connectedness makes the reader "feel as though you are engaging with the thoughts of a person whose beliefs and attitudes intersect with yours, whose personality you find mesmerizing, and who expresses content you value and does so in a way that you believe you would if you could" (10). Many of Wallace's readers appear to share this reading experience and, in some cases, this perceived proximity extends

into a fantasy of actual friendship or other kinds of intimacy with the actual writer (Fitzpatrick). It thus emerges that Wallace's eloquent complaints about the colonization and corruption of interpersonal exchanges by current soft skills regimes concealed his personal mastery of the very communicative proficiencies they require. By anticipating his readers' emotional disposition and combining this anticipation with the (mediated) interpersonal skill of openly communicating about them, Wallace's authorial persona reveals himself to be an excellent emotional laborer. Central is the very discomfort his texts intimate about the contemporary state of interpersonal exchanges: *TPK* abounds with what appears as the uncomfortable honesty and frequent self-deprecation of almost all characters. Most male characters, for instance, are shy introverts who fail to live up to the standard of traditional male role models.

Many of *TPK's* helpless characters are subject to the rule of larger (if mundane) powers. Conversely, the intimacy emanating from "authorial connectedness" is produced by "the reader recognizing something of herself in the work, something she believed or thought or felt before reading the work, for authorial connectedness turns on the reader feeling as though she has found [...] a fellow soul" (Holliday 3). It is unsurprising then that Wallace's credible portrait of everyday white-collar grievances, combined with his emotional reflexivity and fine sense of humor, not only speaks to many of his readers but consoles them as well. For here is an author who accurately describes the stress arising from human interactions (not only in the professional context), the fragmentation of one's (office) work and private life, the difficulty of remaining sane in the ever-accelerating real time. An author, in other words, whose emotional labor "produces the proper state of mind" in his readers to facilitate quality time for them. In turn, their intellectual labor is rewarded with a sense of intimacy. This effect has both narcissistic and nostalgic elements: the readers ultimately recognize an idea of *themselves*, so that their empathetic enlightenment can be seen to be self-involved and limited. Moreover, Wallace facilitates this identification by pastoralizing the dreary but secure work environment of bureaucracy at a time when capitalist structures eschew stable hierarchies and favor flexibility (Dorson). On behalf of its readers, *TPK* symbolically reconciles the incompatible contradictions dominating their (work) lives.

A Managed Community

In a wider context, Wallace's talent can be seen as a contemporary literary expression of what management historians Daniel Wren and Arthur G. Bedeian once identified in the burgeoning notion of human relations, namely "a new mix of managerial skills [...] crucial to handling human situations: first diagnostic skills in understanding human behavior and second, interpersonal skill in counseling, motivating, leading, and communicating" (298). Alexander Styhre's investigation of what Wallace "can teach Management Scholars" is a suitable example of this conjecture between the writer's painstaking observations on the estranging tendencies of present-day (work) relations and organizational psychology. Befitting the essay's publishing venue in the *Academy of Management Review*, Styhre seeks to discern how Wallace's writing might inspire more engaging language in management studies. His praise for Wallace's meticulous focus on what at first appears banal as well as the promotion of what Styhre, with reference to Aristotle's understanding of *eudaimonia*, summarizes as "happiness based on a modest way of life," help to explore the managerial affinities inherent in Wallace's writing (170). Styhre writes that Wallace invites management scholars to "reinvent and reform the language at hand in order to better capture the individuals populating organizations and engaging in management practices. The work of Wallace can inspire new ways to capture everyday life in organizations" (173). Notwithstanding a leap in genre—Styhre bases his claim on Wallace's idiosyncratic nonfiction (176)—this interest in Wallace's ability to valorize the boring by devoting empathetic attention to it and thereby to recognize the reader's often mundane daily grind bespeaks *TPK's* therapeutic potential. The implied belief that institutions, such as the IRS at the novel's center (or the corporations Styhre studies), are suited to build a community among its workers indicates a modest view on what this community might achieve. Conversely, it exposes readings that praise the novel's insights on how to "replace the individual liberty of selfishness in favour of a selflessness in service of collective emancipation" to be overly enthusiastic (Shapiro 1268). More accurately, *TPK* echoes what Wendy Brown calls a "national-theological discourse" of moralized, individual sacrifice to the collective good. Personal duty is proposed as the solution to political crisis, as opposed to debate, contestation, or even "collective emancipation." Though the novel conveys obvious discontent with the intensification of economic and social individualization, its reliance on personal ethics to bring about meaningful change burdens the

individual further—and troubles readings of *TPK* as defying neoliberal paradigms.

By way of conclusion, it can be said that the readers' intimate relationship to an author who knows and understands their alienating experiences in everyday life goes a long way toward explaining the fairly homogenous make-up of Wallace's audience. Many scholars, as well as the author himself, presume his readership to be mostly young, educated, and of a white middle-class background (e.g., Lipsky 82). If practices of intimacy such as the quality time of reading a novel are emotional capitalism's "training grounds" and get distributed unevenly along class lines (Illouz), the vast academic discourse accompanying Wallace should not be surprising either. The fact that it is a privilege to have the time and disposition to carefully read a difficult novel is of course not to be blamed on Wallace. Conversely, his (scholarly) readership *should* reflect this when making larger claims about his work. Given academia's social exclusivity, the ever-growing group of scholars working on Wallace might, except for age, closely resemble his presumed readership. Critics frequently confirm Wallace's communicative skills and emotional competence by declaring a "special relationship" with him. For example, Nicoline Timmer's *Do You Feel It Too?*, an insightful study on the "Post-Postmodern Syndrome" in recent U.S. American fiction, includes an "In Memoriam" for Wallace in which she thanks him "for being such a wonderful, hyper-intelligent, hypersensitive (and also extremely funny) interlocutor in all his work" (10). Another indicator for Wallace's communicative success is the degree to which, until today, scholarship on him relies so heavily on his own interpretations of his fiction: his "sincerity manifesto" of 1993 and the lengthy interview with Larry McCaffery of the same year shaped the scholarship for years to come. The sheer number of quotes by Wallace within scholarly discourse shows that he knew very well how to make his point—and that his insights found an appreciative audience.

In one of his many digressions, *TPK's* Chris Fogle remarks: "If you really look at something, you can almost always tell what type of wage structure the person who made it was on" (184). To the many devoted readers who labor through the novel with the goal to eventually recognize and appreciate Wallace's empathy for middle-class discontent, the statement marks as a self-referential milestone along the way toward their "intimate conversation."

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