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Postmodern humanism and the "exhaustion of easy life"

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POSTMODERN HUMANISM AND THE “EXHAUSTION OF EASY LIFE”

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts - English

Mason Beets

University of Northern Iowa

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ABSTRACT

The twenty-first century appears to herald a new epoch, one in which religion and other similar belief systems appear to have run their course. However, this should not necessarily mean that other forms of spirituality and interconnectedness must fade away. Within America, there is a humanistic undercurrent that is gaining strength within our postmodern condition, even as we begin to challenge several of the tenets of postmodernity itself. The groundswell of American humanism has a notable and wholly unintended effect: it ideologically rehabilitates modes or vehicles of thought that might otherwise be labeled as defunct, or inapplicable to the changing world around them. Two forms of discourse that have been changed in this way are black metal and postmodern literature, by United States bands such as Liturgy and Wolves In the Throne Room, and by writers like David Foster Wallace.

While both of these art forms initially sought to revolt against a perceived status quo, once their revolutions became culturally codified, they seemed to lose much of their potency. However, by choosing to operate within these art forms' modes of discourse, but not adopting all of their accompanying ideological baggage, Liturgy, Wolves In the Throne Room, and David Foster Wallace have breathed new life into the husks of former rebellions not by simply acting as deconstructionists, but as constructors as well. Discontent to accept the empty victories of misanthropic nihilism and despair that were once inextricably associated with their genre, these United States black metallers favor transcendence and spiritual growth within their black metal. Concordantly, David Foster

Wallace's writing utilizes many of the forms of postmodern literature, but discards an all-out allegiance to a particular postmodern use of irony's iconoclasm, and uses them to speak to an attentive interconnectedness that he sees as integral to the human experience. All three artists hearken to a deeper, mindful humanism that values an existential need for self-determination and also recognizes the essential interconnectedness of the human condition. While all three artists also recognize the difficulty inherent in such a task, they see it as vital to the continuance of a positive human experience.

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Entitled: Postmodern Humanism and the "Exhaustion of Easy Life"

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CHAPTER 1

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CLIME

As the lauded Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek notes, we do not live in a cynical age, or an age with no belief. Rather, "we believe more than ever," or at the very least spend a great amount of time searching for something in which to put our belief (Taylor). However, in this postmodern era, the intellectual response, adopting a detached cynicism cultivated in our age, is to reassert the knowledge that religions are bunk. This is where, it is assumed by many in the West, the conversation ends. Belief and spirituality had long thought to be the exclusive property of the Abrahamic religions; once the belief in these monotheistic gods were subverted by other belief systems or abandoned in favor of empirical data, so, too, died the conversation over deeper spiritual feelings that had little to do with creed or cloth. However, these feelings did not die in postmodern American culture at large, and so minus the language, clout, power or limitations of religion, a nascent mutual humanism is shaping itself to become a defining characteristic of what some are calling the "post-postmodern" or "meta-modern" era (Nealon; Vermeulen and van der Akker).

Within America, this humanistic undercurrent has one notable, undoubtedly unintended effect: it seems to ideologically rehabilitate modes of thought that might otherwise be labeled as defunct or inapplicable to the changing world around them. Two forms of discourse that have been changed in this way are black metal and postmodern literature. Black metal is generally defined as a Scandinavian, and Norwegian, more often

than not, style of heavy metal that is crafted to be as harsh as possible, both sonically and lyrically. However, the low production values and insistence on lyrical misanthropy that so typified the genre in its 1980s/1990s inception were often jettisoned by American black metallers, who chose what they liked from the genre and discarded the rest. The uncompromising nature of the music and the iconoclastic, questioning and searching ethos that typified earlier black metal remained, but United States Black Metal (USBM) shows a far wider array of influences in both the music and the views expressed within it. Similarly, while postmodern literature could be said to have been both wrought and wielded at its highest levels in the United States, it is also within the United States that it ran its course, so to speak. Much of postmodernism's pastiche and playfulness seemed to be ignored in favor of the inexorable application of irony, and soon irony became the apparent lingua franca of postmodernity. However, irony as a mode of discourse has readily apparent limitations, among them the ability to express single-entendre principles without ridicule and charges of banality. Like the notable USBM bands Liturgy and Wolves In the Throne Room, who reject misanthropy and nihilism in favor of transcendence and humanism, David Foster Wallace's writing utilizes many of the forms of postmodern literature, but uses them to speak to a mindful interconnectedness that he sees as integral to the human condition.

This gradual shift toward a cooperative humanism does not come from a vacuum. While this humanistic cultural subtext itself may herald a change in the state of the discourse, it now seems largely overlooked in the culture-at-large. Opinion polls routinely tell American readers how little American voters trust American politicians, or

how little their readers should trust the adherents of other American news outlets, etc. The country of rugged individuals is now filled with people distrustful of their neighbors, as the doctrine of self-reliance within a supporting community shifted to become a parodic, all-out subservience to selfishness and suspicion of others. As the country's politicians railed against Communism for the greater part of the twentieth century, anything that could be even tangentially associated as "Red" was, and once-promising socialist or communal political movements were nipped in the bud far and wide. Soon the terms "Socialist" and "Communist" were largely synonymous in the American political vernacular, and equally demonized.

As big-C Communism and associated ideologies took their back seat in American political dialogue, so too the cult of the individual was reinforced, not only from the rise of the advertising industry, but also the Nietzschean death of the gods. In the time since America crowned itself the leader of the free world, advertisers have spent untold dollars and hours trying to influence how the free world spends its free time. David Foster Wallace's essay "E. Unibus Pluram" notes how many of the tactics used by these advertisers appeal to the viewer's individuality, while broadcasting the message itself to everyone money can reach. As the world of Mammon flatters the American's sense that he or she is indeed a beautiful and unique snowflake, the world of Christendom recedes into irrelevancy.

The importance of religion to America, whether by its absence or presence, cannot be understated. Religion in America has always enjoyed a precarious mix of

vociferous vocal belief and statistics that belie the verbiage. The United States claims the highest percentage of Christian believers among developed countries (Merica "Pew Survey"), yet routinely leads the "First World" in the sort of categories that do not appear very Christ-like, such as gun deaths (Fisher), rapes ("10 Facts"), and military spending (Plummer). However, despite this apparent lack of observance of the Commandments, etc., this faith is often centrally defining to American Christians, giving them "something to live for," a moral compass, and an answer to The Big Death Question "What happens when we pass on?" As religion has heretofore had a monopoly on the language of spirituality, if nothing wrests this language from it as it retreats from the public sphere while admittedly it does so slowly, recent polls show a trend indicating higher self-reporting of the non-religious (Merica) we lose the ability to reintroduce concepts and feelings like communalism, self-sacrifice, and cooperation into the modern-day discourse. We would all be the poorer for it.

In the face of a future without the promise of salvation, in a world in which everything that purports to be meaningful has been stripped of meaning and jeered at incessantly, we are faced squarely with the Absurd. As postulated by Albert Camus and others, the Absurd is the conflict between the human affinity to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the resultant inability to find any (*Myth 24*). The postmodern era was influenced early in its development by Samuel Beckett's late-Modernist "theatre of the absurd," a term likely coined with Camus' absurdist philosophy in mind. However, unlike the despotic irony of late postmodernism, but like his existentialist predecessor

Søren Kierkegaard, Camus' relativistic Absurd hardly calls for an ethical clearinghouse, a notion that seems to have gripped postmodern discourse in these later years.

It will be necessary to communicate on these postmodern terms with the new humanism shaping itself in the American culture today. In the United States, the generation poised to inherit the country is more cosmopolitan¹ than ever. Thanks largely to the saturation of television and the internet, there is a higher amount of information and entertainment at anyone's fingertips than many ever thought possible. However, as "E. Unibus Pluram" posits, this world conveyed to us en masse is a world awash with cynicism, and as Wallace further points out in his 2006 commencement address at Kenyon College, not only the information and entertainment, but also the conduits themselves and our very human nature contribute to a navel-gazing solipsism. As Wallace mused to the Kenyon College graduates, it takes real force of will to not simply view the world with a cruelly twisted me-first mentality with such inputs, "but if you've really learned how to think, how to pay attention, then you will know you have other options" (*Water* 92).

Among some Industrial Technology teachers I know, the old saw goes something to the effect of "students, like electricity, always take the path of least resistance." The greater mass of humanity can be dismissed as lightly and effectively, it seems. Since it not only takes force of will to correct this jaded worldview, but also the ability to recognize it for what it is, it is a hard and lonely row to hoe. However, I will show evidence that one offshoot of this humanistic undercurrent has chosen exactly that task, a

¹ Or perhaps cosmopolitan-by-proxy, due to the internet's proliferation and democratization of information.

task which progresses thusly: REBELLION > SOLIPSISM/NIHILISM > HUMANISM. The discrepancy in the central step is a matter of semantics that may be better stated as solipsistic nihilism, although that may stray a little too close to a definition of hedonism. My reason for the slash is that while both arrive at arguably similar conclusions in the middle part of their journey, they reach the same summit from different sides of the mountain, so to speak. Though this arc is by no means limited to the works of David Foster Wallace and United States black metallers, it is in their work that it first became apparent to me. While the arc of Wallace's work may be misread as tending towards a nihilism², it is only the immersion in the self that gives that cause. Many of Wallace's characters choose something to wholly give themselves over to early in life — *Infinite Jest's* Don Gately with drugs and alcohol and Hal Incandenza with tennis and cannabis, etc., — and later find themselves consumed by it. The rejection of the consuming force is often accompanied by a wholesale rejection, since all the character knows is what they have just stood in opposition to. Conversely, black metal's nihilism, especially the extreme brand lived out by its early practitioners, would only be possible with a sort of selfishly inward-seeking journey, and is similarly born from a rejection of lifestyle and/or belief.

If we look to black metal, an offshoot of extreme metal made infamous by a rash of church burnings and murders in 1990s Norway but redefining itself in the United States and around the world, we can trace the evolution of the genre's ideology along the

² As in Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, which contains a chapter entitled "David Foster Wallace's Nihilism."

rebellion-nihilism-humanism arc. Black metal formed itself out of the more commercialized forms of heavy metal that dominated Europe in the late 1980s, and immediately set out defining itself against many things, often on the basis of being alien or non-Nordic. The nihilism, xenophobia, and aggression that characterized the majority of the new Norwegian music were reactions against the vapid, cultureless onslaught that some of the metallers saw as the latest front in a thousand-year-old culture war, now led by McDonald's and the Eurozone rather than monks and kings.

Much of the black metal scene revolved around Mayhem, a Norwegian band who listed among its members, albeit at different times, the three most notorious black metal artists. Varg Vikernes, who is perhaps better known for his nationalistic tendencies and convicted crimes, including arson and murder, than his celebrated Burzum project. The murder Vikernes was convicted of was that of Euronymous, the driving force behind many of the stylistic trappings and attitudes surrounding black metal to this, and rounding out this triad is Dead, the singer who could be likened to a Kurt Cobain of black metal: young, upset, and doomed in his desire to be unabashedly authentic to his own death-driven creed. After Mayhem, the emblematic Norwegian black metal band, comparatively vanishes from prominence in the scene in the mid-1990s, black metal itself becomes stagnant. Mayhem's contemporaries experiment with new musical outlets and style. Vikernes, the catalyst for many of black metal's more extreme actions and beliefs, languished in jail, after succumbing to hubris and granting a reporter and interview which led directly to his arrest (*Until the Light Takes Us*). However, in the twenty-first century, the black metal sound begins to reassert itself across the Atlantic. America, one of the

instigators of the Norwegian youth culture of which black metal was a part, found itself hosting black metal renaissances on both coasts, and furthermore, that USBM seems to have jettisoned the obligatory reactionary nihilism and jingoism at their port of call. The new black metal, represented by bands like Liturgy and Wolves In the Throne Room, espoused new philosophies with humanistic bents.

While to ideologically link American writer David Foster Wallace and black metal may initially seem quite the stretch, consider them against both the rebellion-solipsism-humanism arc. If we situate Wallace within the American literary canon, and more specifically, postmodernism, the trajectories align. Wallace's first works, including *The Broom of the System*, *Fun Thing*, the first two short fiction works, and much of *Infinite Jest's* second half are weighty in tone, intent, and style, all three of which he positions to dethrone what he sees as the postmodern legacy and its grasp upon America: a nation of drifting navel-gazers desperate for something to hang their beliefs on. The literary equivalent of the young basketball player who dunks and stares rather than shoots jumpers and gets back up court, Wallace brashly cross-examines the condition in his early stories, but the remedy he will come to recommend shows itself in his later non-fiction work.

While *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* shows flashes and hints of the entreaty for mindfulness and communality that will permeate his later fiction, the collection is still mostly concerned with diagnosing the evils beset by the Pandoran evils of irony, cynicism, and individualism in America. Wallace begins to fully articulate his

antidote in *Infinite Jest*, and continues to explore the theme against shock jocks, lobster fests, and English language usage boards in *Consider the Lobster*, and then against the specters of bureaucracy and boredom in *The Pale King*, his posthumously published and exhaustively researched foray into ennui and the IRS. Though *Lobster* is non-fiction and *The Pale King* fiction, the ideology is elucidated by topic, characters, plots, and structure throughout both books. However, the most succinct summation of Wallace's humanistic outlook is in his 2005 Kenyon College commencement address, later published as *This is Water*. In the speech, he outlines a somewhat bleaker and banal future for the young graduates than many may have expected, and posits that the only way to face this future with any grace is to do so with a thoughtful compassion for their fellow man.

David Foster Wallace's work shows clear signs of an existential search for meaning throughout his career, which is perhaps best articulated in his non-fiction, but is nonetheless present in his fictional work as well. The meaning Wallace attributes to his writing undergoes a shift from a repudiation of postmodernism towards a humanism that was famously laid bare at his Kenyon College address; a shift paralleling that of black metal's ideology. As black metal, once known primarily for its nihilism and criminality at its Norwegian inception, has found new truths and outlooks upon American shores, the most stunning shift may be its abandonment of reactionary misanthropy for an increasingly all-encompassing humanism: not unlike the worldview of Wallace's work.

While this humanism is doubtlessly in its nascence, as Wallace's death limited his contribution to the ideology, and American black metal has much to do before a clear,

cohesive ideology may be articulated, it is nonetheless hopeful, perhaps most to the land which births it. As America lurches into the twenty-first century, still attempting to play Western-centric, modernist politics to maintain its global unipolarity in a postmodern world rife with geopolitical contenders, it becomes increasingly clear that the States must either confront their malaise in a fashion relevant to its times, or look to the last days of Rome as a best-case scenario. The writing of the late David Foster Wallace and a handful of America's black metallers have begun tracing a path out of nihilism, irony, and bleak cynicism toward a new, postmodern humanism.

CHAPTER 2

BLACK METAL

First, it is important to note that Norwegian black metal is the second proper wave of black metal³. While this may not be as distinct a break to outsiders as, say, modernism and postmodernism, rest assured that it was just as distinct a break within its own in-group. The first wave of black metal also tended to hail from Northern Europe: Switzerland's Hellhammer and Celtic Frost, who laid much of the ideological and lyrical template, Sweden's Bathory, whose wunderkind Quorthon provided the genesis for the black metal guitar riff and later ideological expansion into Norse history and culture, and England's Venom, whose 1982 album *Black Metal* named the genre. However, the Norwegian metal scene was named that way to mark a split. The bands that began and defined the movement came from Norway, and as they gained prominence, they drew metallers from neighboring countries to them.

Ideologically, the chief prerequisite of black metal is a total repudiation of Christianity and the other assorted Abrahamic belief systems — the "black" in black metal retaining its original medieval interpretation: close to or of a Godless evil. This rather open-ended entry requirement means that there are Israeli bands like Orphaned Land who sound as intrinsically Middle Eastern as camel racing filed in the black metal record bin next to veteran Hellenic metallers Rotting Christ, who sound more Greek than a Eurozone crisis. Additionally, there are anti-Islamic black metal bands, though more

³ Following black metal's first wave, which begins with Venom's *Black Metal* album and continues with, most notably, the bands Mercyful Fate, Bathory, and Hellhammer.

death metal bands seem to come out of the Middle East than black metal ones. Ranges of beliefs are nurtured under the black metal umbrella as well. Though the genre is known primarily for fostering neopaganism primarily of the Norse variety, other upstart belief systems are not turned away sight unseen.

The Scandinavian countries in which an exported Americanism began to crop up had, like many of the world's countries, centuries upon millennia of their own culture, a culture that they saw diminishing under the boot heels of Ray Kroc and the like. Since these countries had the historical example of their pre-Christian Norse beliefs and legends succumbing to the Christian Church, it seems likely that they feared for what of their own ancient culture they had managed to thus far preserve into the modern era. The response was predictable in some aspects, less so in others. Many in the greater Norway area began to channel this angst into a new form of music: black metal.

As played by the Norwegian scene, black metal was audially characterized by distinct calling cards. The vocals, rather than the deep growling which characterized many death metal vocalists, were raggedly shrieked. These screeches, something akin to Dirty Harry impersonating a banshee, were backed by what some music journalists called the "buzzsaw riff." This riff involved employing tremolo (read: very fast) picking to create sonic walls of constant notes. The riff itself was, according to Varg⁴, borrowed from Bathory and tweaked by Euronymous, and became one of black metal's signatures (*Until the Light Takes Us*). Not unlike the guitars, the philosophy behind the drumming

⁴ Where the artists have assumed stage names, I will employ them. I will refer to Varg Vikernes as Varg throughout, and not Count Grisenakh/Burzum/Kristian/etc. Conversely, I will oscillate between Euronymous (stage name) and Aarseth Øystein for effect. Per "Dead" Ohlin will always be Dead, as per his last wishes.

was one of constant attack. Neither the drums nor the guitars were given to the flashy solos or dynamic range of other forms of heavy metal; indeed, guitar solos, often thought a mainstay of heavy metal in general, were and are rarely seen in black metal.

Perhaps the defining audible characteristic of Norwegian black metal of this time, however, is what Vikernes and his cohorts came to call "necro-sound." Reflecting the anticapitalistic, Do It Yourself mentality that typifies the genre, the black metallers sought out the worst-sounding methods to record their sound. In the film *Until the Light Takes Us*, Varg describes the headset microphone he recorded the first Burzum album on. Later in the film, Gylve Fenris Nagell, better known as Fenriz, a cofounder of the still-influential black metal band Darkthrone, takes the viewer to the local flea market where he got the tape recorder on which he recorded Darkthrone's first music. As he rifled through a library of cassette tape bootlegs, Fenriz gleefully described how the deck in question was so decrepit when he bought it that it would only record; the tape would then have to be removed and played in another device to be heard.

Further illustrating this rebellious primitivism that was to typify early black metal releases, the coverings on these blasts of distilled aggression was often repurposed art, i.e., Romantic paintings, icy nature scenes, or even woodcuts, such as on Burzum's *Filosofem*, or a stark, hostile, grainy photograph: and either choice came in any color you wanted, so long as that was black and white. These actions can be interpreted as a rebellion against a number of things; Norwegian black metal was typified by an

anticapitalist mindset, so to enter the realm of commerce on commerce's terms, e.g., "clean" production, colorful, painted cover art, etc., was unthinkable.

In his "Blackened Notes," Steven Shakespeare traces the evolution of black metal thought through some of philosophy's great thinkers, including Kierkegaard, Žižek, and Schelling. He goes on to quote Shelling's aphorism that "Idealism, if it does not have as its basis a living realism, becomes just as empty or abstract a system as that of [...] any other dogmatist" (21). This is a challenge that black metal met head-on from its inception. The world of black metal has always been that of the immediate, real, and visceral. Images of the freezing winter's sky, frost & ice, or of death itself are not reduced to abstraction in black metal lyrics, rather, they are revealed in for the seemingly inarguable, realistic truths that they communicate.

The realism that black metal purports is a jaded one, indeed. As Varg notes in *Until the Light Takes Us*, he and many of his black metal contemporaries felt that they grew up in idyllic communities, "homogeneous," and relatively free of crime. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, as American soft power began to take hold on European street corners in the guise of McDonald's, 7-Eleven, and Burger King, Varg recounts how he and his contemporaries shot the windows out with rifles. We can liken this to a later moment in the same film; as images of the once-proud Fantoft stave church fill the screen, Varg laments what he sees as the annihilation of his Norwegian culture by Christianity.

The tenets, stories, teachings, and overall culture of Christianity serve as the specter that haunts much of black metal. While the Satanist aspect may have been invented or exploited by Norwegian reporters eager to literally demonize the youths murdering each other and burning down Norwegian historical monuments, it certainly was present at the genre's inception. Bathory, a Swedish band often cited (*Until the Light Takes Us*) as having influenced the Norwegian black metal scene, trafficked in Satanic imagery, if not the sort of behavior that would later characterize the Norwegian black metal scene.

Indeed, the labeling of black metal as Satanic has proven to be its most lasting pop-culture remnant. Even in my tiny Iowa town, the people who dressed and were labeled "goth" often looked as if Euronymous himself had dressed them from Helvete, Norwegian for Hell, and the storefront which served as the Norwegian black metal scene's headquarters and tended to traffic in Satanic imagery and art. The shapeless T-shirts, dark and abused jeans, and quasi-military boots, all in some shade of black, is black metal's collective gift to alienated youth everywhere: piss off your parents with just one trip to the thrift store and a few hand-drawn pentagrams!

However, few people within the Norwegian black metal movement were actually Satanic. As Varg recounts, the association did begin within the group; as Euronymous began to use Satanic imagery, he did so with a showman's flair and motive. While evidence exists that paints Euronymous as an out-and-out, True Believer Satanist, he certainly used the religion's trappings to court controversy and personal notoriety. Varg

himself held little truck with devil worship; as a True Believer in black metal itself, he yearned for the reawakening of older, nationalistic rites.

Varg's adherence to black metal ideology has always been steadfast. Of course, it's always easier to remain true to an ideology that one has helped to birth and continued to be the most visible and vocal parent. While other black metallers have come and gone, rejoined obscurity or never left it, Varg's voice has remained constant since the *Bergens Tidende* article he temporarily traded for his freedom in 1993. For Varg, black metal could not function as a reactionary movement against Christianity. Varg's black metal has always been a rebellion against what he views as the enemies of Norway and the Norwegian culture of his ancestors, the manifestation of his wish to "eradicate all traces of Christianity from Norway and restore the religious belief systems of his Viking ancestors" (Richardson 152).

Therefore, while Satanism was perhaps a jumping-off point for much of Norwegian black metal, it proves to be a limiting factor for a number of reasons. The fact that few of the members of the original Norwegian black metal cabal were theistically interested in Satanism is an immediate problem. While this immediately puts the black metal community in a sort of ur-reactionary state, compounding their original reactionary position by forcing an answer to the "Satanic question," it also assumes a binary in the equation.

As quoted in Russo's "Perpetue Putesco" article, Dominic Fox asks whether such "studious blasphemy" reveals a "rather perverse attachment to its object" (98), and

indeed, old tropes about the thin line between love and hate do spring to mind. In particular, Euronymous' brand of Satanism was a theistic Satanism one deliberately composed of a perversion of Roman Catholic dogma; this system's Satan was a physical being, and Euronymous claimed that it was as "godly" a "creature" as any Christian believed in (Lahdenperä). One can read much of this belief and its "gentleman doth protest too much" leanings in a 1993 interview Øystein gave to Esa Lahdenperä, in which he states that "Satanism comes from religious Christianity, and there it shall stay" We see echoes and a perversion of the evangelist Christian as he continues: "I'm a religious person and I will fight those who misuse His name." However, the article truly gets interesting, from a personal perspective, with Euronymous' assertion that "[p]eople are not supposed to believe in themselves and be individualists. They are supposed to obey, to be the slaves of religion" (Lahdenperä).

This crypto-fascistic turn that the description of Euronymous' Satanism takes is a particularly revealing one. While Øystein was certainly responsible for many of the trappings, musical or stylistic, that continues to define black metal today, he was also, after the suicide of his band- and housemate Per "Dead" Ohlin, responsible for the movement's dramatic turn into ostensibly Satanic and increasingly criminal acts. Conversely, while Dead, Mayhem's most famous lead vocalist, became the blackened Christ child of Norwegian heavy metal, Euronymous was the virtual center of the black metal world, a world he seemed determined to exert more and more control over.

Mayhem's most feted singer, Dead, is one logical extension of the Norwegian black metal ideology. Obsessed with the macabre since a near-death experience as a child, Dead gave the genre what would become a defining trademark: the porcelain-white face bearing black accents⁵. While today's face-painting metallers tend to resemble Maximum Carnage or Venom from the *Spider-Man* comics⁶, Dead painted his face to resemble medieval Europe's plague victims, accenting disease-faithful areas like the nose, fantastically marking his face with the same sort of stark duality that he grappled with internally. Traditionally, one split between death and black metal is that death metal (the "traditional enemy of the genre") is concerned largely with the desecration and putrefaction of the corpus itself, the actual physical bodies we inhabit, while black metal is almost wholly unconcerned with or malevolently disinterested in the corporeal form (Russo 96). Indeed, as Russo puts it, "expressions of suffering entailed within the song are gruesome particularly because the body is not suffering" (98). It is the spirits on the rack, in the iron maiden, on the wheel; it is the soul itself that is tortured in the shrieks of black metal. Indeed, since "the ability of being is itself suspended," consider the monumental hopeless absurdity of realizing that nothing exists beyond this nasty, brutish, and short mortal coil except the possible cessation of this immense torment, and that even that is unlikely, in this world void of hope, "there is no possibility in the void-world for quantifiable suffering and, therefore, not only is this suffering endless, it is not locatable" (98).

⁵ To my knowledge, no one has ever tried to deny the obvious influence that KISS had on this makeup.

⁶ Alien symbiont-suits that augmented the wearer's homicidal and carnal instincts, while also giving them a really elaborate set of white, terrifyingly large and ornate eyes that sometimes (depending on mood) would cover up to 3/4 of the traditional head region.

While this suffering on Earth's surface is measurable and quantifiable, unlike its possible void-world counterpart, also unlike its counterpart, it can be definitively ended. This suicide, then, is the logical extension of the original Norwegian black metal ideology. Dead chose to take his rebellion against the bleakness of the world he saw to the highest court possible, and gave his ultimate statement. This embracing of the void is unsurprising to anyone who paid close attention to Dead's lyrics, which were bleak, single-minded, and delivered with the religious fervor of a drunken, defrocked priest. Though Varg dismisses Dead's lyrics and mindstate in *Until the Light Takes Us* as obsessed with vampires and the like, their more fantastical elements have since found great appreciation within the scene, and Dead is now recognized as the man who "was responsible for codifying the Black Metal look," and since image had to fit aesthetic within this scene, heavily influenced its outlook as well (Richardson 149). Dead was a man of convictions. Simply put, these convictions all lead to suicide, the releasing of the spirit to Valhalla/Satan, what have you. The end result is a rejection of the world in favor of an order that diametrically opposes it, albeit without hope for anything resembling victory.

Euronymous' burning desire for control of black metal's narrative took a particularly macabre turn at this time. The first to find Dead's corpse after his suicide, Euronymous stumbled upon the singer dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, after multiple deep cuts with a nearby knife. Additionally, after deciding to switch from knife to gun, Dead left a note apologizing for the mess before taking his own life. Euronymous' immediate response was to collect some of the fragmented viscera, for

reasons that have been spooling through the black metal rumor mill ever since, but not before photographing the entire scene. The photo of Mayhem's lead singer lying next to his brains was later used for the band's *Dawn of the Black Hearts* EP, and the bar for extremism within the black metal community was raised not once, but twice, and pointedly (*Until the Light Takes Us*).

While Euronymous' actions seemed to be concerned largely with how the story of his black metal world unfolded, Varg was interested in settling what he saw as some of black metal's oldest scores. The oldest score he sought to immediately revenge was that of Christianity's imposition. When Norway accepted Christianity in the 10th and 11th centuries, many churches were built on what had previously been pagan holy sites⁷, and some people took this as an affront to their Norse heritage. Some people still take offense to this today; Varg is one of those people. Soon, perhaps one of the most famous crimes of the Norwegian black metal movement became indelibly associated with Varg: church burnings. Varg was eventually convicted in connection with the burning of several churches, perhaps most notably the UNESCO-cited Fantoft stave church, whose still-smoldering timbers are captured on the cover of the Burzum EP *Aske (Until the Light Takes Us)*. However, it was the notoriety these actions, and their subsequent wave of imitators, lent Varg within the black metal scene that was to cause the seemingly inevitable genre-defining blowout.

⁷ Thus presaging how the United States would deal with its Native American problem, which may augur the solidarity between USBM and Nativist beliefs. Incidentally, it is noteworthy to consider how many Christian institutions borrowed from Norse paganism, or what vestiges of Norse paganism survive today — including the English names for the days of the week.

A few months before Varg murdered his sometime friend and mentor, the *Bergens Tidende* published an article in which Varg anonymously spoke on the black metal scene "and its alleged criminality, church burnings, Satanism, the participants' shadowy appearances" and put forth his view. Far from his later ascribed motive, "removing the Christian invaders from Norway, returning the grounds to their pagan roots," Varg rejects Satanism as a term, but does say that the group's actions were taken as a means to "spread fear and honor the Devil." Despite contributing anonymously, and by his own admission, exaggerating a bit, Varg would be arrested in connection with the article. Though he would be released, the article would ignite the "inner-scene power struggle between Aarseth and Vikernes" (Stousy 39)

As Varg's star rose within the movement, Euronymous took it as an affront to his own prestige. Varg's actions were seen as more extreme than his own; while others had joined Varg on his immolatory excursions, Euronymous had not. It has been insinuated by several within the black metal inner circles that Euronymous was jealous of Varg's infamy. Varg himself has asserted the same, and has repeatedly pointed to that as posthumous character witness in the aftermath of August 10, 1993, the night he killed Øystein Aarseth. Varg has time after time insisted that he repeatedly stabbed Euronymous in self-defense, claiming that Aarseth was bound to do the same to him, and had told others that he would do so (*Until the Light Takes Us*).

Though Varg's version of the story has morphed and changed over the years, the interest in the incident remains unabated. Stories from both camps have continued to

circulate since the murder, and at the time, were "covered extensively by the Norwegian media and in the British Metal magazine *Kerrang!*" and today, continue to be spun in *SPIN* and on countless internet message boards. The indefatigable interest stems at least partially from the particulars of the crime, and undoubtedly are augmented by "Vikernes's willingness to give incendiary interviews and maintain a personal website that asserts his (sort of) innocence" (Stousy 39).

Now absent Dead and Euronymous, the large- and small-scale potency of Norwegian black metal largely dissipates once Varg goes to jail. During his sentence, the Johnny-come-latelys who were playing death metal weeks before and the posture-adopters who aligned with black metal as part of a larger trend seemed to mostly fade away. Of course, many of the bands continued to play and record, including Darkthrone, Nattefrost, and Burzum itself, though the latter was forced to create music without guitars or drums as part of his sentence, and the former two ceased to play what was understood as the pure black metal sound⁸. Without Euronymous, the self-styled "godfather of the black metal Mafia," to loudly champion the music or set the trends behind it, and with the most notorious metallor of all behind bars, black metal ceased to be a visible, viable cultural force, becoming increasingly self-referential/confined and racist. Norway and greater Northern Europe were doubtlessly glad to see its ideological primacy diminish.

⁸ Darkthrone's stylistic shift might be the most curious: after their early-career shift from death metal also-rans to black metal pioneers, the band has gradually come to adopt a instrumental/vocal attack that borrows heavily from hardcore punk rock, perhaps best personified by their 2007 release *F.O.A.D.* Of course, the ubiquitous necro-sound still abounds.

However, as black metal ceased its dynamism in Norway, American metallers were seemingly all too happy to pick up the torch. American black metal, generally USBM in the music press,⁹ continued many of the sonic styles defined by its Norwegian predecessors. Some of the bands appeared, conversely, to be through with the ideologies. These bands became known within the genre for turning away from the Satanic and dark-occult trappings that had come to embody black metal in the public eye, and thus ideologically limited the creativity of many within the genre. The two bands that stand at the forefront of this movement, far from glorifying death and "Pure Fucking Armageddon,"¹⁰ instead take their cues from transcendentalism and eco-feminism, and flat-out reject nihilism. Wolves In the Throne Room and Liturgy, through not only their music, but also their interviews, and, occasionally, in what many have dubbed their "manifestos," have outlined their direction and interpretation of black metal ("Black Metal," Hunt-Hendrix "Transcendental Black Metal").

While many of the audible hallmarks of Norwegian and Norwegian-influenced black metal still adorn the songs of their American counterparts, there are distinct differences. The most obvious departure at first listen is the sound quality. As these bands are not out to celebrate decay, it follows that they would have no place for either the ideological underpinnings of necro/corpse-sound or how it would jibe when applied to their own music. As this new black metal is not just about subtraction, but addition as

⁹ The music media (including *Kerrang!*, *SPIN*, and a number of here-today, gone-tomorrow metal magazines that pop up from time to time such as *Conservative Shithead Music*) loves to give heavy metal acronyms, the best example of which is probably NWOBHM for the (1980's) New Wave of British Heavy Metal.

¹⁰ One of Mayhem's most well-known track titles.

well, a plethora of sounds are featured that were heretofore unheard on black metal records: from birdsong to ethereal female vocalists to atonal chant, America's musical melting pot has left its impression on the music. While the Brooklyn-based Liturgy tends to evoke extra-black metal comparisons like indie experimentalists Dirty Projectors and the New York punk scene, Wolves In the Throne Room appear to be much more influenced by post- and psychedelic rock. Furthermore, Wolves In the Throne Room place a heavy emphasis on the low-tech, naturalistic aspect of their ethos; the band prefers to play by candle-or-firelight with all possible bulbs off¹¹, and only play or record with vintage, analog equipment (Jordan 1).

This exaggeratedly lo-fi aspect of their performances can trace its lineage to the Norwegian black metallers finding their recording equipment at back alley flea markets. Similarly, the heavy emphasis on nature and the human experience with it that Wolves In the Throne Room depict in their lyrics has roots in the landscapes and soulscapes in their predecessors' black metal. However, the treatment of nature is different in one key aspect. The Norwegian black metal scene seems to revere and fear the forest, as is common in the Germanic traditions from the Brothers Grimm-style fables to Tolkien's re-imaginings of Elves. In this tradition, the forest and woods are scenes of trickery, magic, and deception, e.g. the archetypal wolf in sheep's clothing: Little Red Riding Hood's would-be consumer in Grandmother's clothes. Though the forest is always there and inviting, it

¹¹ To which your author can attest. It changes the entire dynamic of a heavy metal show when there are only five to seven candles lighting a stage strewn with assorted animal skins, Marshall tube amps, and a handful of guys who look like they stepped off of an Eddie Vedder-owned farm ca. 1993 on stage. No corpsepaint, no pigs' heads thrown into the audience, no spike-studded black leather, no violent moshing in the crowd, no exhortations to violence or despair, no BS.

does not always have one's best interests at heart. Conversely, American black metal seems to borrow from the hippie culture, which is itself influenced by the Native American cultures that Haight-Ashbury, etc., reappropriated. The forest is not adversarial; it is a place of constant rebirth and reconfiguration.

We can extend this "metal-forest" metaphor to a "metal-death" one. The Norwegian black metallers see death as the end physically and spiritually. With no afterlife or promise of anything after one shuffles off of this mortal coil, death is bittersweetly and schizophrenically seen as a release from the hostility and banality of the material world as well as a finite, definite end. In United States black metal, the Native American-esque viewpoint is seemingly augmented by biology teachings. The emphasis becomes on the interconnectedness of we material beings on our material Earth, and the roundabout nature of the birth-life-death cycle; as one life form enters the world, it lives, dies, and decomposes, allowing for the future composition of another.

To elucidate the difference in the treatment of both death and nature in the two black metals, take the journey of the spirit as illustrated by Varg in Burzum's "Beholding The Daughters Of The Firmament" from 1993's *Filosofem*:

I wonder how winter will be / With a spring that I shall never see / I wonder how night will be / With a day that I shall never see / I wonder how life will be / With a light that I shall never see / I wonder how life will be / With a pain that lasts eternally / In every night there's a different black / In every night I wish that I was back / To the time when I rode / Through the forests of old / In every winter there's a different cold / In every winter I feel so old / So very old as the night / So very old as the dreadful cold / I wonder how life will be / With a death that I shall never see / I wonder why life must be / A life that lasts eternally

Warily anticipatory of death, nihilistic about all experience until the end, and with a weary nostalgia for ages past, Varg's hymn to the Norse angels of death is a depressing dirge. There is no sense of camaraderie with the elements, as oft-invoked as they might be. Despite the fact that the narrator aligns his feelings with his wintry surroundings, it is not by choice that he does so. Indeed, the worst elements of weather seem to be what plagues Varg's protagonist, as the seemingly unceasing winter and cold have banished all feelings or memories of spring or daytime^{12 13}, or hope that they will ever return. Though a time perhaps once existed when the narrator was younger and stronger, and rode "through the forests of old," this well-remembered nostalgia does not abate the sense that life is too long, too cold, and too cruel for these memory-embers to lend warmth to the pain of just going on.

Contrast this with the lyrics attributed to Wolves In the Throne Room's "I Will Lay Down My Bones Among The Rocks And Roots¹⁴:"

The torment has ended / The beast has done his work / Great fires rage outside of this wooded sanctuary / But soon they will be quenched by a purifying rain / The embers of the ceremonial fire burn to ash / A new warmth stirs within the center of the earth / I am alone here no more / The wood is filled with the sounds of

¹² These lyrics seem to allude to the entire days of nighttime blackness that the northern parts of Norway (and the rest of the Northern Hemisphere) observe, which, metal or no metal, one can imagine being quite harrowing at times.

¹³ This is also pervasive in the visual style of the Norwegian black metal scene. Videos, if and when filmed, were often shot in stark, frozen forests. The figures the images captured tended to be alone, and if the men in the frame were not alone, then he they were often brandishing some sort of weapon with/at a group of similarly armed people. The predominant colors, by far, were/are black and white, though most of these are low-quality, full-color films.

¹⁴ Wolves In the Throne Room do not release lyrics with their albums, nor do they post them on their official website. This is done in an effort to give the music a "more universal aspect" that will "feel more open ended to people," as Wolves "think that having the lyrics published would make the music all about us and our ideas and vision," and wish to avoid any sense of overt ideological impressioning (Jordan 1). It must, no doubt, please the band that all lyrics that are noted here are the work of communities of internet fans who recreate them as a group effort.

wildness / The songs of birds fill the forest on this new morning / This will be my new home / Deep within the most sacred grove / The sun god is born anew / I will lay down my bones among the rocks and roots of the deepest hollow next to the streambed / The quiet hum of the earth's dreaming is my new song / When I awake, the world will be born anew

To Wolves In the Throne Room, the natural world is a place of rebirth and rejuvenation. What is more, it is not a world in which the song's narrator assumes any superiority to. The same narrator does not refer to the wood as a place to ride through or otherwise evade. Naturally occurring purifying fires are conflated with fires purposefully lighted for ceremony, and both are equal. It is implied that the narrator, who is perhaps not human, has met an end by some beast, but negative language is almost wholly absent from the lyrics. Instead, the narrator anticipates its turn within the greater continual cycle of rebirth and rejuvenation, and passes on contentedly.

In a piece of writing that was originally on their website, Wolves In the Throne Room broke their outlook down quite succinctly, even into categories labeled, in order, "Black Metal," "Tribalism and Tradition," and "The Enchanted Earth." In the opening section, Wolves forthrightly assert that nihilistic black metal has run its course, stating that the music began as a "localized expression of emotion," "profound in its time and place," but one that has since "lapsed into self-reference and banality." Wolves see the core of the Norwegian scene as kindred spirits, name-checking Burzum and noting, like Varg would do with Burzum, that what was "important about black metal" was its desire for the "utter destruction of the modern world," through "a pure cry" of sorrow, hopelessness, and pain." However, Wolves In the Throne Room see this as a "starting point," not the end result sought by the Norwegian metallers, noting the beliefs of their

forerunners as merely "the first step toward spiritual growth" (Wolves In the Throne Room).

While Wolves is willing to give Satanism its due, they are not Satanists. While the essay itself is steeped in agnosticism, the band also demands more of a belief-system than "no god, no morality." These beliefs, as well as their lifestyle and goals, are reflected in the questions they pose to the Satanic metallers. While affirming their respect "to those who walk the left hand path with honor," Wolves assert that they "aspire to more." The members of Wolves In the Throne Room are perhaps most celebrated in the music press and Internet chat rooms for their alternative lifestyle: the band is fronted by the brothers Aaron and Nathan Weaver, who have based the band out of a early twentieth century Washington (state) farmstead, which they renamed Calliope.¹⁵ Making the first connection between their ideology and their lifestyle, Wolves ask of the Satanist what could the "satanic farm look like?" Furthering the point and alluding to the band's eco-feminist beliefs fleshed out later in the essay, Wolves celebrate birth, growth and life by asking "[h]ow does one raise Satanic children? How does one reconcile the Satanic black metal vision with the life-force found in a seed?" While these questions certainly reassert that Wolves In the Throne Room are True Believers, preaching what they practice, they also lay aside years of fomented black metal thought that observed a cult of death, despair, and emptiness by invoking the indefatigable processes of life itself, specifically a human life attuned with nature (Wolves).

¹⁵ Not unlike Varg himself, who has relocated since his 2009 release on parole to a farm in Telemark County, Norway ("Gallery," burzum.org).

Noting that it while is "axiomatic in occult study" that the "divine spark" is continually within us and around us, that the "earth itself is divine," Wolves note the solipsistic end to which this impulse has been too often taken: imagining a "black metal superman," who, jealous of his own "knowledge and power," retreats to the lordship of his "suburban bedroom," "his magnificent spirit bowing before none." Satanism, then, is further juxtaposed against other ideologies from which Wolves have taken what they wished, and "let the chaff blow away." (Wolves).

In the manifesto's next section, "Tribalism and Tradition," Wolves In the Throne Room acknowledge that much of their beliefs, like their musical style, comes from the Continent, noting that their "souls are moved by the traditions and the energies of European heathenism," ostensibly another spiritual kinsmanship to Varg and Burzum. Alluding again to their farmstead and accompanying way of life, Wolves align themselves with the sort of paganism invoked in the work of Burzum, Bathory, and other non-Satanic ideological Norwegian black metallers that sought to reappraise Nordic belief structures along the lines of Ásatrú and like-minded revivalist movements. However, unlike Varg and his contemporaries, Wolves does not seek to appropriate the neo-völkisch¹⁶ white supremacist nationalism upon American shores. Directly decrying such impulses, the band seems "convinced" that the "fundamentally, totalitarian, absolutist, rigid" ideologies so often exemplified by right-wing black metallers and the nationalism that generally accompanies them are despicable and dispensable (Wolves).

¹⁶ Think National Socialist racist ideology + North Germanic neopaganism

Passingly name-checking the sort of romanticism that often drives movements aligned with their own, Wolves cite the "romantic, noble side to nationalism" from which they draw inspiration and strength, while taking pains to note the stark difference between their interpretation of nationalism and the well-known jingoistic nationalists of the twentieth century. These totalitarians-in-disguise wish to tap into the baser instincts of man, those that Wolves acknowledge yet transcend with higher-level thought: our "murky and chaotic mythic space, full of unfocussed [sic] aggression and mindless, chaotic violence." Again, *Wolves In the Throne Room* is not content to settle for a low reaction or self-expectation: while agreeing on the "insane world" that these nationalist movements envisage and the notion that it is coming apart at the seams, Wolves believe that there is no "solace in [the sort of] xenophobic tribalism" that many present-day nationalists espouse and many people are often, either wittingly or un-, driven to in this sort of time. However, to attempt to revert to the tribalist, racist politics of bygone centuries is a fantasy: one in which there is "no nobility." Likening those who would "masturbate over the gas chambers" to those who attempt to hearken back to the "teleological, heroic" societies depicted in the epics such as the *Illiad*, *Beowulf* or the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as similarly misguided, Wolves argue that humanity must "look to the past for guidance" to "forge a new path" of "spiritual growth and transformation." *Wolves In the Throne Room* underscores the futility of searching for meaning in the chaotic past, while reminding that the "voice of eternal wisdom is clear and strong," and in a seeming allusion to the progressive's view of history, state that they play "Evolutionary Black Metal" (Wolves).

Wolves In the Throne Room close their statement with a section entitled "The Enchanted Earth," in which they state and support their eco-feminist leanings and reasoning clearly, while reasserting the need to transcend the shackles of modernity. Continuing the invocation of the Earth and its importance, Wolves state that "everything on the earth has incalculable worth" that stands outside the "narrow reductionist criteria" that modernity has placed upon the natural, non-human world. While dourly asserting that only "Christians and other fools" believe that "humanity has been granted dominion over the earth," Wolves state that their music is "informed by eco-feminism" and state unequivocally that the "destruction of the natural world is rooted in our culture's hatred of women and feminine energy." Wolves further lament the impact of this misogyny upon their music of choice, and trace it back to the sort of mistrust and objectification of women in contemporary American society. Noting that they are simply unable to "express the depths of our hatred for misogynistic metal of all stripes," the band returns to masturbatory imagery to denigrate the chauvinistic simpletons in their midst: likening the extreme metal geek and his snuff-pornographic "Cradle of Filth¹⁷ poster" to a "middle-aged suburban dad's diet of Howard Stern and *Playboy*," both are dismissed as "pathetic fantasies" that continue to undermine and weaken any chance of a positive, equal discourse or relationship between the sexes. Wolves In the Throne room here sets forth their challenge: "one can walk the black path in two directions: at one end is annihilation of the soul, at the other, redemption." While, no doubt, wary eco-feminists bridle at the imposition of a binary, Wolves reinforce their deeply ecological, deeply feminist stance

¹⁷ An influential English genre-spanning extreme metal band.

by invoking the power of the feminine and the natural, stating that to listen to black metal and be "deaf to the song of the moon and the wildflowers" is to be an unambiguous failure (Wolves).

By positing that "we as people" must overcome our "weakness, our selfishness, our alienation," Wolves In the Throne Room invoke a spiritual humanism that they see as set aside or bypassed by modernity. Indeed, the notion of "spirit" is brought up time and again. This is notable in an essay that is otherwise atheistic¹⁸ and decries an unblinking adherence to both Christianity and Satanism, but not unforeseen: Wolves allude to the crop of myths that have sprung up around the band regarding their unorthodox stances and lifestyles, and decide that these "uncanny" rumors speak to the "hunger that people feel for a connection with magic and spirit." Wolves In the Throne Room conclude their statement by noting that not only is it preferable to escape the "insane death-march" that we modern subjects believe ourselves inescapably trapped in, that "the truth is that it is quite easy" to remove oneself from the rat-race, and the rat-mentality which accompanies it. Echoing their summation of black metal as an essentially apolitical structure that "does not provide a map out of the darkness," Wolves nonetheless allude to a hope for our evolution from modernity, stating that there are "many ways to find a more meaningful existence" (Wolves).

We see that Wolves in the Throne Room trace the rebellion-nihilism-humanism arc's line: while they take up the banner of rebellion carried grimly by their Norwegian counterparts, they eschew and transcend that group's nihilism and macabre decadence for

¹⁸ And therefore, as previously noted, also a-*spiritual* to the common American layman.

a holistic, collective humanism that is as much about humanity as it is about everything else, *tout le monde*. Speaking for the New York black metal band Liturgy, Hunter Hunt-Hendrix lays out a similar path in his essay "Transcendental Black Metal: A Vision of Apocalyptic Humanism."

In Hunter Hunt-Hendrix's essay/manifesto, he forthrightly states the need to not sink into nihilism, as "impossible as the task may be" (5). To Hunt-Hendrix, the Norwegian black metallers, or "Hyperborean" metallers, wrapped themselves in nihilism because the creators were through with belief; the ancestors from which they drew much of their inspiration in both life and art had failed to stymie either organized religion (the "Middle Eastern plague" as Varg puts it) or the onset of capitalism (the "Anglo-Saxon curse," as many of its detractors deem it). One had co-opted what it needed from their unique Norse belief systems what it needed to gain support with their people, the other had come to supersede and/or monetize nearly all that remained in their personal lives. It follows that a people who have had their beliefs exposed and supplanted would choose a constant a-belief, a state of perpetual self-feeding nihilism rather than to simply adopt a new, likely just as fallible belief or ideology which held no intrinsic pull. The idea that black metal chose to revolve around the constants of death and hate seems a recruiting pitch as least as old as Melville^{19 20}, and eventually as short-sighted as Ahab.

To Hunt-Hendrix, Hyperborean black metal is "lunar, atrophic, infinite, and pure," and he notes the suicide of Dead as a defining attribute in this style of black metal:

¹⁹ "For hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee," though my personal favorite interpretation of these lines is in Star Trek II, which I understand cheapens the effect for some.

²⁰ Or scripture/literature en masse.

one which "secretly inaugurates the birth of black metal and the death of counterculture," echoing the old saw that flatly informs us that once we are born, we are dying²¹.

Conversely, Hunt-Hendrix's Transcendental Black Metal seeks to do much the same as Wolves In the Throne Room's Evolutionary Black Metal; both aim to clear aside "contingent features" in order to explore anew the "essence of black metal." Hunt-Hendrix's Columbia M.A. is on display here, as well as his band's awareness of itself within the greater United States black metal scene: showing a familiarity with socio-philosophical critical jargon and a need for ideological distance, Hunt-Hendrix argues that his Transcendental Black Metal, which seeks to constitute an Apocalyptic Humanism, should instead be called American Black Metal, as the "US is a declining empire; America is an eternal ideal," which is represented by "human dignity, hybridization, and creative evolution" (54, 55).

Part of the duty of Hunt-Hendrix's eternal ideal is to move beyond what he calls the Haptic Void. This Haptic Void is broken down into four psycho-physical reactions not atypical to anyone who has ever observed individual crowd-members at a metal show: 1) "muscular clenching" in the "jaws, fists, arms, and chest;" 2) "a paradoxical sense of power, destruction, fullness, and emptiness;" 3) "a satisfying bouquet of clenching, constriction, and brutal affect;" and 4) "an insufficiency in comparison to the

²¹ Hunt-Hendrix contrasts this act against the murder of Euronymous by Varg, noting that while the homicide has come to be appreciated as Norwegian black metal's birth cry, it is truly Dead's death that defines the genre. While for the purpose of this essay it is relatively unimportant which of these acts or something else entirely founded the Norwegian scene-at-large, it is significant that what I have noted herein to be black metal's ideological trinity are all mentioned. Incidentally, if one is to take Dead's suicide as the defining moment in the black metal adolescence, it is because of the firm hold of the narrative Euronymous took at that moment. By making Dead's suicide a publicity stunt in a number of ways, Euronymous aimed his black metal towards the spotlight. It then becomes pertinent to ask how long he expected that to last: "that" being either the limelight itself or the limelight on Euronymous' terms.

promised plenitude;" but this is indeed the catch-22 of the Haptic Void. The promise of fulfillment that runs through three-fourths of the steps is exposed as a lie, "only its absence is ever present." Further exacerbating the system is the nature of the Void itself, as Hunt-Hendrix sees it, heavy metal's successive spin-offs of progressively more musically and ideologically extreme groups chart with exactitude the "march towards the void." Hyperborean black metal, then, is the culmination of that relationship: the eye finally gazing upon the abyss, but made to undergo a "profound apostasy" that it cannot fully comprehend, and therefore "arrives at nihilism" (56, 57).

We can make one immediate inference and two immediate connections from Norwegian black metal's fall to nihilism: as Hunt-Hendrix's arc sees the Norwegian black metal ideology reject religion and fall directly into unbelieving despair, we can safely assume that with the death of God, the death of spirituality and connection is also dead. It is, at the very least, absent from non-Viking black metal of that time. The first connection to be made is the suicide of Dead, whose total embrace of the misery and despondency of his black metal could have only taken the turn it did. The second connection is echoed in "The Myth of Sisyphus," as Camus writes, intimating religious belief, that a "world that can be explained *even with bad reasons* is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger," and that, unsurprisingly, there is a "direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death" (6, italics mine). While Euronymous and Dead may have turned to bleakness, despair, and death as remedies to the fractured, soulless world they saw themselves in,

with Varg we see the need to affix and create meaning even when the underlying tenet of one's art form is nihilism.

We see much of this struggle for meaning carried on in American black metal; indeed, in Victor Frankl's *Man's Search For Meaning*, he notes that his American student noted the presence of an existential vacuum in their lives at more than twice the rate than their European counterparts did (Frankl 111). It follows, then, that we can see the search for meaning described in Frankl's logotherapy as a phenomenon that has particularly manifested itself in the United States. Logotherapy, which takes its name from the Greek logos, or meaning, is a school of thought that seeks to actualize one's individual struggle for meaning, or "will to meaning" (111). Frankl posits that, rather than the Nietzsche-through-Adlerian concept of the will to power or the Freudian will to pleasure, that humanity's primary motivational force is to find the meaning in our own lives. Frankl goes on to say that the stresses that one feels if/when they lose whatever belief they have that has given their life meaning, be it in Allah, Daddy, or Krispy something else, are entirely normal. Indeed, these stresses are more than normal, they are existential crises, and are to be expected, if not welcomed, as "suffering may well be a human achievement, especially if the suffering grows out of existential frustration" (108). Noting that this existential frustration is neither "pathologic nor pathogenic," the job of the logotherapist is to help the patient sort out their noölogical (noölogy, from the Greek noös, or mind) neuroses: neuroses that occur as a result of the patient being unable to actualize their own search for meaning.

As Frankl observes, the stability of a person's mental health is often dependent upon a certain amount of perfectly healthy tension, "the tension between what one is and what one should become" or "accomplish" (110). Furthermore, "what man needs is not a tensionless state;" in order to have mental health and meaning in one's life and to avoid the existential vacuum which leads to nihilism, what one needs is instead "the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal" that has been freely chosen by the pursuer (110).

If many of the Norwegian black metallers gave up on the search for meaning, instead embracing either a seemingly absurd nothingness or death and despair, American black metal seems informed by the Absurd and the continuing search. Obviously, a nihilism carried as a self-and-life-defining belief cannot serve as this meaning in a person's life: not only is nihilism a self-defeating end, but also it is exactly that it *is an end*, the very thing that Frankl warns us against. According to Hunt-Hendrix, it then follows that in order to create this new meaning in black metal, that there must be a "'No,' to the entire array of Negations," a "Renihilation" "which turns [in]to an affirmation of the continuity of all things." This renihilation is embodied to Hunt-Hendrix in both the America that "is a metaphor for pure unrestricted creativity, the courageous exercise of will and the joyful experience of the continuity of existence" and in the new black metal that has sprung from it and "does not resemble its earlier incarnations" because of the special qualities of its place and time of birth: a "specifically American joyful clamor" (59). As "the very thing that led to despair of the meaning of depth of this life now gives it its truth and its clarity," Hunt-Hendrix's transcendental black metal resonates of Camus' Absurd (Myth 37). Hunt-Hendrix admonishes us to revere the finite rather than the

infinite because "[t]he infinite is everywhere and cheap" and "it is the finite that is peculiar to humankind," (62). Exhorting this new ideology to embrace a solar, life-giving nature also means coming to terms with the end of that life cycle: to look upon the pale king of terrors, and if not laugh, at least turn disdainfully to the task at hand "and doing what is honest with the means one has at one's disposal" (62,63). If we are to fully abandon the thought-fetters of organized spirituality and religion within our personal life-defining spiritual discourse, as Camus says of Nietzsche, we must "kill God to become gods oursel[ves]" (Myth 108).

Like Wolves In the Throne Room, Liturgy set forth a bold vision of what they wish their music to be and to impact. Both bands acknowledge the debt they owe to the Norwegian scene that came before them, but declare that they desire to pick and choose from that scene what they wish. Indeed, both bands show a remarkably Romantic view of this mission, a view that seeks to borrow from many disparate ideologies, including Irish druidism and a sort of nationalism that predates what our sociopolitical sphere now knows as nations, i.e., groups of peoples connected by culture and shared beliefs, not arbitrary "national" boundaries. This connection among nations of people was once a spiritual dimension, and this is a central part of the humanism that both bands intend to assert. Both Wolves In the Throne Room's Evolutionary Black Metal and Liturgy's Transcendental Black Metal decry the existing socioreligious structures and wish to wrest the language of spiritual connectedness from the faiths' collective dying grasp, so that humanity might repurpose it to better and more realistically face the problems we have created for ourselves in the absence of these deeper truths. Both groups define their brand

of humanism somewhat differently, but both look to reappraise the natural growth and life cycle of the earth, and to reevaluate humanity's place in it²².

²² With Wolves In the Throne Room taking the obvious lead in this aspect

CHAPTER 3

SEARCH FOR MEANING

As America loses grasp of its traditional beliefs, and strata of Americans relinquish even the right to be in the conversation about belief, spirituality, or meaning, it becomes easy to diagnose a malaise that has, by now, become oft associated with the postmodern condition itself. Since the educated postmodernist knows that subjective belief is a faux pas, not only unfashionable and nigh-impossible to boldly assert without repercussions, but also, perhaps, simply patently false, even the bravest in society are hesitant to assert single-entendre, totally subjective truths. As postmodernism has undeified the various gods and totems of everything people could wish to believe in, even the idea of belief or adherence to any set of humanistically dutiful maxims, the playing-field is desolate. Even evolution seems to suggest that something will come to fill the void.

Now, as even Christianity seems to fade away on the horizons of American postmodernity or adapt to fit the times, many find their beliefs shaken. A common question directed to atheists, polled as America's most mistrusted group, is some variation on "Without God, what do you believe in?" as if to suggest that there was nothing else that could replace that unshakeable conviction in the awaiting Pearly Gates that would give their life purpose. Indeed, many Americans conflate belief with meaning, and the two terms are often used interchangeably and codependently. As Camus notes, even a newfound freedom from belief is rarely embraced, as the "certainty of a God

giving a meaning to life" to many, "far surpasses in attractiveness the ability of behave badly with impunity" (Myth 67). For many that lose their faith, the dissolution of the rules that govern their life is nowhere nearly as comforting as the knowledge that they cannot simply follow those rules to achieve eternal bliss; even if the tradeoff is existential freedom.

In this day when, as Frankl puts it, "the traditions which buttressed [human] behavior are now rapidly diminishing," we find that we must grapple with many of the choices which humanity has been able to place in the hands of long-held rituals of belief, sometimes every day (111). Camus, Frankl, and David Foster Wallace all note a strong tendency in humanity to vacillate between either wishing to do what other people do, thereby conforming by degree, or, more extremely, to wholly subject to a form of totalitarianism, and exclusively do what other people wish them to do. The amount of "stubborn hope" in the human desire for meaning too often means that the most desperate and "destitute men often end up accepting illusion," whether by hook, crook, or book (Camus 103).

Examination reveals a number of reasons for this. In America, belief always comes with an asterisk. In a land partially founded upon the plurality of religion, one must always take another's belief system into account, and many braver still juxtapose the alien religion to their own, and examine both for inconsistencies. While the history and belief-in-practice of the American experiment has conversely been one of general Christian homogeneity, ours has always been a nation that celebrates and revels in the

words and precepts of its founding. The questions of an afterlife, then, are not usually the sort of thing imposed upon the public sphere, since everyone is entitled to their own thoughts upon the matter; indeed, one finds that the religions that are lampooned the most often are typically the ones that impress themselves into others' private lives, e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

If we return to the question posed to the atheist, one can usually detect at least a note of desperation tinged with sadness. This is wholly understandable; To people of faith, what can often be seen as losing one's life-directional North Star is a life-changing event. The result is often a deep sadness. David Foster Wallace noted this malaise in American culture, saying that "this sadness, that seems to me to infuses the culture right now, has to do with this loss of purpose or organizing principles; something to give yourself away to" (Silverblatt 1).

Wallace argues further that this American cultural melancholy will eventually culminate in some form of totalitarianism, positing that "we're creating a hunger that will eventually drive us to the sort of state where we may accept fascism, because the nice thing about fascists is that they'll tell you what to think"²³ (1). This is reflective of a widely held belief about the nature of meaning, and of belief itself. Consider the Abrahamic religions, in which the literal word is held sacred and immutable, steadfastness is cherished. Perhaps the most literal metaphor for this is that the Ten Commandments were written in stone. The unwavering interpretation of one's chosen

²³ There are echoes of Wolves In the Throne Room here, who mirror the "absolutism of the totalitarian state" with the "sheep mentality of Christianity" in their essay-manifesto.

holy texts is favored over the mind that constantly changes in these religions. Indeed, if a person is said to change his or her mind a lot, in the Western world it is often intimated that this is a negative trait to have.²⁴

This idea of a fixed, unwavering belief that one can set their sights upon and be done with it, is in and of itself not altogether troublesome, until the belief itself is undermined or successfully challenged. As Wallace alludes in the Silverblatt interview, the result is often a desire to simply hang one's hat on any peg one can find. However, this is not a view in step with existentialist thought, particularly not in Frankl's logotherapy. It is, however, reflective of the sort of humanism that, once embraced, can empower and sustain, the sort of humanism championed by David Foster Wallace.

In this, neither Wallace nor *Wolves In the Throne Room* nor *Liturgy* are so far removed from the theories of Peter Kropotkin, who also sought to throw off the ideological shackles from his field of endeavor, evolutionary science. As Stephen Jay Gould writes in "Kropotkin was no Crackpot," Kropotkin comes from a Russian school of evolutionary theory that directly criticizes the gladiatorial model of evolution traditional to the Anglophone. Kropotkin's school asserts that cooperation and mutual aid, not struggle and competition, was what ensured the survival of a species (6). Since Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, nature has largely been seen in the English-speaking world through the eyes of Darwin and his famous "bulldog," Thomas Huxley. In an explanation of the nature of the natural world, that has often been boiled

²⁴ Barring the self-styled "Dean of Inconsistency" Henry F. Ashurst, one of the first two U.S. Senators from Arizona.

down to "dog-eat-dog" or Tennyson's "red in tooth and claw." However, this is not the only interpretation of the data at hand.

Gould points to the difference in training as one aspect of this difference. While Darwin generally made his observations in the tropics. This was likely influenced by the fact that his native England had little unspoiled nature left and *carte blanche* by cannonball to go anywhere in the world one could get by sea. Conversely, Kropotkin makes the bulk of his observations in the northern wastes of Siberia, and so observed a nature with far fewer animals, plants, or other resources to go around. However, this did not stop him from bifurcating Darwin's notion of struggle: though he acknowledged the classic "Darwinian" notion of struggle that pitted "organism against organism of the same species for limited resources, leading to competition," he argued for the more, though oppositely, important, idea of struggle as "organism against environment, leading to cooperation" (7). Gould notes that while Kropotkin is influenced by his anarcho-socialist tendencies in his findings, he is no less so than Charles Darwin is in his view of a continuous war on all sides for existence, one Gould suggests is rooted in such English touchstones as Thomas Hobbes' theory of politics, Adam Smith's economic thought, and the prevalent English sport of the day, boxing (7). However, while Kropotkin, by his own admission, sought and found evidence of this continual struggle, he found "at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defense" (Kropotkin qtd. in Gould 8).

That Kropotkin can find evidence for sociability being "as much a law of nature as mutual struggle" (qtd. in Gould 8) in the relatively dead lands of northern Russia bears good tidings for our postmodern condition. Consider that while Darwin observed mostly populous, resource-laden tropical areas and found evidence of struggle, that this is only one of the ways in which this struggle may be interpreted through Kropotkin. The second mode, that of organism, and thus, species, versus environment is the one that concerns us now. If we talk of the material world, it is of a planet with rapidly diminishing resources, and a population which grows exponentially to consume what remains: a situation which neither Darwin nor Kropotkin were able to observe in the wild. However, this is the postmodern condition, and as we recognize it as one that still leans heavily on Tennyson-through-Darwin in its jingoistic words and deeds, perhaps it is time to apply the second mode of struggle and embrace mutual aid.

Echoes of *Wolves In the Throne Room* and *Liturgy* abound as Gould writes about Kropotkin's paeans to the "human solidarity, deeply lodged in men's understanding and heart" that survived onslaughts by both the "crushing powers of the centralized State" and the "teachings of mutual hatred" (qtd. in Gould 9). While some authors have noted the emphasis on individualism which marked Norwegian black metal, particularly Fenriz's assertion on Norwegian television that "Black Metal is individualism above all!" (Hester 79) and Euronymous asserted that "people are not supposed to believe in themselves and be individualists. They are supposed to OBEY, to be SLAVES" (Lahdenperä), clearly, a middle path is called for between these two poles. By appealing to mutual cooperation and communalism of bygone eras, Kropotkin, *Liturgy*, and *Wolves In the Throne Room*

address nearly everything but the question of meaning, only opining that there are many ways to find it. However, as previously noted, it is often this question which matters most to Americans today, one which many seek to have answered before all else.

CHAPTER 4

A POSTMODERN HUMANISM IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

Like many aspects of United States black metal found precedent in Norwegian black metal, whether aesthetic, factual, or spiritual, there is a precedent for an American postmodern humanism as well. The human drive to understand the world and reduce it "to the human, stamping it with his seal" does not fly from the stage during the years in which irreverence, pastiche, and black humor reigns (Camus 16). Indeed, a central part of our theatre of the Absurd may be said to be the "confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity" which defines much of our literature of any age (21). Though humanism as a cultural cause may have made itself persona non grata, humanistic ideas and philosophies have been present in American postmodern literature nearly since its inception

The humanism espoused by Wallace seems to harken back to an earlier avatar of American postmodernism, Kurt Vonnegut. Like Wallace, Vonnegut, a grand old man of postmodern literature and famously self-professed humanist, was as up-front about his beliefs in his fictional works, as he was in his speaking engagements, and his nonfictional essays. Also like Wallace, Vonnegut did not do this idly; he saw this charge as one of the tasks laid upon any mindful fiction writer in the new, fractured and searching America, and was "concerned not only with the form his writing takes – one that reflects postmodern concerns about the nature of reality and our ability to express that reality in language – but also with the positive work [their] artistry may engender" (Davis 6). Both

Vonnegut and Wallace are Midwesterners by birth, and as Vonnegut invokes this upbringing as central to his particular brand of humanism, remarking that it "was just what I learned in junior civics class in Indianapolis, how important it was to be a good citizen," (qtd. in Davis 7), one wonders what imprint Midwest, which seems to have affected almost all other aspects of his life, had on David Foster Wallace's own humanism.

At postmodernism's ascendancy, humanism was all but a dirty word. As Todd F. Davis explains, the humanism of Modernity failed the postmodernists because of its subjective viewpoint, which led to unfortunate occurrences such as the "justification of Western superiority and its significant role in cultural imperialism," the atrocities that resulted from these stances such as the Holocaust or My Lai, and the world's various wars around them (25). As the cherished tenet that humanity was to survive and thrive thanks chiefly to its rationality became laughable in the aftermath of Dresden, Nagasaki, and Auschwitz, the notion that the West's seeming love of reason and virtue would ensure a future for the race was largely abandoned. In its place ascended a perspective that favored objectivity above all else, and held the conviction that no one's particular beliefs took precedent over anyone else's to be a central principle.

Both Vonnegut and Wallace ostensibly revel in the relativism of the postmodern climate. As a trained anthropologist, Vonnegut's schooling tells him that there are no absolute truths, a truism no doubt reinforced by the philosophy Wallace studied and at one point planned to pursue as a career. However, as noted by Davis and others, this

postmodern insistence on relativism as opposed to universal values raises a number of questions in this era of global interconnectedness. When postmodernism was in its infancy, the world was a different place. While many of the so-called humanisms of the prewar period found themselves exposed as ethnic cleansing, eugenics, or out-and-out racism, the notion that no one person, group, or nation's claim to truth or righteousness held any more sway over anyone else's ascended to the top of the idea chain. As some of the world's formerly subjugated people began to emancipate themselves, their former subjugators looked upon them warily, secure in their Western value structures.

The problem arose when these former colonies and protectorates began to assert (or sometimes to *reassert* previously repressed) cultural practices that didn't jibe with these Westernized mores. Whether it was Communism, caste systems, clitoral castration, cannibalism or chemical weapons, these ethical outliers pose a new question to this brave new relativistic world: given that we are pledged to respect the rights of others to self-govern²⁵, what can the moral response possibly be to atrocity in this age where no one's values are supposed to take precedence over anyone else's? Here, perhaps the most succinct of the postmodern humanist has an answer; as Vonnegut tells us through Eliot Rosewater, "God damn it, you've got to be kind" (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* 110).

Vonnegut's ideology is firmly rooted in the freethinking ways of his family, the Midwestern civic values he was raised in, and a sort of cultural Christianity that is nigh

²⁵ In a personal sense, not in the sense of the 1648 Treaties of Westphalia, which required nations to respect others' sovereignty absolutely (and are still a benchmark of international relations). In interpersonal human terms, this means that we should never ever interfere with the doings of another person, no matter how despicable. Not ideal.

impossible to dodge in contemporary middle America. While Vonnegut's family may not have been hard-line Christians, they were not reactionary atheists, and so the question of God seems to have never fully been off the table. Indeed, Vonnegut often chalked his popularity with the young up to his interest in the God questions; "I talk about what God is like, what could He want, is there a heaven, and, if there is, what could it be like?" (*Conversations* 103). Famously, the author remarked in one of his later works that had it not been for Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount, he would just as soon "be a rattlesnake" (*Man Without a Country* 81), and Wallace himself was known to attend church on a semi-regular basis, it stands to reason that these champions of American postmodern literature saw something — "being part of a larger thing" within the ethics of the beatitudes and platitudes that they yearned to recreate in their writing, without having to take "things on faith" alone (Arden).

Vonnegut capitalized on his mass appeal amongst the college-age crowd to these youths that their future professions could not be ethically neutral. While Vonnegut most often made this entreaty to masses of young scientists, once positing to an audience at MIT that medicine's Hippocratic Oath ought to be rewritten to apply to all sciences "remembering that all sciences have their roots in the simple wish to make people safe and well" (*Fates* 120), it was hardly lost upon him that contemporary writers had the very same duty to their public. Vonnegut saw writing as an act of "good citizenship," (*Conversations* 72), a chance to catch people (generally American youths) who were eventually to inherit the reins of American power, and to "poison their minds with humanity" so that they might "make a better world" (5).

In Wallace's second collection of essays, *Consider the Lobster*, we notice a very similar tone. In the essay "Joseph Frank's Dostoyevsky," Wallace tentatively lays forth his desire to write "morally passionate, passionately moral fiction that was also ingenious and radiantly human" (*Lobster* 274), and while doing so, asks why our own fiction does not reflect these qualities, traits he sees heroically embodied in Dostoyevsky's fiction. While Wallace notes that Dostoyevsky himself was a bit of a morally-challenged curmudgeon, he also hails him for his bravery. Calling attention to the fact that Dostoyevsky not only wrote his works in an incredibly repressive sociopolitical climate²⁶ but continued to worry about his literary reputation: something which "never stopped [Dostoyevsky from] promulgating unfashionable stuff in which he believed" (272). Wallace's words here are telling: "And he did this not by ignoring (now a.k.a. 'transcending' or 'subverting') the unfriendly cultural circumstances in which he was writing, but by *confronting them*" (272, my emphasis).

We see immediately that Wallace judges the previous attempts to harken back to this passionate morality as having failed: perhaps because they still chose to embrace the subject with the cynicism-couched language of the postmodern. If one "believes deeply in moral/spiritual values," it seems unlikely that they would try to assert that these values transcend or subvert anything (272). Rather, these values are not present enough in our culture that they need to be redefined; they must be firmly asserted, as Dostoyevsky did with his beliefs in his time. Another interesting facet to the quote is that, while having

²⁶ Russia, while seemingly never known for its stability or friendship to the freethinking writer, was in an especially Russian state of turmoil during the 19th century in which Fyodor Dostoevsky worked.

previously acknowledged the sociopolitical turmoil that Dostoyevsky lived in, Wallace does not here recall that difficulty in the Russian writer's life. Instead, he highlights that the chief obstacle to writing this sort of fiction is the *culture*, of both Dostoyevsky's time and our own.

As Wallace notes, the culture in which we live would reject a Dostoyevskian writer, almost on principle. Arguing that our intelligentsia and art culture "distrust strong belief, open conviction," and believe that ideology is now the bailiwick of the ever-devouring capitalist culture of the rival special interest groups, multinational corporations, and political action committees "trying to get their piece of the big green pie" (272). However, as he concedes, if this is true, "it's largely because we've abandoned" (273) the field upon which morals, beliefs, and convictions used to be discussed and argued. In academia and the arts, Wallace largely blames the "Political Correctness movement," a movement that effectively crippled dialogue vis-à-vis these big subjects in its zeal to sanitize "mere forms of utterance and discourse," and has largely resulted in one American sociopolitical cross-section's complete silence on the matter.

As Wallace sees it, "our best liberal instincts" have now turned one of postmodernism's greatest achievements, the ongoing democratization of the literary world, into a toothless sham, and liberalism with it. He further laments that to remove liberal, progressive discourse from this field is to leave it exclusively to "fundamentalists whose pitiless rigidity and eagerness to judge show that they're clueless about the

‘Christian values’ they would impose on others,” and to other, less desirable segments of the American vox populi (273). To do otherwise and confront these issues not only head-on, but in a largely unfamiliar arena, is make oneself that most unfashionable of American writers, one who is not "serious" (272).

The serious writer, according to Wallace, is, since Modernism, lauded largely for their ability to "raise aesthetics to the level of ethics – maybe even metaphysics," and since the impact of James Joyce²⁷, "Serious Novels" are "valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity" and are further hindered by the self-awareness and self-reflexivity that are "imposed by postmodernism and literary theory" (272). Wallace does not continue the point, but I would posit that these added constraints to the field of literature, combined with postmodernism's insistence on subjective truth, and thus, novels bereft of moralizing, has resulted in a field in which aesthetics has is often raised to a level above ethics. In this new, insular world that deems what literature is serious and what is drivel, someone who trades in morals is a queer bird, while someone who dares to present those morals without distorting the narrative in a seemingly inventive fashion is an outright fool. Just ask Kurt Vonnegut.

As Davis notes, Vonnegut's work was and has been denigrated early and often by literary critics. Juxtaposing his works with those by linguistic acrobats such as Thomas Pynchon (barring his last few works, Pynchon is perhaps the most lauded postmodern writer, no doubt owing partially to the Salingeresque mystique his Salingeresque

²⁷ And the idea that this uptick in literary criticism was postwar and very American-influenced, it could be argued.

eremitism has lent him and the fact that he seems to deal exclusively in labyrinthine tomes), Vonnegut was derided as precious and easy to read, perhaps the two chief sins in this brave new literary world. While fellow writers such as John Irving would mock the fallacy that "what is easy to read has been easy to write," (*Palm Sunday* 41, qtd. in Davis 5) and in so doing, invoke the postmodern maxim that the artistic process is equally important to the finished product, Vonnegut's relative lack of technical-linguistic literary flourishes would partially damn his status as a Serious Writer to oblivion. Assisting this character assassination of sorts was Vonnegut's insistence upon a sort of lingual transparency in his work; arguing that while "clarity looks like laziness and ignorance and childishness and cheapness" (*Palm Sunday* 320, qtd. in Davis 5) to American literary academia, his was a style of the common man, specifically, one from Indianapolis. This insistence on plainspoken prose and relatively unconvoluted structural experiments seemed in step with the culmination of his goal as a humanist writer, one that could perhaps be summated by the edited Hippocratic oath he presented to MIT which included the exhortation to operate for the "benefit of all life on this planet" (*Fates* 120). In other words, Vonnegut's oft-assailed parables of straightforward prose are a calculated, Dostoyevskyan response to the monolithic adherence to brain-achingly multifarious narratives that mean almost nothing to the human condition outside of the literary ivory towers that glorify them. Dostoyevsky's works did what Wallace seeks to²⁸, to weigh this nigh-irreconcilable contemporary existence with a "passionately honest heart and mind" (*Conversations* 192, qtd. in Davis 6)

²⁸ Perhaps not stylistically, though it would have been interesting to see if his prose would have become more or less intricate over time.

In "Joseph Frank's Dostoyevsky," we see Wallace struggling with the what he sees as Dostoyevsky's legacy: he identifies with wanting to write the passionately human fiction that deals with feelings, hopes, and desires, as well as working within a literary establishment that seems to discourage that inclination as a sort of unwritten rule. As Dostoyevsky's life and work were fettered by the political pressures he felt throughout his career, so too does Wallace feel pressured to follow unblinkingly into the postmodern canon, a fact of circumstance and influence. Born in 1962, Wallace came of age alongside postmodernism, which predated him like a much older brother. Unsurprisingly, Wallace's admiration for such postmodern stylists as Pynchon, William T. Vollmann, and Don DeLillo is well documented; Wallace's novels in size and scope alone are homages to the early works of Pynchon²⁹ and Vollmann, and he quotes liberally from DeLillo in his essays, among them "E. Unibus Pluram." This landmark essay from *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, Wallace's first essay collection, gives the first hints to his greater ambitions for both his career and the state of contemporary literature.

While the "Pluram" essay is largely concerned with the effects of television on literature and the state of literature of the 1990s, Wallace begins "Pluram" by noting a few things that postmodernism has done for the sociopolitical landscape since its inception, perhaps foremost among them the introduction of irony as a mode of

²⁹ Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V.* was an ostensible technical template for the postmodern novel, a sprawling, overpopulated, and unexplainably fractured narrative. It can also be viewed as a ethical touchstone for the postmodern novel, especially the sort dealt in by Wallace. *V.* is a multi-vocal narrative that shifts between a number of characters' voices and stories, and none seem to be particularly privileged. Morally, the narrative voice is dispassionate, and similarly refuses to privilege the actions or thoughts of the book's cast. The ending is rather open-ended, and many of the characters' arcs remain unresolved. It's not difficult to see this as a template for Wallace's novelistic works.

discourse. The postmodern use of irony served to expose our seemingly pious gatekeepers for the deeply flawed charlatans that they truly were; iconoclasm and irony went together like peas and carrots to un-deify our deities and similarly defrock revered societal institutions. The two helped to show that things were not always as they were reported to be, while emphasizing the myriad and increasingly vocal perspectives in the contemporary world and placing them within the same conversation as those who were deemed and deemed themselves to be their superiors.

However, while irony may have well-highlighted the fact that in contemporary society, the "arbiters of sanity were often crazier than their patients" (*Fun Thing* 66), as Wallace points out, though it has remained central to the cultural discourse, irony may have ceased to be a meaningful lens through which to view and critique the world. Here, as Allard den Vulk notes, Wallace is not merely concerned with irony as a "verbal strategy" or "an ambiguous form of language use, but "with irony as an *attitude towards existence*" (den Dulk 2, emphasis from original). Den Dulk aligns this with Søren Kierkegaard's similar distaste for existential irony, or what the Dane called "pure irony." This sort of ironist takes up an "ironic relation to the whole of reality," and "also means that no positive content lies 'behind' it, because existential irony places the totality of existence under negation," therefore, delegitimizing its meaning in the same fashion as it has everything else (3) —the result of this "endless irony" is that all other "distinctions and values" will "*by definition, become invalid*" (7). For this reason, according to Kierkegaard, we should only employ irony "temporarily" (5).

This is because irony, while useful as a frontal assault upon the absurdities of life, is a poor weapon or defense in a prolonged battle. Irony may serve to clear the field of pretenders, but it does nothing at all to repopulate it; it is entirely "unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (67). What, then, will or can enter the playing field after irony has cleared it? Nothing, because nothing really can. Wallace uses the metaphor of a political insurgency in a Third World country to great effect:

Third World rebels are great at exposing and overthrowing corrupt hypocritical regimes, but they seem noticeably less great at the mundane, non-negative task of then establishing a superior governing alternative. Victorious rebels, in fact, seem best at using their tough, cynical rebel-skills to avoid being rebelled against themselves – in other words, they just become better tyrants (67).

Wallace passionately believes that our lives either already have, or are in danger of becoming, tyrannized by this irony-as-Third World rebel. As the rebel knows best how to take the throne and then how to defend it from others like themselves, so too, has irony entrenched itself into the culture in an increasingly nefarious way, and done an excellent job of ridding the field of competitors. As Wallace will later note in *Consider the Lobster*, non-ironic, passionate sentiment is met, not with "outrage and invective, but worse – one raised eyebrow and a very cool smile," the very picture of hip irony (273). The enormous societal pressure to be detached and sardonic with the similarly-pressured masses is reinforced as Wallace presents his version of a novelist of our age's "truest version of hell:" being simply "laughed out of town" (273), discouraging the hypothetical

writer and his similarly-minded comrades from ever attempting to work with heartfelt beliefs again.³⁰

Biographically, this is not unlike Wallace's career trajectory at the time of "Pluram's" 1997 publication. As Samuel Cohen notes, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* is often cited as the work in which Wallace moves past influence enough to begin to forge his own style, wholly of his moment. The earlier fiction works, held against this lens, "contain earnest, sophisticated, and sometimes very funny attempts to take this step," to finally "move from critique to alternative" (72). Fully able and equipped to rebel against postmodernism, it appears to be enough for him at this point merely to parody and satirize it, as in the Barth-inspired short story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," where Wallace's effort to, as he accuses the image-fictionists of in "Pluram," use postmodernism's own tricks upon itself: the apparent attempt to "get past ironic self-consciousness by being conscious of it," "to be meta-aware of meta-awareness" (72) ultimately falls short³¹ and ultimately reinforces the solipsistic nature of the style.

³⁰ Wallace's brother-in-quills Dave Eggers raised similar complaints upon the critical reception of his 2000 breakthrough, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Eggers, who considered his memoir a sort of unflinchingly honest exorcism-by-publication, was bewildered to find that a vocal number of critics found his book "ironic." This so offended Eggers that in the addenda affixed to later publications of *Genius*, Eggers inserted a three-page footnote in maddeningly small type (which, among other things, took time to define irony and later to note that neither footnotes nor small type were inherently ironic) to lambast the people who so exclusively dealt in irony that they could recognize non-ironic art when it was presented to them. Though later in that same footnote, Eggers also took on the terms "modern" and "postmodern" and advised readers to "KILL THE HUMORLESS," the main thrust was the attack on the titular "Irony and Its Malcontents" (*Genius*, MWKWW 33-35).

³¹ Though perhaps reinforcing the Heisenberg uncertainty principle.

Further complicating the picture is the problem birthed when irony and capitalism found themselves bedfellows: the continually evolving and all-consuming ability for the nexus of irony and capitalism to reinvent itself upon attack, swallow and render meaningless the attack, and then, most diabolically, to sell the attack back to its former attackers. For a particularly cynical example, consider the Guy Fawkes masks nigh-ubiquitous at the Occupy Wall Street movement and its adherents. A potent symbol of rebellion with its roots in seventeenth-century English rebellion against religious oppression by the royalty, it was reintroduced into pop culture by way of a similarly subversive, if less violent, publication written by renowned comic book writer Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta*. Moore's allegory, aimed at the then-current politics of Margaret Thatcher, was groundbreaking in the comic book world and featured a Guy Fawkes-masked protagonist fighting in a dystopian future England wracked by the aftereffects of what Moore saw as some of the logical conclusions of Thatcher's conservative politics. In the mid-2000s, directly contrary to Moore's wishes, the story was packaged into a movie by the team responsible for the *Matrix* franchise, and marketed with all of the now-expected merchandising tie-ins, including countless Guy Fawkes masks used by the film's eponymous hero. That hero, V, who is more of a Romantic ideological cipher than a one-message man, is quoted in both the books and movies as saying that "people should not be afraid of their governments, governments should be afraid of their people" (*V for Vendetta* (2005)). This rhetoric was eagerly adopted by both the anticapitalist Occupy movement and the iconoclastic hacker collective known as Anonymous, who then seemingly all rushed out to buy the Guy Fawkes/V masks, making them one of the most

visible symbols of the rebellion against the global politicocapitalist consortium. If America can be sold a dead rebel's visage on numerous, separate occasions, surely whatever intent the rebel had originally has been reclaimed and undermined by however the mask's buyer was influenced to purchase it, whether the marketing campaign was book, film, or guerrilla³².

Indeed, the only currently thriving religion in America is capitalism, the lauded free market, "the only absolute truth that the upper class accepts these days" (Douthat). While it can be debated to what degree our market is actually as classically "free" as Rousseau or Adam Smith may have called for, it is of no dispute that the idea has always been central to American culture. We point to the Boston Tea Party as our country's birth-cry: the armed vandalism and destruction of goods that the colonists deemed to be unfairly taxed. If the founding of our upstart nation was based in this sort of discourse, is it any wonder that the idea of unimpeded capitalism has been so integral to the American character? The twentieth century, for many Americans, is remembered largely by the health of Wall Street at any particular time, for example, the generation-defining Great Depression, or our current recession. The economy has largely become how America defines itself to itself and to the world at large in the postmodern era: Americanism has been exported in the forms of rock 'n' roll music, Coca-Cola, and blue jeans,³³ as most

³² See also: any use of Che Guevara since his expiration.

³³ In terms of geopolitical ideology, think of the Cold War: the nation-states involved neatly aligned themselves with either the Eastern Bloc countries, who supported various forms of communism or socialism, or with the United States and its largely capitalist allies. While it is indeed true that many of the Communist countries of the twentieth century eventually became more dictatorial in practice than anything Marx, Trotsky, or Lenin had intended, the same observation can be made of some nominally "free" countries during and since. At its core, therefore, the struggle is clear: free markets versus state-controlled

famously parodied by Andy Warhol and the Pop artists. Warhol, whose early work variously treated images of mid-twentieth century American popular culture to present its "brand" of irony without comment, nonetheless capitalized upon the already established fame of the images he co-opted, and tacitly reinforced the cultural imperialism³⁴ that created them.

This is the truly insidious and insular nature of irony, once it has become so institutionalized, it then acquires and/or develops the ability to "interdict the *question* without attending to the *subject*," a practice that is tyranny in every sense (*Fun Thing* 68, emphases original). By gutting issues of problematic questions or charges, repackaging them in innocuous forms, and selling them back to its questioners, irony has made itself singularly unassailable, or so it seems. In so doing, irony has also obviously undermined itself as the thoughtful, even-handed leader, yet still remained entrenched in the cultural thought processes. The obvious analogy here is Ronald Reagan's myriad quips undermining the role of government as he sought governorships, and the Presidency within that government. Reagan's Presidency-defining, and post-Reagan conservatism defining, and unfortunately by extension American politics post-Reagan defining, quote from his first inaugural address that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem" (Reagan) is a neat rhetorical flourish that, like the irony Wallace watched eviscerate and monopolize literary discourse, is a case of the gatekeeper disparaging the gates and all beyond them, while smugly grinning from their other side.

markets, and this is the debate that nearly brought civilization to its knees several times during the War's testier times.

³⁴ Whether imagined or factual.

One watches the contemporary proponents of this political philosophy, deriding all that they can about the government while pandering shamelessly to get themselves set up in said government, and see a real-life analogue to Wallace's institutionalized irony.³⁵

Having then diagnosed a facet of the problem facing the postmodern condition, what does Wallace suggest we do to throw off the fetters irony's ubiquity has placed us in? In "Pluram," Wallace suggests that to turn the weapons of irony upon irony itself, to try and out-ironize irony, so to speak, is an ultimately futile gesture for American letters, and makes his point by referencing the then-current trend of so-called "Image Fiction." This breed of fiction writers, Wallace argues, has decided to counterattack television, irony's most utilized and effective disseminator, by adopting the language of their oppressor and using it to protest against it. However, as is readily apparent, to level the all-consuming and repurposing nature of irony against itself is to become trapped in a sort of feedback loop; as both combatants enter the arena with identical agendas and tactics, then both adapt their tactics to the attacks of their opponent, the effect gradually becomes that of a prizefight between two identically-trained identical twins with identical goals and beliefs, and it no longer matters at all who wins the match.

The writers who try to turn irony against itself, Wallace argues (directing most of his attention here to Mark Leyner and his 1990 work *My Cousin, My*

³⁵ One can also draw a parallel between the continuous re-enthronement of irony and the Borg from *Star Trek*. In *Trek*, the Federation starships, manned largely by Earthlings and idealism, encounter the Borg in battle, and often lose. As the Borg's tagline is something to the tune of "We are Borg. Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated," when and if the Federation starships do lose in interstellar battle, their technologies and people are absorbed and repurposed among the Borg collective, lather/rinse/repeat. Humorless conformity swallows up the principled and, if you'll forgive the Lecter/Gacyesque metaphor, wears the face of the principled as a mask to get one more over on the rubes who choose to disassociate with things like "self-consciousness and hip fatigue" (*Fun Thing* 81).

*Gastroenterologist*³⁶), reveal a reliance on the "tired televisual ritual of mock-worship," and find their best efforts resultantly "dead on the page" (*Fun Thing* 81). The genre attempts to "flatter the reader with appeals to his erudite postmodern weltanschmerz," (79) and only succeeds in reading as a sort of homage to television's ironic techniques. Even a "masterful reabsorption of the very features TV itself has absorbed from postmodern art" falls short of the mark. Television, the ultimate master of reabsorption, effectively disarms its opponent without entering the battle, as "the best stuff [Image Fiction has] produced to date" has sealed its own fate by choosing as its opponent a "TV-culture whose mockery of itself and all value already absorbs ridicule" (81).

Alexis de Tocqueville, Wallace notes, saw an awful lot of this coming. Stating that the French author, "by 1830," had already passed judgment on the States as a culture particularly inclined to the "vehement and untutored and rude," (*Democracy in America* 57, qtd. in *Fun Thing* 37) to level these criticisms back at the culture which produced it is literally self-defeating when done from within the culture — especially if one is not prepared to offer an alternative.

The answer, the prescription, the solution to the problem, is to readopt the very things that irony deconstructed and decimated: values and beliefs. As Wallace posits, the next generation of "real literary 'rebels'" will need to risk being called "backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic," for he sees the reinstatement of "old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life" as central to the next, post-ironic step. In so doing, Wallace

³⁶ Wallace also addressed Leyner and his style face-to-face on the May 17, 1996 episode of *The Charlie Rose Show*, which also featured Jonathan Franzen.

acknowledges, these new rebels must be willing to risk his hypothetical novelist's³⁷ contemporary Hell, must contend with "the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh, how *banal*'" (81). In a contemporary climate that Wallace sees as both hateful and fearful of "sentimentality, naïveté, archaism, and fanaticism," (*Lobster* 272) the postmodern literary establishment will go to elaborate lengths to avoid demonstrating or endorsing these qualities, ensuring an uphill battle for those who choose to "endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles" with "reverence and conviction" (*Fun Thing* 81). These new rebels will be espousing humanistic principles in spite of the irony-pervaded landscape, following the "negative freedom established" by irony's field-clearing to take up the existential "responsibility to give shape and meaning" to the world in a direct, honest, and forthright fashion, "thereby realizing a positive freedom" (Den Dulk 339).

Albert Camus, who lamented to Pierre Dumayet in a 1959 interview about the nihilism rampant in "ideologies who used to be generous," ("Les Possédés") would have rejected at face value the crypto-nihilism which postmodernism's institutionalized irony has effectively become. Camus' absurdist philosophy advocated a frank recognition of the existential incongruities inherent in day-to-day life, but stopped far short of recommending a sort of resultant despondency. Indeed, Camus argues that the "realization that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning. This is a truth nearly all great minds have taken as their starting point. It is not this discovery that is interesting, but the consequences and rules of action drawn from it" (Sagi 43). By acting

³⁷ From "Joseph Frank's Dostoyevsky."

as a sort of continual field-clearer, irony places all beliefs and meanings on the same level of banality, ensuring an eventual nihilism in practice, even if only unconsciously. Camus cites the tendency to drift toward despondency, noting that "[t]he certainty of a God giving a meaning to life far surpasses in attractiveness the ability to behave badly with impunity" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 67). However, Camus dismisses this as a recommendation of criminality, saying that to do so would ignore its "futility," and "would be childish" (67).

Conversely, Camus' stance is that while the earthly notions of judicial fairness are irrelevant to the absurd, "there may be responsible persons, but there are no guilty ones," indirectly noting that the need for personal responsibility survives the ethical upheaval inherent to the absurd. Indeed, this personal responsibility is reflected in Camus' musings upon Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov's* maxim that absent God, "everything is permitted" (67). Far from taking this ostensibly liberating aphorism at face value, Camus asserts that the "absurd does not liberate; it binds. 'Everything is permitted' does not mean that nothing is forbidden" (67). The absurd does not rubber-stamp all actions, rather, it merely deems that the consequences of those actions are equal and that the "consequences must be considered calmly" (67).

As noted by Frankl (and apparently, many others), "to the European, it is a characteristic of the American culture that [...] one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy'" (*Meaning* 140). Indeed, it is a part of our national credo: "life, liberty, and the

pursuit of³⁸ happiness," and since our founders said it, that means it crops up in the sociopolitical discourse ad nauseum. However, as noted by Wallace, the sort of happiness that Americans are over encouraged to pursue for themselves is one of the "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions" (*Fun Thing* 81) that is wholly unfashionable and derided in this postmodern America. Those who attain this happiness are acting upon "what's really important – motive, feeling, belief" (*Lobster* 273). However, were someone to then write about this happiness, the book may sell, the writer may become rich, but they would not be a Serious Writer. In fact, according to Wallace, one defining aspect of the Serious Novel is that "'serious' literature would be aesthetically distanced from real lived life," something we assume now, as "a matter of course" (272). To write life-affirming, passionate fiction in contemporary America is to be labeled as "pretentious, overwrought, and silly," the latter term perhaps the most damning in the literary world.

The Pale King is often described as Wallace's book about boredom. However, I posit that it is much more than simply a book that delineates dreariness. Much like his 2006 Kenyon College address, *King* is not about the Internal Revenue Service, or the tedium that one assumes would be inherent to a book that depicts the people who staff it, the book is about the people themselves. No book that uses the inner workings of the IRS as its axis would be able to get away with the soliloquy to a rapt listener that effectively closes out the book, or the truncated chapter that actually does.

³⁸ ~~property~~ (which originally stood in place of "happiness" in America's Declaration of Independence)

No, *The Pale King* is like its predecessor-in-form, *Infinite Jest*, insofar as the novel's seeming focus serves as a sort of MacGuffin for the reader. In *Jest*, the plot unfolds around you as you delve deeper into the book, and by the time you've got a few hundred pages under your belt, it has likely dawned on you that you probably aren't going to see or hear very much of Himself's *Infinite Jest* in the self-titled novel. Similarly, in *The Pale King*, one acquires the book likely accepting the fact that they have, consciously or un-, agreed to read a large book, by an author well-known for his elliptical style and dense prose, and about the Internal Revenue Service, no less. However, once one gets a significant way into *King*, it is striking how little time the novel actually spends in IRS halls or on actual IRS duty and/or protocol.

The typical Wallace postmodern hijinks are on display as well. While enough gravity should indeed be given to the fact that this is an unfinished work, that is hardly a hindrance either, especially as Wallace was given to abrupt, sometimes maddeningly incongruous starts and endings in his narrative, as well as a rather liberal regard for the niceties of plot structure. This is to say that the book, by accident, carries at least this stamp of Wallace's work with it. Also, the David Wallace character (that the reader is familiar with), spends an awful lot of his time on-page simply embroiled in the act of getting from place to place, as do his counterparts, a few of whom he spends a particularly detailed car ride with at one point. Even in the cramped close quarters of a coupe's backseat, Wallace samples the car's silent passengers' internal monologues, and finds a common truism of everyday life: each character imagines himself embroiled in a struggle somehow larger than he is, and similarly imagines that his fellows have found

him out for his flaws. Wallace's tendency to not write "about his characters," but "into them" (Sullivan 5) means that our insights into his characters' private lives are simultaneously surgically insightful, stupefyingly pedestrian, and achingly personal. In *The Pale King*, this ability comes through, strikingly, the most often in Wallace's female-centered narratives, notably 8 & 45, the Tori Ware chapters.

The thoroughly disconcerting tale of Tori Ware shows her living the hardest of hardscrabble existences, existing nomadically and marginally with her emotionally deadened mother. Victim to some of the most stereotypical trailer-park-esque crimes and/or affronts seemingly since setting foot to ground, Tori has responded by hardening her heart to men, who are never her fellows, and regarding the world-at-large with distance and distrust. Tori, throughout her life on the fringes, has self-taught in literature, survival, and revenge; several sentences are given over on how to exact one's retribution in ways ranging from mundane to murderous.³⁹ She stays as engaged with society as society seems to allow her, and is resultantly subjected to some of modern society's very worst cruelties, including one rape by force and another by drug.

The narrative style Wallace employs underscores Tori's utterly removed reality. He depicts the younger Ware as totally alone, whose approach to existence could be summated by her feeling, brought on after reading *The Red Badge of Courage* and knowing innately that its author had never seen combat, that "past some extremity, one just floated above the fear and could blinklessly watch it while doing what had to be done

³⁹ Including whetting down a car's brake lines with wirestrippers, putting asbestos cloth into the dryer with the target's otherwise innocuous articles of clothing, killing a tree with copper piping, etc.

or allowed to stay alive" (*King* 58). This feeling of detachment is reflective of the way the two Ware chapters are written, in a matter-of-fact, composed style that is corpulently verbose at first and Kerouacly colloquial by the time Wallace flatly informs us that "this girl is damaged goods," his final words on the subject (443). As to whether we are reading third-person omniscient narration or the first-person musings of Tori herself, an argument can be made either way⁴⁰. Ware is descriptively dispassionate nearly to the point of parody⁴¹, and if one is willing to view the chapter's narrative style as at the very least reflective of the girl's inner workings, then they are as much a product of her life as her skill set is. Wallace's depiction of Ware's inner life is reminiscent of the calm water on top of a tank of sharks: everything seems fine until you get a little bit deeper.

While 19 may not deal with any issues as immediately harrowing as Tori's story, it allows for a macro-level view of Wallace's America, just as the two Tori chapters give a micro-level view. One of the novel's most ideologically complex and baring chapters, 19 is the chapter in which Wallace is allowed to fully flesh out some of his ideas regarding civics, freedom, and humanity more so than anywhere else in *The Pale King*. In a stalled elevator car, one of the characters opines that he's probably "talking about the individual U.S. citizen's deep fear, the same basic fear that you and I have and everybody has," the fear of death, of what comes after it, and what that means to one before it, "except nobody ever talks about it except existentialists in convoluted French prose" (*The*

⁴⁰ Especially since this seems to be a new narrative style Wallace is working with, especially in regard to the rest of *The Pale King*, as noted by Sullivan (7).

⁴¹ Sullivan writes that Wallace seems to be making fun of "bad" Cormac McCarthy, the "incorrigible McCarthy, who when he wants to write 'toadstools,' writes 'mushrooms with serrate and membraneous soffits where-under toads are reckoned to siesta'" (7).

Pale King 143). Indeed, if *The Pale King* is truly a book about boredom, than it is only a book about boredom insofar as boredom allows the mind to wander, and as Wallace's characters often find out, a wandering mind often returns gloomier than when it started out. Boredom allows one the opportunity to self-reflect, and given enough self-reflection, the big questions get asked, and what happens if one doesn't like the answers?

Wallace recognizes the decline of the traditional values of civics and citizenship in *The Pale King*. In 19, several of the book's IRS men are stuck in an elevator, talking about whatever comes up, and what comes up is death, taxes, and everything in between. As the cultural attitudes of the authority-questioning 1960s conversationally crash against the authority-lauding 1980s generation who would re-enshrine some of their belief structure in the 1980s, a succinct, if truncated, American cultural landscape is drawn. Within the discussion, Wallace makes a case for a particularly American communalism in language which is often striking in its resemblance to the Steeply-Marathe conversations from *Infinite Jest*, especially the bits in which Marathe pointedly notes that American freedom is often "freedom-from," which means "only freedom from constraint and forced duress," and mentions nothing of "freedom-to" (*Infinite Jest* 320). This negative definition of freedom, as Kierkegaard and no doubt Marathe would submit, must be augmented once it has been established to "give positive meaning to one's freedom" (Den Dulk 329).

A stalled elevator car provides the playing field for these ideas, as Gaines, Nichols, Glandenning, and X discuss the role of freedom in contemporary American

lives. A large part of the conversation is given over to the discussion of civics and civic values, in which the older men bemoan a perceived shrinking of those values, especially of the "common good" that each citizen was "part of Everything, that the huge Everything else," "and that they had to hold up their end and pull their weight," assuming that every fellow citizen was doing exactly the same in order to ensure that "the country was going to stay a nice place to live" (*King* 139). Wallace's characters note the spreading feeling of alienation in the country⁴², a problem one notes has been around since the founding of America, as diagnosed by the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville. As the character quotes/paraphrases, democracies, "by their very nature," corrupt the citizen's sense of "true community," eventually creating a self-interested and covetous populace unable to fathom what had been the rule in the past: that they were in fact merely part of a collection of "real true fellow citizens whose interests and concerns were the same" as their own. The "ghastly irony" of the "form of government engineered to produce equality makes its citizens so individualistic and self-absorbed they end up as solipsists, navel-gazers" is noted as well (141).

This is exactly the sort of thing that Wallace exhorts the Kenyon College graduates to keep out of: the sort of self-centeredness that is so easy to fall into in our society, but so incredibly toxic for it. As Wallace says, "many more dreary, annoying, seemingly meaningless routines" are going to make up their adult life,

⁴² Though Wallace lived in the era of the internet, it is truly remarkable how little even its mere existence crops up in his work. Had it done so more often, this scene set in the 1980s might seem a sort of Mad Men-style in-joke at the simplicity of the times and their respective problems. But it's not: it's a problem that the characters in 19 align with the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville at America's inception, and is thusly shown to be a sort of peculiar American malaise, allegedly ingrained in the national character.

[b]ut that is not the point. The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing is going to come in. Because the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm going to be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop. Because my natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me. About my hungriness and my fatigue and my desire to just get home, and it's going to seem for all the world like everybody else is just in my way (*Water* 77).

As Wallace goes on, he underscores a tendency we've all observed in our friends as we sit shotgun in their cars, and find in ourselves upon further reflection:

[a]nd who are all these people in my way? And look at how repulsive most of them are, and how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem in the checkout line, or at how annoying and rude it is that people are talking loudly on cell phones in the middle of the line. And look at how deeply and personally unfair this is (78)⁴³.

By allusion in *The Pale King*, and by outright admonition and exhortation in the Kenyon College address, Wallace argues that in order to fully exercise your humanity, the people that join us in the shopping line must be imagined with their lives fully attached to them, and the next thing to forefront in our mind as we address them. As Wallace put it in *This Is Water*, finishing his parable about being at the supermarket after "an average adult day" at a "challenging, white-collar, college-graduate job[...] for eight or ten hours," the challenge is not to forget or ignore what sort of existential baggage everyone around you has dragged into the supermarket with them. In fact, it is our duty to "choose to force [ourselves] to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated" as we could possibly be. Not

⁴³ On the audio recording of this speech, available on YouTube, the students laugh here at his barrage of hypothetical insults, undoubtedly hearing their own rancor reflected in his words, while Wallace reminds them that "this is how not to think," and presses on.

only that, but "some of these people probably have harder, more tedious and painful lives than I do" (86).

Wallace argues that these are precisely the sorts of otherwise banal things that must be not only grappled with, but also ultimately accepted. To accept these truths is to make a giant step forward to the sort of mindfulness that Wallace called "not only meaningful, but sacred" (93). To ignore them is to enter a sort of disassociated solipsism, the King of the realm inside your own skull. Avoiding these tendencies will take work, as Wallace notes:

Again, please don't think that I'm giving you moral advice, or that I'm saying you are supposed to think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it. Because it's hard. It takes will and effort, and if you are like me, some days you won't be able to do it, or you just flat out won't want to. (88)

If you're aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line. Maybe she's not usually like this. Maybe she's been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer. Or maybe this very lady is the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department, who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness. Of course, none of this is likely, but it's also not impossible (89).

Wallace stresses the importance of recognizing our fellow humans as the sort of wholly complex and important creatures that we are, by default, to ourselves. The reality here is in the symbol of what your fellow supermarketers might be, whether that is in relation to your own life or not at all. It is relatively unimportant what or whom the people around you are, so long as you are able to believe in the moment that it your assumption could, in fact, be the case. As Wallace asserts, "[i]t just depends what you

want to consider.⁴⁴ Indeed, if "you're automatically sure that you know what reality is, and you are operating on your default setting," the solipsistic, self-assured, and self-centered, easy way out, "then you, like me, probably won't consider possibilities that aren't annoying and miserable" (90, 91). Solipsism is the easy route out of this, but cognizance, mindfulness, and practice are the ethical ones.

As in *The Pale King*, Wallace exhorts his audience to use the moments of skull-splitting tedium, boredom, and banality for more than just self-servitude. While in *The Pale King*, boredom serves to underscore the inherent uneases we tend to collectively have as Americans, Wallace's supermarket example is just as universal, and just as apparently pedestrian in its appeal as it is nigh-universal in its insight. But there are other ways to think about it all, and as Wallace already told us, it's hard to do that. However, there are benefits, and reasons to be hopeful otherwise.

Here, the hope is that civility still lives, reports of its death having been exaggerated. While perhaps we do not have the sort of omnipresently understood and easily explicated civic values of past generations of Americans and mourned by *The Pale King's* IRS men, enough civility and respect for one's fellow man exists that the supermarket is only made a personal hell because we are sufferingly polite enough to put up with the lines, the tedium, and everything else. In Wallace's supermarket, it's the rules and manners that are part of the unspoken civility that governs the behavior of everyone

⁴⁴ Indeed, one imagines that to actually obtain the pertinent information would bring the whole thing crashing down, for a number of reasons.

within the situation: it structures the disposition of actually existing elements within and around it.

Wallace's career followed a trajectory that saw him initially railing against the very style whose stylists he greatly admired, and eventually led to his creation of a new, distinctive voice. His artistic talent and ambition seemed to grow hand in hand with his humanistic outlook over the course of his career, and it is unsurprising that his work becomes more visibly humanist once he is able to lay the specter of postmodernism aside, if not totally conquer it. While his beliefs were elucidated in his novels, his short fiction, and his non-fictional works, it took the clearest form when he addressed a liberal arts college class and tried to poison their mind with humanism.

The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day. That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing (120-3).

I know that this stuff probably doesn't sound fun and breezy or grandly inspirational the way a commencement speech is supposed to sound. What it is, as far as I can see, is the truth, with a whole lot of rhetorical bullshit pared away (124-5).

It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: "This is water." "This is water." It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out. Which means yet another grand cliché turns out to be true: your education really is the job of a lifetime (131-6).

As Wallace notes, "If you really learn how to pay attention [...] it will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as

not only meaningful, but sacred." (93). This humanistic, communal, and civic sentiment is echoed in the works and words of the American black metal bands Wolves In the Throne Room and Liturgy, both of whom practice and preach a humanism that demands a constant, mindful reappraisal of the world around us. All three artists come from styles that originally sought only to rebel against the world it hated: Norwegian black metal revolted against the perceived oppression of foreign cultures and practices, including Christianity and capitalism, and postmodern literature asserted itself strongly against the modernity which preceded it, exposing it for the Euro-centric, subjectivist-in-relativistic-clothing fashion that it was. However, these movements stagnated once they became the entrenched rebels, comfortable in their newfound positions as the arbiters of importance, all diagnosis, no prescription. This constant rebellion against all comers soon lapsed into nihilism or something like it in both instances, a tactic which had less and less staying power as time went on.

CHAPTER 5

SYNTHESIZED REVOLUTION

Both the American black metal bands and Wallace would eschew nihilism in favor of what they saw as older, deeper truths that would serve to inspire and lift, rather than satirize and condemn. Wallace and United States black metallers have taken a middle path, one which echoes Camus' assertion that as there are "gods of light and gods of mud," it is therefore "essential to find the middle path leading to the faces of man," or in our case, the face of a new humanism which holds a sort of worldly, a-nationalistic citizenship and a need for self-determination in equal regard (*Myth* 103). As Camus' Absurd man must both perform the tasks of negation and magnification, we too must choose how we "give the void its colors" (114). Hunt-Hendrix unequivocally states that with this "affirmation" comes a final "refusal to deny," rejecting the descent into all-consuming depravity that he likens to "a poison dart shot from the shadows," a "retreat that feels like an advance," and an "attack that is only a shield" (62-3).

The postmodern humanisms that the Wallace, Wolves, and Liturgy advocate call for us to look past the chaos of self-interest and self-servitude, and to embrace the sort of mutual aid and collective humanism that drew equally from the sacred traditions of the past, clear-eyed appraisals of the present, and pragmatic predictions for the future. As Wallace repeated at Kenyon College, it is easy to slip into navel-gazing nihilism. As Fenriz from Darkthrone asserted, part of the rebellion of black metal came out of the "exhaustion of easy life" (*Until the Light Takes Us*). It is apparent that many today are

exhausted with the ease of existing in an atmosphere which precludes us meaning, and that we are therefore searching for our will to create that meaning. The humanism set forth by David Foster Wallace, *Liturgy*, and *Wolves In the Throne Room* may help us to find it, so that we may ourselves feel "on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down" (*Water* 93).

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