

Boredom, Irony, Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self

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Boredom is one of the main themes of David Foster Wallace's posthumously published, unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011). In the novel, Wallace suggests that boredom might in fact serve as a path to meaningful existence. For example, in the "Notes and Asides" at the end of the novel, he writes:

It turns out that bliss [...] lies on the other side of crushing boredom. Pay attention to the most tedious thing you can find [...], and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you [...]. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom (546).

The subject of boredom connects *The Pale King* to what I consider to be the larger, philosophical dimension of Wallace's oeuvre, and especially of his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996), namely: the challenges to becoming a coherent self and realizing a meaningful existence amid the fragmented plurality of the contemporary Western world. Or, as Wallace has expressed it himself, somewhat more generally: "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (McCaffery: 131).

In its portrayal of human existence Wallace's work displays strong affinities to existentialist thought. Nevertheless, in the critical and scholarly interpretation of his fiction this illuminating philosophical perspective has been largely ignored.¹ The classic existentialist motif of the individual fleeing from fundamental existential questions plays an important role in Wallace's oeuvre. *Infinite Jest* describes a large host of characters who evade responsibility for their lives through irony and addiction, and end up in a state of depression. But the novel also portrays the possibility of changing one's way of life and finding meaning and becoming a human self, as in the case of the character Don Gately. *The Pale King* addresses this

anxiety – that is, the ‘dread’ one feels when confronted with existential responsibilities – through the subject of boredom, which is represented, above all, through the extreme tedium of the work of the employees of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) who form the main focus of the novel. In *The Pale King*, Wallace portrays boredom as a state that one can either try to avoid or embrace. Perhaps surprisingly, the novel affirms the latter option as the possible route to a meaningful life.

The connection between these themes – boredom, anxiety, irony and meaningful life – in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* can best be understood in light of the philosophy of Danish existentialist thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Wallace’s works express a view of the self that is almost identical to that of Kierkegaard. The fundamental distinction in Kierkegaard’s philosophy of self-becoming, between the aesthetic and the ethical life, applies to Wallace’s existentially lost drug addicts and his heroic Alcoholics Anonymous supplicants and IRS agents, respectively. Kierkegaard’s critique of irony plays an important role in the distinction between the aesthetic and ethical, and connects in many ways with Wallace’s irony critique.² Similarly, Wallace’s treatment of boredom and anxiety, as leading to meaning and happiness (a suggestion repeatedly stated but not much elucidated in *The Pale King*), resembles Kierkegaard’s own in-depth analysis of these states. Therefore, using Kierkegaard’s philosophy as a heuristic perspective will provide a clear analysis of the role of boredom and of related concepts in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, and thereby of the connections within Wallace’s oeuvre.

The existentialist view of the self in Kierkegaard and Wallace

In Kierkegaard’s view, an individual is not automatically a self but has to become one. A human being merely embodies the possibility of becoming a self. For Kierkegaard, there is no ‘true core’ that an individual always already ‘is’ or ‘has’ and that underlies selfhood. *Becoming* a self is the *task* of human life (cf. *EO* 2: 250-1). We can recognize this view throughout Wallace’s writing.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge the difference between the existentialist and the “postmodernist” view of the self. Existentialist and postmodernist philosophies agree in their denial of a pre-existing, unified self. Subsequently, postmodernist views state that this fragmentation (or decentering) of the self should be honoured, even celebrated.³ However, a strange paradox underlies this

argument: namely, the postmodernist celebration of the fragmented self is based on the assumptions that the individual is not whole and cannot be made whole without being selective and therefore ‘untruthful’ to all the different things the individual is, and that such an untruthful unification is always imposed and dictated by outside forces. The self, in other words, is a fiction produced by cultural conventions. This whole picture reveals a romantic longing for the impossible authenticity of a fragmented, self-less ‘entity,’ free from forces that corrupt that ‘genuine’ state of fragmented diversity (cf. Guignon: 109, 113-9).

For Kierkegaard, the fact that the self is something ‘made’ does not imply that it is a fiction, in the sense of an imperfect artificiality that corrupts the diversity of the individual. What exactly is it that is corrupted when there is no pre-existing self? The postmodernist view turns freedom into a goal in itself. (We will see that this view of the self – which is also the view criticized in Wallace’s work – strongly resembles the so-called aesthetic attitude that Kierkegaard critiques.) Conversely, Kierkegaard posits that the self is fragmented but should be made whole – this is the task of human life (*CA*: 155). For Kierkegaard, and existentialist philosophy in general, human existence is characterized by both ‘facticity’ and ‘transcendence.’²⁴ On the one hand, the individual finds himself in a factual situation, not of his own making. It is, in a sense, a product of coincidence – he is born in a certain country, to certain parents, brought up in a certain culture and community, et cetera. On the other hand, the individual is freedom, that is, he has the potential to place himself in relation to his accidental situation, and thereby ‘own’ it instead of just being unwillingly determined by it. In addition to this, he can choose from new possibilities that lie before him, thereby reshaping his situation, becoming more than what was determined for him – in other words: transcending his facticity. This is what Kierkegaard means by “becoming a self”: a human being has to take up his individual limitations and possibilities, and integrate them into a unified existence. If the individual does not take himself up in this way, he does not acquire a self; he is just an immediate, natural being – “a thing among the things.” Such a human being does not ‘exist’; he just ‘is’ (cf. Taels: 96, 102).

Wallace formulates an almost identical view of the self in a talk he gave on Franz Kafka, who is also an important representative of the existentialist tradition (Bennett: 236; Marino: xv). Wallace remarks that in our present age it is a common mistake to think “that a self is something you just *have*.” According to Wallace, we should realize the central insight of existentialism, “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." Wallace also explicitly compares Kafka to Kierkegaard in this respect ("Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness," 64-5). In this context Wallace's statement, "Although of course you end up becoming yourself" – which became the title of David Lipsky's 300-page 'road trip' interview with Wallace – has a strong existentialist ring to it (Lipsky: 52).

This view of the self underlies *Infinite Jest's* description of its characters suffering from addiction as having no self, as being "empty" inside. In the novel, addiction is a metaphor for not taking up responsibility for one's life, and, as a result, suffering from "internal emptiness." Conversely, the novel describes Don Gately, in his process of recovery, as "returned to himself" (694-5, 860). In *The Pale King*, Lane Dean Jr.'s remark that he is "just broken and split off like all men" (42) expresses the same view, that the self is not based on some pre-existing unity but rather something that is constantly torn between freedom and facticity and, therefore, has to be *made* whole. Additionally, in the chapter about the boy who wants to kiss every part of his body, the narrator remarks: "Every whole person has ambitions, objectives, initiatives, goals" (394).⁵ A person becomes 'whole,' becomes a 'self,' by giving direction to her own situation through choices and taking on responsibilities.

Irony in the Aesthetic and the Ethical Life-View

Kierkegaard further thematizes the problem of becoming a self in his distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical life-view. Both life-views are stages in the development of the individual. To be sure, Kierkegaard also describes a third stage that follows on the ethical, namely the religious life-view. However, when examining the matter at hand, this view is often combined with the ethical and referred to as the ethical-religious life-view. The fundamental separation in this analysis of self-becoming lies between the first two stages, in which Kierkegaard opposes the aesthete, who fails to become a self, to the ethicist, who does take up the task of self-becoming.

The crucial difference between these two stages lies in the use of irony. For Kierkegaard, irony is not just a verbal strategy, an indirect or ambiguous form of language use, but an *attitude towards existence*. In Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* we read: "Irony is an existence-qualification, and thus nothing is more ludicrous than regarding it as a style of speaking or an author's counting himself lucky to express himself ironically once in a while" (1: 503-4). According to Kierkegaard, irony initially fulfils an important role in the existence of the individual: "just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human

begins with irony" (*CI*: 6). Through irony, the individual frees himself from what Kierkegaard calls "immediacy," from what is 'given' – the individual's upbringing, social background, culture, that is, his facticity –, and realizes that he does not coincide with this. Kierkegaard values this initial, liberating potential of irony. Through irony the individual obtains a negative freedom, a freedom-from. As such, irony constitutes an indispensable step towards freely choosing a personal interpretation of one's moral life, a positive freedom, or, a freedom-to.

However, irony cannot be the source of that 'positivity,' because it is pure negation. "In irony," Kierkegaard writes, "the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself – that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything" (*CI*: 257). So, irony, in its liberating potential, should be employed only temporarily. In his essay "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace, too, acknowledges that irony can initially be a valuable means of freeing oneself from what has become the standard, immediate way of seeing things that does not hold true anymore. But Wallace also notes, quoting Lewis Hyde, that "[i]rony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage." To this, Wallace adds that irony "serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (67).

Kierkegaard and Wallace agree that irony can initially have a liberating effect. However, Kierkegaard recognizes the danger of the ironist getting wrapped up in his ironic freedom, and turning irony into a permanent attitude. This is the defining characteristic of the aesthetic life-view. The type of individual that Kierkegaard calls the aesthete uses an endless "total negative irony"⁶ to avoid all commitment, all responsibility and retain his negative freedom. It is to this aesthetic attitude of total negative irony that Kierkegaard is strongly opposed. Wallace's irony critique targets the same form of irony: an automated, total irony that is no longer a means to overthrow hypocritical, unquestioned truths, but rather an instrument of cynicism, that makes it incredibly difficult for individuals to realize a meaningful life.⁷ The contemporary Western individual, confronted with endless possible ways of shaping his life and therefore with the feeling that he has to shape it into exactly what he wants it to be, can easily come to resemble Kierkegaard's aesthete, wanting to retain his freedom and bring his life into accord with his fantasy (cf. Dewey:191-2).⁸ According to Wallace, this contemporary ironic attitude has become "poisonous," functioning as a "mechanism for avoiding some really thorny issues," resulting in "the contemporary mood of jaded weltenschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference" and,

as such, is the cause of "great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" (McCaffery: 46; Wiley; "E Unibus Pluram": 63, 49).

In the ironic-aesthetic life-view, all reality is 'suspended,' because the real is just an unnecessary limitation to the endless possibilities of the aesthete's own thinking, to the *ideality* that he can shape in his own mind. And as all distinctions and criteria have become invalid for the aesthete, the only decider that remains for him is pleasure. The aesthete wants to 'aestheticize' his life, to make it exactly as it should be according to his own fantasy and desire; to this everything is secondary. The aesthete accepts no limitations, everything should be possible. In the end, the aesthetic life-view leads to despair. By neglecting reality, not realizing a new, freely chosen relation to that reality, the self is also neglected – it is completely emptied out. And as we read in Kierkegaard's *Repetition*: "such a mistake is and remains a person's downfall" (137).

The resemblance between Kierkegaard's aesthete and the addicts portrayed in *Infinite Jest* is clear (cf. Boswell: 138). In the novel, the aesthetic ironizing of values and actions leads to the point where for most of these addicts "the cliché 'I don't know who I am' unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché" (204). The result of the addict's aesthetic attitude is the feeling of emptiness and despair that *Infinite Jest* describes as "anhedonia" or depression (a term that Kierkegaard uses as well): "a kind of emotional novocaine," "a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content" (692-3). To give an example, from the perspective of Hal Incandenza:

It's of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. [...] We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age [...]. And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté (693-4).

In *The Pale King* we can recognize the aesthetic life-view and its consequences in Chris Fogle's descriptions of his old life as a "wastoid," and when he considers "that I might be a real nihilist, that it wasn't always just a hip pose. That I drifted and quit because nothing meant anything, no one choice was really better" (223).

But perhaps the most striking instance of the aesthetic life in *The Pale King* is the case of the 'tortured father' (405), because it contains such salient similarities to the so-called "Seducer's Dairy," included in Kierkegaard's work *Either/Or*. The fictive author of this diary, who goes by the name of 'Johannes the Seducer,' represents the most extreme embodiment of the ironic-aesthetic life-view.⁹ Both the father from *The Pale*

King and Kierkegaard's Johannes are 'serial seducers': they constantly long for new women. The father has an aesthetic disgust with obligation and routine (he is described as becoming "nauseous," a typically existentialist term),¹⁰ yet at the same time wants to retain all possibilities (all the women he started seeing) (405-7). Although the father is motivated by physical sexual desire, while Johannes seeks a mental gratification – he enjoys his own manipulation of each girl, stirring up her love to greater and greater heights –, both their lives are caught in a terrible frenzy without end. About Johannes we read: "he soon perceives that it is a circle from which he cannot find an exit" (1: 308). And, in the case of the father:

Thus began the father's true cycle of torture, in which the number of women with whom he was secretly involved and to whom he had sexual obligations steadily expanded, and in which not one of the women could be let go or given cause to detach and break it off, even as each became less and less a source of anything more than a sort of dutiful tedium of energy and time and the will to forge on in the face of despair (405-6).

The tragic fate of the aesthete raises the question: how can the individual liberate himself from the ironic-aesthetic attitude and realize a meaningful life? Kierkegaard's answer is deceptively simple: by choosing. In *Either/Or*, the ethicist states: "the ethical constitutes the choice" and this choice is "the main concern in life, you can win yourself, gain yourself" (2: 169, 163). The aesthetic life is characterized by not-choosing; the aesthete wants to retain his negative freedom. To overcome the empty despair in which this life-view runs aground, the negative freedom established through irony should be followed, as mentioned above, by taking up the responsibility to give shape and meaning to one's life, thereby realizing a positive freedom. This is the choice that, for Kierkegaard, characterizes the ethical life-view.

Wallace states something very similar, in an article on Dostoevsky, another cornerstone of existentialism (Marino: xv): "Dostoevsky wrote fiction about the stuff that's really important. [...] His concern was always what it is to be a human being – that is, how to be an actual *person*, someone whose life is informed by values and principles" ("Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky": 265). In an interview, Wallace adds that "some of the sadness" that seems to "[infuse] the culture right now has to do with this loss of a sense of purpose or organizing principles" that, according to Wallace, are needed to be an actual person (Silverblatt).

In *Infinite Jest*, the characters Remy Marathe and Hugh Steeply explicitly discuss – in terms very similar to Kierkegaard's – the importance of choice

in self-becoming and in overcoming the emptiness of contemporary, aesthetic life. Marathe says that Americans talk about freedom without fully understanding what it implies:

Your freedom is the freedom-*from*: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress. [...] But what of the freedom-*to*? [...]. How for the person to freely choose? [...] How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose? (320)

In *The Pale King*, the elevator discussion between several IRS employees similarly expresses the neglected bond between freedom and choice, between rights and responsibilities: "Americans are in a way crazy. We infantilize ourselves. We don't think of ourselves as citizens – parts of something larger to which we have profound responsibilities. We think of ourselves as citizens when it comes to our rights and privileges, but not our responsibilities" (130).

Choice is always an action in which the individual connects to reality, to the world. Choice always means taking responsibility for a certain commitment to the world. And it is through that choice, through that connection to reality, in consciousness transcending itself towards the world, that the self emerges.

This also implies that choice means paying attention; it means attending to something in the world. It is important to see the enormous difference between this 'ethical' ability to pay attention and the aesthete's constant self-reflective absorption (as Chris Fogle remarks in *The Pale King*, "awareness is different from thinking") (190). The problem with the latter – and why it cannot possibly be called 'attending to something' – is that it has no object, except for itself; the self-reflecting aesthete is solely interested in his own reflexive processes, absorbed by the endless associations produced by the ideality of his own mind. However, the aesthete ends up lost in his own 'hyperreflexivity,' or "*Analysis-Paralysis*" as it is called in *Infinite Jest* (203). We can recognize this in Hal Incandenza, whose self-reflection "gets too abstract and twined up to lead to anything"; it just leads to getting "lost in a paralytic thought-helix" (54, 335). We also see it in the second chapter of *Infinite Jest* where Ken Erdedy's thoughts, about whether or not to call his marijuana supplier, send his mind into a frenzied overdrive (26-7). In *The Pale King*, this "oblivion of indecision" – as Gregory Carlisle aptly labels it – is expressed in Lane Dean Jr.'s description of his "real vision of hell": "It was of two great and terrible armies within himself, [...] opposed and uncomprehending, for all human time. Two hearted, a hypocrite to yourself

either way” (41). Another *The Pale King* character, Claude Sylvanshine, experiences a similar “paralysis,” when considering the logistics of getting to his new place of work and apartment:

the whole thing presented such a cyclone of logistical problems and complexities that Sylvanshine was forced to do some Thought Stopping [...] trying to merge his own awareness with the panoramic vista [...], an oceanic impression so literally obliterating that Sylvanshine was cast or propelled back in on himself and felt again the edge of the shadow of the wing of Total Terror and Disqualification pass over him (24)

In contrast to hyperreflexivity, paying attention means that consciousness is completely ‘in’ the world, unaware of itself, fully attending to the object of attention. In *The Pale King*, Shane Drinion’s ability to pay full attention and dispel self-consciousness is accompanied by levitation: “Drinion is actually levitating slightly, which is what happens when he is completely immersed; [...] Drinion himself [is] unaware of the levitating thing by definition, since it is only when his attention is completely on something else that the levitation happens” (485).

So, choosing to pay attention forms the transition to the ethical life-view. But how does this transition take place? In both Kierkegaard and Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* the realization of the importance of attention is crucial. This realization in itself, when it is the full recognition of the failure of the aesthetic life-view and the necessity of ethical choice, is already the first choice, the first action, through which the individual leaves the aesthetic attitude behind. The ethicist B in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* calls out to the aesthete A: “What, then, is there to do? I have only one answer: Despair, [...] not as a state in which you are to remain, but as an act that takes all the power and earnestness and concentration of the soul. [...] a person must truly will it; but when he truly wills it, he is truly beyond despair” (2: 208, 213). Despair means recognizing the need for change, and that means changing despair from a situation to a self-chosen action. With that choice the individual leaves despair behind.

In *The Pale King*, this insight seems to be the essence of the ‘visions’ that both Chris Fogle and Lane Dean Jr. experience. In the novel, both men experience a moment of insight into what they should do with their lives. While accidentally attending an Advanced Tax class, Fogle experiences his ‘calling’ to join the IRS. He realizes:

It had something to do with paying attention and the ability to choose what I paid attention to, and to be aware of that choice, the fact that it’s

a choice. [...] If I wanted to matter – even just to myself – I would have to be less free, by deciding to choose in some kind of definite way. Even if it was nothing more than an act of will (187, 223-4).¹¹

The Pale King describes the run-up to exactly such an act of will on the part of Lane Dean Jr., when he and his girlfriend Sheri have to decide what to do with their unplanned pregnancy. Lane realizes that “[h]e was not a hypocrite [...] What if he is just afraid, if the truth is no more than this, and if what to pray for is not even love but simple courage, to meet both her eyes as she says it and trust his heart?” (42-3). This choice changes everything: “for had he once said it, avowed that he did love her, loved Sheri Fisher, then it would have all been transformed” (40). Kierkegaard describes such moments as moments of “redemption,” as the decisive choice through which “*nothing new is added to the old, but the old has become new*” (Eriksen: 7-9).

Another way of saying that choice always implies attention, is that choice always implies the present. Attending to something is an action ‘in’ the world. As already mentioned, the aesthete neglects the relation to reality and, instead, is absorbed by the ideality of his thoughts; therefore, the aesthete does not really have a present either – there is no moment in which he connects to reality and his self becomes real. Choosing, on the other hand, is always part of the present.

In *Infinite Jest*, the importance of choice, the present and the transition to the ethical life-view comes to the fore in the description of Don Gately “kicking” his addiction:

[Gately] remembered Kicking the Bird for weeks on the floor of a Revere Holding cell [...]. He had to build a wall around each second just to make it. [...] A breath and a second, the pause and gather between each cramp. An endless Now stretching its gull-wings out on either side of his heartbeat. And he’d never before or since felt so excruciatingly alive. Living in the Present between pulses (859-61).

The choice, the action, the ethical connection with the world in the Kierkegaardian sense is something that repeats itself with each new present, and is something that *has* to be repeated by the individual, if it is still to qualify as a choice.

Boredom, Anxiety and Meaningful Life

This brings us to the subject of boredom, since repetition and prolonged attention entail the possibility of ‘getting bored.’ *The Pale King* suggest that enduring boredom leads to meaning and happiness, but hardly explicates how this works. This might be an instance of Wallace’s well-known narrative strategy of ‘exformation’ – not giving all the information needed to make sense of something –, leaving it up to the reader to think about how this might work. This activity, attending to the ‘boring’ subject of boredom (with the risk of becoming bored), might in itself be regarded as an example of boredom leading to meaning, or embodying a meaningful pursuit (paying attention to something difficult, not instantly gratifying).

First of all: what is boredom? Kierkegaard categorizes boredom as a mood (*CI*: 284-5). Lars Svendsen explains the difference between moods and emotions as follows: “Broadly speaking, we can say that an emotion normally has an intentional object, while a mood is objectless. Moods have more to do with the totality of all objects, i.e., the world as a whole” (110). To this “lack [of] determinate objects,” William McDonald adds that moods are “states of mind which condition the individual’s whole orientation to existence” (63).

What characterizes this mood of boredom? In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard calls boredom an “eternity devoid of content” (285). In *Either/Or*, the aesthete describes boredom as follows: “Boredom rests upon the nothing that interlaces existence; its dizziness is infinite, like that which comes from looking down into a bottomless abyss” (1: 291). This dizzying abyss is the confrontation with the endless possibility that is existence (Bigelow: 258). In boredom, the individual experiences the implication of the transcendence, the freedom of his existence, namely: that there is no automatic, intrinsic meaning. In boredom, the world is *emptied* of meaning.

This absence of meaning connects boredom to anxiety, Kierkegaard’s famous term for the individual’s confrontation with nothingness. Kierkegaard distinguishes anxiety from fear, in that the latter is always directed at something specific, a (supposedly) concrete object, “while anxiety does not have a specific object – or, rather: the object of anxiety is nothing” (Grøn: 5). When the individual is gripped by anxiety, he is placed in relation to himself. In anxiety, the individual experiences that he is not automatically a self but has to *become* one, precisely because a human being is not a thing, but a relation to himself, who can therefore determine himself through choice (Grøn: 12).¹²

In an interview, Wallace again formulates a very similar, existentialist view. Even though he uses the term 'fear' instead of 'anxiety,' it is clear that what he is referring to is connected to what Kierkegaard calls anxiety. Wallace says that "the fear is the basic condition, and there are all kinds of reasons for why we're so afraid," but "the job that we're here to do is to learn how to live in a way that we're not terrified all the time. And not in a position of using all kinds of different things, and using *people* to keep that kind of terror at bay" (Lipsky: 292). The individual feels anxiety when confronted with existential responsibilities and therefore constantly tries to distract himself, fleeing from existential questions that have to be faced in order for a meaningful life to be attained.

This motif of the 'anxious' flight from responsibility plays an important role in Wallace's work. In *Infinite Jest*, for example, Avril Incandenza, explains to her son Mario that "[t]here are, apparently, persons who are deeply afraid of their own emotions [...]. Dolores describes these persons as afraid of obliteration [...] I am saying that such persons usually have a very fragile sense of themselves as persons. As existing at all." Avril adds: "This interpretation is 'existential,' Mario, which means vague and slightly flaky. But I think it may hold true in certain cases" (765).

In *The Pale King*, Lane Dean Jr. experiences the dizzying vertigo of anxiety before committing himself to Sheri and their unborn child: "a terrible kind of blankness had commenced falling through him" (39). The feeling of "dread" experienced by another character, David Cusk, is both brought on by and causes his attacks of enormous "public" sweating (91, 94). Perhaps the notion of anxiety appears most explicitly in the case of Claude Sylvanshine, who, as mentioned above, feels the shadow of "Total Terror" pass over him (24). Part of the solipsistic illusion of the aesthetic life-view is that the individual thinks he is unique in this 'anxious' suffering: "What if there was something essentially wrong with Claude Sylvanshine that wasn't wrong with other people? [...] What if he was simply born and destined to live in the shadow of Total Fear and Despair" (14).

But what is the difference, then, between anxiety and boredom, since both are described as a confrontation with nothingness, with the fact that the individual's relation to the world does not have automatic meaning but is infinite in its possibilities? The difference lies in the fact that in anxiety the individual is firmly gripped by the insight into the endless possibility of his existence: he stares deeply into the abyss, unable to turn away. Boredom, on the other hand, "recoils from this abyss [of possibility], refus[ing] to recognize it" (Bigelow: 258). Anxiety refers to a highly agitated state of being, while boredom is exactly the opposite: it is utter apathy. As Patrick Bigelow writes: "It is the despairing insistence that the nothing means

nothing, since in the indifference of boredom, nothing matters, not even the nothing” (259-60).

This last remark points to the ‘double’ nature of boredom. Boredom is the flight from the confrontation with nothingness, the attempt to negate the significance of this confrontation. But, in doing so, boredom becomes at the same time a constant, although passive, confirmation of this nothingness. This double nature of boredom is also expressed by the fact we use the term ‘boredom’ to describe both the individual’s basic, languid state of apathy, as well as the frenetic attempts that he might undertake, ‘out of boredom,’ to distract himself from that boredom.

Perhaps we could say, as the portrayal of contemporary Western life in Wallace’s novels also appears to suggest, that in our time anxiety has been absorbed by boredom. Svendsen observes: “Boredom simply seems to be a more contemporary phenomenon than anxiety. We no longer suffer as much from anxiety, but all the more from boredom” (116). Whereas the insight into the groundless existence of man once caused deep, existential anxiety, in our time we have come to regard this insight as an insignificant platitude, a ‘cliché’ that our aesthetic minds find hard to bear. Instead of experiencing anxiety, we regard ourselves as ‘just’ bored, and no longer seem to hear the existential call of the nothingness underlying that boredom.

How is this analysis of boredom connected to the earlier discussion of the aesthetic and ethical life-view? Irony, by liberating the individual from immediacy, opens up the nothing and, thereby, the possible ‘call’ of anxiety, to realize a positive freedom. But the total irony of the aesthete negates this possibility. In doing so, the aesthete ignores his relation to reality, ironizes himself into boredom, from which he tries to distract himself through fantasy and pleasure.

It is important to note that when, in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, we read the famous line: “Boredom is the root of all evil,” it is the aesthete A who is speaking.¹³ For the aesthete, who after all wants to bring his life into accord with ideal fantasy, boredom is the “[evil that] must be held off” at all cost, the worst enemy imaginable (1: 289). This is also what is meant by the passage from *Either/Or* that is quoted in *The Pale King*. “Strange that boredom, in itself so staid and solid, should have such power to set in motion” (385).¹⁴ In *Either/Or*, this line comes directly after the aesthete’s previous quote, and is itself followed by: “The effect that boredom brings about is absolutely magical, but this effect is one not of attraction but of repulsion” (1: 285). What is expressed in these lines is that the aesthete is permanently looking for ways to distract himself (which explains boredom’s “power to set in motion”), because he is “repulsed” by even the idea of being bored.

However, again, we can immediately recognize the double nature of boredom. The aesthete's constant striving for distraction from the nothingness of boredom can only lead back to boredom. As Kierkegaard writes: "Boredom is the only continuity the ironist has" (*CI*: 285). Karl Verstrynge phrases it as follows: "The aesthete's entire existence seems to be supported and threatened by boredom at the same time. [...] Possibilities may offer a counterweight to boredom, but the wilful aesthetic indecision is at the same time the ground for its infinite emptiness" (296-7; my translation). The aesthete is convinced that his life-view "assures him complete suspension [...] [so that he is] able to play shuttlecock with all existence." But in the end, the aesthete turns out to be bored, empty and unhappy. The aesthete A says: "my eyes are surfeited and bored with everything, and yet I hunger" (*EO* 1: 295, 294, 25).

Infinite Jest portrays the same dynamic of seeking distraction from nothingness which leads to even deeper boredom, emptiness and unhappiness. In the novel, the different addictions of almost all characters symbolize their deep need for distraction from potentially difficult, existential issues. *The Pale King* describes this 'dread' of boredom as follows:

Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least feeling directly or with our full attention. [...] This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do (85).

What can the ethical dimension of boredom be? The following line from *The Pale King* might point us in the right direction: "*boring* also meant something that drilled in and made a hole" (378). This reference to boredom as 'drilling a hole' can be understood in two distinct ways: (1) boredom makes a hole, in the sense that it creates a hole inside of me, emptying me out (this refers to the effect of boredom in the aesthetic life); (2) that drilling, making a hole, has to do with what in other places in *The Pale King* is called "single-point concentration" (293), that is, attending to something and understanding, *penetrating* it. This second interpretation is the starting point of the ethical value of boredom.

Compare *The Pale King's* formulation of boredom as 'single-point concentration' to the description of the importance of attention in Wallace's short story "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20." The story tells of a woman who tries to prevent being murdered by a sexual psychopath through

‘self-forgetful,’ empathetic attention, by “focus[ing] her way into the sort of profound soul-connection that would make it difficult for the fellow to murder her” (252; cf. Boswell: 196; Smith: 298). We are told to “envision” this focus as an “intense concentration further sharpened and intensified to a single sharp point, to envision a kind of needle of concentrated attention whose extreme thinness and fragility were also, of course, its capacity to penetrate” (257). Here, single-point attention has an explicitly ethical dimension: it implies a commitment towards another person.

The Pale King also connects enduring boredom to the ability to pay prolonged attention, to ‘attend’ and thus commit to something outside oneself. The work of the IRS employees who are the main focus of the novel, symbolizes this capacity. Their daily tasks – processing tax forms – are described as extremely tedious, as requiring an incredible capacity to stay focused on one’s work, to be able to deal with boredom. They do their job, not because it is pleasurable, but to provide for their families and because in our society someone has to perform that task.

In Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, the aesthete A gives the following advice: “[n]ever become involved in *marriage*,” because “through marriage one falls into a very deadly continuity with custom,” and “[n]ever take any *official post*. If one does that, one becomes just a plain John Anyman, a tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic” (1: 296-8). This advice is very understandable from the aesthetic point of view, which aims to bring life into accord with fantasy. It is interesting to note that, in *The Pale King*, Lane Dean Jr., as part of his redemption, does exactly the opposite. Taking responsibility for his existence instead of fleeing from it, Lane marries his pregnant girlfriend and enters into public service, taking on a monotonous job characterized by extreme boredom that he will have to learn to endure. With Kierkegaard in mind, we can say that Lane has to make these choices, if he is to realize a meaningful existence. Only through choice, as a commitment to the outside world and to others, will the individual be able to develop a self.

William McDonald formulates Kierkegaard’s ethical evaluation of boredom as follows: “modern individuals are increasingly unaware that they even have the achievement of selfhood as a task. Yet the best hope for awakening awareness of this task lies in the suffering inherent in [boredom]” (63).¹⁵ Enduring boredom means attending to the nothingness that underlies it, to the infinite abyss of possibility. Here, the necessity of ethical choice can announce itself. That is why Kierkegaard sometimes calls the choice a ‘leap,’ to express the anxiety with which the individual chooses, jumps into, the ethical life.

We can see similar imagery in *Infinite Jest*’s description of an addict’s “Bottom,” his absolute low point. The word “Bottom” isn’t quite the right

term, recovering drug addict Don Gately feels: "it's more like someplace very high and unsupported: you're on the edge of something tall and leaning way out forward..." (347). This is "the jumping-off place for just about every AA you meet," the starting point of their recovery (349). The choice to get clean is like a Kierkegaardian leap over a dizzying abyss. Enduring boredom means that the individual resists fleeing – for example through addiction – into ideality, ignoring reality and the self. The substitute lecturer in *The Pale King* uses the same imagery, of boredom related to the anxious leap, in the speech that inspires Chris Fogle to join the IRS, making clear that this leap towards a meaningful life means a *return to reality*: "you will hesitate, you will feel dread and doubt. This will be natural [...], in that literally dreadful interval of looking down before the leap outward. [...] Gentleman, welcome to the world of reality" (227-31).

By enduring boredom, we resist fleeing in aesthetic distraction and, instead, *choose* to attend to something. Thereby, we commit ourselves to the world and start to take up our task of self-becoming. In this way boredom leads us back to meaningful, *real* existence.

The Pale King contains the following passage about why we tend to avoid the topic of boredom: "Maybe it's because the subject is, in and of itself, dull... [...] There may, though, I opine, be more to it... as in vastly more, right before us all, hidden by virtue of its size" (85). Compare this to what Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept of Irony*: "Because reflection was continually reflecting about reflection, [...] [p]hilosophy walked around like a man who is wearing his glasses and nevertheless is looking for his glasses"; to which Kierkegaard adds: "he is looking for something right in front of his nose, but he does not look right in front of his nose and therefore never finds it" (272).

This emphasis on the importance of what is right in front of our noses, is a central theme in Wallace's work (cf. *This Is Water*). Like existentialism, it is about the experience of concrete human existence. One of the most valuable things that Wallace's fiction can contribute to our philosophical understanding of the current age is that it points out the real world and urges us to pay attention to it, to commit to it, and thereby, to become ourselves.

Notes

¹ An important exception being Marshall Boswell, who has noted the relevance of Kierkegaard's philosophy in relation to Wallace's writing in *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (137-40, 143-4).

² In my correspondence with him, Wallace himself wrote: “I too believe that most of the problems of what might be called ‘the tyranny of irony’ in today’s West can be explained almost perfectly in terms of Kierkegaard’s distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical life” (Letter from David Foster Wallace to Allard den Dulk, dd. 20th of March 2006). Cf. Den Dulk, “Beyond Endless ‘Aesthetic’ Irony.”

³ We can find this view, for example, in the work of Michel Foucault, when he speaks of the passing of “the privileged moment of *individualization*” in “What Is an Author?” (197-8, 210) and of the effacement of the subject as a sovereign self, “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea,” the famous last line from *The Order of Things* (422). Compare this latter formulation to the last line from *Infinite Jest*: “And when [Gately] came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out” (981). In the chronology of the story, this marks the start of Don Gately’s recovery from addiction, his ‘return to himself’ (instead of his ‘self’ being ‘washed away,’ the ‘tide’ is in fact way out).

⁴ Kierkegaard himself uses the expression: the self as ‘gift’ and ‘task’ (*CI*: 276, 277; *EO* 2: 275, 279, 197). However, as the significance of ‘facticity’ and ‘transcendence’ will be more evident to readers who are not specialized in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, I have chosen to use the latter two terms.

⁵ Other descriptions of the boy invite comparisons to Hal and Mario Incandenza, from *Infinite Jest*. For example, the boy is described as “prayerful” (Mario is repeatedly described as praying) and “catatonic” (similar to Hal). Also, as a result of his stretching exercises, the “boy’s smile, which appeared by now constant,” which is said of Hal and Mario as well. These states or qualities are regarded by most characters around Hal and Mario (and also the boy, it seems) as an indication that something is ‘wrong’ with them, while, in my opinion, both can actually be seen as in the process of becoming a self (*TPK*: 397-8; *IJ*: 590, 3, 314, 875).

⁶ Term adopted from Scholtens: 21 (my translation).

⁷ For other analyses of Wallace’s irony critique, see e.g.: Den Dulk, “Beyond Endless ‘Aesthetic’ Irony”; Goerlandt, “‘Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away’: Irony and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”; Holland, “‘The Art’s Heart’s Purpose’: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*.”

⁸ Take, for example, romantic relationships. The freedom for every individual to choose his or her own partner, on the basis of what a person likes and what makes her happy, is of course a good thing. But it can also take on hedonistic forms, where everything comes to revolve around the continuous satisfaction of that person’s needs, around what makes her happy, to which the other simply has to comply. If not, the other person is pushed aside as ‘no longer useful.’ In such a relationship the person in question does not really ‘engage’ herself with the other (cf. Giddens: 87-91).

⁹ In his works, Kierkegaard makes regular use of different pseudonyms, fictional narrators and characters, which all embody and articulate certain philosophical positions.

¹⁰ Cf. Sartre, *Nausea*.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Fogle is nicknamed 'Irrelevant Chris Fogle' (257), and that his IRS Video Interview is a long and winding personal story (§22).

¹² Grøn, just like Wallace in *The Pale King*, gives the example of test anxiety: "The question is whether to call it anxiety, because we can say to ourselves 'Don't worry, it is just an exam. Fortunately life goes on.' In order for it to be anxiety, 'the test' we are put to must be more difficult to define or keep ourselves out of. The question becomes who we are. This is where Kierkegaard wants to take us: that the object of anxiety is 'nothing' does not mean anxiety does not involve a situation. On the contrary, in anxiety we relate to our situation, but in anxiety the situation manifests itself as indeterminate. Kierkegaard compares anxiety with dizziness" (6). In *The Pale King* we read about "the theory that America had some vested economic interest in keeping people over-stimulated and unused to silence and single-point concentration [...] that the real object of the crippling anxiety in 'test anxiety' might well be a fear of the tests' associated stillness, quiet, and lack of time for distraction" (293n47); cf. "E Unibus Pluram."

¹³ For example, Svendsen, in his otherwise compelling *A Philosophy of Boredom*, fails to recognize this when he writes: "I think Kierkegaard exaggerated when he claimed that 'Boredom is the root of all evil'" (16).

¹⁴ Wallace uses an older translation of Kierkegaard's text – for a more recent translation, see the edition used throughout this article (1: 285).

¹⁵ Cf. Wallace's above-quoted remark that in our age it is a common mistake to think "that a self is something you just *have*" ("Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness," 64).

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