WHEN PAIN "FINDS A VOICE": THE ARTICULATION AND NARRATIVIZATION OF PAIN IN THE WORK OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND CHARLIE KAUFMAN

by

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Abstract

In response to the increasing cultural interest in diversifying the canon by no longer engaging with problematic artists such as David Foster Wallace and Charlie Kaufman, this thesis argues the merit in continued critical engagement in their work—particularly, because of their complex treatment of pain. While paying particular attention to questions of gender, this thesis illuminates how their characters, when faced with its all-encompassing, destructive power, seek to express and address their own pain. First, "Breaching That Wall" examines how Wallace in "The Depressed Person" and Kaufman in *Synecdoche, New York* address the problem of pain's inherent inexpressibility. Analyzing the ways in which characters struggle to articulate their pain, this chapter not only explores the inevitable failures that arise as they employ literary devices such as metaphor and synecdoche to approximate their pain experience but also elucidates the necessity in undergoing this process. Then, "Whereby One Does Not Equal Two" investigates how women become talismans, or "invested objects," through which male characters seek to alleviate their pain. Using Julia Kristeva's definition of melancholy, this chapter traces how the male protagonists' pain permeates and corrupts their relationships in Wallace's "B.I. #20" and Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Ultimately, in uncovering the importance of empathy in the face of seemingly insurmountable pain, this thesis illustrates the significance of Wallace and Kaufman's contribution to critical conversations about pain, gender, and the necessity of human connection.

Lay Summary

Throughout the work of David Foster Wallace and Charlie Kaufman, there is an unyielding preoccupation with pain; while this interest is not new, the manner in which they portray pain is. This thesis examines how these artists address the problem of pain—namely, its inexpressibility—as well as questions of gender in their work. First, delving into the ways in which emotional pain in particular is expressed through language and the body, I illustrate the importance of fostering connection to stave off the alienating effects of pain. Then, analyzing the way in which female characters become objectified by their pained male counterparts, I explore how pain often distorts the redemptive connections necessary to soothe suffering. Ultimately, in its examination of Wallace's and Kaufman's complex treatment of pain, this thesis illuminates the significant contributions their work brings to critical conversations about pain.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Michelle Martin.

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To my sister, Shelley

For being my best friend and my best reader

Chapter 1: Introduction

> "We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown."
>
> –Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill"

Stepping into the mainstream cultural spotlight in 2017, the Me Too movement, founded in 2006 by activist and survivor Tarana Burke,[1] electrified discourse about the prevalence of sexual violence and abuse against women. Along with helping expose the rampant sexual abuse endured by women in the entertainment industry, the movement more broadly raised poignant questions in the art world about how the art we consume perpetuates harmful misogynistic values. In solidarity with the movement, poet Mary Karr spoke out against her abuser, David Foster Wallace. Revealing his abusive behavior towards her—which included but was not limited to his relentless, unwanted attention, his getting a tattoo of her name, and his threatening to kill her husband[2]—Karr bolstered a pre-existing current of criticism that had already been denouncing Wallace's work for its misogyny and privileged overindulgence. Among the most vocal critics against Wallace, Amy Hungerford has, on many occasions, spoken openly about her rejection of his work, calling her refusal to read it her "small act of countercultural scholarly agency" (Hungerford). Chalking his popularity up to clever marketing, she points to Wallace's documented reluctance to shorten *Infinite Jest* as exemplifying her argument against him; since the act of reading, for Hungerford, has become more politicized with the seemingly endless

[1] More specifically, according to the Me Too movement's "History & Inception" page on their website, Burke created the movement in order "to bring resources, support, and pathways to healing where none existed before" (Burke). In 2017, actress Alyssa Milano popularized the movement on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter in order to "shift the conversation away from the predator to the victim" (Chen).

[2] For more on his abusive behavior, see "Please Don't Give Up on Me" chapter in D.T. Max's biography *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*; however, it is important to note that Mary Karr condemns Max's depiction of the events, arguing, "the violence #DavidFosterWallace inflicted on me as a single mom was ignored by his biographer & @NewYorker as 'alleged' despite my having letters in his hand" (@marykarrlit).

amount of books being published each year, Wallace's "defen[se of] its length and its obscurities by indicating that he expected people to read it twice" illustrates a distillation of all the hideous entitlement with which she charges him (Hungerford).

Akin to Wallace, Charlie Kaufman, too, holds a precarious position in modern discourse surrounding serious art. While he does not have as controversial of a legacy, he shares many contentious stylistic and thematic affinities with Wallace. More specifically, along with creating intellectually challenging, male-centric films that necessitate additional viewings, his work has also been accused of fostering sexism. For example, in an essay about Kaufman's film *Adaptation*, Bridget Conor argues that Kaufman propagates sexist stereotypes about screenwriting. In particular, Conor takes issue with how *Adaptation*—a film Kaufman wrote about the strenuous process of writing a film in which a fictional version of himself stars—depicts screenwriting as "deeply exclusionary," "largely white and male," and "not open to alternative voices, subjects or representations" (Conor 124). Although the creative labor of author Susan Orlean predicates the film's creation in that her book *The Orchid Thief* acts as its source text, the filmic Orlean's romantic entanglement with the protagonist of her book, John LaRoche, greatly overshadows depictions of her creativity. In other words, for Charlie,[3] Orlean becomes a muse for his writing and a balm for his loneliness as he imagines her during his writing process and in his masturbatory fantasies.

In a blog post in response to Karr's brave confession and the growing demand to dismiss Wallace's work exemplified by Hungerford, critic Clare Hayes-Brady poses a question that continues to trouble readers and scholars of Wallace when she asks, "In considering the role of the #metoo movement in critical dialogues around such writers, I want to think...about whether,

[3] Here, I am referring to the screenwriting protagonist of *Adaptation*, not the screenwriter himself.

and how, it may be possible to ethically engage with a writer whose recorded behaviour is so troubling. Does reading Wallace make [someone] a bad feminist?" ("Reading Your Problematic Fave"). Along this same vein, does watching Kaufman's *Adaptation*—because of its sexist depiction of screenwriting—also betray one's feminism? For those like Hungerford, the answer to Hayes-Brady's question is a resounding yes; how can someone ethically engage with problematic works and/or artists when there is a multitude of other compelling artists to experience? Despite its persuasiveness, this kind of argument, however, falls flat in that it circumvents critical conversations about gender, diversity, and oppression. Hayes-Brady argues that refusing to read certain authors based on their moral character as a critic is "counterproductive" and "functions to isolate and divide rather than to critique and elucidate" ("Reading Your Problematic Fave"). She, instead, proposes the continued engagement with works from authors like David Foster Wallace in order to "sincerely interrogat[e] these works for what they can teach us about both individual and structural engagements with toxic masculinity" ("Reading Your Problematic Fave"). For, if we avoid rather than tackle these difficult discussions, how can we, as consumers, critics, and creators of art, progress?

Consequently, this paper originates from a desire to reckon with these questions and engage in the kind of interrogation Hayes-Brady envisions. Therefore, in spite of the criticisms launched against them, the work of Wallace and Kaufman, I argue, still warrants critical engagement because of its unrelenting interest in the nature of pain. Replete with narratives of paralyzing self-loathing, spiritual angst, and bodies in various stages of decay, their cinematic and literary works explore manifestations of physical, emotional, and spiritual pain in their most

mundane and modern forms. Rather than powerful portrayals of distant, dystopic futures[4] or war-riddled revisions of the past, they focus on pain's present, or rather its overwhelming presence that enables it to erase anything but the present experience of pain. All-encompassing, this kind of pain can be described as the pain of selfhood—of being contained in mortal flesh, of being trapped in one's own consciousness, of not being able to truly understand how someone else's pain feels. Encapsulated in her essay "On Being Ill," Virginia Woolf elucidates this problem when she bemoans the "poverty of language" regarding pain (6). In particular, she asserts, "English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache...The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare, Donne, Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry" (Woolf 6-7).

Focusing on this theme that Wallace and Kaufman explore throughout their careers, the following chapters will closely examine their treatment of pain's inexpressibility. Delving deeper into the theory surrounding this poverty of pain language (Scarry, Biro, Emmons, Jackson), the second chapter "Breaching that Wall" will explore how, in "The Depressed Person" and *Synecdoche, New York,* Wallace and Kaufman's characters emphasize and problematize the healing power of language. Paying particular attention to the all-encompassing, seemingly insurmountable pain of Wallace's depressed person and Kaufman's Olive, I will unpack how these female characters hopelessly struggle and inevitably fail to fully render their isolating pain experience comprehensible to others through metaphor. Then, in my third chapter "Whereby One Does Not Equal Two," I will shift to questions of pain and gender relations as I investigate the ways in which Wallace and Kaufman further complicate the problems of pain in regard to love.

[4] Admittedly, both Wallace and Kaufman do set some of their work (e.g. *Infinite Jest* and *Synecdoche, New York*, respectively) in what can be considered dystopian universes. However, because their alternate universes highly resemble the present, I argue that these depictions of the future fail to fully qualify to be categorized as dystopic.

Adapting Kristeva's definition of melancholy and Madeleine Wood's theory of the female as talisman, I will illustrate how Joel Barrish of Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and interviewee #20 of Wallace's "B.I. #20" imbue their romantic counterparts—in a manner akin to metaphor—with the power to alleviate their melancholic pain. Ultimately, both chapters will illuminate how Wallace and Kaufman underscore the importance and seeming impossibility of the Sisyphean task of sharing and connecting through one's pain; through these chapters, I seek to exemplify the merits of continued critical engagement with Wallace and Kaufman by demonstrating how, despite their contentiousness, these artists have significant contributions to conversations about pain, gender, loneliness, and art's role in facilitating them.

Chapter 2: "Breaching that Wall": Pain, Gender, and Synecdoche in David Foster Wallace's "The Depressed Person" and Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York*

> "How odd I can have all this inside me and to you it's just words."
> –David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*

In the introductory chapter of *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry defines physical pain as an all-encompassing force that "does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4-5). Being in pain pushes the pained into a kind of solipsistic space in which they experience an "absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons" (Scarry 4). For the sufferer, communication breaks down in a manner akin to that of the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic* in that this perception of pain separates the individual from others. It thrusts the sufferer out of their shadowy, shared cave into the searing glare of the pain experience. Isolated by the limitations of language and the human inability to transcend barriers of consciousness, the sufferer must endure the blaze alone or attempt the Sisyphean task of trying to communicate the reality of this outer—or, in the case of the sufferer, inner—world to those who have never and will never be able to comprehend it as anything but the faintest of shadows. Put another way, as David Biro in *The Language of Pain* explains, pain "erects walls" between the sufferer and the outside world while also "prevent[ing them] from breaching that wall by communicating the experience to others. Despite its overwhelming presence, pain has the elusive quality of an absence, an absence not only of words to describe it (that is, a linguistic absence) but also of ways to think about it (a conceptual one)" (Biro 15). Even when evinced by a grimace or noticeable limp, for instance, these shadowy

glimpses into the pain experience inevitably fail to convey it in its entirety to others whose "doubt…amplifies the suffering of those already in pain" exponentially because of this two-fold absence (Scarry 6).

The problem of doubt becomes infinitely more complicated without these external manifestations of pain. In her book about depression *Black Dogs and Blue Words*, Kimberly K. Emmons argues for understanding depression as a rhetorical illness in which the importance of language and its limitations is very much at play. Unlike the purplish-blue swelling of bruise that can give some insight into the pain of the individual, mental illnesses like depression have no external manifestations that point to the individual's suffering. The sufferer of mental illness, then, has a greater burden of proof if they want to express their pain.[5] In her chapter from *Pain as a Human Experience*, Jean Jackson demonstrates how this increased burden affects diagnosis in that often clinicians see "any pain with inputs from psychological factors [as] to some degree *unreal* because of the nonphysical nature of these causes and the problematic nature of responsibility for them" (Jackson 143-44; emphasis added). Jackson explains that this lack of reality of pain comes from a perceived patient "responsibility for [the psychic] pain's cause: not taking care of oneself (lack of exercise), smoking, drinking, obesity, overmedication, substance abuse" (Jackson 143). While their clinical understanding has progressed since Jackson's chapter was published in 1992, illnesses with psychological components, especially those primarily located in the mind, still struggle against the deep-rooted stigma surrounding questions of personal responsibility and mental health—in part because of their dependence on rhetoric; both the diagnosis and treatment of these illnesses largely rely on the language sufferers use.

[5] It is important to note that, akin to mental illnesses, there are also certain physical pains, such as migraines, that often lack easily identifiable, external symptoms. In addition, this burden or need to prove one's pain is tethered to issues of class, race, and gender.

Expounding upon this dependence, Biro explains that although it inherently fails to accurately represent the pain experience, language paradoxically can provide some relief:

> Even when the pain of cancer, arthritis, or depression has proven refractory to treatment, language still offers the potential to help. By enabling us to communicate (from the Latin *communicare*, "to share") our feelings, language can replace isolations with community; it can relieve our suffering when chemotherapy or psychotropics cannot. (Biro 15).

Therefore, not only is language needed in identifying pain and requesting its treatment, but it can also be a form of treatment in itself because speaking about the pain, especially the pain of a mental illness, can alleviate some of its symptoms. As Emmons argues, although often "words cannot describe the pain of depression…it is ironically a condition largely known through the words that they do find" (Emmons 13). Without proper articulation, the pain of depression, for example, is virtually invisible and often considered to an extent unreal, and its invisibility and unreality only further entrench the sufferer in their pain-induced isolation. So, if the physical and emotional pain of depression is destructive to language and unreal in that it lacks physical evidence in the body, how does the sufferer heal? How do they break down the linguistic walls surrounding their pain experience and express the reality of their pain to someone else?

For Biro and Scarry, the answer lies in metaphor; whether in a medical or interpersonal context, metaphor "replaces absence with presence. It illuminates aspects of existence that would otherwise remain in the dark, from private experiences such as pain or our belief in God to new scientific theories of how the objective world works" (Biro 16). Despite the limitations of language, pain, through metaphor, "finds a voice…[and] begins to tell a story" (Scarry 3); and, this chapter will examine some of the myriad ways in which pain is voiced and its stories told. Focusing on two contemporary American artists: the author David Foster Wallace and filmmaker

Charlie Kaufman, I will analyze the rhetoric of pain expressed by suffering characters desperate to articulate their pain. Exemplified by the down-and-out drug addicts of *Infinite Jest* working through the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and the lonely people in *Being John Malkovich* so desperate to feel connection that they are willing to pay to be inside of Malkovich's head for a mere 15 minutes, the work of Wallace and Kaufman focuses on the pain of the human condition. More specifically, in an essay comparing the two artists, Jon Baskin notes the way in which they both tread a "path between the Scylla of postmodern nihilism and the Charybdis of consumerist kitsch" ("Can Charlie Kaufman?"). United by their deployment of "postmodern techniques like narrative fragmentation and meta-commentary," Kaufman and Wallace use "detachment, irony, and 'critique'…not [as] their goal but [as] their starting place; their ambition was to work their way, as 'Charlie Kaufman'[6] does in *Adaptation*, to authentic expression" of, I would add, pain ("Can Charlie Kaufman?").

For their characters, pain is not only inevitable but fundamental to their senses of self. Even the seemingly shallow characters—like, for instance, Charlie's identical twin Donald from *Adaptation* whose absolute lack of self-consciousness comically contrasts the hyper-consciousness of his brother[7]—do not escape the grasp of pain's seemingly endless reach completely unscathed. Critics discussing both Wallace (O'Connell, Holland, Baskin) and Kaufman (Davers, Baltutis, Baskin) remark again and again about the widespread physical,

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[6] Kaufman's name here is in quotation marks because Baskin is referring to the fictionalized version of himself that makes an appearance in *Adaptation*—a film that especially makes use of the postmodern technique of meta-commentary in that it is ostensibly a film about the struggles of writing said film.

[7] Kaufman does not reveal the pain so essential to Donald's sense of self until the end of the film. Up until the end, Donald appears carefree and often clueless to how goofy he comes off to others. Unlike his brother whose neuroses sever connections, Donald's insouciance charms everyone around him except for Charlie, who finds his brother to be embarrassingly foolish. However, when Charlie and Donald are hiding in a swamp from Susan Orlean and her illicit lover John Laroche, Charlie learns how Donald's happy-go-lucky attitude stems not from obliviousness but from an active choice to not care about the opinion of others because their opinions are their business. More specifically, when his high school crush pretended to flirt with him and then made fun of him behind his back, Donald chose to not let her actions hurt him because he feels "you are what you love, not what loves you" (*Adaptation*).

psychological and/or moral deterioration that mark their work. For example, Baskin expounds upon this uniting theme across Kaufman's work, arguing that his "characters come to understand their pain as a condition of self-expression: they emerge from the maze of the inner self intact and, at least for the moment, capable of genuine feeling" ("Can Charlie Kaufman?"). The same sentiment, I argue, could be said for much of Wallace's work although not everyone emerges intact or at all,[8] but this quest to understand one's pain—successful or not—unites the characters of both artists.

And so, because of its ubiquity in both artists' oeuvres, the pain I will focus on will be female pain, which often resides at the periphery of the pain of their male counterparts. Paying particular attention to how these male artists attempt to transcend barriers of pain, gender, and consciousness, I will illuminate how they give voice to the pain of female individuals whose pain Wallace and Kaufman, given their positions of power and privilege, will never fully comprehend. Through Wallace's short story "The Depressed Person" from his *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* collection and Charlie Kaufman's film *Synecdoche, New York*, I will examine the context and content of the pain of their female characters. Exploring the ways in which their pain encourages yet resists categorization, I will elucidate how Wallace's depressed person and Kaufman's Olive contend with the problem of articulating pain and the inevitable failures wrapped up in undergoing such a task. Analyzing how they intentionally and subconsciously voice their pain, I will show how Olive and the depressed person negotiate narratives about pain and recovery. Ultimately, in my examination of how these women carry and communicate pain, I

[8] Some theorists such as Mary K. Holland in her essay "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," argue that, in fact, no one emerges intact. While she agrees that Wallace's novels attempt to "eschew empty irony for the earnestness," she refutes the idea that his characters ever succeed and contends that they are trapped in their own narcissism ("The Art's Heart's Purpose" 218). She argues, "Wallace has managed in *Infinite Jest* the patricidal liberation of eliminating one key purveyor of self-reflexive schlock, Jim Incandenza, but has left in his place through Incandenza's final film an ill-guided and failed attempt at healing whose clean-up attempt that only begets more solipsistic mess" ("The Art's Heart's Purpose" 239).

will reveal how Wallace and Kaufman illustrate the necessity of fostering connection even if/when those attempts fail.

Saturated with loneliness and decay, "The Depressed Person" and *Synecdoche, New York* share an unyielding interest in capturing pain and transfiguring it into something comprehensible. For example, this desire to comprehend pain appears immediately in the opening single sentence paragraph of "The Depressed Person" in which the narrator explains, "The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror" ("The Depressed Person" 37). Immediately, the story begins by explicitly encapsulating both the problem of pain of which Scarry and Biro have argued—namely, its unsharability—as well as the sheer force of pain's destruction. Having never given her name, Wallace magnifies the way in which the depressed person's "terrible and unceasing emotional pain" overtakes her identity.[9] He ostensibly denies her full personhood and portrays her as a perpetually whining caricature of a depressed person—the exact demarcation she so adamantly seeks to spurn in her search for language:

> …how painful and frightening it was not to feel able to articulate the chronic depression's excruciating pain itself but have to resort to recounting examples that probably sounded, she always took care to acknowledge, dreary or self-pitying or like one of those people who are narcissistically obsessed with their "painful childhoods" and "painful lives" and wallow in their burdens and insist on recounting them at tiresome length to friends who are trying to be supportive and nurturing. ("The Depressed Person 38)

[9] Across Wallace's oeuvre, names have immense significance. As Clare Hayes-Brady notes in *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace,* "characters who are named are often embedded in a particular network of references by means of their name" (135), and his "use of involuntary networks highlights the fundamental connectedness of human experience, made voluntary by narrative engagement" (136).

While speaking about the painful and frightening feeling of being unable to articulate her pain, she reveals a heightened awareness of her own behavior and how it might be perceived. However, her concern about "recounting examples" "at a tiresome length" stems not from genuine fear of taking advantage of her friends but instead out of her fear about what it might make them think of *her*. In *The Language of Pain,* David Biro recalls a similar mindset that he had during his time in a hospital in which his pain made him feel completely "detached" from the world around him. He remembers feeling as though "the only thing in the world that mattered was what was happening inside my body…and those events, unlike the upcoming presidential election between Clinton and Dole or the snow falling outside the window, were completely unknowable and unfeelable for my family" (Biro 25). Like what David Biro describes in *The Language of Pain*, Wallace's depressed person experiences the isolation of pain. Feeling intense psychic pain and accompanying fear about her inability to articulate it, she feels isolated and misunderstood. She feels that if no one can fully understand the immense pain she feels, then how can they really know her since the pain becomes such an essential part of her identity?

Although she acknowledges—and implicitly denies—that she might seem "narcissistically obsessed," the depressed person continues to exhibit this narcissistically obsessed behavior in her search for words to express her own pain and by extension her identity. Constantly looking back into her past and examining her childhood traumas, she retells and relives the events in her search to legitimize them and the residual feelings she fosters towards them. In her article "Unending Narrative, One-sided Empathy, and Problematic Contexts of Interaction in David Foster Wallace's 'The Depressed Person,'" Ellen Defossez explains the consequences of such a preoccupation with pain when she explains that while "depression narratives have been championed for their potential to empower the narrator by liberating her

from the constraints of biomedical language," the depressed person's situation "suggests a flip side that merits consideration: namely, that the inducement toward narrative can disempower the narrator and can potentially prolong her pain" (18). In other words, by revisiting the myriad moments of trauma in her life repeatedly, she prolongs those moments of pain, giving them power over her once again. For example, while attending a therapy retreat, the depressed person, with the help of other attendees and staff, "role-played the depressed person's parents and the parents' significant others and attorneys and myriad other emotionally toxic figures from the depressed person's childhood" as a therapeutic exercise ("The Depressed Person" 47). Embracing her "Inner Child," the depressed person begins to have a "cathartic tantrum in which [she] had struck repeatedly at a stack of velour cushions…and had shrieked obscenities and had reexperienced long-pent-up and festering emotional wounds" ("The Depressed Person" 47). Although catharsis is often the goal of these kinds of exercises, her cathartic tantrum fails to help her heal. Instead, her reaction epitomizes the strong grasp it still has over her, diminishing her into a child-like state anterior to language in which screaming and hitting seem like her only methods of expression.

More specifically, without adequate words to express her festering wounds and "deep vestigial rage," she regresses, and her childish actions become her language; they, in particular, become the only way she can express the pain of her parents' horrific divorce and her forced "role of mediator and absorber of shit from both sides while she (i.e., the depressed person, as a child) had had to perform essentially the same coprophagous services [as the parents' exorbitantly paid mediator] on a more or less daily basis for *free*, for *nothing*, services which…her parents had then turned around and tried to make *her,* the depressed person *herself*, as a *child*, feel *guilty* about" ("The Depressed Person" 47-48). Reinforced by the quickened

rhythm and ample use of italicization, Wallace's diction captures the way in which this exercise exacerbates the depressed person's childhood trauma instead of relieving it. Epitomizing her descent into self, the depressed person's language illustrates what Wallace described in an interview as the "paradox" of the popular psychology movement in which "the more we are taught to list and resent the things of which we were deprived as children, the more we live in that anger and frustration and the more we remain children" ("Interview by Das ZDF"). Even with her therapist and Support System to help her through these painful memories, the depressed person loses her way. In her book *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* Clare Hayes-Brady argues that the depressed person fails in "her attempts at communication [because] her communication is utterly one-sided; the insistent, unending wail of a baby with unmet needs." (134). Absorbed by her own pain and suffering, she regresses into a childlike or infantilized state, which only increases her inability to genuinely articulate the content and context of her pain. Therefore, despite—or because of—her dogged search for the language of pain, the depressed person prolongs her own suffering by constantly returning to the figurative scene of the crime during which she feels her parents wronged her by forcing her to withstand immense, undue psychological trauma as the unofficial "mediator and absorber of shit."

If immense emotional pain causes Wallace's depressed person to remain a child, then Olive's childhood trauma in Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* drives her to grow up too rapidly; daughter of struggling artists, Adele and Caden whose failing marriage threatens to crumble, Olive rapidly diminishes into a version of 'the wild child of an absent father' cliché in the fragmented temporal logic of the film.[10] She attempts to voice to her own pain—namely, through the full body tattoo she gets as a 10-year-old. The audience first discovers these tattoos

[10] Primarily focalized through her father, Caden, in his quest to capture what it means to be human in an ever-expanding theater format, the film only gives restricted glimpses in Olive's life after she moves to Germany with her mother.

when Caden does when he uncovers a magazine article about Olive. Having not seen or heard from her for roughly four to five years, Caden finds this article titled “Flower Girl: Ten year old Olive Wittgart of Berlin is the first child in human history with a full body tattoo” with a large, full-page photo of his daughter fully nude, standing unashamed before the camera. A father’s nightmare realized, Olive, while still young, is no longer the innocent child he had known; she is literally and figuratively marked by moving to Germany. Later, during their deathbed discussion, Olive reveals to him that he was much of the reason she got the tattoos. She explains that in the face of his absence, “these flowers defined me” (*Synecdoche, New York*). Emblems of his absence, they become a way through which Olive shares and takes ownership of her trauma.

In addition to her tattoos, Olive redefines her trauma through her sexuality. Shortly after seeing the magazine article and subsequently being denied visitation in Germany, Caden learns more about how much Olive has changed through her diary—which she inexplicably writes in even after having left it before she moved away[11]—and through an advertisement for “Olive the Flower Girl” he finds plastered beneath a layer of posters on a heavily postered New York City wall. In her diary, he learns of her relationship with the tattoo artist and best friend of Adele, Maria. In a short entry, Olive divulges, “Dear diary, today I felt a wetness between my legs. Maria explained to me now I am a woman. And being a woman is wonderful with Maria to guide me” (*Synecdoche, New York*). Directly after revealing this entry, the film cuts to Caden finding the nude “Olive the Flower Girl” advertisement and visiting her show. After waiting in a long line of men, Caden finds his daughter blowing bubbles and dancing naked behind a glass partition. The exact amount of time that has passed between which Caden last saw his daughter and this scene is unknown; however, because of Caden’s extreme reaction of banging on the

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[11] Adele reveals this fact in a note she faxes to Caden, which reads “Olive wanted me to ask you <u>not</u> to read her diary. She left it under her pillow by mistake” (*Synecdoche, New York*).

glass screaming "that's my little girl," there is a sense that she is still quite young—perhaps in her teens or early 20s (*Synecdoche, New York*). In a chapter on the film from a book about Kaufman titled *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, David Smith notes the peculiar manner in which time elapses in *Synecdoche, New York* when he explains, "time passes by leaps within single scenes or at uneven rates among characters" in accordance with its "kind of dream logic…employed in the film to put us inside a character's feel for life" (Smith 245). Being no exception to this strange temporal logic of the film, Olive's age jumps from approximately five to ten then to young adulthood in a pace much more accelerated than what seems rational in the film, echoing and magnifying the sense of shock and loss that Caden feels seeing her dance.

Robbed of her adolescence, Olive—as well as Caden whose relationship with Olive was severed when Adele moved them away—contends with this pain of absence in her own way. For Caden, he faces the pain through his play as he, like Wallace's depressed person, re-enacts his most painful moments in search of meaning; for Olive, it is finding something (tattoos) or someone (Maria) to attempt at least in part to fill the void she feels from being abandoned by her father. In addition, her dancing and sexuality echo a kind of popular psychology myth that girls with absent fathers behave in what society deems unruly manners like getting tattooed at a young age or getting involved in sex work. Further adding to the film's somewhat nightmarish atmosphere, Olive's loss of her father strongly shapes her identity in a manner akin to the way the depressed person's trauma overtakes hers.

As well as playing with time in order to "put us inside a character's feel for life," Kaufman's dream-like logic about which Smith explains features the literalization of characters' psychological states. For example, Hazel, the most compatible of Caden's romantic interests in the film, buys a house on fire. Her choice of how she wants to live and eventually die are

realized, or physically manifested, in this burning house. Full of smoke and burning incessantly, the home gives her a morbid chance to gain some control in her life because not only is she choosing to buy a home alone at 36, but she is making a choice of how she wants to die. As she is discussing with her realtor about whether she should make an offer on the home, Hazel tells her, "I'm just really concerned about dying in the fire" to which the realtor agrees, adding "it's a big decision how one decides to die" (*Synecdoche, New York*). Discussed with a surreal nonchalance, the decision of how one decides to die is juxtaposed with more banal and lighter yet still serious choices like home-buying. In her essay "'I Know How to Do It Now': A Part of Willy Loman in *Synecdoche, New York,*" Rebecca Davers interprets this purchase as "fatalistic," raising the question of "whether Hazel's decision to buy the burning house was a prolonged suicide" (Davers 31). Regardless of the verity of this approach, Hazel's burning house actualizes the metaphorical language Hazel might use when speaking about buying a house or growing old. Even more so, the presence of this house on fire and her decision to purchase it harkens back to the overall nightmarish atmosphere of the film. Michael Baltutis, in his chapter about the construction of home in *Synecdoche, New York*, uses the Freudian theory of the uncanny to discuss the dream-like quality of film. More specifically, he explains how Kaufman uses synecdoche to create a sense of the uncanny in a film that centers around the constant creation and recreation of home:

> The sense of the terrifying is encouraged in these films through their dual use of the synecdoche that recalls the opposing meanings that Freud asserted are inherent within the language of the *unheimlich*, the uncanny: "among the different shades of meaning that are recorded for the word *heimlich* there is one in which it merges with its formal antonym,

> *unheimlich*, so that what is called *unheimlich* becomes *heimlich*."[12] That which is *heimlich*, resonating with valences of domestic space, represents what is most familiar to us, but this familiarity easily shades into that which is most *unheimlich*, or concealed from us. The duality of the (*un*)*heimlich* reflects the central tension within [the] film, as its protagonists construct urban worlds that are both familiar and concealed, both domestic and public: reflective of the worlds in which their architects actually live, these model cities operate as alternative universes, concentric worlds, and shadows of their own urban selves. (Baltutis 144)

In other words, each character in *Synecdoche, New York* has an active role in crafting—consciously or not—their lives. Thus, just as the burning home physically manifests Hazel's complicated emotional state, Olive's tattoos visually tell the story of her emotional trauma. Her flowers make her unseen pain visible and even beautiful: an impulse not dissimilar from Caden's own artistic raison d'etre.

However, while an effective manner of visually articulating and taking ownership of her pain, her visual language of pain breaks down. Once a symbol of her youth and beauty in the face of pain, her tattoos become infected, and this infection kills her. After greeting him with a weak smile and broken English and informing him of a translation machine in which she will deliver her dying remarks, Olive speaks to this break down, "I'm dying…as I'm sure Maria told you. The flower tattoos have become infected, and they are dying. So am I as well. This is life" (*Synecdoche, New York*). The dual voices—her speaking in German and the translation machine's faint male voice echoing in English—imbue this moment with a sense of the uncanny. Having lived in Germany for most of her life, Olive has lost her American roots and connection

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[12] This quotation is retained from Baltutis's original text, and its citation goes as follows: Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in David McLintock (trans. and ed.), *The Uncanny* (New York, 2003), p. 124.

to her father. Unlike Caden who expresses his fear of his own impending death often, Olive in these moments seems resolute and unafraid of death, seeing it as an inevitable part of life. In fact, even as a child, Olive seemed more comfortable with the idea of death than life. While the idea of having blood terrifies her, death, for young Olive, represents home. More specifically, in a journal entry in which Caden discovers she is dying, Olive recalls a childhood game she played with her father in which they are both fairies. Reminiscent of Melanie Klein's work on children's play, her play-acting game involves Caden killing her. As she dies, Olive gives a glimpse of her conception of death, telling her father that he will have to wait "a million years to see [her] again" (*Synecdoche, New York*). Expounding upon death further, Olive explains, "I'll be put in a box and all I'll need is a tiny glass of water and lots of tiny pieces of pizza And the box will have wings like an airplane. And you ask, 'Where will it take you?' 'Home,' I say," (*Synecdoche, New York*). Both imaginative and mundane, her conception of death illustrates how Olive even from a young age sees death as coming home. Echoed by her on her deathbed, Olive seemingly feels at home with her impending death with her calm profession that both she and her flower tattoos are dying. Foretelling this death, her flowers tattoos have visibly withered since Caden had seen them last. As if they are real flowers, their withering demonstrates that, like Olive, they have reached the end of their life cycle. Although once a symbol of her youth and beauty in the face of pain, her tattoos rot and decay; they, too, fail her.

Akin to the way her tattoos attempt to give her definition, Olive attempts to share her incommunicable pain with Caden. After she informs him that she is dying from the tattoos and Caden blames Maria for tattooing and corrupting, Olive offers her own reading of what has happened in the years past. Telling him of the existential pain she experienced when Caden left her life, she explains how Adele's friend Maria gave her purpose first through her flower tattoos

and then through their sexual relationship. Although Caden protests, telling her how he had tried to find her and how her conception of what has happened is extremely misinformed, Olive cuts him off, arguing, “I need to forgive you before I die, but I can’t forgive someone who has not asked for forgiveness” (*Synecdoche, New York*). When he tries to interject, she interrupts again, insisting, “I have no time. I need you to ask for forgiveness” (*Synecdoche, New York*). Defeated, Caden concedes, weakly asking for forgiveness, but Olive wants more. She insists upon him admitting that he was not sorry for simply abandoning her but makes him tell her that he needs forgiveness “for abandoning you to have anal sex with my homosexual lover Eric” (*Synecdoche, New York*). Tearfully he gives this false admission, but it is not enough for Olive, and she dies, sobbing that she cannot in the end forgive him for his transgressions.

Punctuated by a real, shriveled petal falling by Olive’s withered tattoos, this scene ends unresolved, highlighting the impossibility of communicating one’s pain. This scene, which begins promising with the possibility of final reconciliation, closes without one. Highlighting the impossibility of this reconciliation, Olive and Caden speak two different languages and tell two different stories of their pain. For Caden, the years since Adele and Olive left him have gone by quickly. Although absorbed in his work, Caden actively tried again and again to reach Olive, but in their final moments together, he cannot. Olive has lived a different story, one with an absent father who left her for his homosexual lover. Even though he tries to refute her claim and the audience, in fact, knows this belief to be false, this idea is *her* truth; therefore, although they are in close proximity—Caden at her bedside—and they have the translation machine, they cannot bridge the gaps between them. Even though their tears illustrate a shared pain, they never fail to find a way to translate it. In this moment, they seemingly enact “the two-language two-meaning compromise” of pain that David Biro describes in *The Language of Pain* (50). Having both

experienced the pain of losing each other, their "pain is universal to a degree, part of the human condition as it were, and therefore sharable in a sense," but as their failed resolution demonstrates only "in the *most limited and superficial sense*" (Biro 50-51). Even when Caden attempts to bridge the gap and falsely apologize for a homosexual affair he never had, Olive cannot accept it and cannot forgive him, illustrating "the private and unsharable part [of her pain] is what's most important about the experience" (Biro 51). Caden's apology, in other words, cannot atone for the years of pain his absence cultivated in her.

Akin to the unbreachable wall between Olive and her father, the depressed person's pain similarly prevents any genuine sense of communication or connection. For example, after losing her therapist, the depressed person begins conducting a psychological autopsy of their relationship before the therapist's tragic suicide, and, quite predictably, the depressed person does not like what she finds. Carefully examining their relationship and its absence, she realizes that "she could locate no real feelings for the therapist as an autonomously valid human being" ("The Depressed Person" 67). She discerns that all the residual feelings of loss she felt "since the therapist's suicide had in fact been all and only for *herself*, i.e. for *her* loss, *her* abandonment, *her* grief, *her* trauma and pain and primal affective survival," and even as she makes these realizations, she still only feels fear and disgust for herself ("The Depressed Person" 67).When looking into their relationship, she sees herself only, and she finds the isolation and narcissism of her pain too tempting. Like Olive on her deathbed, the depressed person is given an opportunity through the possibility of death to heal. As I noted before, Defossez in her essay about Wallace's "The Depressed Person" speaks about depression narratives as being empowering for most but not for Wallace's depressed person. In a more conventional depression narrative, her grief over her therapist's death would be a wake-up call. She would have an epiphanic moment in which

she realizes the error in her approach to her pain and her life. She would figuratively see the light and find a way out of depression; however, that is *not* how Wallace chooses to end this story. Like Kaufman who denies Caden and his audience the satisfaction of closure between the absent father and his dying daughter, Wallace resists that kind of redemptive narrative.

As Jean Bocharova in her essay "David Foster Wallace's Catholic Imagination" argues, "by allowing his main character to adopt a purely mechanistic view of the self, Wallace highlights the limits of clinical frameworks to provide meaning" (Bocharova 234). These limitations are demonstrated through not only the depressed person but also her therapist, who ironically fails to endure the immense torment of depression that she encourages her patients to face. Although well-versed in medical and therapeutic methodology, the therapist cannot even save herself, underlining the problems of what Baskin explains are the key tenets of the "kind of 'talking cure' that has been popularized since Freud" that "focuses predominantly on etiology and diagnosis, under the presumption that these are the fastest routes to self-knowledge and, thereby, health" (*Ordinary Unhappiness* 5). "Deliberately eschew[ing] confrontation and 'should'-statements and all normative, judging, 'authority'-based theory in favor of a more value-neutral bioexperiential model," her therapist, then, embodies the pop psychology paradox against which Wallace warns ("The Depressed Person" 40). Along with a long list of attempted medical interventions,[13] the therapist employs a variety of "creative" methods using "analogy and narrative (including, but not necessarily mandating, the use of hand-puppets, polystyrene props and toys, role-playing, human sculpture, mirroring, drama therapy, and, in appropriate cases, whole meticulously scripted and storyboarded Childhood Reconstructions)" ("The Depressed Person" 40). Each of these methods attempts to address the problem of expressing

[13] E.g. "Paxil, Zoloft, Prozac, Tofranil, Welbutrin, Elavil, Metrazol in combination with unilateral ECT (during a two-week voluntary in-patient course of treatment at a regional Mood Disorders clinic), Parnate both with and without lithium salts, Nardil both with and without Xanax" ("The Depressed Person" 40).

pain creatively, seeking to fill the gaps in language with often childish play items like puppets and toys. Consequently, because she encourages the depressed person to focus on her Inner Child, she causes her to regress into one, but because the therapist avoids any intervention that could be considered confrontational or authoritative, she cannot help her out of it, so the depressed person finds herself trapped in sort of emotional hall of mirrors in which she is left with only distorted reflections of her own thoughts.

Both Olive's life and "The Depressed Person" story seemingly end illustrating not only that the isolation and unsharability of pain are insurmountable but also that the narratives surrounding them are misleading. As Kaufman has Olive die without forgiving her father, Wallace also ends the depressed person's story without any real sense of resolution; in the final moments of the story, the depressed person is "hunched and trembling in a near-fetal position atop her workstation cubicle" as she waits for "her terminally ill friend to go on, to not hold back, to let her have it" ("The Depressed Person" 69). Hoping for her friend to give an honest appraisal of her, the depressed person listens for "what words and terms might be applied to describe and assess such a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge as she now appeared to herself to be?" ("The Depressed Person" 69). Overwhelmingly, these two final scenes exude a sense of loneliness and isolation without much hope. Although Olive and the depressed person have tried to accurately articulate and overcome their pain, their journeys end incomplete, neither woman being able to resolve it. Wallace and Kaufman, then, seemingly tell us that the isolation of pain cannot be overcome and that the narratives surrounding them are inherently false because they raise the question: how can someone speak about and, therefore, overcome pain, if there is no way to accurately articulate it? Unavoidable and its wall

unbreachable, pain seems to thwart connection, leaving each trapped inside their own pained mind and body that no one else could possibly understand.[14]

In contrast, I argue that this kind of reading oversimplifies the careful work these artists do in their depiction of pain. While aspects of their pain prove unsharable, the proliferation of pain for every character elucidates that there can be some sense of commonality. For example, although Olive and Caden's understandings of the events causing his absence differ, they, in her last moments of her life, share a common despair about the loss of one another. Caden, feeling it so strongly, admits to the affair he never had in an attempt to console his daughter. Throughout the film, Caden, like a more artistic version of Wallace's depressed person, focuses entirely on himself and on representing *his* pain, but as he witnesses the last dying breath of his daughter leave her, he is devastated to be losing her; unlike the depressed person who mourns the loss of her therapist only in terms of how it negatively affects her life and her progress, Caden genuinely mourns the loss of his daughter and the relationship they never had.

From this loss of Olive as well as many others throughout the film,[15] Caden begins to understand that his ever-expanding project to capture life and all its pain fails because of the way he sees life. At Sammy's funeral, Caden, in his grief, whispers to Hazel that he understands how he must shape his play now: "there are nearly thirteen million people in the world…None of those people is an extra. They're all the leads of their own stories. They have to be given their due" (*Synecdoche, New York*). Accused throughout the film of being selfish,[16] Caden has the epiphanic moment denied to both Olive and the depressed person; he sees the error in his ways, realizing that he shares the feeling with thirteen million other people in the world that he is the

[14] This sentiment could easily extend to questions of gender as well, and this is a theme that I delve into more deeply in the next chapter.
[15] The film is full of death, and there are over six funerals and countless re-enactments of these funerals throughout.
[16] For example, right before Sammy jumps to his death, he tells Caden, "I've watched you forever, Caden, but you've never really looked at anyone other than yourself. So watch me" (*Synecdoche, New York*).

star of the show and that his pain is deeper and his loneliness harder than anyone else. In this moment, he begins to understand what Charlie Kaufman in his acceptance speech for the BAFTAs refers to as the "ancient wound" that everyone shares. Unknowable yet fundamental to humanity, this wound, Kaufman explains, is something that is "both specific to you and common to everyone" and "the thing that won't be interesting to other people if revealed. It is the thing that makes you weak and pathetic. It is the thing that truly, truly, truly makes loving you impossible. It is your secret, even from yourself. But it is the thing that wants to live" ("Charlie Kaufman's Screenwriters' Lecture"). This thing to which Kaufman refers *is*, I argue, pain. While the way it manifests is different for each character, this inner pain is what unites and isolates each and every one of them. As Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain,* "to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt" (Scarry 7); throughout the film, Caden tries to articulate his pain. He does so through playwriting like Olive does through her dancing and tattoos. Although the language of their pain differs, their impulse to articulate it is shared. Like the depressed person, Caden constantly interprets and reinterprets his pain as he retells it through his theater piece. Never satisfied, he, too, shares the disappointment and dogged determination that the depressed person feels during her nightly calls with her support group, but, unlike the depressed person, Caden *does* begin to appreciate the pain of others around him.

Although arguably he loses sight of others now and again after this realization, Caden actively tries to give others "their due," and this impulse is, I argue, precisely what Wallace and Kaufman seek to illustrate in their work. Even as they interrogate modes of recovery such as talk therapy and deathbed reconciliations, Wallace and Kaufman offer their readers some hope that, even in the darkest of moments such as the death of Olive, there can be redemption and connection. In *Ordinary Unhappiness,* Baskin argues that unlike other authors of his time,

Wallace "is not content to *reflect* contemporary alienation in his fiction; he wants to therapeutically treat it" (*Ordinary Unhappiness* 85). I contend that what Wallace and Kaufman do so well is ask their viewer to see themselves in the pained characters. In their depictions of pain and suffering, they capture the hidden yet familiar "ancient wound" that everyone bears. More specifically, through "The Depressed Person," Wallace distills the hideousness of depression into one character in order to illustrate how the intense feelings of alienation are common to all who come in contact with the mental illness. As Baskin explains, "what is under attack in *Brief Interviews* as a whole [and "The Depressed Person," in particular, is] a certain way of talking and therefore of living, which seems to exacerbate the problems of postindustrial life—social atomism, the fear of fraudulence and inauthenticity" (*Ordinary Unhappiness* 85). In other words, by illuminating how the depressed person's monomaniacal approach to her pain fails her, Wallace asks his readers to try another way; by portraying the depressive personality to its extreme, Wallace seeks to demonstrate the way in which her approaches only shore up rather than break down her walls of pain. Similarly, through *Synecdoche, New York*, Kaufman shows the breakdown and temporary bridging of connection between a father and daughter. He portrays the ways in which their disparate pain is articulated visually and verbally in order to reveal the universality of their pain. Ultimately, both artists, through their depictions of characters in pain like Olive and the depressed person, synecdochize the pain of the human condition. Offering a vision into the specific content and context of each character's pain, they reveal how each character is in a constant struggle to address, escape, or reclaim their pain. Encapsulated in his discussion of what makes Franz Kafka's work so moving yet comedic, Wallace describes the exact kind of therapeutic revelation that Kaufman's and his own work seeks to elicit: "that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from

that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home" ("Some Remarks" 64-65). In other words, the impossibility of articulating one's own pain is fundamental to the pain experience, and the constant struggle to do so is exactly what life is about.

Chapter 3: "Whereby One Does Not Equal Two": Melancholy Men and their Female Talismans in David Foster Wallace's "B.I. #20" and Charlie Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

> "I still thought you were going to save my life."
> – Charlie Kaufman, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
>
> "I'd fallen in love with her. I believed she could save me."
> – David Foster Wallace, "Brief Interview #20"

Professed in climatic moments, the epigraphs—uttered by Joel Barrish of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the unnamed male subject of "Brief Interview #20" ("B.I. #20")—offer virtually identical sentiments: love saves. How or from what, the epigraphs' originators do not explicitly mention, but salvation is the outcome they so desire. United not only by this dogged, trite belief in the redemptive power of love, these men, who differ greatly in temperament, both hold positions of privilege; as white, middle-class men who are educated and materially comfortable, Joel and interviewee #20 clearly need saving not from financial strife or imminent danger but instead from something much more undefined. Like so many of the other male protagonists in Wallace's and Kaufman's work, they seek salvation from the banality of everyday life. Leading cynical, unfulfilling lives before encountering their romantic counterparts, Joel and the unnamed interviewee suffer from what Julia Kristeva calls "melancholy." In the first chapter of her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva describes melancholy as "a living death" (4), "a sad voluptuousness, a despondent intoxication" (5), and as the "most archaic expression of an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound"[17] (Kristeva 12). Expanding the Freudian understanding, Kristeva does not depict melancholy as solely

[17] Interestingly, both Kaufman and Wallace echo Kristeva's diction in speeches they have given; while Kaufman speaks of one's ancient wound in his 2011 BAFTA speech, Wallace discusses what a living death entails in his 2005 commencement address for Kenyon College, which was subsequently published as *This Is Water* in 2009.

pathological or as merely reserved for hysterical housewives, but rather she extends it into the realm of philosophy:

> For the speaking being life is a meaningful life; life is even the apogee of meaning. Hence if the meaning of life is lost, life can easily be lost: when meaning shatters, life no longer matters. In his doubtful moments the depressed person is a philosopher, and we owe to Heraclitus, Socrates, and more recently Kierkegaard the most disturbing pages on the meaning or lack of meaning of Being. (Kristeva 6).

Philosophy, for Kristeva, presupposes melancholic meaninglessness; for, without the loss of meaning to shatter his world, the philosopher walks through life unexamined. Kristeva even goes as far as to declare melancholy "not a philosopher's disease but his very nature, his ethos" (7). Joel and interviewee #20,[18] as well as the myriad more male melancholics so characteristic of both artists work,[19] thus, begin to understand themselves in their melancholic states as something akin to the philosopher kings of Plato's *Republic*. No longer seeing the world as shadows of meaning cast on cave walls, these melancholics venture out of the cave and now experience the world in all of its terrible, meaningless vibrancy—their melancholy being the key to their ability to see beyond the shadows.

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[18] Henceforth, I will often refer to the interviewee merely by his numerical title #20 for the sake of brevity. However, it may be important to note that Rachel Himmelheber in an essay about the short story argues this unnamed narrator *does* have a name, Eric. More specifically, she posits, "the interviewee himself identifies both of their names late in the story when he responds directly to what he perceives as the interviewer's judgment of him: …'The whole prototypical male syndrome. Eric Drag Sarah To Teepee By Hair'" (Himmelheber 523n1). While Himmelheber contends it "is difficult to interpret these names as anything but directly referential to the interviewee and his subject," I will refrain from using them due to the lack of critical acceptance of this claim and the conventionality of these names—both of which could have easily been randomly selected from a list of prototypical names for their respective genders.

[19] For example, Kaufman's films are briming with extremely neurotic, melancholic creators like Charlie (*Adaptation*) and Caden (*Synecdoche, New York*) and the madcap film critic B. Rosenberger Rosenberg from his first foray into the novel form, *Antkind.* Similarly, Wallace's work features a slew of hideously condescending philanderers in *Brief Interviews* as well as his nihilist wastoids Chris Fogle (*The Pale King*) and Stonecipher "the Antichrist" LaVache Beadsman (*The Broom of the System*). These characters make up just a small sampling of the plethora of spiritually lost, melancholy men that inhabit the worlds Wallace and Kaufman create.

Yet, being a necessary precondition of philosophy does not make melancholy any more palatable for them. Along with their knowledge of the meaninglessness of the world comes an immense loneliness. As discussed in the previous chapter, their pain has a cyclical structure in which the inexpressibility of their pain inflames and is inflamed by the pain of being unable to articulate it. For example, the struggling puppeteer Craig Schwartz in Kaufman's debut film *Being John Malkovich* expresses this exact sentiment when he despairs, "You don't know how lucky you are being a monkey. Because consciousness is a terrible curse. I think. I feel. I suffer" (*Being John Malkovich*). Despite feeling superior to the monkey, Craig, on some level, envies it because it shares a stronger connection with his girlfriend than he does. Isolated by his sense of self-awareness, he feels misunderstood by those around him who cannot understand the profound beauty of his puppetry. His artistic vision and insight into the human condition seemingly come at the cost of his ability to connect with others; he suffers, and he does so consciously alone.

Like Kaufman, Wallace, too, makes this connection between suffering and thought. Baskin, who has also written about the stylistic and thematic similarities between the two artists, remarks how pain—like that of Craig, Joel, and #20—goes hand in hand with the way in which Wallace's characters view the world, "correlat[ing] the concrete suffering of his characters with their bewitchment by...a conflation of thinking in general with the form of skeptical, analytical thinking that modern philosophy valorizes above all others" (*Ordinary Unhappiness* 4). Baskin goes on to explain that "for Wallace, the separation of philosophy from literature—and the crude dichotomies often correlated with that separation: mind/body, theoretical/practical, intellectual/emotional—are *both a cause and a symptom* of a 'dis-ease,' as he calls it in *Infinite Jest*" (*Ordinary Unhappiness* 4). In Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, melancholy, or "dis-ease" as the recovering alcoholics from its AA program refer to it, has taken America by siege, causing

widespread discontent and addiction. While there are arguably many differences between this emotional dis-ease and bodily pains such as a broken ankle or migraine, Wallace conflates these two types of pain. In *Infinite Jest* for example, physical pain torments the mind, and emotional pain is felt acutely throughout the body. As the recovering addict Don Gately lies in his hospital bed after getting shot while defending a fellow resident of the Ennet House,[20] he feels immense physical and emotional pains that cannot be disentangled from one another. In other words, the agonizing pain from his wounds is bound up in the immense isolation he feels as he is unable to articulate his pain. Similarly, Kate Gompert's description of her depression further underscores how Wallace treats mental/bodily pain as a "crude dichotomy." When describing her depression to a doctor, Gompert resists the diagnosis of depression because she understands her pain as extending beyond pure emotion, explaining she feels it "all *over.* My head, my throat, my butt. In my stomach. It's all over everywhere" (73), "all through [me]. Like every cell and every atom or brain-cell or whatever was so nauseous it wanted to throw up" (*Infinite Jest* 74). Both of these pain experiences highlight the artificiality, for Wallace, in making these distinctions, and this conflation of emotional and physical pain, I argue, extends to all work from both artists. This conflation is especially apparent in Wallace's *Brief Interviews* collection which theorist Marshall Boswell calls "a more accessible and yet also less satisfying treatment of many of the central concerns at work in *Infinite Jest*" (181) such as "depression, solipsism, community, self-consciousness...and the impact on our collective consciousness of therapeutic discourse writ large" (*Understanding David Foster Wallace* 182). Inevitably, characters in both Wallace's and Kaufman's works experience pain and loneliness and feel disconnected from others. This failure to connect, Baskin notes, comes from the way they understand and seek to control the world. In

[20] The halfway house in which Gately resides and works.

their struggle for control, these melancholy men seek solace in many forms such as liquor, drugs, power, and sex as well as through honing a craft like puppetry, playwriting, or accounting.

For Joel and #20, their relief from melancholy comes from the women whom they imbue with immense transformative power. Employing both Kristeva's depiction of melancholy and Madeleine Wood's theory of the female as talisman, this chapter will explore precisely how Joel and #20 infuse their love interests with talismanic power in their attempts to confront and resolve their melancholy. Building on my previous chapter, which sought to analyze the ways in which inexpressible pain often finds a voice through metaphor and identification, this chapter will examine how the pain of a desired "Other" is appropriated by the desiring gaze of the male protagonists, Joel and interviewee #20. Paying particular attention to how these female narratives of pain are read and (re)written by their male counterparts, I will illuminate how Wallace and Kaufman, through their use of female talismans, address problems of the inexpressibility of pain and limitations of consciousness.

Before I begin examining their female talismans, I must more deeply discuss the conditions of melancholy from which Joel and #20 need their female counterparts to save them. Fundamental to Kristeva's approach to melancholy is the Freudian psychoanalytic understanding of depression[21]—namely that it, "like mourning, conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning" (Kristeva 11). Their ambivalent feelings toward the object, then, result in self-loathing because the depressed person subconsciously thinks, "I love that object...but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it,

[21] In the opening chapter of *Black Sun*, Kristeva uses depression and melancholy almost interchangeably, remarking about "the confusion in terminology that I have kept alive up to now (What is melancholia? What is depression?)"; while she does make some distinctions, she remarks that what she is really referring to is a "composite that might be called melancholy/depressive" (Kristeva 9-10).

that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad" (Kristeva 11). Kristeva takes this conception of depression further when she makes a distinction between the mourner's lost Object and the melancholic's lost Thing; unlike the mourner, "the depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing…[which is] the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated" (Kristeva 13). The Thing, for Kristeva, in other words, retains its ambiguous position in the depressed person's heart, but by making the distinction between the Object and Thing, Kristeva takes one more step from the physical world than Freudian and Kleinian theories of object-relations. More specifically, in contrast to Freud, who attributes an infant's development through object relations to biological drives, Klein contends that this process has an emotional component. In a chapter titled "Klein's Theory of Depression," Trevor Lubbe explains that, unlike Freud, "for [Klein,] the object...becomes the repository not only for somatic pain but also for painful *states of mind*" (Lubbe 27). Furthermore, Kristeva identifies the lost Thing as something unspeakable, leaving the depressed person with the pain "of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, that perhaps only devouring may represent, or an *invocation* might point out, but no word could signify" (Kristeva 13). In other words, while, for Klein, "the body in pain provides a replacement for the lost object," Kristeva's body—and mind—in pain replaces an inexplicable sense of loss not tethered to any external object (Lubbe 31).

Experiencing this inexpressible, insurmountable void, both Joel and #20, I argue, exemplify Kristeva's description of melancholy sufferers. For example, when *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* begins, Kaufman introduces the viewer to an unexceptional, lost Joel. Bathed in the grayish light of a winter morning, Joel, upon waking, looks neither well-rested nor

happy. Framing Joel's tired face in what is known in film as a dutch angle,[22] Kaufman immediately, visually foregrounds Joel's unease in the world, his subsequent sighs and grunts as he pulls himself off of his sleeper sofa only further reinforcing his discontent. For Joel, even getting out of bed is a miserable task, echoing Kristeva's depiction of melancholy as "a life unlivable, heavy with daily sorrows" of "an infinite number of misfortunes [that] weigh us down every day" (Kristeva 4). His melancholy becomes even more apparent when he finds his car inexplicably dented. Instead of requesting insurance information or expressing his frustration, Joel scribbles a note that he places on the neighboring car that features only two passive aggressive words: "thank you!" Without the context of his dented car parked as evidence (because he drives away immediately after writing it), the note loses all its power, seeming much more like an expression of gratitude rather than anger. The note's powerlessness mirrors Joel's own; although he finds himself in a "funk" and wishes he could meet someone new, he cynically notes that "the chances of that happening are somewhat diminished seeing that I am incapable of making eye contact with a woman I don't know" (*Eternal Sunshine*). Despite breaking out of his normal pattern and skipping work to take a spontaneous train to Montauk, Joel simply cannot enjoy the stark beauty of the frozen beach in winter. Dressed in business-casual with his briefcase in hand, using a stick to fruitlessly dig at the frozen sand, Joel sticks out, seeming as isolated as the deserted, snow-covered beach he finds himself visiting during this spontaneous trip. While some of this physical and emotional discomfort in the world can be explained by the

[22] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a dutch angle is a cinematic term for "a camera shot which is tilted so the frame is not level, esp. used to portray disorientation, tension, or unease" ("Dutch Angle").

fact that, as viewers find out later,[23] his memories have been erased, his isolation in these scenes mirrors the shy temperament he exhibits before he first meets Clementine at a beach party; forced to attend by his sister, Joel aimlessly wanders at the outskirts of the party, avoiding conversation until his love interest, Clementine Kruczynski, intercedes.

If Joel's melancholy manifests in his bitter loneliness, Wallace's interviewee #20's melancholy takes another form entirely: a cold, predatory nature. For example, having "worked himself through both college and two years now of postgraduate school" (289-290), Wallace's interviewee has an above-average intellect with an impressive vocabulary[24] and a working albeit problematic understanding of feminism. Despite, or because of this education, the unnamed interviewee feels a restless boredom. As with Joel, his discomfort does not come from financial strife since both characters seemingly live alone in relative material comfort, but something more spiritual, which he attempts to soothe through his sexual conquests. In the beginning of his interview with the silent female interviewer,[25] he attempts to begin unpacking his romantic epiphany in which he falls deeply in love with a woman whom he exclusively refers to as the "Granola Cruncher" only after "she had related the unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed" ("B.I. #20" 287). In doing so, #20 reveals this calculating nature ("B.I. #20" 287). Describing himself as "a reasonably experienced, educated man," he admits a carnivorous interest in the Granola Cruncher, whom he had initially

[23] As the movie progresses, the audience learns that these opening scenes come from neither the chronological beginning nor present of the film's complex temporal structure but are, in fact, from Joel's not-so-fresh start after undergoing his memory-erasing procedure. In his chapter for the book *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Chris Dzialo sums up the intricate structure of time in the film as the "antagonist['s, i.e. Lacuna Corporation's]...time machine of sorts that only operates in the present, on the protagonist's memory" (Dzialo 108).
[24] Although obviously trying to illustrate his education and intellectual prowess to the female interviewer, his casual use of words like "obviate" (293), "decoct" (308), and "scotopia" (309), for example, illustrate his intellect.
[25] In all of the interviews from Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* collection, the voice of the female narrator is purposefully excluded and replaced by the letter "Q"—a stylistic, "redacted question-and-response" technique that, Lucas Thompson in *Global Wallace* argues, Wallace adapted from the Latin American author, Manuel Puig (65).

seen as “an extraordinarily good-looking girl whose life philosophy is fluffy and unconsidered and when one comes right down to it kind of contemptible” (“B.I. #20” 289). Along with using diction like “fluffy” to describe her, he makes his less-than-sincere interest even more clearly linked to the idea that he thinks of her as prey when he deliberately recounts how his friend Tad jokingly refers to her as “a really sexy duck” (“B.I. #20” 288). Making this dehumanizing comparison between the Granola Cruncher and a duck illustrates his predatory state of mind. #20 clearly sees bedding women as a sport or game like hunting or chess.

While enabling him to avoid any chances of not only getting hurt, his game-like mindset also prevents him from feeling genuine connection. In his survey of Julia Kristeva’s work and legacy, John Letche recapitulates her discussion of how to understand Don Juan, who is a figure not unlike Wallace’s interviewee #20, in relation to love. Infamous lothario and lover to many, Don Juan, according to Letche’s reading of Kristeva, is primarily “in love with an inaccessible ideal woman with whom no real woman can compare” (Letche 175). Letche explains that because he can never find his ideal woman “in his flight from one woman to another,” Don Juan feels only a “love [which] is a love of conquering, that is, of power. Even more: in his entrances and escapes, in his repeated lack of attachment, Don Juan shows himself to be in love with the *game* of power. The game of course is entirely symbolic, entirely a product of language” (Letche 175). For Don Juan and #20, their games of power are like play-acting.[26] Casting themselves in the role of director as well as the lead actor on the stage, they expertly conduct their epic romances, plotting their “entrances and escapes” while always maintaining a sense of removal from the scene; since, from the comfort of the director’s chair, they are in control, they, therefore, cannot truly be affected.

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[26] Play-acting also features significantly in *Infinite Jest*. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace attributes this behavior to addicts, portraying the root of many addictive behaviors as the overwhelming impulse to control how one feels internally and is seen externally.

Throughout the interview, #20 consciously takes on roles such as the seasoned hunter and the man who has been irreparably changed, switching between these roles with ease. For example, so completely "moved" and "changed" (317) by the Granola Cruncher, he divulges with self-proclaimed complete honesty how his initial courtship with the Cruncher "was a pick up, plain and simple" and how he had deemed her "a strictly one-night objective" ("B.I. #20" 288). Attempting to be as open as possible to capture the gravity of his romantic transformation, #20 plainly speaks about the "pick up" process. For example, early in the interview, he admits that he classified her in the Granola Cruncher "typology"; this "dictated a tactic of what appeared to be a blend of embarrassed confession and brutal candor" and entailed his deployment of a "rhetorically specific blend of childish diction like *Hi* and *fib* with flaccid abstractions like *nurture* and *energy* and *serene*" ("B.I.#20" 291). It is important to note here that his descriptions of his tactics to pick up the Granola Cruncher are strikingly similar to those of his approach to the interview process. Constantly inserting commentary meant to assure the interviewer of his sincerity, he injects phrases like "I'm going to admit it at the risk of sounding mercenary" (288) or "I know how this sounds" (318) to illustrate that fact that he is being completely transparent even though he runs the risk of sounding foolish. Yet, as with the Granola Cruncher, on whom he admits to using carefully crafted doses of self-humiliation, he strategically editorializes his own story in the attempt to disarm the interviewer from any skepticism and to demonstrate how irrevocably changed he truly is.

Attempting to conceal his hidden woundedness in another instance of calculated confession, #20 concedes to these tactics for controlling the perception of others when he compares his own treatment of women to the horrific actions of the rapist. For example, as he explains to the interviewer that the "primary reason your prototypical sex killer rapes and kills is

that he regards rape and murder as his only viable means of establishing some kind of meaningful connection with his victim," #20 expertly unpacks the rapist's psychology, adding that only through torturing and killing is the psychotic in the story "able to forge a sort of quote unquote connection via his ability to make her feel intense fear and pain [with an] exultant sensation of total Godlike control over her" (303). As he reaches the climax of his retelling of Granola Cruncher's story and imparts this analysis, #20, then, explicitly draws comparisons between the rapist's twisted perception of his actions and #20's own predatory nature when he notes, "nor is this of course all that substantively different from a man sizing up an attractive girl and approaching her and artfully deploying just the right rhetoric" (303). Demonstrating his shrewd self-awareness, he continues to meticulously detail his "pick up" process and his equally calculated escape routine in an incredibly complex sentence spanning half a page. After "induc[ing] her to come home with him" (303) and "leading her gently and respectfully to his satin-sheeted bed… [to make] exquisitely attentive love to her" (304), he begins to reveal the extent of his affinity with the rapist:

> ...then lighting her cigarettes and engaging in an hour or two of pseudo-intimate postcoital chitchat in his wrecked bed and seeming very close and content when what he really wants is to be in some absolutely antipodal spot from wherever she is from now on and is thinking about how to give her a special disconnected telephone number and never contacting her again. And that an all too obvious part of the reason for his cold and mercenary and maybe somewhat victimizing behavior is that the potential profundity of the very connection he has worked so hard to make her feel terrifies him. ("B.I. #20" 304)

Akin to what he sees as "the primary reason" behind the rapist's insidious behavior, he reveals his own reasons for his carefully crafted courtship tactics; namely, he is afraid of "the very connection" he desires. In particular, his diction not only demonstrates his self-consciousness in terms of his "mercenary" behavior but also reveals a fear of losing control, which is highlighted by his use of third person narration. Like Don Juan, his game of dominance, in which he feigns romance, allows him to feel a semblance of power and connection without the vulnerability that comes with being sincere.

In other words, the elaborate games and play-acting enable #20 to control his world; but, in vying for control, #20 betrays his own inner, uncontrollable fear. In a strategic move, #20 *does* admit to this fear but does so only to illustrate the extent of his ontological transformation. Even as he claims to be changed by the sheer power of her story, #20 cannot help but grasp for control of the situation. Directly after revealing that it terrifies him, he reverts to insults in order to regain his command over the conversation, as he adds, "I know I'm not telling you anything you haven't already decided you know. With your slim chilly smile. You're not the only one who can read people, you know" ("B.I. #20" 304). While not as cruel as he is at the end of the interview, he reasserts his dominance in what Mary K. Holland would refer to as a "hirsute" manner. Holland, to encapsulate the hideousness of Wallace's interviewee, employs a term that Wallace himself used to describe David Markson's appropriation of femininity in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. "Connot[ing] beastliness and insinuat[ing] the physical savagery that is always a possible component of male domination of women," the term hirsuteness, for Holland, captures not only the horrific, beastly ways in which #20 treats the interviewer but also the "full-body hairiness, or a kind of animal masking" he dons to hide his own fear and feelings of inferiority ("By Hirsute Author" 137). Put another way, #20, too, suffers from a form of melancholia—his lost Thing

perhaps being the idealized, supremely good woman who would satiate and appease his immense appetite for connection. Instead of wearing the pain of his loss on his sleeve akin to someone like Joel, #20 compensates for this unnameable, horrific loss in his games for power. Only through asserting his dominance does he feel, if only temporarily, any sort of relief. Thus, despite their vast differences in personality, both Joel and #20 suffer from various forms of melancholy. While Joel's manifestation seems much more straightforward in his misery, #20 also endures its pain and does everything in his power to mask it. Both men experience the ambivalent pulls of attraction and repulsion toward their lost Thing, which, in their cases, can be understood as genuine human connection; both Joel and #20 bare this inner anguish differently, and most importantly, both men find themselves in need of saving.

Having discussed the ways in which their melancholy takes shape, I will now turn my attention to their female counterparts and the talismanic power they contain. In her chapter for *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices,* Madeleine Wood examines the roles that female characters inhabit in Victorian literature. Often silenced or deemed hysterical, feminine voices, Wood argues, play a particularly important role as "keepers of secrets, objects of desire, and prisms through which all male stories must pass" (Wood 16). Focusing on "the disruptive presence of the (potentially hysterical or damaging) female voice within the male narrative, and...the way in which the female figure simultaneously becomes the means for narrative solution" (16), Wood discusses how female voices "become talismanic for both the male authors and male protagonists" (Wood 23). Although Wood focuses solely on Victorian literature, her theory of the female talisman readily applies to Wallace's and Kaufman's work because she employs Freudian psychoanalysis to illustrate the manner in which women become "invested objects" for their male counterparts (Wood 22). Influenced by the sexual frigidity of the Victorian era

through which he lived, Freud's work on narcissism, object relations, and melancholy focuses heavily on the sexual and familial relationships between men and women; given his interest in these subjects and his popularizing of the talking cure, Freud's work similarly looms large over Wallace's and Kaufman's depictions of their melancholy men with their varying sexual and social neuroses. Adapting Wood's female talisman theory to more contemporary subject matter, I will unpack the ways in which these male protagonists use their female talismans to gain the power and insight necessary to remedy their own traumas.

If women, for Wood, "are the means by which a mourning process can be enabled and...traumas worked through" in Victorian literature, then I argue Joel's and #20's love interests, Clementine and the Granola Cruncher respectively, represent a talismanic power that Joel and #20 use to resolve their melancholy to varying degrees of success (Wood 22). For example, when Clementine enters Joel's life, she both figuratively and literally brings a pop of color into its muted tones embodied by the dismal, deserted beach where he (re)meets her. With her dyed blue hair and blindingly bright orange sweatshirt, Clementine, in her first moments on screen, is almost as visually disruptive to the gray color palette of Joel's life as she later is to his personal one. Even before they speak, Joel feels both attracted and repulsed by her. When he first spots her coming down the beach towards him, Joel momentarily gazes at her before quickly, self-consciously looking away, visually shrinking as he looks back toward the expansive ocean. Seeing her for the first time provokes him into thinking about his love life, or lack thereof, because of his self-proclaimed inability to make eye contact with an unknown member of the opposite sex; this moment, too, spurs on thoughts about getting back together with his ex-fiancée Naomi, whom, unbeknownst to him because of his memory-erasing procedure, he had originally broken up with in order to be with Clementine. Although the only thing of note about Naomi is

that she was "nice" and loved him, Joel's loneliness makes his certainty of Naomi's affections sound soothing because having her love him already means he does not have to fear rejection (*Eternal Sunshine*). Like #20 and his analysis of the rapist's motives, Joel, too, craves yet fears connection, but instead of masking his fear through language games or torture, he simply removes himself from the possibility of being hurt. He actively avoids any sort of confrontation, whether it be negative like with his dented car or positive like speaking with an attractive woman, in order to protect himself from having to endure any more pain and suffering than he already experiences.

Trapped in this suffering and unable to bear the psychic cost of connection, Joel closely resembles Wallace's depressed person from my second chapter in his painful isolation, with seemingly no hope for meaningful redemption—that is, until his talisman infiltrates his life. Unlike the nice Naomi, the decidedly not nice Clementine does not wait for him to approach her; she rather actively disrupts his life and any plans to reconnect with Naomi as she somewhat forcefully insinuates herself in Joel's life (again). In this (re)introduction, Clementine reveals herself to be a version of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) trope. In her essay "500 Days of Postfeminism," theorist Lucía Gloria Vázquez Rodríguez traces this term to film critic Nathan Rabin, who used it to capture the "bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries" (qtd in Rodríguez 169). Echoing Wood's theory of female talisman, Rabin's MPDG definition considers characters like Clementine as existing solely for their male counterpart's benefit.[27] For instance, despite, as the audience later learns,

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[27] While Rabin's definition of MPDG casts the trope in a somewhat problematic light, Jordynn Jack, in the fifth chapter of her book *Autism and Gender*, demonstrates how the trope acts as "much more as a performance, a rhetorical device and a coping mechanism" (194). Instead, it "provides" neurodiverse individuals "with a culturally legible performance of gender" (Jack 194).

being the one to erase Joel first, she finds herself inexplicably drawn to the place where they first met in the opening scenes. While part of her compulsion to return to the romantic scene of the crime (i.e., the location of their first meeting) stems from the fact that one of the technicians of the memory-erasing procedure is using stolen items and recorded memories of Joel to woo her, Clementine's impulse to visit the Montauk beach at the very same time as Joel further reinforces her MPDG qualities in that she, for better or worse, seems irreparably linked to him.

As their second meeting scene continues, Clementine's chaotic presence solidifies her in MPDG typology. After they both wander around the deserted beach, visit the same diner, and catch the same train back home, Clementine cannot help but confront Joel. Starting with a quick "hi," Clementine quickly ends up in the seat in front of and then the seat next to him on the train as she launches into a somewhat manic opening salvo, rambling about her dyed hair and job at Barnes and Noble in her disorderly attempt to figure out how she knows him. Although Joel appears visibly uncomfortable conversing with her, Clementine either does not notice or does not care. She also seemingly does not care for polite conversation, getting openly annoyed with him at several moments when he mistakenly tries to be nice or calls her nice. She even, in a moment of awkward confession, calls herself a "vindictive little bitch" (*Eternal Sunshine*). In these moments, Kaufman shores up Clementine's MPDG status, illustrating many of the traits that Rodríguez uses to classify her as one. "Tend[ing] to dye her hair eccentric colors, wear vintage dresses, listen to indie music and engage on spontaneous carpe diem behavior that can range from socially inappropriate...to outright dangerous," Clementine, in all of her MPDG glory, brings a chaotic power into Joel's life (Rodríguez 169). Seemingly within 24 hours of knowing

Joel,[28] Clementine not only induces him to smile incessantly but also convinces him to walk out on the frozen Charles River despite his obvious fear of the ice cracking. Her spontaneity and fearlessness, in these moments, seem to be the exact balm Joel needs to heal his melancholic woundedness.

In addition, just as Clementine embodies the MPDG trope, the Granola Cruncher, too, epitomizes a specific trope, which is an essential qualification for becoming talismanic. Not even given a name, the Granola Cruncher, for #20 and for readers, precisely represents a specific type—one that #20 finds extremely contemptible. From the very outset of the interview, #20 has nothing but derogatory things to say about the kind of woman the Granola Cruncher represents, claiming that a large factor of his deeming her as a one-night stand "was due mostly to the grim unimaginability of having to *talk* with a New Age brigadier for more than one night" ("B.I. #20" 289). While #20 presents his interest in her as merely a coincidence in that she just happened to be the woman to capture his eye that night, I contend that this typology was, in fact, what attracted him to her. In order to maintain a perception of control over the situation, he purposefully chooses women he despises in order to minimize the likelihood of him feeling any sort of profound connection that he admits "terrifies him" ("B.I. #20" 304). Like Clementine's MPDG-ness, the "post-Hippie, New Ager" trope, "comprising the prototypical sandals, unrefined fibers, daffy arcana, emotional incontinence," inexplicably fits the precise needs of her male counterpart, in that she represents his opposite, the sincere yin to his cynical yang ("B.I. #20" 288).

Although undoubtedly these women, much like the depressed person and Olive from the previous chapter, have their own histories and traumas that do not revolve around their romantic

[28] In the complicated time logic of the film at this moment, they have known each other for an entire relationship yet also have only just met; however, for the viewers and the characters themselves, these opening scenes are the first time they meet.

partners, Clementine and the Granola Cruncher are effectively denied them because of their roles as talismans. Despite authoring a life-altering tale of personal strength in the face of pure evil or co-authoring a complex, sometimes problematic epic romance, the Granola Cruncher and Clementine become appropriated and interpolated into the larger narratives of their male counterparts' lives. For Clementine, the interpolation process begins when she and Joel have reached a more solidified point in their relationship. Because the viewer only has access to their romantic history through Joel's eyes and almost exclusively during the memory-erasing procedure, the trajectory of the romance shown by the film is incredibly complex and incomplete; in the moments the viewer sees, though, amongst the cutesy couple moments to which Joel desperately clings, there emerges a glimpse of their decline. Even before the fight that ends them, Joel attempts to tame Clementine's chaotic ways. Several of their bleaker memories, for instance, take place in a Chinese food restaurant named Kang's that they seem to frequent. Each time as they sit, eating their food, there is a growing sense of boredom and resentment between them. At about the halfway point in the film, Joel's mind relives a memory of a particular dinner at Kang's as the memory technicians work to erase it. Both Clementine and Joel look visibly uncomfortable with each other as Joel's voice narrates, "Are we like those bored couples you feel sorry for in restaurants? Are we the dining dead?" (*Eternal Sunshine*). Then, Joel fully enters into the memory as himself and despairs, "I can't stand the idea of us being a couple that people think that about," as he reaches to brush a strand of hair out of her face. Clementine, however, snubs his attempted intimacy, looking even more resentful at him as she smooths her hair again as if to tell him that she was happy with it before. Because Joel is reliving this memory, he plays a double role in it, playing his part in the scene when he asks, "How's the chicken," and acting as a narrator when he provides his own commentary, noting, "She's going

to be drunk and stupid now" right before she takes a swig of her beer and venomously inquires, "Hey, could you do me a favor and clean your goddamn hair off the soap when you when you're done in the shower? It's really gross" (*Eternal Sunshine*). In these moments, Clementine's unhappiness illustrates that they are, or were, the dreaded "dining dead" couple; in other words, she, a once free bird, has become locked away in a stifling cage while he has become a man struggling to rekindle the dying flames of their once burning passion.

Despite seemingly being more interested in staying together, Joel causes their explosive demise at the precise moment when Clementine threatens to actively change their romantic narrative. More specifically, when Clementine happily announces, "I want to have a baby" at a flea market, Joel shuts the idea down, saying that he does not believe they are ready (*Eternal Sunshine*); and, when she refutes him, insisting that *he* is the one who is not ready, Joel replies with a hint of condescension, "Clem, do you think you could take care of a kid?" (*Eternal Sunshine*). Understandably, Clementine becomes incensed, feeling completely betrayed by his lack of faith in her maternal abilities. In this scene, Joel finds himself in what Wood would describe as "a tense and irresolvable conflict between the woman as object of desire, and the woman as subject of desire" (Wood 23-24). Up until this fight that precipitates their breakup, Clementine has ostensibly been, for Joel, a talismanic object of desire that he holds close to him in order to temper the sting of his melancholy; however, in this moment, she shifts into a subject of desire who no longer exists solely to reinvigorate his life and whose needs now diverge from his own, and Joel cannot handle it.

With the introduction of Clementine into his life, Joel's life parallels the trajectory Wood tracks for Arthur in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*: "The nothingness, which defines Arthur's identity from the beginning of the novel, is overwritten by a sentimental narrative, which posits...the

figure of the daughter as the true mother" (Wood 28). Like Arthur, Joel begins the film in a state of meaninglessness (melancholy) that, in turn, with the introduction of Clementine changes into a "sentimental narrative"—a romance; in contrast, instead of revealing the figure of the daughter as the true mother, it is ironically Clementine, the lover, who ostensibly inhabits the maternal role. Therefore, while differing greatly because of the near 120 year difference between their publication dates, *Little Dorrit* and *Eternal Sunshine* both participate in the process of triangulation, casting their female characters as mothers, lovers, and/or daughters. For example, in a strange, Freudian moment when Joel is attempting to hide his memory's representation of Clementine from the technician's map of what needs to be erased, Joel's subconscious reveals his conflicting desire when he unintentionally charges her with a maternal role. Stowed away in some of Joel's earliest memories, Clementine becomes a maternal figure to a regressed, childish Joel as she helps him deal with his childhood traumas like being bullied and feeling an overwhelming need to hold his mother's undivided attention and affections. From this brief glimpse into Joel's childhood, Kaufman reveals the early manifestations of Joel as a melancholic male as well as the source of his apprehension around starting a family: his own inner woundedness. Still fixated on and pining for his lost Thing, Joel cannot fathom becoming parents with Clementine because having a child would change the nature of their relationship. No longer would it revolve around him and his needs. In this knee-jerk reaction against parenthood, Joel epitomizes the kind of psychological predicament Wallace speaks about as being the motivation for writing *Infinite Jest.* In an interview with a German television ZDF, Wallace locates part of his impulse for writing a novel set in the future in his theory that, he explains, "to an extent my generation tends to think of itself as children still and as people with parents, and I remember wanting to do something about what would be the situation of our children" ("Interview by Das

ZDF”). Unable or unwilling to grow up and let go of his sense of deprivation of that unnameable supreme good, Joel, like the depressed person from my second chapter, chooses to continue perpetuating his narrative of meaninglessness and pain rather than forging ahead into the unknown to find new meaning with Clementine. On one hand, this choice to remain in his pain severs his connection to Clementine, who has become an object of desire too overdetermined with the fear, rejection, and shame as well as goodness and connection outside of himself; on the other, this choice activates the chain of events (i.e. the memory-erasing procedures) that trigger an important change in Joel. Only through reliving his relationship with Clementine does Joel start understanding Clementine as a subject of desire and, thus, truly begin the process of loving her.

#20 undergoes, in a single one-night stand, a life-altering romantic transformation in an almost complete inversion of Joel’s romantic trajectory, which theorist William Day identifies as a variant of “the narrative genre identified by Stanley Cavell as the Hollywood comedy of remarriage” (Day 133-134). More specifically, readily admitting that up until she began her anecdote about her rape and near-murder he had been “planning right from the outset to give her the special false number when [they] exchanged numbers in the morning,” #20 confesses to viewing her pre-anecdote as only a conquest or something disposable that can be used and then promptly tossed away; yet, unexpectedly, when she tells her story, #20 feels moved. Starting merely as a story about hitchhiking, her narrative quickly intensifies into “the most difficult and important battle of her life” (301), and with it, #20 begins to feel, he admits, “hint[s] of sadness or melancholy, as I listened with increasing attention to her anecdote, [learning] that the qualities I found myself admiring in her narration of the anecdote were some of the same qualities about her I’d been contemptuous of when I’d first picked her up in the park” (“B.I. #20” 297). These

qualities that save her from "becom[ing] just another grisly discovery for some amateur botanist" to uncover—namely, her spirituality, sincerity, and seemingly supernatural ability to empathize—become, during her story, a beacon of hope ("B.I. #20" 295). If she could transform her horrific situation into a spiritual one and empathize with what #20 tastelessly describes as a "weeping psychotic whose knife's butt jabs [her] on every thrust," then could she not save him too ("B.I. #20" 309)?

In addition, akin to the way Clementine becomes a maternal figure for Joel, the Granola Cruncher, in her ability to love unconditionally, serves a purpose for #20. Although the psychotic rapist receives the care-giving, not #20, the interviewee appreciates and desires her transformative, talismanic power:

> Can you see why there's no way I could let her just go away after this? Why I felt this apical sadness and fear at the thought of her getting her bag and sandals and New Age blanket and leaving and laughing when I clutched her hem and begged her not to leave and said I loved her and closing the door gently and going off barefoot down the hall and never seeing again? Why it didn't matter if she was fluffy or not terribly bright? (317)

Within these questions posed to the interviewer, #20 concedes that the thought of her leaving filled him with "apical sadness and fear." This fear, in turn, triggers his own regression, causing him—a man who evidently prides himself on control over himself and others—to consider clinging on to her hem and begging like a child. Clearly, #20 ascribes to her a certain power to access the unnameable good often associated with the mother that he, the rapist, Joel, and all the other melancholic men of Wallace's and Kaufman's work so crave.

Critics examining "B.I. #20" have argued about how to interpret this moment of supposed transformation for #20. For example, in her analysis of the story, Himmelheber

disparages the kind of irresponsible reading of the story she identifies Christoforos Diakoulakis as perpetuating when he depicts the story as “an optimistic tale of love that lacks a social critique of rape culture” (Himmelheber 525). “Miss[ing] the complexity of the story’s content altogether by locating its meaning in the word ‘love’ and deeming ‘B.I. #20’ ‘the narrative of a love narrative/the narrative that is love,’” Diakoulakis, Himmelheber posits, fails to appreciate the complexity of the story and the intricacy with which Wallace unravels it (Himmelheber 525). Conversely, for Himmelheber, #20 has not fallen in love but instead “has found a woman whose story offers him this type of salvation: her particular rape, and her particular rapist, present [#20 with] an opportunity to acknowledge predatory aspects of himself without having to relinquish control over his presentation of self as a man incapable of ‘real’ violence” (534). In other words, the Granola Cruncher’s story enables him to illustrate that while he harbors predatory personality traits, he, himself, is not a villain. If even the man who rapes and nearly murders her can be redeemed in the Granola Cruncher’s eyes, then so might he. For Himmelheber, the Granola Cruncher represents a ticket to salvation for his villainous ways even if he fails to redeem it. Unless the reader chooses to read it as a love story, “B.I. #20” becomes what Wallace might refer to as “the song of a bird that has come to love its cage” (“Interview by Das ZDF”); although Wallace employs this metaphor to discuss impotent forms of irony, his description of how “even though [the bird] sings about not liking the cage, it really likes it in there” applies very well to #20’s redemption, or lack thereof (“Interview by Das ZDF”). Despite attempting to sing the Granola Cruncher’s praises for her ability to change him, #20 maintains his hirsuteness. Even in the last moments of the interview, he resolutely insists, “Nothing else mattered. She had all my attention. I’d fallen in love with her. I believed she could save me” after having continuously insulted her intelligence and beliefs throughout the interview (“B.I. #20” 317). And so, asserting

his dominance up until his final lines with vulgar abusive language, #20 ends his interview with a culminating confrontation: “I stand here naked before you. Judge me, you chilly cunt. You dyke, you bitch, cooze, cunt, slut, gash. Happy now? All borne out? Be happy. I don’t care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story” (“B.I. #20” 318). If the litany of incredibly abusive insults fails to raise doubts about the validity of his romantic epiphany alone, then his sentiment “I knew I loved,” with its telling absence of the object of his love conclusively illustrates his lingering narcissism.

In conclusion, Wallace and Kaufman end their stories with a plethora of difficult, open-ended questions. Does the reader commit an optimistic misreading by clinging to “B.I. #20” as a love story, or do they read it as evidence of the all-too-alluring power of narcissism? Similarly, should the viewer watch *Eternal Sunshine* as an eccentric romantic comedy or as a modernized epistle mourning the kind of idealized, all-encompassing, unattainable love from which the film gets its name? Significantly, neither Joel nor Clementine utter the lines from “Eloisa to Abelard,” the epistolary poem written by Alexander Pope from which the film gets its name, but Mary Svevo, the receptionist at Lacuna Corporation, recites them to her boss for whom she has fallen: “How happy is the blameless vestal's lot! / The world forgetting, by the world forgot. / Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind! / Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd” (*Eternal Sunshine*). Like Clementine and Joel, Mary, too, undergoes and subsequently forgets the memory procedure. In fact, she is the one who, after learning of her surgically erased memories of her affair with her married boss Dr. Mierzwiak, anonymously informs both Joel and Clementine of their own memory-erasing procedures. Mirroring Joel and Clementine’s cyclical romantic trajectory, Mary’s heartbreak after unwittingly developing a crush on her boss again raises

questions of whether Joel and Clementine can break the cycle or if they, too, are doomed to repeat their past mistakes.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and "B.I. #20" both depict the limitations of love encapsulated in what #20 calls "pure logic, whereby one does not equal two and cannot" ("B.I. #20" 314). Like with the pain discussed in my previous chapter, the intensity of both love and melancholy cannot be truly shared. Although, as Jeffrey Severs in *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* notes, "we subscribe all the time...to a mythology of love relationships that shows two magically becoming one," these stories demonstrate the impossibility of this myth because, no matter how hard we try, no person can ever truly know what it is like to inhabit someone else's mind (Severs 151). Portraying the inevitable problems that arise when fallible, deeply troubled people enter into relationships with one another, Wallace and Kaufman expose their own concerns "not just about being [heterosexual men] but about being [artists], and about the possibilities for manipulating, appropriating and dominating others that come along with both" ("By Hirsute Author" 137). Through their use of female talismans, they raise important, unanswered questions about the validity of the myths perpetuated about love. Ultimately, in leaving these stories open to interpretation, Wallace and Kaufman foster what Wallace believes great art should: "a conversation" in which the reader is invited to experience at least momentarily "unalone[ness]—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually," and feel as though they are "in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness" ("The Salon Interview" 62).

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In the postscript of *The Language of Pain,* David Biro muses about our impetus to articulate pain: "Pain," he explains, "silences us. So why bother trying to speak? Why not just close one's eyes...and wait for it to pass? And for those who witness pain, why bother trying to break down the wall of private experience and attempt to share what cannot be shared?" (214). In the pain-riddled worlds of Wallace and Kaufman, silence is undoubtedly tempting in the face of insurmountable suffering. No matter how many times she revisits and reassesses her trauma, the depressed person from Wallace's *Brief Interviews* collection, for instance, cannot find the right words to alleviate her unendurable psychic torment. Words, too, even in the form of a tear-filled apology, similarly fail Olive in *Synecdoche, New York* as she dies unable to accept her estranged father's plea for forgiveness. Trapped in the pain of their own melancholy, both Joel of *Eternal Sunshine* and interviewee #20 from "B.I. #20" fall victim to the painful limitations of language while also facing the cruel calculus of love, "whereby one does not equal two and cannot" ("B.I. #20" 314). Whether it be with their family, friends, or love interests, each of these characters shares in the impossible struggle to communicate his or her pain. Unable to breach the barrier that pain erects between the self and the outside world, Wallace's and Kaufman's characters inevitably fail and fall short of connecting with another, reinforcing Biro's question: why bother? If language and love, for Wallace and Kaufman, fail to break down pain's walls, then what can?

Along with significant similarities in style and interest in, as Baskin notes, "authentic expression," Wallace and Kaufman share this grim vision of the prospect of sharing pain (Can Charlie Kaufman?); however, at the same time, as I have argued in both chapters, they continuously illustrate the importance of attempting to do so. Delving into the ways in which their female characters struggle to voice their pain, my second chapter "Breaching the Wall"

illuminates the paradox of pain—namely, that it isolates yet unites all who experience it. While no one can know the exact texture or context of the depressed person's horrific depression or comprehend the immense sense of loss that prevents Olive from forgiving her father in her last moments in life, others, Wallace and Kaufman demonstrate, have their own comparable suffering to bear and attempt to share. Furthermore, in my third chapter "Whereby One Does Not Equal Two" in which I unpack how the male protagonists imbue their romantic counterparts with the talismanic power to heal their traumas, I further elucidate how pain heightens and obscures the barriers between consciousness. Desperate for the redemptive power of love, Joel and #20 misread and dehumanize their lovers. So entrenched in their own needs and internal narratives about pain, they fail to appreciate Clementine's and the Granola Cruncher's personhood; they, like the depressed person and Olive, become so dominated by their own suffering that they cannot see others as anything but mere shadows in the face of their own all-encompassing pain experience.

In summation, Wallace and Kaufman, in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Synecdoche, New York,* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,* illustrate the impossibility yet necessity of resisting the powerful draw of pain's isolation. While depicting the countless ways in which their characters can be seduced, misled, or defeated by pain, these artists uncover the value of persevering regardless of its apparent futility. As the anguish their characters experience so often confirms, Wallace and Kaufman show that the narcissism of the pain experience, while seductive, only leads to more pain and isolation. Without attempting to not only share one's pain but also to share *in* someone else's pain, these characters are forever trapped in their own suffering. Only after losing and reliving their tumultuous romance, for example, does Joel truly start to understand Clementine as a desiring subject rather than an object of his desire. Similarly,

only after watching the pain of many others around him, including his own daughter, lead to their destruction does Caden finally understand the true nature of his ever-expanding play; from these tragedies, he realizes something that Wallace also discusses in his Kenyon College commencement speech, which is that because of the limits of consciousness, every person feels as though they are "the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence" (*This is Water* 36). It is precisely this revelation, which they perpetually return to in their work, that provides a rebuttal for the criticisms launched by readers like Hungerford. Cognizant of this seemingly trite truth, Wallace and Kaufman seek—through their challenging literary and filmic texts that encourage multiple readings or viewings—to encourage the reader to fight the urge to close one's eyes, as Biro describes, and thus succumb to pain. In other words, because and in spite of their challenging style, Wallace and Kaufman embody what Wallace in an interview describes as the role of good art. For Wallace, good art "locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this dark world *and* to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" ("An Expanded Interview" 26). Thus, even in their most challenging and bleak stories, they invariably leave a space for the kind of illumination Wallace describes; their work, which time and time again exhibits widespread devastation, desperation, and decay, invites its readers open their eyes to the pain of others. While acknowledging the nearly infinite ways in which pain and its alluring solipsism triumph, Wallace and Kaufman offer empathy as the last refuge in the face of the sheer destructive power of pain.

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