

Body, Authenticity, Choice: David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion* as an Illustration of
Phenomenology and Ordinary Language Philosophy

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Introduction

It came when I had been in bed for a time and was beginning to fall asleep but only partway there – the part of the featherfall into sleep in which whatever lines of thought you’ve been pursuing begin now to become surreal around the edges, and then at some point the thoughts themselves are replaced by images and concrete pictures and scenes. You move, gradually, from merely thinking about something to experiencing it as really there, unfolding, a story or world you are part of, although at the same time enough of you remains awake to be able to discern on some level that what you are experiencing does not quite make sense, that you are on some cusp or edge of true dreaming.

– David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion* 107

I have always been a reader. From novels to street signs to song lyrics to graffiti, words fascinate me, move me to laughter or tears or rumination. In the course of growing up and learning to reflect on the practice of reading, I have felt its meaning expand to encompass consciousness itself. It is no coincidence that reading our favorite fiction feels like living in another world; our life is a reading of our own reality. From the moment when you realized that you are you, you have always been a reader, too.

The epigraph above is taken from “The Soul is not a Smithy,” the second story of *Oblivion*, a collection of stories by David Foster Wallace. Among the many aspects of this passage’s beauty is its uncanny portrayal of the transition from our normal consciousness to the state of reading fiction. One moment, we still perceive the text as an object, a mass of words on

the page, and we ponder the first few sentences from a distance, perhaps applying them to the context of our factual lives. Then, a moment later, the words seem to disappear, and we disappear with them. All that remains is the fictional realm, with its own voices, characters, places, and time. We may even identify with, or live vicariously through, some of the characters. Just as in dreams, though, our experience of fiction is still *our* experience; it always materializes through the framework of meaning that characterizes our particular style of subjectivity. This essay takes place in the liminal state that Wallace illustrates in the passage above. We will experience *Oblivion* “as really there, unfolding,” but at the same time, “enough of [us] will remain awake” to perform interpretations that connect the text’s world to our own.

I am sure you will identify with me when I say that my transition to adulthood was (and is) a very difficult liminal state. The shift from middle school’s *Harry Potter* and *Great Expectations* to high school’s *Heart of Darkness* and *Less than Zero* marked a wave of disillusionment and loneliness that ate away at my love for my family, friends, and life itself. I began to perceive that the actions of my peers were defined by paradigms that discouraged authentic, emotional communication. During that stage of frantic identity formation, I felt that the desire to fit a certain image prevented people from expressing themselves and from experiencing the true *being* of others. To make matters worse, I participated in the very image-obsession that repulsed me, and I found it tremendously difficult to “let my guard down,” so to speak.

At first, unable to diagnose my disillusionment and alienation, I experienced my struggles as a vague depression for which I could imagine no cure. I tried to cope with my dejection through passive methods of altering my frame of mind, such as smoking marijuana and watching movies and television, but these behaviors only compounded my loneliness by making me feel

like an outsider, the audience of a spectacle. But then, when I was seventeen, my friend Curtis gave me his copy of *Infinite Jest*, a novel by David Foster Wallace. “It’s amazing but really confusing,” he said. “I had to give up after about a hundred pages. See if you like it, and pass it on when you’re done.”¹

Curtis was right; *Infinite Jest* is very confusing. However, after a brief period of habituating myself to Wallace’s writing style, the likes of which I had never experienced, my confusion regarding the overarching network that connects the novel’s various narratives seemed irrelevant to me. I was completely enraptured by the richness of Wallace’s language, the distinctiveness and diversity of his literary voices, his sense of humor that ranges from light wittiness to dark absurdism, and most of all, the *truthfulness* of his fiction. For me, this is the most confusing aspect of *Infinite Jest* and all of Wallace’s fiction: his astonishing talent for expressing what I already perceive to be true but am unable to articulate, even to myself. Reading *Infinite Jest* is like having a candid, emotional conversation with someone who shares my philosophical struggles, wants to work through them with me, and happens to be a genius. In the course of my first reading of the novel, my conversation with the text gradually showed me that my depression, like that of Hal Incandenza (one of *Infinite Jest*’s principal figures), stemmed from an inability or unwillingness to immerse myself in meaningful connections with other people or with some sort of otherness. Although *Infinite Jest* was not an instant remedy for my suffering, the novel was the first of many forms of otherness with which I developed the deep connections that have transformed me into the well-adjusted person who is currently taking great pleasure in writing this essay.

¹I will never be done with *Infinite Jest*, but I did pass Curtis’s copy on to my friend Will when he was struggling with addiction, legal trouble, and an existential crisis. Four years later, Will has been sober for several years and is about to graduate with honors from Johns Hopkins University. I cannot help but imagine that reading *Infinite Jest* played a role in his transformation as well.

More recently, *Oblivion* has been the primary otherness through which I find meaning. *Oblivion*'s stories are the worlds of readers who suffer from the fundamental existential difficulties that plague us all: the disappointment in our negligible impact on the large-scale systems of society, the frustration and loneliness of being unable to connect with people and know their true intentions, the sense of powerlessness that accompanies our perception of ourselves as products of our environment, the absurd objective meaninglessness of our subjective meaning, and the horror of being a mortal body that is inevitably conditioned by violence. I must admit, much to my chagrin, that I may identify particularly deeply with these stories because they are primarily composed of the worlds of well-educated white American cisgender heterosexual males like me. However, this trend in the perspectives of *Oblivion* actually reflects Wallace's effort to address the philosophical struggles that transcend race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.² Wallace describes this artistic ethos in "David Lynch Keeps His Head," an essay about David Lynch, a visionary filmmaker with a distinctive, philosophically engaging aesthetic. Wallace writes:

why are Lynch's movies all so *white*? The likely answer involves the fact that Lynch's movies are essentially apolitical. Let's face it: get white people and black people together on the screen and there's going to be an automatic political voltage. Ethnic and cultural and political tensions. And Lynch's films are in no way about ethnic or cultural or political tensions. The films are all about tensions, but these tensions are always in and between individuals. There are, in Lynch's movies, no real groups or associations.
(*Supposedly Fun* 189-190)

In *Oblivion*, Wallace certainly illustrates forms of political tensions, tensions between the individual and the masses, but in the same manner as Lynch, Wallace avoids ethnic and cultural

² It may be impossible to transcend – to any extent – race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Nevertheless, we must take into account Wallace's apparent desire to bracket these pervasive issues.

tensions and accentuates the tensions “in and between individuals,” the problems of the ethical sphere. Of course, you alone can decide whether the philosophical struggles illustrated in *Oblivion* apply to your life. I am merely explaining why I feel justified in using the terms “we,” “us,” and “our” as universally inclusive (or in some cases, inclusive of all Americans/Westerners) throughout this essay’s exploration of the human subject.

One of my readings of *Oblivion* coincided with my first exposure to phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy. After tasting a few phenomenological texts, I delved into Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, a comprehensive treatise on our embodied creation of a unified, meaningful world. Similarly, after reading a few short essays by ordinary language philosophers, I entered into an extensive conversation with *The Claim of Reason* by Stanley Cavell, which explores the nature of our existence through an interrogation of our use of language. Throughout my concurrent readings of these three texts, I felt as if I were hosting a dinner party where three philosophical geniuses engaged in dialectic on the nature of the human subject while I observed in amazement and absorbed their enlightening discourse. The interplay between the works of Merleau-Ponty and Cavell quickly became clear: Merleau-Ponty provides the foundations of phenomenology, and Cavell conducts a more specific phenomenological exploration of signification.³ Even more fascinating is the relation between these philosophical texts and the literary text of *Oblivion*. I came to experience *Oblivion* as a series of illustrations, and *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Claim of Reason* became a set of descriptions that serve as captions for *Oblivion*’s tableaux. In this way, the philosophical corresponds with the literary in a conversation of mutual clarification and enrichment. The dead concepts of the nonfictional works come to life in Wallace’s fiction, and in being imbued by these concepts,

³ This is a very crude, vague explanation of phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy, and I will clarify what I mean in the chapters to come.

Oblivion's philosophical import comes fully to light. Bearing in mind the notions of Merleau-Ponty and Cavell, we experience *Oblivion* in the liminal state that Wallace describes in "The Soul is not a Smithy," where ideas become reality without entirely disappearing. I do not mean to propose a strict dichotomy between illustration and description; the characters of *Oblivion* often engage in philosophical description, and *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Claim of Reason* include many illustrations of lived experience that support the texts' claims. However, I do believe that there is a fundamental difference between Wallace's fiction, where the characters' philosophical descriptions take place in the context of their lived experience and their world of meaning, and philosophical essays, where the philosopher provides mere glimpses into his or her own experience through inevitably peripheral examples. By tying philosophical description to literary illustration, I seek to respond to the question that concludes *The Claim of Reason*: "But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?" (Cavell 496). I respond in the affirmative and point to the liminal state of this essay.

The Phenomenological Body: Being-in-the-World

In *Oblivion*, David Foster Wallace grants us access to the internal lives of characters who seem to be of our own flesh and blood. Whether they are presented to us through their own voices or through the voices of empathetic narrators, these characters are defined in large part by their struggle with familiar philosophical questions, many of which involve the problem of personal freedom, or the ability to choose. *Oblivion* interrogates modes of freedom that are essential to our identity: freedom with respect to personal history, psychological dispositions, thoughts and emotions, cultural influences, and the body. With *Oblivion*, Wallace asks to what extent we can be who we want to be, feel how we want to feel, and want what we want to want. *Oblivion* conducts this investigation through its characters' *perception*, or attention to phenomena, and *intention*, or integration of each momentarily perceived phenomenon (figure) into a meaningful, unified world of past experience (background). The mode of thought that takes this figure/background structure of existence as its basis is called phenomenology.

Phenomenology's primary objective is to assert perception's primacy over consciousness, or in other words, to show that cognitive *explanations* of reality are secondary to actual *experience*. In fact, cognitive explanations often obscure the nature of our immediate perception. In the phenomenological perspective, the human condition does not center on an essence or an ethereal self like the Cartesian mind; rather, our condition is that of "being-in-the-world," a term coined by Martin Heidegger that refers to the human subject's fundamental state of being a body. The term "world," in the phenomenological perspective, refers not only to the material world of physical objects but also to the subject's field of meaning, or "intentional arc," which unifies these objects into a cohesive, navigable reality. Edmund Husserl, generally considered to be the founder of phenomenology, declared phenomenology to be a response to René Descartes' dichotomy of mind and body. Husserl urges us to bracket the possibility of Descartes' radical skepticism, the possibility of doubting that anything exists beyond our own thinking, and to focus instead on the relation between the so-called internal subject and the so-called external world. How does the subject come to distinguish between objects? How are habits formed? How do we experience our bodies? What is language? What is the relation between past and present? These are some of the questions that Husserl argues to be more urgent than the Cartesian question of whether the world exists.

Despite Husserl's foundational role, the phenomenological treatise that pairs best with *Oblivion* is *Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception* provides a highly detailed and wide-ranging phenomenological account of existence and thus includes descriptions that correspond with nearly every aspect of *Oblivion*'s exploration of subjectivity. Throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes freedom as

a human condition that is both contingent upon and limited by our embodied being-in-the-world.

This fundamental notion of freedom comes to light when he says:

My freedom, that fundamental power I have of being the subject of all of my experiences, is not distinct from my insertion in the world. I am destined to be free, to be unable to reduce myself to any of my experiences, to maintain with regard to every factual situation a faculty of withdrawal, and this destiny was sealed the moment that my transcendental field was opened, the moment I was born as vision and as knowledge, the moment I was thrown into the world. (Merleau-Ponty 377)

The apparent paradox of being “destined to be free” stems from the nature of the body, which both unifies past experience into a meaningful world and destabilizes that world, moment by moment, by remaining open to new experiences. If our freedom indeed consists in our capacity to transcend our present situation and contemplate temporarily the ever congealing and reopening flux of perceived phenomena and intentionality that constitutes our world, then we must ask: what is the impact of our transcendence? What are its limits? To what extent can we perform an authentic, creative contribution to the world? To what extent are we determined by the world into which we were thrown and by the trauma of our past? Merleau-Ponty addresses all of these questions in *Phenomenology of Perception*, often by showing the impossibility of a definite answer. For instance, when he describes the extent to which we are free to understand our sexuality, he says, “Why else would our body be, for us, the mirror of our being, if not because it is a *natural self*, a given current of existence, such that we never know if the forces that carry us belong to us or belong to our body” (174, emphasis M-P’s). This understanding of sexuality as an indeterminately significant factor of our existence makes sense in the abstract scheme of phenomenology, but it is unclear what this indeterminacy actually *means* in the lived experience of, for example, someone who feels repulsed by his or her own sexual impulses and

hopes that he or she has the freedom to eliminate the consequent suffering. Though Merleau-Ponty constructs a thorough manifesto of phenomenology, including its idea of freedom, he is limited by the nature of his endeavor to analytical description of experience and therefore cannot illustrate, or recreate, experience itself.

In *Oblivion*, David Foster Wallace illustrates experience with all of the richness and indeterminacy that Merleau-Ponty describes in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Wallace's characters are inseparable from their bodies, express themselves through habitual gestures, transcend their immediate experience with layers of contemplation, memory, and fantasy, and find meaning (often indeterminate meaning) in all aspects of existence. The acute self-consciousness of the characters in *Oblivion* demonstrates the transcendence that Merleau-Ponty identifies as our fundamental freedom, and the perceptual and intentional content of the characters' experience fills *Oblivion* with very specific phenomenological illustrations of how we live the concept of freedom.

The opening story of *Oblivion*, "Mr. Squishy," focuses primarily on Terry Schmidt, a product testing facilitator for a market research firm. Much of the story consists of a free indirect discourse that relates Schmidt's thoughts and actions as he facilitates a test group of consumers, or Focus Group. The simultaneity of Schmidt's complicated behavior and layered, often unrelated thoughts illustrates the nature of our "faculty of withdrawal," the transcendence that, for Merleau-Ponty, constitutes freedom. In "Mr. Squishy," withdrawal, attending to one's inner world of memory and imagination, does not preclude attention to one's situation in the world; rather, Schmidt often transcends and perceives immediate reality at the same time. For example, the layered nature of our existence is encapsulated in the following passage:

Schmidt at night in his condominium sometimes without feeling as if he could help himself masturbated to thoughts of having moist slapping intercourse with Darlene Lilley on one of the ponderous laminate conference tables of the firms they conducted statistical market research for, and this was a tertiary cause of what practicing social psychologists would call his Manual Adjusting Mechanism with the board's marker as he used a modulated tone of off-the-record confidence to tell the Focus Group about some of the more dramatic travails Reesemeyer Shannon Belt had had with establishing the product's brand-identity and coming up with the test name *Felony!*, all the while envisioning in a more autonomic part of his brain Darlene delivering nothing but the standard minimal pre-GRDS instructions for her own Focus Group as she stood in her dark Hanes hosiery... (*Oblivion* 16)

Here, Schmidt's romantic desire is integrated into the gesture of "rotating the Dry Erase marker in his hand in an absent way that connoted both informality and a slight nervousness in front of groups," an unconscious gesture that contributes to the overall aesthetic of the presentation that Schmidt is conducting while he also imagines an eroticized Darlene Lilley (15). The freedom that Merleau-Ponty describes as being inherent to our faculty of withdrawal extends only to our inability "to reduce [ourselves] to any of [our] experiences" and our capacity to "throw into doubt every perception taken in isolation" (M-P 377). Though Schmidt does not exercise his capacity for doubt in this instance, Schmidt's transcendence of the moment manifests itself through traces of the history that informs his sexuality, which penetrates his experience of his present situation. This moment, like all others in Schmidt's life, draws its meaning from the context of his history, to which the moment is inevitably linked.

The above passage also illustrates another facet of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological freedom: the freedom to signify. In his discussion of the linguistic gesture, Merleau-Ponty says:

Available significations, namely, previous acts of expression, establish a common world between speaking subjects

to which current and new speech refers, just as the gesture refers to the sensible world. And the sense of the speech is nothing other than the manner in which it handles this linguistic world, or in which it modulates upon this keyboard of acquired significations. (M-P 192)

Schmidt not only has the freedom to share facts about the development of the *Felony!* snack cake, but he is able to do so with a certain expressivity, “a modulated tone of off-the-record confidence.” Schmidt’s freedom to signify also extends to his non-linguistic gestures, such as his “graceful, practiced way of panning his gaze back and forth to make sure he addressed the entire table,” an acquired, conventional signification of inclusiveness that he has freely chosen to adopt. However, Schmidt’s freedom to control what he means is limited in a way that corresponds with Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of repression, the preservation of “sensory messages or memories [that] are only explicitly grasped or known by us given a general adhesion to the zone of our body and of our life that they concern” (M-P 165). A major component of Schmidt’s characterization is the gestural manifestations of his repressed self-loathing, such as the “bashful, somewhat fidgety presentation of his body as he spoke before the assembled men” and his “smile[, which] had a slightly wincing quality as of some vague diffuse apology” (*Oblivion* 4). Schmidt’s unintentional signification of his own sense of self provides a three-dimensional performance of the notion of repression that Merleau-Ponty describes when he says, “For every moment that goes by, freedom degrades and becomes less likely” (M-P 166). In other words, as we unconsciously inculcate the trauma of our past into our bodies, we become less and less free to recognize and reverse the habitual gestures that express the trauma.

Schmidt also struggles with the limitations of another aspect of the freedom inherent to his transcendence of his present situation in the world: his freedom to imagine, or in this case, to fantasize. After a description of his recurrent, inevitable fantasy where “he and Darlene Lilley

were having high-impact intercourse on the firms' conference tables[, and] Schmidt kept finding himself saying *Thank you, oh thank you* in rhythm to the undulatory thrusting motions of the coitus," the narrator, indirectly channeling Schmidt's internal discourse, reflects:

The fantasy would of course have been exponentially better if it were Darlene Lilley who gasped *Thank you, thank you* in rhythm to the damp lispingslapping sounds, and Schmidt was well aware of this, and of his apparent inability to enforce his preferences even in fantasy. It made him wonder if he even had what convention called a Free Will at all, deep down. (54-55, emphasis Wallace's)

Schmidt does not have a conventional Free Will, complete control over the movements of his inner world, because his will is characterized by the relatively unconventional, phenomenological version of freedom. Schmidt's freedom is limited not only by the repression that presumably causes him to project his sense of himself as pathetic onto his imaginary self but also by the fact that, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, "[the] power of imagining is nothing other than the persistence of the [subject's] world" (M-P 186). Just as Schmidt's gestures carry the trace of the most psychologically overwhelming regions of his loneliness and self-loathing, this trauma, ingrained in the body, also penetrates his imagination because "the body, being our permanent means of 'adopting attitudes' and hence of creating pseudo-presents, is the means of our communication with both time and space" (187). Merleau-Ponty again describes the impossibility of a free, entirely abstract will when he says, "All that we are, we are on the basis of a factual situation that we make our own and that we ceaselessly transform through a sort of *escape* that is never an unconditioned freedom" (174, italics M-P's). The ultimate difficulty for Schmidt therefore consists in the limitations on the conscious choice involved in the appropriation and transformation of factual situations, the mechanics of both reality and fantasy.

Oblivion's discourse on the phenomenological freedom of imagination continues in the collection's second story, "The Soul is not a Smithy." The story's unnamed narrator recounts a childhood experience that he would later understand as "likely to be the most dramatic and exciting event I would ever be involved in in my life" (*Oblivion* 69). From an empirical perspective, the event in question is the psychotic breakdown of his substitute teacher, Mr. Johnson, in his fourth-grade Civics class. As the teacher spasmodically writes "KILL THEM ALL" on the chalkboard, the narrator and three other students are unable, for various reasons, to join the class's fearful flight from the classroom, resulting in "the *hostage circumstance* that justified the taking of life" (*Oblivion* 67). However, while the narrator's account of the event includes this objective, factual perspective, the factual narrative is interwoven with the narrator's perception of the situation, which is characterized by his tendency "to actively construct whole linear, discretely organized fantasies" (71). The narrator projects his imagination into the classroom window's wire mesh, which "appeared to look quite like the rows of panels comprising cartoon strips, filmic storyboards, Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Comics, and the like" (71). In fact, his deep immersion in his fantasy on the day of Mr. Johnson's psychotic episode is what renders him oblivious to the situation and causes him to remain in the room. Since the narrator "actively construct[s]" his imaginary world, he exercises his freedom-in-transcendence rather than passively experiencing it. The narrator's inability to make the potentially life-saving return from fantasy to reality and his inability to control all of the events that take place in his imagination suggest that the freedom of his fantasy, though active, also constitutes a form of limitation: a barrier from reality.

In a further phenomenological nuance, the content of the narrator's fantasy on the day of Mr. Johnson's psychotic breakdown complicates the tension between imagination and reality.

The narrator recalls, “I was becoming more and more disturbed by the graphic narrative that was unfolding, square by square, in the window. While compelling and diverting, few of the window’s narratives were ever gruesome or unpleasant” (*Oblivion* 88). The parallel between the rising sense of distress in the classroom as the children process the shock of their teacher’s demonic behavior and the horrific events of the narrator’s fantasized narrative suggests that fantasy never entirely disengages from the factual situation of the present moment. The narrator reflects on this connection between fantasy and reality when he says, “In retrospect, I believe that the atmosphere of the classroom may have subconsciously influenced the unhappy events of the period’s window’s mesh’s narrative fantasy, which was now more like a nightmare” (92). Here, *Oblivion* continues to press Merleau-Ponty’s notion of freedom-in-transcendence by appealing to an unconscious atmosphere in which even the most immersive of fantasies are grounded. Fantasy is limited not only by the dreamer’s history but also by his or her present situation.

“The Soul is not a Smithy” also continues *Oblivion*’s discourse on the relation between fantasy and history. Besides the account of the traumatic event, another major focus of the story is the narrator’s memories of his father, who had a dull career as an actuary, and of his related anxiety about adulthood. The pairing of these memories with the account of the traumatic incident has several implications, including his childhood anxiety’s influence on his fantasy. His father’s deadened expression after coming home from work gives the narrator nightmares where he is looking at a large room full of rows of desks where people in suits worked silently with “colorless, empty-eyed, long suffering faces [that] were the face of some death that awaited me long before I stopped walking around” (109). The role of long suffering in *Oblivion* will be discussed at length in this essay’s conclusion. For now, I want to focus on the connection

between the anxious atmosphere of the narrator's childhood and the sense of distress in his fantasy. The fantasy involves several intertwining narratives, each of which centers on a member of the Simmons family, the blind young girl Ruth, her dog Cuffie, her jaded, narcissistic mother Marjorie, and her "kindly, long suffering father" Mr. Simmons (81). The narrator's use of the term "long suffering," a term that encapsulates his anxiety about adulthood, projects his history into his fantasy and thus demonstrates the persistence of his world. While Schmidt's conscious self-loathing attends his fantasy, the narrator of "The Soul is not a Smithy" experiences fantasy that bears an atmosphere of which he has very limited cognitive awareness. The narrator notes, "It is in hindsight that I believe the dreams to have been about adult life. At the time, I knew only their terror" (104). "The Soul is not a Smithy" thus illustrates the unconscious flow of emotion that connects history to present and actuality to fantasy. This pervasive emotional atmosphere is beyond the control of the narrator, which suggests that this phenomenon is a limit of our phenomenological freedom.

"The Soul is not a Smithy" also sheds light on another limit of freedom-in-transcendence: our indeterminate level of control over our transitions from reality into fantasy and vice versa. The hypnotic quality of the narrator's fantasy comes to the fore when Mr. Simmons meets his grotesque and tragic fate:

the Snow Boy sprang into life on its side while Ruth Simmons' father had his hand deep inside the intake chute, severing not only Mr. Simmons' hand but much of his forearm, and badly splintering his forearm's bone all the way down to the bone marrow, with a horrifying full color spray of red snow and human matter jetting at full force straight up into the air...and completely blinding Mr. Simmons, whose face was right over the chute. (91)

This horrific moment of fantasy causes the narrator to disengage partially from his imagination in a way that likens fantasy to sleep. The narrator describes his partial detachment by saying, “My shock and alarm over what was happening to Ruth Simmons’ father, whom I liked, and felt for, created a sense of shock and numbness that distanced me from the panels’ scene somewhat, and I remember being distanced enough to be able to be on some level aware that the Civics classroom seemed unusually quiet” (91). The narrator’s tenuous awareness of his surroundings mirrors the experience of being slightly, momentarily roused from sleep. It is not surprising then, that Merleau-Ponty’s description of the limits of the will, though presented in the context of sleep, also applies to fantasy as it is characterized in “The Soul is not a Smithy.” Merleau-Ponty writes:

I lie down in my bed, on my left side, with my knees drawn up; I close my eyes, breathe slowly, and distance myself from my projects. But this is where the power of my will or consciousness ends. Just as the faithful in Dionysian mysteries invoke the god by imitating the scenes of his life, I too call forth the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper. (M-P 166)

We are free to meet the conditions of sleep or to summon an imaginative mindset, but the actual transitions to and from sleep and fantasy are not performed within the realm of our transcendental freedom.

Adding yet another nuance to its discourse on fantasy, “The Soul is not a Smithy” also likens imagination to the experience of watching film. When the narrator describes his final, complete return from fantasy to reality, he says, “Nor can I remember for just how long the Civics classroom remained like that...(when you’ve been intensely preoccupied, coming back to what is actually happening around you is somewhat like coming out of a movie theatre in the

afternoon)” (*Oblivion* 101). This comparison shows, again, that the subject has no control over the inception and duration of his or her fantasy. “The Soul is not a Smithy” contains a brief digression into filmic analysis, which will play an important role in the discussion of *Oblivion*’s Lynchian body horror in chapter 2. In terms of the current question of how freedom is portrayed in *Oblivion*, the fact that fantasy has the immersive quality of film demonstrates that our freedom-in-transcendence does not entail the freedom either to transcend or to attend to a moment exactly how and when one wants to do so. The extent to which we can control our attention is a point of indeterminacy that will be explored further in the final section of this essay.

The third story of *Oblivion*, “Incarnations of Burned Children,” is a two-and-a-half-page vignette that continues the discourse on the connection between history and the body. In “Mr. Squishy,” Terry Schmidt’s habitual gesture, his “wincing smile,” expresses his perception of himself as painfully pathetic, which is informed by his past experience. “Incarnations of Burned Children,” though, illustrates the other side of this relationship: the influence of the body’s history on the subject’s style of being-in-the-world. The vignette describes a moment where a mother spills boiling water on her baby. The mother and her husband try desperately to soothe their child, but the baby does not stop convulsing in pain until the parents finally think to take off his diaper, which is soaked with water that has permanently scalded his penis. The story’s final sentence shows the relation between the baby’s bodily trauma and his style of perceiving the world:

the Daddy lifted him like a newborn with his skull in one palm and ran him out to the hot truck and burned custom rubber all the way to town and the clinic’s ER...but by then it was too late, when it wouldn’t stop and they couldn’t make it the child had learned to leave himself and watch the whole rest unfold from a point

overhead, and whatever was lost never thenceforth mattered, and the child's body expanded and walked about and drew pay and lived its life untenanted, a thing among things, its self's soul so much vapor aloft, falling as rain and then rising, the sun up and down like yoyo. (*Oblivion* 116)

The baby's physical pain and bodily mutilation lead him to live "untenanted" as "a thing among things," which indicates a fundamental connection between the body and subjectivity itself.

Phenomenology of Perception provides a description of the mind-body unity that underlies the trauma described in "Incarnations of Burned Children":

Consciousness is being toward the thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its 'world,' and to move one's body is to aim at the things through it, or to allow one's body to respond to their solicitation, which is exerted upon the body without any representation. (M-P 140)

Since our world is made meaningful by our body's modes of inhabiting space, damage done to the body necessarily affects what we imagine to be the ethereal self, the network of significations and associations that unifies our perception. While Merleau-Ponty asserts that the exact psychological effects of certain corporal situations are indeterminate, with this horrifying vignette, Wallace offers an instructive example of this indeterminate relation between physical pain and psychic trauma.

The description of the burned child as "a thing among things" and as having "learned to leave himself" shows that his sense of subjectivity has been severely diminished. The child's leaving himself, his transcendence of this extremely painful moment, seems to have left him permanently empty, or "untenanted." This description of physio-psychological trauma bears striking similarities to the case study of a psychiatric patient named Schneider, which plays an important role in arguments throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*. Schneider suffered

physical trauma in World War I, yet Merleau-Ponty describes the abnormality resulting from this trauma as psychological rather than physical. Instead of being too physically damaged to accomplish a specific motion, such as bending the knee, Schneider is “incapable of performing ‘abstract’ movements” (M-P 105). While “concrete movement” is akin to habit, “abstract movement” is motivated by an imagined, unfamiliar end. Merleau-Ponty explains:

Within the busy world in which concrete movement unfolds, abstract movement hollows out a zone of reflection and of subjectivity, it super-imposes a virtual or human space over physical space. Concrete movement is thus centripetal, whereas abstract movement is centrifugal; the first takes place within being or within the actual, the second takes place within the possible or within non-being. (114)

Here, Merleau-Ponty equates abstract movement with subjectivity, which suggests that Schneider, like the child in “Incarnations of Burned Children,” lives his life untenanted. *Oblivion* therefore illustrates the inseparability of perception and the body with a vignette that construes the child’s bodily history as a determinant of his style of being-in-the-world.

“Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” to broach an entirely new question concerning phenomenological freedom: to what extent can we be aware of our style of being-in-the-world? In phenomenological description, as in all writing, the writer transcends the factual situation of the moment by attending to his or her own internal experience. Phenomenological description, though, often both performs and describes this transcendence in an attempt to understand its nature. This self-interrogating transcendence of the moment can address the universal qualities of experience as Merleau-Ponty does when he says, “My freedom, that fundamental power I have of being the subject of all of my experiences, is not distinct from my insertion in the world,” or it can address the specific elements of a particular subject’s style of perception. The narrator of

“Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” engages in the latter pursuit. Although he harbors an entomological focus on objectivity rather than a phenomenological focus on subjectivity, the narrator’s descriptions of himself connote an awareness of his distinctive manner of experiencing the world.

“Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” is an unnamed narrator’s account of two situations the he weaves together, often with no transition: his mother’s botched plastic surgery, which has left her with a permanent expression of extreme terror, and the narrator’s legal trouble resulting from a boy’s falling through the narrator’s garage roof onto his collection of black widow spiders, which poisoned the boy to death. Given the strong phenomenological current throughout *Oblivion*, it is unsurprising that the narrator’s self-analysis in “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” involves his perception of his body. He says, “Nor am I even a good specimen to sit with if she wanted to be inconspicuous because of the way my head physically *towers over* all others in the crowd. Physically I am a large specimen and have distinctive coloration, to look at me you would never know I have such a studious bend” (*Oblivion* 183, emphasis Wallace’s). Though this is the narrator’s only direct description of himself in this very short story, his acknowledgment of his “studious bend” suggests that his use of scientific language is a conscious revelation of his personal mode of existence. We come to understand his “studious bend” as the basis for his manner of perceiving humans, which can be described as a sort of anthro-zoology. The narrator illustrates his perspective through his use of the word “specimen” to refer to people and through statements such as, “One today would call a briefcase a *sematic accessory* to warn off potential predators” (184, emphasis Wallace’s). While the narrator does not seem to have any choice in his scientific style of being-in-the-world, he does seem to have embraced his innate scientific worldview when he says with apparent pride, “Standardized

testing has confirmed that I have both a studious bend and outstanding retention in study which [mother] would not even deny” (184). With the narrator’s descriptions of his studious bend, “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” (1) reinforces the idea underlying “Mr. Squishy” and several other stories of *Oblivion* that we are not free to determine the framework of our formation of meaning and (2) posits the possibility of acknowledging and fortifying this framework.

The question of our freedom to acknowledge and modify the distinctive schema of our being-in-the-world also arises in the final story of *Oblivion*, “The Suffering Channel,” which features interwoven accounts of the office culture of *Style* magazine, a traumatized military veteran who poops out intricate sculptures, and a television channel that consists entirely of images and clips of extreme human suffering. The story’s principal figure, Virgil “Skip” Atwater, a sincere, self-conscious journalist from the Midwest who writes for *Style*’s “What in the World?” section, is introduced in terms of body and gesture: “Atwater was a plump diminutive boy faced man who sometimes unconsciously made a waist level fist and moved it up and down in time to his stressed syllables” (*Oblivion* 239). Wallace supplements this indication that some of Atwater’s defining behavior occurs beyond his awareness when he writes, “He sometimes looked down at the moving fist without recognition, as if it were somebody else’s. It was one of several lacunae or blind spots in Atwater’s self concept” (243). However, in opposition to these expository remarks, later descriptions of Atwater highlight his self-awareness and capacity for change.

The discourse on self-acknowledgement and -change begins with the narration of a moment of Atwater’s history where he was forced by his former employer, the editor of the

Indianapolis *Star*, to acknowledge his flaws as a writer. The narrator describes Atwater's reaction to this conversation:

After which performance review Atwater had literally run for the privacy of the men's room and there had struck his own chest with his fist several times because he knew that at heart it was true: his fatal flaw was an ineluctably light, airy prose sensibility. He had no innate sense of tragedy or preterition or complex binds or any of the things that made human beings' misfortunes significant to one another. (270)

The fact that this acknowledgement crushes Atwater's "dream of someday writing a syndication grade human interest column for a major urban daily" connects this moment to the second phase of the self-transformation discourse in "The Suffering Channel," Atwater's contemplation of "the conflict between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance" (270, 284). In the course of his analysis of this conflict, he thinks, "And it was also the world altering pain of accepting one's individual flaws and limitations and the tautological unattainability of our dreams," thereby affirming that acknowledgement of the nature of one's being-in-the-world is not only possible but essential to resolving "the single great informing conflict of the American psyche" (285, 284). The third and final stage of this discourse shows Atwater's own resolution of his struggle with accepting his limitations. After a description of the public opinion of Atwater at the *Style* office, the narrator describes Atwater's own opinion of himself by saying, "He knew just what he was: a professional soft new journalist. We all make our adjustments, hence the term well adjusted. A babyfaced bantam with ears about which he'd been savagely teased as a boy. A polished, shallow, earnest, productive, consummate corporate pro" (298). In this passage, the term "well adjusted" connotes an active transformation of the self. Atwater has come to terms with the idea that his style of being-in-the-world is not suitable for writing a syndicated human interest column and has directed his efforts towards a

goal that he is able to achieve admirably. Like the narrator of “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,” Atwater has no control over his fundamental mode of existence, but he can – and does – garner a considerable amount of self-knowledge, which he uses to exercise the freedom to accept and respond productively to his nature.

While Atwater uses his freedom-in-transcendence to analyze himself and to make choices designed to construct a relatively comfortable identity for himself, his body also performs unconscious transformations that contribute to that same comfort. As Atwater entertains a gruesome fantasy, the narrator comments, “In some respect, Atwater’s various tics and habitual gestures were designed to physicalize his consciousness and to keep him from morbid abstractions like this – he wasn’t going to have a stroke, he wouldn’t have to look at the painting or listen to the idiot tune over and over until a maid came in the next morning and found him” (*Oblivion* 310). Just as Terry Schmidt’s body expresses the trauma of his self-loathing with a “wincing smile,” Atwater’s body adapts to his anxious style of being-in-the-world. Atwater’s helpful mechanism of physicalization shows that the focal terms of this essay, freedom and limitation, do not correspond respectively to happiness and suffering. We often suffer from the anxiety and regret inherent to our freedom-in-transcendence, and we often benefit from uncontrollable aspects of our world, including the unconscious behavior of our bodies.

Out of all of the stories in *Oblivion*, “The Suffering Channel” contains the most developed and explicit commentary on our relation to our bodies. The crux of this discourse surfaces in the story’s opening conversation, which begins:

‘But they’re shit.’
‘And yet at the same time they’re art. Exquisite pieces of art.
They’re literally incredible.’

‘No, they’re literally shit is what they are.’ (238)

In this telephone conversation, Atwater argues with his associate editor over whether the sculptures that Brint Moltke defecates qualify as art in order to determine whether Atwater will be able to publish a story on Moltke’s controversial productions in *Style*. Though the initial focal point of the story’s opening debate is likely to be its humorousness, this argument develops into a profound dialectic about how we experience our bodies and how our embodied experience relates to art. With the phenomenon of Moltke’s fecal figurines, Wallace bluntly emphasizes the truth that art, no matter how abstract, cerebral, or sublime, is always produced by the body. This emphasis illustrates Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological description of art where he says:

A novel, a poem, a painting, and a piece of music are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression cannot be distinguished from the expressed, whose sense is only accessible through direct contact, and who send forth their signification without ever leaving their temporal and spatial place. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to the work of art. It is a knot of living significations and not the law of a certain number of covariant terms. (Merleau-Ponty 153).

Art, then, is not only a production of the body but also an extension or recreation of it. Moltke’s incredible poop expresses the intentional arc that defines his world in the same way that his gestures and linguistic significations do. This is not to say, however, that Moltke’s art, or the work of any artist, performs the same expression as the artist’s gestures; art and gesture are often wildly different manifestations of the subject’s world. In Moltke’s case, the detailed, awe-inspiring nature of the fecal figurines differs entirely from the quality of his gestures. The artist is introduced as having “a posture reminiscent of a scolded child,” a constant “rigid smile” that “was not an empty professional corporate smile, but the soul effects were similar,” and an idiosyncratic arrangement of his hands where “their thumbs and forefingers formed a perfect lap

level circle, which Moltke held or rather somehow directed before him like an aperture or target” (*Oblivion* 248). The narrator continues his description of Moltke’s circular gesture by saying, “He appeared to be unaware of this habit. It was a gesture both unsubtle and somewhat obscure in terms of what it signified” (248). While Moltke’s sculptures are characterized by polished craftsmanship, his physical mode of being-in-the-world signifies his unrefined awkwardness and, on a deeper level that is revealed later in the story, his repressed childhood trauma. The significations of his art and his gesture are certainly dissimilar, yet his sculptural poop and his fingers’ circle stem from the same defining characteristic of Moltke’s style of being-in-the-world: an unconscious need to communicate. We will return to the therapeutic value of communication in this essay’s conclusion.

Atwater’s story on Moltke’s fecal figurines, or “the miraculous poo story,” circulates the *Style* office, which prompts a discussion between the magazine’s interns that yields some of the story’s most illustrative commentary on our cognitive relation to our embodiment (262). The interns’ range of responses to embodiment is best encapsulated by their diverse reactions to a story told by “an editorial intern in a charcoal gray Yamamoto pantsuit” where her fiancé was “performing cunnilingus on what was at the time one of Swarthmore’s most beautiful and widely desired girls...when evidently she had, suddenly and without warning...well, farted – the girl being gone down on had – and not at all in the sort of way you could minimize or blow off” (262). The narrator then describes the group’s response by saying, “The anecdote appeared to strike some kind of common chord or nerve: most of the interns at the table were laughing so hard they had to put their forks down, and some held their napkins to their mouths as if to bite them or hold down digestive matter” (262). The universally dramatic reaction to this anecdote owes itself to the jarring nature of combining sexuality, generally idealized as a realm of ecstasy

or out-of-body experience, and flatulence, a blatant reminder of the crude reality of our embodiment. These interns harbor the common, perhaps inherently human belief that certain elements of experience are ideal, spiritual, or otherwise separate from the body, and the editorial intern's anecdote challenges their belief and forces them to attend to the permanence of their embodiment. Two opposing gestural responses mark this change of perspective: laughter and expressions of disgust, or even horror. The interns themselves realize the import of their laughter, but the narrator does not delineate their attempts "to suss out just why they had all laughed and what was so funny about the conjunction of oral sex and flatus" (262). The humor of this conjunction may have several factors, such as the joy of never having experienced such an embarrassing moment or the mere deviation from expectation regarding sexual encounters, but considering the focus on embodiment in "The Suffering Channel," it seems appropriate to interpret the interns' laughter as a coping mechanism similar to Atwater's fist-pumping. Their laughter is the manifestation of their body's habitual, unconscious direction of attention towards the aforementioned departure from expectation and away from the fact of their embodiment. In this way, laughter can protect our world from the trauma of what may be understood to be a tragic disparity between an ideal, incorporeal existence and our being-in-the-world.

The interns' disgust may, of course, be caused by a sympathetic imagination of the intensity of the fart's foul odor. However, it is more likely that their disgust is accompanied by a sense of horror, perhaps incited by the notion that they may someday have the same mortifying experience. Their horror is a manifestation of "the world altering pain of accepting one's individual flaws and limitations," as Atwater phrases it, and in this case, the interns are forced to accept the limitations inherent to the fact of their embodiment. While the freedom that we experience through our body and its capacity for transcendence elicits a sense of awe, we are

horrified by our limitations: the limitations upon our ability to signify, our ability not to signify, our ability to fantasize, our ability not to fantasize, our ability to know ourselves, and our ability to change, all of which have been shown in this chapter to stem from the fact of our embodied being-in-the-world. This conception of horror, which I will call “body horror,” is a major concern in *Oblivion*, and the next chapter will explore body horror’s various forms and functions in the text.

Body Horror

David Foster Wallace's investment in body horror plays a key role in his essay "David Lynch Keeps His Head." Wallace spends much of this essay explaining the term "Lynchian," which he fundamentally defines as "a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter" and, more simply, as "irony of the banal" (*Supposedly Fun* 161, 162). Although these definitions do not explicitly refer to the body, Wallace's examples of the Lynchian tend to classify the macabre as a horrifying perspective on the human body. For instance, Wallace explains that while Ted Bundy does not qualify as Lynchian, "good old Jeffrey Dahmer, with his victim's various anatomies neatly separated and stored in his fridge alongside his chocolate milk and Shedd Spread, was thoroughgoingly Lynchian" (162). Here, the juxtaposition of the mutilated human body with common household objects produces the aesthetic of the macabre, and this image's insistence on the body's status as an object is the essence of body horror. Again, in his argument about Lynch's influence in contemporary film, Wallace says, "Quentin Tarantino

is interested in watching somebody's ear getting cut off; David Lynch is interested in the ear" (166). This passage calls attention to the distinction between the spectacle of violence, where the central focus is an agent's exertion of power, and true body horror, which dramatizes the fact that our bodies are material objects. This drama bears the horrifying truth that the body-as-object can be subjected to traumatic violence or even fatal harm.

In his efforts to define the Lynchian, Wallace says:

We've all seen people assume sudden and grotesque facial expressions...but I've determined that a sudden grotesque facial expression won't qualify as a really *Lynchian* facial expression unless the expression is held for several moments longer than the circumstances could even possibly warrant, is just held there, fixed and grotesque, until it starts to signify about seventeen different things at once. (163)

This example suggests that Wallace consciously channels the Lynchian aesthetic in the sixth story of *Oblivion*, "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," where the narrator's mother has undergone botched cosmetic surgery that "did something to the musculature of her face which caused her to look *insanely frightened* at all times" (*Oblivion* 182, emphasis Wallace's). This clear link between Lynch and Wallace provides an insight into *Oblivion* that reveals its multitude of Lynchian situations and images, a handful of which will be briefly catalogued below.

■ In "Mr. Squishy," the narrative voice digresses unflinchingly from descriptions of office life at Δ y to lessons on how to synthesize lethal poisons: "Agency MROPs whom Terry'd worked with for years had trouble recalling his name, and always greeted him with an exaggerated bonhomie designed to obscure this fact. Ricin and botulinus were about equally easy to cultivate" (49). The unexplained divergences into the narrative about the monstrous figure climbing a building also contributes to the Lynchian vein of "Mr. Squishy" by juxtaposing the

figure's macabre appearance and unorthodox behavior with his composed attitude and mundane intention to advertize.

■ “The Soul is not a Smithy,” too, contains a Lynchian strain, of which the primary manifestation is the ironization of Mr. Johnson's banal activity of teaching elementary school, which intermingles with his disturbing psychotic breakdown. The narrator remembers:

The only sound...being that of Richard A. Johnson writing on the chalkboard, ostensibly about the XIIIth Amendment's abolition of Negro slavery, except instead it turned out that he was really writing *KILL THEM KILL THEM ALL* over and over again on the chalkboard...in capital letters that got bigger and bigger with every letter, and the handwriting less and less like the sub's customary fluid script and more and more frightening and ultimately not even human looking, and not seeming to realize what he was doing or stopping to give any kind of explanation but only cocking his already oddly cocked head further and further over to the side, like somebody struggling might and main against some terrible type of evil of alien force that had ahold of him at the chalkboard...and making...a strange, highpitched vocal noise that was something like a scream or moan of effort, except that it was evidently just one note or pitch maintained throughout. (91)

Not only does this scene exhibit irony of the banal, but the prolonged monotonous moan of the psychotic episode itself also reflects the unmistakable influence of David Lynch.

■ As is the case in “Mr. Squishy,” the narrator's cold, detached digressions, which stray from the central tragedy of “Incarnations of Burned Children” to the image of a door hanging by a single hinge, constitute the story's Lynchian aspect. Wallace cites this cold detachedness when he explains why Lynch's movies can be considered sick or creepy:

The absence of linearity and narrative logic, the heavy multivalence of the symbolism, the glazed opacity of the characters' faces, the weird ponderous quality of the dialogue, the regular deployment of grotesques as figurants, the precise, painterly way scenes are staged and lit, and the overlush, possibly

voyeuristic way that violence, deviance, and general hideousness are depicted – these all give Lynch’s movies a cool, detached quality. (*Supposedly Fun* 167)

■ In addition to the mother’s fixed expression of horror, “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” engages in a Lynchian project by complicating ostensibly banal urban spaces through an insistence that deadly black widow spiders may dwell there. Embittered by the legal repercussions of his accidental release of his widow spider collection into his neighborhood, the narrator explains, “Specimens of widely varied size and aggression are to be found in basement corners, beneath shelves of sheds...Or outside the moving bus in the palm trees they stand so naively beneath in the shade to await their buses, *Rent a ladder and carefully examine the undersides of those fronds sometime!* one is tempted to shout through the window” (*Oblivion* 187, emphasis Wallace’s).

■ The Lynchian strain continues in the collection’s titular story, “Oblivion,” where the narrative again swings on an understated hinge, this time between the story’s central focus and macabre references to incestuous child molestation. The story’s narrator, Randall Napier, experiences hallucinations due to sleep deprivation, and a scene that illustrates an episode of auditory hallucination demonstrates the way in which the macabre seems to intrude upon the story’s narrative, which primarily concerns the relatively banal subject of marital strain:

The sound of a hand-held hammer. The sound of a Driving range. The sound of a nail gun and portable air compressor. Of one of more rotary or ‘power’ saws...Of a lengthy putt being ‘made’ or ‘drained’ in the cup’s shallow hole. The sound of struggles and muffled breathing ad a male- or ‘Father’ figure’s whispered grunts and shushing. Some type of construction, maintenance or related activity was under way some distance along the central corridor or hallway. (227)

This auditory image of rape bears the same sickening aesthetic that accompanies the disembodied ear's presence in the idyllic suburban setting of Lynch's *Blue Velvet*.

■ Finally, in "The Suffering Channel," another Lynchian prolonged grotesque facial expression appears: the constant "rigid smile" of Brint Moltke (248). In addition to Molke's smile, the eroticization of Amber Moltke, Brint's morbidly obese wife and the grotesque ironization of the banal phenomenon of poop cast a distinctly Lynchian creepiness over the story.

Clearly, the Lynchian aesthetic plays a crucial role in *Oblivion*, but what exactly is this role? Does the irony of the banal have a purpose beyond itself? How do the Lynchian and body horror cooperate in *Oblivion*? To broach these questions, I will consult Linda Badley's *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, an analysis of horror in contemporary film that includes a section on David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*.

Badley begins her work by devoting a chapter to a broad explanation of the development of the American horror film since the 1980s, which centers on a phenomenon that she calls "the body fantastic." The principal definition of this term comes to light when she says, "Horror became a hysterical text or a theater of cruelty specializing in representations of the human anatomy *in extremis* – in disarray or deconstruction, in metamorphosis, invaded or engulfing, in sexual difference, monstrous otherness, or Dionysian ecstasy: the body fantastic" (Badley 26). Badley attributes the recent obsession with the body fantastic to a concurrent shift in society's dominant perspective on the body, a shift from the Cartesian/Christian to the phenomenological. "Sartre wrote that the body is the sign of one's 'facticity,' one's ontological reality," Badley writes, "And the material body continues to signify unity, wholeness, identity, and humanity even as 'the body' as a concept becomes increasingly unstable...Now that the body is imagined,

perceived as an icon, commodity, and disposable machine, we are challenged to reimagine and construct our physical nature as well” (28). Extrapolating from the phenomenological claims that we are inseparable from our embodiment and that our experience of the body always includes a degree of indeterminacy, Sartre asserts that the image of our body serves fallaciously as an external symbol for the quality of our subjective being-in-the-world. Badley identifies the genre of anxiety incited by the phenomenological deconstruction of the body/soul binary and the conceptualization of the body as a symbol when she says, “We feel trapped in the bodies that increasingly determine who we are, projecting a negative or positive image, defining our neuroses as disorders and our rituals and relationships as addictions and codependencies” (27). According to Badley, these are the anxieties that nourish contemporary horror. At the end of this introductory chapter, when Badley describes the body fantastic as a language, she returns to Sartre’s phenomenologically inspired existentialist discourse:

In contrast to the fantasy in the past, which presumed with religion and metaphysics a “human power to transcend the human,” Sartre argued, there was nothing supernatural about the modern fantastic. It was “one of a hundred ways” we have of “mirroring [our] own image.” “We recognize the footprint on the shore as our own.” In existentialist ontology, as conscious (transcendent) subjects that are simultaneously embodied within the world of objects, alienated from that world and from ourselves as bodies, we produce the fantastic. (35)

The fantastic as described in this passage encompasses the Lynchian, where irony of the banal emphasizes the fantastic, horrifying truth of our body’s absurd duality.

In chapter 4, “Deconstructions of the Gaze,” Badley elaborates on the role of the Lynchian aesthetic within the realm of the body fantastic through a close analysis of *Blue Velvet*. First, Badley deepens Wallace’s concept of Lynchian irony of the banal by describing the film’s

formal elements: “Lynch juxtaposes two visual styles: hypernaturalism and surrealism, or as Lynch describes it, ‘Norman Rockwell meets Hieronymous Bosch. It’s the two extremes in conflict.’ The effect is a hysterical displacement of the senses” (114). Then, by proceeding to claim, “Jeffrey’s voyeurism leads him inevitably to Frank’s assertion of his (and the spectator’s) complicity” (115), Badley affirms Wallace’s argument:

Since the really disturbing stuff in *Blue Velvet* isn’t about Frank Boothe or anything Jeffrey discovers about Lumberton but about the fact that a part of Jeffrey himself gets off on voyeurism and primal violence and degeneracy, and since Lynch carefully sets up his film both so that we feel a/f/w Jeffrey and so that we (I, anyway) find some parts of the sadism and degeneracy he witnesses compelling and somehow erotic, it’s little wonder that I find Lynch’s movie “sick” – nothing sickens me like seeing on-screen some of the very parts of myself I’ve gone to the movies to try to forget about. (*Supposedly Fun* 167)

The Lynchian body fantastic, then, expresses the horrifying reality of our unconscious desires, the monstrous interest in “sexual terrorism and body invasion” that underlies our mundane, everyday experience of being-in-the-world (Badley 115).

The hysteria-inducing concept of the body as the site of a latent, violent libido develops fully in Badley’s next argument, where she delineates Lynch’s conscious implementation of Freudian themes. For example, the strange, violent sex-ritual between Dorothy and Frank Boothe renders Dorothy “Frank’s symbol of pre-Oedipal unity,” and by dominating Jeffrey and severing him from Sandy, his primary love interest, Dorothy becomes “the castrating mother” (116).

According to Badley, “Dorothy wears the taint of abjection” (116), which recalls her introductory passage on the abject:

The fundamental reflex of horror (and the Gothic), abjection or revulsion, initiates ego formation. It originates in the child’s turning-away or splitting off from the archaic Mother, encountered

for the first time as the Other, the “not-me.” The term *abject* is applied to “any kind of transgressive state, or any condition which challenges the limits and boundaries of being,” and thus to experimental texts...in whose gaps and disruptions of meaning we glimpse the mother’s body, the body fantastic. (Badley 32, Hanson qtd.)

The horror of the Lynchian, then, stems from the force of illustrations of Freudian abjection, or in other words, the distress that attends our unconscious awareness of violence and of being violated. Badley links the abject to phenomenological repression, the body’s indeterminate style of absorbing the trauma of its history, when she says, “The alienation effects [of abjection] call attention to the violence of the construction of sexuality. Sex is, invariably, violent” (117). In this way, Badley provides the context to understand a crucial nuance of Lynchian body horror: we are horrified not only by the fact that our body is an object vulnerable to violence but also by the violence that has been exerted upon and inculcated in our body-as-object, the violence that is *always already present* in our body and the body of the other, to which we are awakened by exposure to the body fantastic.

With this new perception of body horror as informed by Badley’s *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, the examples of Lynchian horror in *Oblivion* can be understood to reflect compounded anxieties. The irony of the banal, the surreal within the real, now appears to be a violation of the banal, the affirmation of the indeterminate and uncontrollable violence that pervades us all. Terry Schmidt’s cultivation of poison is his body’s reaction to society’s violent suppression of his will to make a difference. Mr. Johnson’s psychosis is not an abstract demon but, rather, the eruption of his ever-present violence, which may be the product of his long suffering. The mother’s horrified expression in “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” bears both the violence of the surgeon’s knife and the mother’s own violent desire to reconfigure her body,

a desire that is itself informed by the violence of the male gaze. Randall Napier's visions of incestuous rape are expressions of his body's desire to "repeat the cycle" of violence (*Oblivion* 229). Brint Moltke's smile is not merely a sign of the childhood trauma inflicted upon him; the smile *is* the trauma, the violence sustained by the body.

As was mentioned in chapter 1, the narrator of "The Soul is not a Smithy" strays from the central account of his experience of Mr. Johnson's psychotic episode and engages in an analysis of horror film that provides an insightful formulation of Badley's message that the abjection caused by the body fantastic marks our realization of our inherent violence. This filmic analysis is based on *The Exorcist*, a movie whose body horror Badley describes by saying, "The battle of God and the Devil was fought with unprecedented clinicism and intensity on and within the body of a twelve-year-old girl" (Badley 25). The narrator of "The Soul is not a Smithy" focuses on a dream sequence that ends with a falling medallion:

Despite the bucolic setting, the air through which the coin falls has been airless and black, the extreme black of nothingness, even as the medallion and chain come to rest on the stone; just as there is no sound, there is no background. But spliced very quickly into the sequence is a brief flash of Father Karras' face, terribly transformed... This flash of the face is extremely brief, probably just enough frames to register on the human eye, and devoid of sound or background, and is gone again and immediately replaced with the Catholic medal's continued fall. Its very brevity serves to stamp it on the viewer's consciousness. (*Oblivion* 97)

This image of a deformed face is a prime example of the abject body fantastic, the body imbued with violence at the limits of being. The force of the image is generated not only by what is depicted, though, but also by the peripheral nature of its occurrence. The narrator elaborates on the power of the peripheral when he describes nightmares:

The lone, nightmarish panel appeared in the window as just a momentary peripheral snapshot or flash of a horrifying scene, much the way such single, horrible flashes often appear in bad dreams – somehow the speed with which they appear and disappear, and the lack of any time to get any perspective or digest what you are seeing or fit it into the narrative of the dream as a whole, makes it even worse...perhaps because its very instantaneousness in the dream meant that your mind had to keep subconsciously returning to it in order to work it out or incorporate it. (94)

This description of the peripheral mirrors Badley's framing of the abject, which occurs in "gaps and disruptions in meaning." Wallace's emphasis on the peripheral also establishes the visceral nature of abjection; the witness of the abject must "incorporate it," integrate the horror into his or her body.

Just as Badley's illustration of the body fantastic sheds light on the macabre violence that inevitably lurks within the mundane body, Wallace's analysis of periphery highlights the indeterminate nature of this violence. The peripheral is absent presence, and horror must illuminate the violence within the periphery of existence subtly enough to prevent the violence from becoming fully present. If a transgressive phenomenon becomes the norm, then, by definition, it loses its transgressive force. Film is an ideal medium for the production of horror through the peripheral due to its sustained captivation of the audience's visual and auditory perception, which allows for a diverse array of powerful interruptions in the artwork's aesthetic continuity. In another passage of "The Soul is not a Smithy" that we discussed in chapter 1, the narrator asserts that watching film is like the experience of fantasy or other immersive mental activity. "When you've been intensely preoccupied," he says, "coming back to what is actually happening around you is somewhat like coming out of a movie theatre in the afternoon" (*Oblivion* 101). Literature's grip upon the reader is similarly sustained, but the implementation of

peripheral horror is rendered more difficult by the fact that the reader has a much more active role than the film's viewer. However, Wallace masterfully crafts peripheral horror into *Oblivion's* stories and, more often than not, imbeds the horror in the Lynchian body fantastic. Among long, easily readable sentences that engulf the reader, Wallace inserts sudden digressions and parenthetical interruptions that perform a peripheral horror not at all unlike a brief image spliced into a cinematic sequence.

As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, the horrifying digressions involving poison and a strange figure scaling a building in "Mr. Squishy," as well as the sudden images of incest in "Oblivion," take place at the periphery of the stories. While the digressions in "Mr. Squishy" are not announced by unusual punctuation, many of the abrupt images or fragments in "Oblivion" occur parenthetically, particularly in the story's disorienting finale. For example, Wallace writes, "this youth and the ('*only hurt a tiny*') Somnologist conferred together," and, "utilizing a sheet of coded ('*Please!*') Somnological data" (234, 235). By this point in the story, it is clear that these interjections are moments of incestuous rape, extreme violence exerted by and upon the body. Additionally, in "The Soul is not a Smithy," the fantastic image of Mr. Johnson's body occurs at the periphery of the narrator's consciousness. In "The Suffering Channel," too, the fact that the *Style* headquarters is located in 1 World Trade Center is a horrific peripheral element that calls forth the future burning and plummeting of bodies.

Let us return to the overarching focus of this essay. This chapter's presentation of the interplay between the Lynchian, the body fantastic, and the peripheral provides several different angles from which to approach body horror: a creepy conflation of the macabre and the mundane, a transgressive interruption that portrays the inescapable violence and vulnerability of embodiment, and an absence that makes itself partially, ominously present. These

conceptualizations of horror in relation to the body deepen our understanding of our limitations as human subjects. By producing and/or demystifying horror, Lynch, Wallace, and Badley force us to confront difficult truths: that the body that we experience as our transcendental self is also an object to be violated, that this violation is inevitable, and that the traces of violence are preserved, often unperceived, in our bodies, which can express this latent violence at any time without our conscious consent. Of course, meditating on our condition does not constitute an escape to a liberated state of being, but if we engage in this interpretation of *Oblivion* as confrontation, if we allow this horror and its mechanics to “get inside [our] head,” as Wallace would have it, we can begin to accept the limitations inherent to our embodied being-in-the-world and thus to live more authentically (*Supposedly Fun* 171). The question of exactly what *Oblivion* identifies as authenticity will play a major role throughout the remainder of this essay.

Phenomenological Authenticity

Oblivion addresses an urgent question that pervades David Foster Wallace's work: are we free to be authentic? For Wallace and many philosophers, the term "authentic" connotes sincerity (saying what one means), honesty (revealing only and all of what one believes to be true), and originality (transcendence of convention). Can we be sincere if we do not fully understand ourselves or if the language we use to communicate is unstable? Can we be honest in the face of a society that seems to demand deceitful manipulation? Can we be original when we have been cultural conventions define our experience? And if authenticity is possible, can we choose to become authentic, or is it a default setting, a natural style of being-in-the-world? *Oblivion* brings these questions to life and offers a variety of responses.

This chapter is deeply linked to our phenomenological exploration of the body because authenticity is based on signification, which can only be performed through the body. To

illustrate the dynamics of signification that determine authenticity, this chapter will continue the discussion on phenomenological signification in *Oblivion* that was initiated in chapter 1.

In “Mr. Squishy,” much of Terry Schmidt’s suffering centers on his recognition that he is not free to control all of the meaning that he conveys. A particularly striking example of this anxiety occurs when Schmidt analyzes his contempt for the two members of the Focus Group who “made little self-satisfied adjustments to parts of themselves and their wardrobes”:

he knew that a certain percentage of his reaction to the way these older men coolly inspected their cuticles...was his own insecurity, that he felt somewhat sullied and implicated by the whole enterprise of contemporary marketing and that this sometimes manifested via projection as the feeling that people he was just trying to talk as candidly as possible to always believed he was making a sales pitch or trying to manipulate them in some way. (*Oblivion* 25)

Schmidt’s understanding that others are free to misinterpret the intentions of his linguistic gestures corresponds with Merleau-Ponty’s statement, “In understanding others, the problem is always indeterminate because only the solution to the problem will make the givens retrospectively appear as convergent” (Merleau-Ponty 184). Schmidt’s interlocutors can be sure of his motive only if they have “the solution to the problem,” or complete access to his world, which is never the case due to the unique nature of each subject’s situation in the world, a condition presupposed by the very act of communication. Schmidt’s intention in speaking candidly is to share his world with his interlocutor, and the apparent impossibility of self-revelation fills him with a profound loneliness expressed as a “terrible and thoroughgoing *smallness*” and a sense of being “ordinary and unbeautiful and incapable of miracles” (31, 33, emphasis Wallace’s). With Schmidt’s complex loneliness, “Mr. Squishy” illustrates the anxiety that stems from the phenomenological reality that we can always be perceived as inauthentic.

The fear of being perceived as inauthentic is also a key concern in “Another Pioneer,” a fourth-hand account of a boy genius who single-handedly propels his Paleolithic tribe through entire eras of civilization’s development (property, agriculture, etc.) and then suddenly begins to question the nature of existence and thus to alienate himself from the rest of the tribe. The child’s interrogation of existence occurs in the second of two distinct phases of his life. In the first phase, the child, who lives on a dais built in the center of the village where the tribesmen congregate once a month to ask him questions, responds to the villagers’ queries by “operating out of an almost classically binary or *comme on dit* Boolean paradigm, a crude human computer” (*Oblivion* 131). In the second phase, though, the child is “disposed not just to respond to villagers’ questions but to as were *read* them” (131, emphasis Wallace’s). This act of reading corresponds with the “wholly different *gestalt*” (130) of the child’s worldview, which the narrator describes thus:

The child will sometimes answer a villager’s question just as before, but now will also append to this specific answer additional answers to certain other related or consequent questions which the child apparently believes his initial answer entails, as if he now understands his answers as part of a much larger network or system of questions and answers and further questions instead of being merely discrete self-contained units of information. (130-131)

This transition represents the fundamental distinction between analytic philosophy and continental philosophy, which latter includes phenomenology. In his second, phenomenological phase, the child perceives the unity of his world and the indeterminacy therein. The story’s framework, too, accentuates the endless, labyrinthine world of questions as conceived by continental philosophers: the narrator is giving a lecture about a second-hand account partially overheard on an airplane by one of his friends. By filtering the information through a series of

unreliable sources, Wallace calls into question the story's authenticity in a way that mirrors the child's crucial struggle.

The child's transformation is catalyzed by an event that has several "variants," or versions, which further complicates the labyrinth of its meaning. Each variant of the event involves an enemy village's theocratic shaman who somehow curses the child, and in the version upon which the narrator later elaborates, the shaman whispers transformative words into his ear. The narrator relates this moment by presenting the shaman's monologue:

You, child, who are so gifted and sagacious and wise: Is it possible that you have not realized the extent to which these primitive villagers have exaggerated your gifts, have transformed you into something you know too well you are not? Surely you have seen that they so revere you precisely because they themselves are too unwise to see your limitations?...Have you begun yet then to plan for the day when they wake to a truth you already know: that you are not half so complete as they believe? (138)

Here, we see the corollary manifestation of Schmidt's problem of authenticity. While Schmidt feels that his authentic feelings are perceived as fraudulent, the child in "Another Pioneer" is thought to be an authentic demigod when he himself knows that he is not. If the child's fear of being revealed as inauthentic is what causes his transformation, then the shaman's monologue "appears in retrospect to have been both sound and fatal advice" because it is precisely the child's questioning of authenticity in himself and in the rest of the tribe that leads to his ultimate demise (138). His interrogation of the rest of the tribe is best exemplified by his response to a question about how best to please the Yam Gods, where:

The child apparently launches into an entire protodialectical inquiry into just why exactly the interlocutor believes in jealous and temperamental Yam Gods at all, and whether this villager has ever...gazed deep inside himself to see whether in his very heart of hearts he truly believes in these ill-tempered Yam Gods or whether

he's merely been as it were culturally conditioned from an early age to ape what he has seen his parents and all the other villagers say and do and appear to believe, and whether it has ever...occurred to the questioner that perhaps all these others didn't really, truly believe in petulant Yam Gods either but were themselves merely aping what they in turn saw everyone else behaving as if they believed. (132-133).

This passage expresses the anxiety that attends the lived experience of the indeterminacy that Merleau-Ponty describes when he says, "Just like words, passionate feelings and behaviors are invented. Even the ones that seem inscribed in the human body, such as paternity, are in fact institutions. It is impossible to superimpose upon man both a primary layer of behaviors that could be called 'natural' and a constructed cultural or spiritual world" (M-P 195). Just as the problem of his own authenticity challenges the gestalt of the child's worldview, the threat that his words pose to the tribe's own security in its sense of spiritual authenticity causes the villagers to shun the child, depart from the village, and set the village ablaze with the child still sitting alone on his dais. The unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) question of authenticity in "Another Pioneer" is thus rendered profoundly urgent by the suggestion of its life-or-death import.

The tragic disparity between a subject's public image and his or her sense of self is also illustrated extensively in "Good Old Neon." The story's narrator, Neal, suffers from a different anxious relation to authenticity from that of Schmidt and the genius child. While Schmidt believes that he cannot convey his authentic feelings to the other, and while the child in "Another Pioneer" does not live up to the tribe's natural idealization of him, Neal has no trouble controlling the signification that others perceive in his gestures, linguistic and otherwise, yet he feels utterly inauthentic. The narrator recounts the first realization of his natural talent for manipulating meaning when he says:

I'd realized somehow right in the middle of his asking me if I'd broken the bowl that if I said I did it but 'confessed' it in a sort of clumsy, implausible way, then he wouldn't believe me and would instead believe that my sister Fern, who's my stepparents' biological daughter, was the one who'd actually broken the antique Moser glass bowl... plus it would lead or induce him to see me as a kind, good stepbrother. (*Oblivion* 147-148)

Neal is able to project a specific image of himself into his father's world by means of an innate understanding both of the acquired, common signification of "clumsy, implausible" expression and of the freedom of the alter ego, or the other, which Merleau-Ponty describes when he says, "once the other's gaze upon me has stripped me of a part of my being by inserting me into his field, then it is clear that I can only recuperate my being by forming relations with the other or by making myself freely recognized by him, and that my freedom requires that others have the same freedom" (M-P 374). Neal's unconscious awareness of the other's subjectivity, or freedom-in-transcendence, also allows him to generate a fraudulent image of himself. He understands his father's freedom to derive meaning from the expressive quality of his linguistic gesture despite its being at odds with the confession's literal signification. The above passage is part of Merleau-Ponty's argument that we perceive the other without any cognitive comparison with the self, that we do not have to perform a calculation to determine whether a particular phenomenon is another human. "Good Old Neon" supplements this phenomenological reality by presenting it in a different context that illustrates a complication of the effort to "recuperate [one's] being": in supposedly recuperating his or her being in the other's world, the subject may choose to invent a version of him- or herself that differs from his or her personal self-concept.

Neal remembers that at first, he enjoyed his ability to create a favorable, false image of himself in the worlds of others because he feels "suddenly connected to something larger" (*Oblivion* 149). In a phenomenological context, this sense of connection refers to an acute

perception of the common world of signification and the freedom of others, which grants him access to a transcendental, intersubjective unity that Merleau-Ponty calls a “collective consciousness” (M-P 372). However, Neal’s fraudulent tendencies have congealed over time, and as a result, he has come to perceive himself as “a basically empty, insecure person whose whole life involved trying to impress people and manipulate their view of [him] in order to compensate for the inner emptiness” (154). In a word, Neal feels that he is inauthentic. This condition of inauthenticity stems not only from his obsession with his public image, which he calls “the statue,” but also from the feeling that he is a cliché, a cheapened copy of some original, authentic person (161). When Neal is trying to overcome his perceived inauthenticity by conceptualizing his feeling of inner emptiness as a possibly remediable inability to love, he happens to see a moment of the television show *Cheers* where the character Lilith, a psychotherapist, says, “If I have one more yuppie come in and start whining to me about how he can’t love, I’m going to throw up” (168). Neal relates his horrified reaction:

This line got a huge laugh from the show’s studio audience, which indicated that they...recognized what a cliché and melodramatic type of complaint the inability-to-love concept was...I suddenly realized that once again I’d managed to con myself, this time into thinking that this was a truer or more promising way to conceive of the problem of fraudulence...and it was the next morning after that that I woke up having decided I was going to kill myself and end the whole farce. (168-169)

Like the Paleolithic tribe’s repulsion to the idea that their Yam Gods are a cultural invention, Neal’s contempt of being a cliché or of engaging in cliché behavior stems from the indeterminate division between our natural and cultural selves. A key component of Neal’s suffering is his inability to locate the natural, authentic motivation of his thoughts and actions, which is interwoven ambiguously into the mundane cultural motivation by which he feels ensnared.

As was briefly mentioned a moment ago, Neal tries to combat his feeling of inauthenticity by exercising his freedom to transform the factual situation that he has taken up. He willfully alters his notions and day-to-day activities by actively reimagining his inner emptiness as an inability to love and by taking the initiative to try “EST, riding a ten-speed to Nova Scotia and back, hypnosis, cocaine, sacro-cervical chiropractic, joining a charismatic church, jogging, pro bono work for the Ad Council, meditation classes, the Masons, analysis...celibacy, collecting and restoring vintage Corvettes, and trying to sleep with a different girl every night for two straight months” (*Oblivion* 142). Despite his wholehearted devotion to overcoming his suffering, Neal is only able to escape his impulsive fraudulence by suicide. If we choose to read his suicide as literal, we must conclude that Neal’s obsession with his public image resides in a repressed domain that is unaffected by his conscious choices. In one of his sections on repression, Merleau-Ponty describes this inaccessible domain of experience in his explanation of the term “metaphysical hypocrisy,” the condition by which the subject “deceives itself by means of generality. It ends up then in a state or situation that is not destiny, but that is not posited and desired; it is discoverable even in the ‘sincere’ or ‘authentic’ man each time he pretends to be what he is without remainder. This is part of the human condition” (M-P 165). Neal feels psychologically (or psychopathically) inauthentic because he believes that his manipulation of others’ worlds is a particular behavior categorized as fraudulence, but in fact, he is only metaphysically inauthentic since, like all human subjects, he cannot account for his fundamental state. Paradoxically, Neal’s perception of his inability to account for his style of being-in-the-world is made possible by the constant self-criticism inherent to his natural analytical mode of existence, which he describes when he says, “I seemed always to have had this fraudulent, calculating part of my brain firing away all the time, as if I were constantly

playing chess with everybody” (*Oblivion* 145). Neal’s extensive, ultimately fruitless efforts to change the unchangeable within himself is *Oblivion*’s most thorough illustration of the element of tragedy in the universal experience of having the freedom to intend to transform aspects of our world that are, unbeknownst to us, inexorably ingrained by repression or cultural custom.

Just as Schmidt fails to escape his loneliness and the philosopher-child is abandoned on his dais, Neal never frees himself from his crippling anxiety vis-à-vis authenticity while he is still alive. However, his experience of death incites a sense of wonder that mirrors the attitude of the phenomenological perspective, which allows him finally to overcome his suffering. Neal depicts the experience of death by saying, “imagine everything anybody on earth ever said or even thought to themselves all getting collapsed and exploding into one large, combined, instantaneous sound – although *instantaneous* is a little misleading, since it implies other instants before and after, and it isn’t really like that” (*Oblivion* 167). This image of pure, universal meaning calls our attention to the world of signification that connects all of our individual worlds. The world of signification is shown here to be so profoundly vast that even in our phenomenological transcendence, the horizons of our world only encompass an infinitesimally tiny portion of this ever-expanding totality of meaning. Furthermore, Neal marks a crucial incongruity between our transcendental experience of the world and our capacity to signify when he says, “What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant” (151). This awe-inspiring illustration of the world of signification accomplishes a fundamental intention of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty conveys this profound message when he describes the origination of meaning, the foundation of the common world of signification:

The contraction of the throat, the sibilant emission of air between the tongue and the teeth, a certain manner of playing with our body suddenly allows itself to be invested with a *figurative sense* and signifies this externally. This is no more and no less miraculous than the emergence of love from desire, or that of the gesture from the uncoordinated movements at the start of life. (M-P 200)

The philosopher's term "miraculous" suggests a motive beyond the desire to understand the nature of our perception: the desire to inspire appreciation and acceptance of that nature. By drawing out the mysterious indeterminacy and the profound unity that characterize our existence, phenomenology restores life to our subjectivity, upon which empiricists and intellectualists seek to perform an autopsy. David Foster Wallace performs the same revival, yet with even greater force, through the medium of the sympathetic, contemporary tragic-hero narrator of "Good Old Neon." The triumph of this phenomenological return to the miracle is expressed at the end of "Good Old Neon" when Neal directly addresses the reader:

this is what it's like...it's what makes room for the universes inside you, all the endless infinite fractals of connection and symphonies of different voices, the infinities you can never show another soul. And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees? Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock. (*Oblivion* 179)

Once again, free will appears in *Oblivion* as the ability to signify, or, as Merleau-Ponty would have it, to engage in "a certain structuring of experience, a certain modulation of existence" (M-P 199). While our freedom to signify is limited by time, cultural convention, the interpretations of others, and the repression that structures our world, the suffering caused by these limitations is always conditioned by and inseparable from the miracle of meaning. I will return to this point in the conclusion of this essay.

The question of authenticity in *Oblivion* is not limited to linguistic and gestural signification; the text also interrogates a mode of signification that is based on the manipulation of the body's material features. For the text's first instance of this phenomenon, let us return to an image that was discussed in chapter 2: the face of the narrator's mother in "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," which has been hideously deformed by plastic surgery. The narrator describes his mother's condition by saying, "The cosmetic surgeon botched it and did something to the musculature of her face which caused her to look *insanely frightened* at all times" (*Oblivion* 182, emphasis Wallace's). With her permanent expression of horror, the mother herself is a horrifying spectacle. "We had learned through experimental method to not sit further back in the rows of more regular seats which face frontally,' the narrator reports, "because of the way certain fellow passengers would visibly react when they board" (183). The narrator offers a few descriptions of his mother that provide context for her decision to undergo plastic surgery. First, he describes the moment where she sees the result of her surgery: "Mother herself who is a decent-hearted if vain, bitter and timid female specimen but who is not a colossus of the roads of the human intellect, to put it frankly, could herself not ascertain at first if the look of insane terror was the response or the stimulus" (185). Given this description, it is reasonable to attribute the mother's desire to change her appearance to her vanity, bitterness, timidity, and inability to think deeply. Another telling element of the mother's style of being-in-the-world is revealed when the narrator says, "Mother is blackly cynical in matters of the heart referring to the entire spectrum of mating rituals as a *disaster waiting to happen*" (189, emphasis Wallace's). Characterized by these descriptions, the mother is a figuration of body-image anxiety. The mother's bitter cynicism, the result of suffering from an unfulfilled desire for romantic connection to the other, corresponds with her vanity, her obsession with her body as an object to be eroticized by others.

Herein lies this story's illustration of a destructive inauthenticity: the mother's desire for the experience of love manifests itself as the desire to transform herself into an object to be desired. The story aligns this latter desire with horror because horror and obsession with the body-as-image stem from the same reality: that the human body can be treated as a mere object. While horror relies on the captivating repulsiveness of the fact that the body is an object of violence, image-obsession is based on the delusion that the appearance of the body-as-object determines the value and identity of the embodied subject. Since vanity embraces objectification instead of simply using objectification for aesthetic effect, vanity has an inauthentic essence that horror does not. The narrator's mother is operating under an illusion that denies the fundamental message of phenomenology and of Wallace's treatment of the human subject in *Oblivion*: while the body certainly has the materiality of an object, the body must also be understood as the site of our subjectivity and transcendence, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "an expressive space" that serves as "our anchorage in the world" (M-P 147, 146). While there is certainly interplay between our sense of our body as a visible object and our style of embodied experience, to reduce the body to the former aspect, as the narrator's mother appears to have done, is deeply inauthentic in its denial of the authentic nature of our existence, our being-in-the-world.

The following story, "Oblivion," contains a characterization that provides deeper cultural context for the image-obsession of the mother in "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature." The story is told from the perspective of Randall Napier, who spends most of the narrative analyzing his ongoing and incredibly frustrating argument with his wife, Hope, over whether he has been waking her up with his snoring or she has been dreaming that he is snoring when in fact he is still awake. In the course of his illustration of Hope, he describes her image-driven ethos:

The natural but nevertheless terrible reality – albeit unspoken of in any viable union, over time – is that, by this point in our marriage, Hope was already *de facto* or practically speaking unsexed, an, as the saying goes withered vine or bloom, and this somehow all the worse or ‘more so’ for all of her scrupulous devotion to self care and youthful *desiderata*, just as so many of her own other bloated or desiccant circle of friends and Book and Horticulture clubs’ middle aged wives and divorcées who habitually congregate together around the Raritan Club’s pool throughout the Summer season are obsessed by, as well: the Exercise classes and caloric regimes, emollients and toners, Yoga, supplements, tanning or (albeit rarely mentioned) Surgical ‘work’ or procedures – all the willful clinging to the same nubile or ‘*virgo intacta*’ vivacity which their own daughters unknowingly serve to mock as they latterly blossom. (*Oblivion* 218, emphasis Wallace’s)

Here, Napier presents a microcosm of the American/Western culture of image, where women are conditioned to desire to embody the cultural erotic ideal of youth. Though Napier is averse to his wife’s conformity, he contributes nonetheless to this eroticization of youth. Napier’s arguments with his wife cause severe sleep deprivation, and his narration accordingly features disorientation characterized by “distorted or ‘altered’ sensory perception...the symptoms and sensations of which were nearly impossible to describe, except perhaps to say that when these periods hit they were not unlike a cerebral earthquake or ‘tsunami,’ an, as it were, ‘neural protest’ or ‘-revolt’ against the conditions of emotional stress and chronic sleep deprivation” (191). A recurring theme in the content of these moments of disorientation is Napier’s quasi-incestuous sexual desire for his step-daughter, Audrey. For instance, Napier relates a “neural protest” during his discussion with a couple counselor where “an additional momentary hallucinatory ‘flash’ or vision of our Audrey supine in a beached canoe and myself straining piston-like above her” (212). This moment of Napier’s fantasy seems to legitimize Hope’s image-obsession and jealousy towards Audrey. However, “*Oblivion*” distinguishes between love and desire in a way

that, again, calls attention to subjective experience and shows the dangers of (self-) objectification.

Among the many passages about his deep frustration with Hope throughout the course of their conflict, Napier devotes one passage to describing the relation between his love and his desire for her:

Hope's strong will and refusal to be anyone other than 'who' and 'what' she was had been one of the original attractions between her and myself; and at this point, even during my exhausted presentation of the 'last resort' of the Edmund R. and Meredith R. Darling Sleep Clinic, I can even now remember remembering that I had never forgotten this, or been unmoved by her 'inner fire,' or ceased to (in my 'way') 'love' and find her desirable despite the fact that, even prior to the enervating dissolution of the present conflict, the intervening recent years had not been, as the saying goes, 'kind' with respect to Hope's gynecic or womanly charms or appeal. (217)

Although Napier does not see his wife as an erotic ideal, he is still in love with her, and the frustration that permeates his narrative demonstrates his desire to get their "marriage back on track and to once more derive pleasure in one another's company and affections" (215). Napier's love for Hope exists in their continuous ethical relation, the intersubjective communication that is both situated within and essentially distinct from their broader context of cultural convention, including erotic ideals. Conversely, Hope's desire to transform her body into a desirable image, which Napier portrays as pathetic, exists in the realm of the political, where Hope constructs herself as an object to be viewed by an anonymous mass of others. "Oblivion" thus establishes a fundamental choice between the authentic, ethical relation to the other and the inauthentic, political relation to others. Just as the mother in "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" suffers from her rejection of her authentic nature, much of Hope's suffering stems from her investment

in her political self-concept as an undesirable object, which is at odds with the possibility of engagement in mutual affection with her husband. In a philosophical glorification of the ethical sphere, Merleau-Ponty presents the alternative to the perspective that causes Hope's suffering by describing the phenomenological unity between the self and the other:

The other body is already no longer a simple fragment of the world, but rather the place of a certain elaboration and somehow a certain "view" of the world. A certain handling of things – which were until now mine alone – is taking place over there. Someone is using my familiar objects. But who? I say that it is another person, a second myself, and I primarily know this because that living body has the same structure as my own. I experience my body as the power or certain behaviors and for a certain world, and I am only given to myself as a certain hold upon the world. Now, it is precisely my body that perceives the other's body and finds there something of a miraculous extension of its own intentions, a familiar manner of handling the world. Henceforth, just as the parts of my body together form a system, the other's body and my own are a single whole, two sides of a single phenomenon, and the anonymous existence, of which my body is continuously the trace, henceforth inhabits these two bodies simultaneously. (M-P 370)

We will return to the tension between the ethical and the political in this essay's conclusion.

In "The Suffering Channel," Brint Moltke's poop-art raises yet another question of authenticity: what is authentic art? This question comes to the fore in a discussion between Ellen Bactrian and an unnamed executive intern. As Wallace sets the stage for this discussion, he calls the reader's attention to the issue of the artwork's authenticity by saying, "Certain parts of a four way internal email exchange Tuesday morning had concerned what specified type(s) of piece the magazine should require the Indianan to produce under tightly controlled circumstances in order to verify that his abilities were not a hoax or some tasteless case of idiot savantism" (*Oblivion* 316). Bactrian and the executive intern elaborate on this second worry, first by establishing its relation to authenticity. After mentioning the unlikelihood that Moltke, an uneducated

Midwesterner, would be familiar with the subject matter of his art, which includes Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* and Anubis's head, the executive intern postulates, "I'm saying: Does the man have to see or know something in order to represent it? Produce it? Let's say that if he does and it's all totally conscious and intentional, then he's a real artist" (320). The interlocutors then explore alternatives to the mode of artistic creation that they have theorized to be authentic. Ellen Bactrian asks, "If he doesn't [know about what he represents in his art], it's some kind of, what, a miracle? Idiot savantry? Divine intervention?" (320). From a phenomenological perspective, Bactrian is suggesting that art can be an expression of repressed, unperceived elements of the artist's world. The executive intern supplements this phenomenological vein by directly appealing to the artist's embodiment: "Or else maybe it's subconscious. Maybe his colon somehow knows things his conscious mind doesn't" (320). Though this notion may be packaged humorously in this passage, the idea of art as gesture, conscious or not, poses a legitimate challenge to the belief that representations in authentic art must be consciously intended by the artist. This question of intention in Moltke's art is a contemporary figuration of the indeterminacy that Merleau-Ponty describes in his refutation of the Marxist conception of art as the artist's response to his or her economic condition:

Neither the conservative nor the proletarian are aware of being engaged in a merely economic struggle and they always give their action a human signification. In this sense, there is never a purely economic causality because the economy is not a closed system and because it is part of the total and concrete existence of society. But an existential conception of history does not strip economic situations of their power of *motivation*. (176, emphasis M-P's)

The phenomenological concept of motivation relates to art in the same way that phenomena relate to our world. Just as we create a world by constructing personal meaning from the impersonal phenomena that we perceive, art is personal expression that is neither entirely

separate from nor specifically necessitated by motivating factors such as one's economic situation or sexuality. Merleau-Ponty continues, "Economic and social drama offers each consciousness a certain background or again a certain *imago* that it will decode in its own manner" (177, emphasis M-P's). Since art is produced from an unconscious *imago* and not an intellectual analysis of one's world, the authenticity of Moltke's fecal figurines does not rely on a conscious understanding of the representations with which he expresses himself. Moltke's unconscious replication of historical representations, which have apparently filtered into the *imago* that informs his consciousness, may be described as "idiot savantry," but the so-called idiot savant and the artist are not mutually exclusive. Regardless of the artist's situation, the poop-sculptures are authentic insofar as they embody the unity of expression and expressed that constitutes art (as explained in chapter 1). Indeed, the fact that the sculptures are "only accessible through direct contact" (153), one of Merleau-Ponty's principles of art, is made abundantly clear by the choice of Laurel Manderley, Atwater's intern, to "place [the fecal sculptures that Atwater shipped to his office] on Ellen Bactrian's desk before she returned from her dance class, so that they would be sitting there waiting for her, and not to say a word or try to prevail on Ellen in any way, but simply to let the pieces speak for themselves" (*Oblivion* 280).

While Moltke's art may be authentic in the sense that it is true personal expression, "The Suffering Channel" also interrogates the sculpture's authenticity from the angle of originality. In a private conversation with Atwater, Amber Moltke brings this question of authenticity to light by insisting:

Still and all, though. To have you TV reporters or Dave Letterman or that skinny one real late at night making their jokes about it, and folks reading in *Style* and thinking about Brint's bowel, about him sitting there in the privy moving his bowel in some kind of special way to make something like that come out. Because that's his

whole hook, Skip, isn't it. Why you're here in the first place. That it's his shit. (280)

By undermining the value of the artistic content of her husband's figurines and suggesting that their intrigue lies solely in their medium and implied mode of production, Amber Moltke implies that an artwork's medium has no bearing on its originality. Amber puts forth the possibility that the incredible nature of Brint's poop may not be its aesthetic value but its mere human interest, like that of a freak show. Again, this notion involves the idea that Brint's artistic process is unconscious, which equates the production of the sculptures to the likes of the deformed body of Joseph Merrick, the so-called "elephant man," since neither of these marvels seems to be brought about by conscious choice. However, "The Suffering Channel" consistently pushes back against the notion that Brint Moltke's sculptures are unoriginal, and again, this counter-argument relies on the affirmation that his poop is a form of personal expression. In addition to its emphasis on the necessity of directly confronting the Moltke's art, the story illuminates the work's expressive nature by revealing Moltke's deep, complex suffering. Brint's suffering is brought into focus by Amber in the same private conversation with Atwater that provokes the question of the sculptures' originality. She explains:

What we've got here is a boy whose folks beat him witless all through growing up. That whipped on him with electric cords and burnt on him with cigarettes and made him eat out in the shed when his mother thought his manners weren't up to snuff for her high and mighty table...I know that one time when he was a boy that [his mother] came in and I think caught Brint playing with himself maybe, and made him come down in the sitting room and do it in front of them, the family, that she made them all sit there and watch him. (268-269)

This horrific childhood trauma lies at the heart of Moltke's further suffering, his inner battle that Atwater conceives to be "the universalizing element that made great soft news go: the conflict

between Moltke's extreme personal shyness and need for privacy on the one hand versus his involuntary need to express what lay inside him through some type of personal expression or art" (271). Although the figurines may be unoriginal in their reproduction of artifacts such as the Liberty Bell, they are also expressions of Moltke's authentically original experience as defined, in large part, by his extraordinary childhood suffering. Like Terry Schmidt's wincing smile, Moltke's artistic expressions are gestures of his individual, authentic body, into which his history has been ingrained. In the final moment of *Oblivion*, Moltke's suffering is again brought to light, this time quite literally, when his artistic reproduction of *Winged Victory of Samothrace* is filmed for The Suffering Channel, a television station that airs a continuous loop of photographs and video clips that portray moments of extreme human suffering. In a dark double entendre, Moltke's colon becomes another suffering channel:

There's also some eleventh hour complication involving the ground level camera and the problem of keeping the commode's special monitor out of its upward shot, since video capture of a camera's own monitor causes what is known in the industry as feedback glare – the artist in such a case would see, not his own emergent *Victory*, but a searing and amorphous light. (329)

With this closing image, Wallace performs a phenomenological portrayal of art as the embodied subject's authentic self-expression and of suffering as a primary determinant of the self.

Authenticity through the Lens of Cavell's Ordinary Language Philosophy

In the preface to the second edition of his philosophical treatise *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell explains that he seeks “another way than polemic, than taking sides” between “English-American lines, or along French-German” (Cavell xiii). Cavell is referring to the division in the field of philosophy between (English-American) analytic philosophers, who view the world as a set of problems to be approached logically, and (French-German) continental philosophers, who interpret the world as a literary text where meaning and logic are always unstable, subject to interrogation. Under the influence of J. L. Austin, Cavell's work is essentially ordinary language philosophy, an analytic approach to determining what words mean and do, yet Cavell also performs his analyses in an endless, cyclical manner that “puts a pressure on philosophical language that is not unlike a literary pressure” (xiii). Indeed, Cavell suggests that his style of ordinary language philosophy can be understood as an extension of phenomenology, which is typically envisioned as a branch of continental philosophy, when he says, “the knowledge I have claimed of what we ordinarily say has itself, and essentially,

demanded an awareness of, for example, what it would be ‘odd’ or ‘forced’ or ‘absurd’ to say, and while I have insisted that we all know these things, part of *what* we there know is exactly the phenomenology of our immediate consciousness” (231, emphasis Cavell’s). The aspect of phenomenology to which Cavell refers here is our immediate experience of language, which serves as the foundation for the logical analyses that Cavell undertakes in *The Claim of Reason*.

The principal pursuit of Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy is to question and rediscover what we really mean when we use language, and this is a pursuit in which several characters in *Oblivion* also partake in their attempts to realize authentic signification. In “Mr. Squishy,” the narrator, often through the indirect discourse of Terry Schmidt, ruminates on the manipulative language used in marketing. For example, when the narrator introduces the product to be tested by the Focus Group, he says:

The dark and exceptionally dense and moist-looking snack cakes inside the packaging were *Felonies!*® - a risky and multivalent trade name meant both to connote and to parody the modern health-conscious consumer’s sense of vice/indulgence/transgression/sin vis à vis the consumption of a high-calorie corporate snack. The name’s association matrix included as well the suggestion of adulthood and adult autonomy: in its real-world rejection of the highly cute, cartoonish, *n-* and *oo-*intensive names of so many other snack cakes, the product tag ‘*Felony!*’ was designed and tested primarily for its appeal to the 18-39 Male demographic, the single most prized and fictile demotarget in high-end marketing. (*Oblivion* 5)

The “association matrix” is an enlightening figuration of what Cavell explores in his ordinary-language analysis of signification. Describing his method, Cavell writes:

In philosophizing, I have to bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is a convening of my culture’s criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture’s words

may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me. (Cavell 125)

The narrator of “Mr. Squishy” confronts the word “Felonies” in the context of alimentary advertizing and uses his own experience of the word to imagine the corresponding cultural experience. This moment of ordinary language philosophy calls into question the authenticity (in the sense of sincerity) of the corporation’s presentation of this snack cake. Of course, it would be absurd to imagine that this usage of the word “Felonies” could possibly signify what we perceive as its literal meaning: illicit acts of a particular severity. However, the tension between the public perception of “Felonies” as a mere brand name and the set of connotations that the narrator is only able to contemplate through rigorous analytical attention and a familiarity with the mechanics of marketing epitomizes a key tension between the authentic and the inauthentic. Much of the commentary on marketing in “Mr. Squishy” is conveyed through the “quote unquote Full Access background information” that he reveals to the Focus Group to glean data on the effects of consumer awareness of the psychology of marketing (*Oblivion* 7). The assumption that consumers do not normally have a sense of the association matrix incited by brand names and the general presentation of products shows that the language of marketing does much more than it pretends to be doing. “Mr. Squishy” distinguishes between what is said and what is performed by the language of advertisement by showing that while advertisements promise the fulfillment of the consumer’s desire, advertising actually defines the world within which the consumer unconsciously forms his or her desires. This distinction is at play in Schmidt’s explanation of “the stresses on individual consumers caught between their natural God-given herd instincts and their deep fear of sacrificing their natural God-given identities as individuals, and about the way these stresses were tweaked and-slash-or soothed by skillfully engineered trends” (36). The bulk of this discourse identifies *Felonies!* as a product that is

marketed within “Antitrend Shadows, the spin inside and against the larger spin of in this instance Reduced-Calorie and Fat-Free foods, nutritional supplements...and the really rather brilliantly managed stress that everyone was made to feel about...squeezing the absolute maximum productivity and health and self-actuation out of every last vanishing second” (36). According to Schmidt, this Antitrend Shadow does not merely satisfy the human subject’s inherent desire for immediate gratification; rather, the marketing of *Felonies!* is “aimed to remind the consumer that he was at root an individual, one with individual tastes and preferences and freedom of individual choice” (37). Here, the use of the word “remind,” uttered perhaps with a tinge of ironic litotes, suggests that marketing does not react to the consumer’s fundamental needs but, instead, aggravates an anxiety inherent to the human condition and associates that anxiety with the lack of a certain profitable object or behavior. Schmidt again illustrates the deceit of marketing when he considers the power struggle within high-level marketing firms, where “everyone in the whole huge blind grinding mechanism conspired to convince each other that they could figure out how to give the paying customer what they could prove he could be persuaded to believe he wanted” (45). Marketing is therefore inauthentic in its exploitation of the instability of language, the indeterminate association matrices within every word and sentence, in order to manipulate the desires of the human subject.

This portrait of marketing calls into question our freedom to experience authentic desire. Schmidt’s affirmation that the Antitrend Shadow reminds the consumer that he or she has individual tastes and preferences is clearly tongue-in-cheek since a cultural trend, by definition, unifies a mass of individuals. We return, then, to the previous chapter’s exploration of the possibility of an original choice. Just as Neal does not believe that he can transcend cliché behavior, Schmidt suggests that marketing leaves no room for authentic choice. The discourse on

trends and marketing in “Mr. Squishy” mirrors an assertion that Cavell makes about the convention that underlies signification: “The internal tyranny of convention is that only a slave of it can know how it may be changed for the better, or know why it should be eradicated. Only masters of a game, perfect slaves to that project, are in a position to establish conventions which better serve its essence” (Cavell 120-121). While Cavell seems to be referring to teleological conventions such as judicial systems, his claim holds true for the conventions of language and identity formation. In defining themselves through products that connote a certain lifestyle, consumers are slaves to the conventions of marketing that dictate which products correspond with which identity. However, “Mr. Squishy” shows that even further entrenched within the conventions of marketing are the marketers themselves. These “perfect slaves” to the project of identity formation must be thoroughly engrossed in the trend of trends, as it were, to agitate the latent desires and anxieties that characterize the existing paradigm and thus to incite a new, profitable web of trends, desire, and fear. The marketers are no puppet-masters, though. In a bitter internal tirade against the pretensions of high-level marketers, Schmidt illustrates the eventual powerlessness of those who catalyze trends by citing the inception of *Felonies!*:

One [Reesemeyer Shannon Belt marketing firm] Senior Creative Director...had had one idea, and one or two dozen pistons and gears already machined and set in place in various craggy heads at R.S.B. and North American’s Mister Squishy had needed only this one single spark of $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$ –inspired passion from an SCD whose whole inflated rep had been based on a concept equating toilet paper with clouds and helium-voiced teddy bears and all manner of things innocent of shit in some abstract Ur-consumer’s mind in order to set in movement a machine of which no one single person now...could be master. (*Oblivion* 45)

This machine, which can refer either to the trend of cutesy toilet paper advertisements or the Antitrend Shadow where *Felonies!* flourish, is Schmidt’s figuration of the uncontrollable flux of

trends and impulses that inform our fears and desires. While the flux cannot be controlled, it can be influenced by these perfect slaves of convention, whom Cavell characterizes as revolutionaries when he says:

Only a priest could have confronted his set of practices with its origins so deeply as to set the terms of Reformation. It is in the name of the idea of philosophy, and against a vision that it has become false to itself, or that it has stopped thinking, that such figures as Descartes and Kant and Marx and Nietzsche and Heidegger and Wittgenstein seek to revolutionize philosophy. It is because certain human beings crave the conservation of their art that they seek to discover how, under altered circumstances, paintings and pieces of music can still be made, and hence revolutionize their art beyond the recognition of many. (Cavell 121)

Again, Cavell's analysis is much more optimistic than the marketing discourse in "Mr. Squishy," but despite the story's framing of marketers as manipulators, the narrator shares Cavell's awe regarding the marketers' ability to make a difference. Indeed, the marketers in "Mr. Squishy" and the theologians and philosophers that Cavell names in *The Claim of Reason* do not control the outcome of their contributions to the social ethos, and although the language used in all of these cases may be inauthentic their pretense of being reactionary (to people's desires and philosophical problems) when in fact they engender new desires and problems, but these revolutionaries do nonetheless have an authentic, undeniable impact on the shape of our world.

The question of our ability to make an authentic difference is Schmidt's principal anxiety. Schmidt is certainly a slave to the game of marketing, but he does not have the revolutionary potential of a "perfect slave," a top-level marketer. Aware of his impotence, Schmidt ruminates on the corporate landscape that renders his role as part of the ironically named "Team Δ " entirely inconsequential:

Team Δy's real function was to present to Reesemeyer Shannon Belt test data that R.S.B. could then turn around and present to Client as confirming the soundness of the very [Overall Campaign Concept] that R.S.B. had already billed Client in the millions for and couldn't turn back from even if the actual test data turned out to be resoundingly grim or unpromising, which it was Team Δy's unspoken real job to make sure never happened, a job that Team Δy accomplished simply by targeting so many different Focus Groups and foci and by varying the format and context of the tests so baroquely and by facilitating the different TFGs in so many different modalities that in the end it was child's play to selectively weight and rearrange the data in pretty much whatever way R.S.B.'s MROP division wanted. (*Oblivion* 44)

This passage demonstrates how Schmidt's inability to make a difference is inseparable from the jargon, the firmly established conventional language, of marketing. "Mr. Squishy" casts a net of corporate abbreviations (IRP, GRDS, QA, UAF, TFG, GRDS, MROP, PR, R.S.B., NQA, D.D.B.N., C.F.D., SCD, MAM, SRD, PSA, B.B./B.S., WT, IMPC, N.A.S.C., A.C.R.-J., SMTP/POP, ANOVA) that denies Schmidt the freedom to make an authentic difference – or even an authentic choice, a choice that is not made within an established, limited set of options – in the social sphere to which he slavishly devotes himself. As was discussed in chapter 2, Schmidt's horrifying response to his inability to make a difference is to produce poisonous compounds that he plans to inject into a *Felony!* snack cake and thus to direct "attention to defects in manufacturing and/or packaging rather than product tampering, which would of course heighten the overall industry impact" (58). These compounds offer a completely separate, yet pointedly similar-looking, conventional language (KCN, As₂O₃, C₂₁H₂₂O₂N₂, NaOH, CH₃COCH₃) through which to make a difference. While this act of violence would certainly be the authentic cause of a shift in the flux of the desires that characterize the world of consumers, the difference that Schmidt would make through terrorism fundamentally opposes his initial desire to promote authentic advertising, to "say to a sorry and cynical US market: Trust Me You

Will Not Be Sorry,” a desire that has been crushed by the corporate world (30). This distinction displays the complexity of the term authenticity. On one hand, Schmidt can live with his unachievable, authentic (original, natural) desire to be the authentic (original) cause of a shift towards authentic (honest) marketing, and on the other hand, Schmidt can resort to an inauthentic (desperate, contrived) impulse to undertake an inauthentic (manipulative) course of violent action that would be the authentic (original) cause of a decrease in public desire for *Felonies!*. This condensed view of this chapter’s exploration of how the word “authentic” applies to “Mr. Squishy” is a prime example of this essay’s engagement in ordinary language philosophy with a focus on “freedom,” “limit,” “choice,” “human,” “body,” “perception,” “experience,” “fantasy,” “self,” “other,” “authentic,” and “oblivion.”

The evolution of Schmidt’s desire to make a difference will be explored further in the final chapter, but for now, let us consider Schmidt’s plight in relation to ordinary language philosophy. In imagining philosophy as the ability “to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in [us],” Cavell promotes an awareness of our experience of language in its conventions and its possibilities. Schmidt’s in-depth analysis of language used in marketing exemplifies the transcendence that Cavell encourages, but Schmidt’s transcendental analysis of the mechanics of marketing does not give Schmidt the freedom to change the conventions he perceives. Instead, Schmidt’s awareness serves to intensify the sense that he is not free to make an authentic difference. Cavell also writes, “One of the beauties of the practice of linguistics is that it gives, or ought to give, full play to our everyday knowledge of its data. And this is, or ought to be, one of the beauties of ordinary language philosophizing as well” (Cavell 93). Philosophy, including the philosophical strains that inform literature like *Oblivion*, therefore provides a window into our state of being that deepens our sense of what we are, what we can be,

what we mean, and what we can do. While philosophy and literature (ideally) improve our responses to these questions, these pursuits do not destroy the limits that they elucidate.

In “Good Old Neon,” Neal continues *Oblivion*’s Cavellian strain by interrogating the language of psychoanalysis. When Neal first mentions his experience with talk therapy, which he calls “analysis,” he says, “It didn’t really work, although it did make everyone sound more aware of their own problems and added some useful vocabulary and concepts to the way we all had to talk to each other to fit in and sound a certain way” (*Oblivion* 142). Neal immediately describes psychoanalysis as I have just described philosophy: as a mode of signification that illuminates but does not change the nature of our condition. On several occasions throughout the story, Neal translates the conventional psychoanalytic language used by his “analyst” Dr. Gustafson into his own personal lexicon, which he clearly finds to be more authentic. For instance, in the course of his reflection on a particular phase of his therapy, Neal mentions parenthetically, “(Dr. G’s term for approval was *validation*)” (166, emphasis Wallace’s). The therapeutic phase in question revolves around another instance of interpersonal translation: Neal’s process of integrating his sense of being “fraudulent” into Dr. Gustafson’s conventional, reductive psychoanalytical view of existence, which is based on “the claim that there were really only two basic, fundamental orientations a person could have toward the world, (1) love and (2) fear, and that they couldn’t coexist” (164). Using this psychoanalytic schema, Neal equates his use of “fraudulence” with an inability to “love,” as Dr. Gustafson uses the term. Neal believes that this equation may be therapeutic because “being unable to really love was at least a different model or lens through which to see the problem, plus initially it seemed like a promising way of attacking the fraudulence paradox in terms of reducing the self-hatred part that reinforced the fear and the consequent drive to try to manipulate people into providing the very approval I’d denied myself”

(166). Neal's assertions that validation really means approval and that an inability to love really means fraudulence illustrate Cavell's description of our perception of authenticity in language, where he says:

If the bases you offer in support of your identification of a specific object invoke inappropriate criteria, then one response we cited was "But that's not what is officially or conventionally called a such-and-such"...But if you have to say "But that's not (what is called) 'pointing to the color', 'explaining the meaning', etc.", there is no such appeal. We are all equal with respect to such claims. (Cavell 110)

According to Cavell, affirmations of authenticity are always subjective in analyses of the language used to convey abstract methods, conventions, or rules, such as ways of understanding the self in relation to love, fraudulence, approval, and validation. Neal seems to recognize this reality since he does not claim that Dr. Gustafson uses these terms incorrectly; he merely acknowledges that the therapist's vocabulary is informed by his context as a psychoanalyst. In fact, Neal believes that Dr. Gustafson's style of signification may actually provide a useful approach to the phenomena that torture him.

Neal's interrogation of psychoanalytic language and of language in general also reflects two other interwoven questions that pervade *The Claim of Reason*: what does it mean to have a self? and to what extent can we reveal ourselves to others? Throughout the story, Neal describes himself as "a basically empty, insecure person whose whole life involved trying to impress people and manipulate their view of me in order to compensate for the inner emptiness" (*Oblivion* 154). Much of *The Claim of Reason* is based on Cavell's reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein's masterpiece of ordinary language philosophy, *Philosophical Investigations*, and

one of Cavell's readings of Wittgenstein elucidates the nature of Neal's sense of emptiness.

Cavell writes:

[Wittgenstein's] readers get [the sense that] in denying that we know (say) our sensations and in denying that our words for the sensations of others refer to objects, somethings or other, inside that other, he is denying that we *have* sensations and that there *is* anything going on in the other. If one shudders at the thought, perhaps that comes from a surmise that what it feels as if Wittgenstein is denying may be true, that we have nothing inside, that we are empty. (91, emphasis Cavell's)

In other words, since (as Neal knows all too well) the bodily expressions that supposedly reveal or prove our subjective experience do not, in truth, necessarily correspond with our experience, it is therefore logically plausible that our experience is nothing at all. Furthermore, Neal and Cavell also have similar ways of overcoming the emptiness-anxiety that they both acknowledge. A key component of Cavell's refutation of our essential emptiness is his exploration of the notion of "private language," signification that can only be understood by the one who uses it. When Cavell introduces his analysis of private language, he asks, "So what is the point of 'trying' to 'imagine' a 'language' which 'another person' 'cannot' 'understand'? Evidently, the effort is to illuminate something about the publicness of language, something about the *depth* to which language is agreed in. I would like to say: its point is to release the fantasy expressed in the denial that language is something essentially shared" (344, emphasis Cavell's). Neal shares Cavell's position that language is shared and that every experience can conceivably be communicated, yet Neal also explains that we do not have nearly enough time to try to reveal the entirety of our experience, which indicates that some of our use of language must remain private. In his philosophical interpretation of language and time, Neal says:

This is another paradox, that many of the most important impressions and thoughts in a person's life are ones that flash through your head so fast that *fast* isn't even the right word, they seem totally different from or outside of the regular sequential clock time we all live by, and they have so little relation to the sort of linear, one-word-after-another-word English we all communicate with each other with that it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out the contents of one split-second's flash of thoughts and connections, etc. (*Oblivion* 151, emphasis Wallace's)

This passage reflects Cavell's interpretation of private language as a fantasy because while Neal believes that complete self-revelation is impossible, he also suggests that every individual aspect of his experience is sharable. According to Neal and Cavell, we express certain aspects of ourselves, often by choice, but due to the complexity of our experience and the nature of language, we can only ever express a portion of who we are. Cavell emphasizes this point when he says, "I may dedicate a lifetime to the effort to convey the meaning a small budget of words has for me. I may be one of a circle of people so dedicated, even to the same words. I would hardly have come to this verge, supposing I am of sound mind, if I thought that *no* one else *could* understand my words" (Cavell 349). From the perspective that self-revelation is a meaningful pursuit that can never be completely achieved, we are not empty or essentially inauthentic; on the contrary, we are so full of meaning that we cannot signify the entirety of ourselves to the other. One subject's understanding of another is therefore always an inauthentic version of that other.

As is evident in Neal's discourse on signification and time, he is deeply intrigued by paradoxes. Along with the paradoxical incongruity of a thought's importance relative to the time it takes for that thought to occur (mentioned in the previous paragraph) and the paradox of the cliché (discussed in the conclusion), which becomes meaningless only because its deep, universal meaning causes it to be implemented repeatedly, Neal also contemplates what he calls the "fraudulence paradox." This paradox comes to light when Neal states, "The more time and

effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside – you were a fraud” (*Oblivion* 147). Neal’s obsession with paradoxes, especially with the fraudulence paradox, compliments Cavell’s notion of the role of the paradox in our efforts to understand ourselves:

I must disappear in order that the search for myself be successful. These words may express a significant truth. They form a homonym of the truth, a kind of sentence-length pun, a metaphysical irony. If so, this serves to explain why the writing on the part of those who have some acquaintance with the topic of self-knowledge – Thoreau or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, for example, takes the form it does, of obsessive and antic paradox and pun, above all of maddening irony. (Cavell 352)

If, as Cavell suggests, the discovery-in-destruction of the self occurs through a “war with words,” then Neal’s emphasis on paradox reinforces his discourse on language, which he describes as insufficient for complete self-revelation (352). Neal’s notion of the fraudulence paradox shows that while he may ostensibly imagine self-revelation to be a revelation of the self to the other, his suffering stems primarily from his inability to reveal himself to himself. Neal’s search for self drives him to try talk therapy, meditation, and all of the other activities through which he challenges his default notion of himself as a fraud. Following Cavell’s view of paradox as an enfeebling of language, Neal ruminates on paradoxes until he perceives his significations to be inauthentic, which leads him to believe that he is empty. Neal seems to have defeated language by means of paradox, but instead of a triumphant realization of self, Neal experiences a lonely existential despair coupled with the anxiety that he may not have an authentic self at all. The correlation between Neal’s disappointment with signification and his disgust with himself illustrates the fundamental nature of tragedy as Cavell would have it. After an extensive

argument where he defines “believing” someone as accepting his or her expression of him- or herself, Cavell writes:

I wish to paint my conviction that I am intelligible to others, my capacity to present myself for acknowledgment, as my believing myself. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche speaks of believing oneself as the correct or hopeful relation to one’s body, having previously identified the self as the body... (For Nietzsche, there is no key to one’s identity. Hence, after his first book, there is for him no tragedy. One might feel that just *this* is our (new) tragedy. For it means that there is no ending, only return, eternally.) Skepticism and solutions to skepticism consequently make their way in the world mostly as lessons in hypocrisy: providing solutions one does not believe to problems one has not felt. (Cavell 393)

Given this conception of tragedy, Neal is the Cavellian tragic hero. His eternal cycle of skepticism (the belief that he is a fraud) and solution (solace in giving himself up to belief systems, i.e. Christianity and the belief that he cannot love) drives him to suicide, where, in the ultimate paradox of simultaneous life and death, Neal does not merely contemplate but truly *experiences* paradox and thus finally realizes and accepts himself. Neal’s relation (and our relation) to paradox as a manifestation of what may be termed the inauthenticity of language will reappear in the closing chapter of this essay.

Of all of the stories in *Oblivion*, “Oblivion” is the most direct and thorough illustration of Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy. Just as Cavell uses double quotation marks to call attention to the particular words and phrases that he is investigating, the narrator of “Oblivion,” Randall Napier, also interrogates the use of language by using single quotation marks. Napier’s use of quotation marks creates an ironic distance between his own use of language, which he perceives as authentic, and conventional usage of idioms that he perceives to be potentially misleading. The first example of this technique occurs in the story’s first sentence, where Napier

recounts the events of his morning. He explains that he and his father-in-law, Dr. Sipe, have “just completed the ‘front’ nine,” when a thunderstorm interrupts their play and causes their “having gotten ‘in’ only nine holes” (*Oblivion* 190). Here, Napier accentuates the fact that the term “front nine” involves arbitrary positional language and may just as well be signified by “first nine,” “one through nine,” or “bottom nine.” He also shows the arbitrariness of the preposition used conventionally by golfers to indicate how many holes they have completed. Since the word “in” conventionally signifies the state of being surrounded by something, the idiomatic usage of the word “in” to mean the acquisition of experience may seem absurd. Napier thus engages in Cavell’s aforementioned project: “to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me” (Cavell 125).

While Napier’s interrogation of the large-scale conventional idiom continues the project of Schmidt, who analyzes marketing language, and that of Neal, who translates the language of psychoanalysis, Napier also conducts a more specific questioning of the language used by his wife, Hope. This interpersonal analysis illustrates many of Cavell’s claims about our relation to the singular other. For instance, in the story’s second sentence, Napier says, “The old fellow had originally wanted to tee off at almost dawn, and I had found myself unable to explain why this could represent a possibly untenable hardship without opening the whole ‘can of worms’ of the conflict in front of Hope” (*Oblivion* 190). Napier uses his wife’s term “can of worms” to signify the marital conflict at the heart of the story. By distancing himself from his wife’s language, he highlights her difference, her otherness, and signals that he is questioning the authenticity of her signification. The ways in which Napier conducts this investigation of authenticity can be synthesized by three questions: Does she mean what she says? Does she mean what she thinks she means? Does what she says/means correspond with my idea of what is true?

Napier translates Hope's phrase "can of worms" into his own language when he says, "the strange and absurdly frustrating marital conflict between Hope and myself over the issue of my so-called 'snoring'" (192). While Napier's interrogation of "can of worms" belongs to the first inquiry listed above (Does she mean what she says?), his focus on his wife's use of the word "snoring" conveys his skepticism regarding the factuality of Hope's claim. Before we explore this skepticism, let us examine the conditions that allow Napier to feel as though he is adequately translating Hope's term "can of worms." Napier's ability to imagine what Hope means illustrates Cavell's notion of acknowledgment, which has two main elements. First, the subject must be capable of empathic projection, the unconscious recognition of other humans as humans. Cavell writes, "Empathic projection is to other minds what seeing is to material objects, not what dreaming is," which means that if we were to discover that our empathic projection is inauthentic, we would suffer "a generalized and massive *trompe l'ame*; my soul (and what it wishes?) cheats me (supernaturally cheats me) into taking it that it has company" (Cavell 425, 424, emphasis his). Cavell's discourse on empathic projection deals primarily with the question of whether other minds exist, which is not a major concern in *Oblivion*. However, empathic projection constitutes the foundation for the other aspect of acknowledgment, which Cavell describes when he says, "Acknowledgment of another calls for recognition of the other's specific relation to oneself, and that this entails the revelation of oneself as having denied or distorted that relation" (428). Napier's acknowledgment of Hope's specific relation to himself naturally includes, perhaps above all else, her way of communicating, signifying. Since acknowledgment is an open process that occurs in every encounter with the other, we must conclude that Napier, in the course of his marriage, has come to realize countless denials and distortions that have resided in his relation to Hope. With his thorough acknowledgment of Hope's style of

signification, Napier can imagine what she means by “can of worms” just as he can envision what “front nine” means to his culture.

Although Napier’s acknowledgment of Hope gives him access to the nature of her signification, the process of acknowledgment will never come to an end; he can never experience Hope as she is. One of Cavell’s descriptions of our relation to the other portrays the philosophical mechanics that underpin the futility of Napier’s attempts to comprehend his wife. Cavell writes:

In knowing others, I am exposed on two fronts: to the other; and to my concept of the other. Being exposed to the other is being exposed to the occurrence of a best case. I said that it is to be expected that we will avoid the best as long as we can. But “avoiding the best” is undeveloped. It means “avoiding the occurrence of the best”, but also “avoiding *knowing* that an occurrence is the best.” (Cavell 432, emphasis his)

Here, Cavell refers to the element of skepticism that attends all of our encounters with the other and is inherent to the transcendence that, for Merleau-Ponty, constitutes our fundamental freedom. For Cavell, the best response to our skeptical questioning of our experience of the other is the fact of that experience itself. The gradual intensification of the conflict in “Oblivion” demonstrates the role of our concept of the other as an obstacle to our experience of him or her. Throughout the conflict, Napier conceptualizes Hope as suffering from a delusion, and at first, he treats her with sympathy. Napier explains, “For the first several weeks of the dreams and accusations, I was concerned primarily for Hope herself, and feared that she was having a more difficult time of it adjusting to our Audrey’s ‘leav[ing] the nest’ than it had at first appeared” (*Oblivion* 202-203). At this early stage of the conflict, Napier questions whether Hope authentically means what she thinks she means by reading her behavior as an expression of

repressed suffering. While a distance already exists in Napier's judgment of Hope's meaning as inauthentically expressed, the distance only increases as Napier's concept of Hope congeals to the extent that he ceases to sympathize with her:

After some further time had passed, however, and all attempts to discuss the conflict rationally or induce Hope to consider even the mere possibility that it was she, not myself, who was in reality asleep when the alleged 'snoring' problem manifested itself led only to a further entrenchment or 'hardening' in her own position...I essentially ceased, then, to say or do anything in the way of '*in situ*' response or objection when she would suddenly sit violently up in bed across the room. (203, emphasis Wallace's)

In this phase of the conflict, both Hope and Napier harden their positions, and for Napier, Hope is conceptualized as an argumentative adversary. The two levels of Napier's experience of Hope are later encapsulated by the question posed to Napier by various couple counselors: "whether I myself, on balance, would prefer to prevail or 'win' in the conflict and be vindicated as 'innocent' or 'right,' on one hand, or would rather instead have Hope and myself's marriage back on track" (215). Although the dichotomy is not as simple as the couple counselors suggest, Napier's obsession with the conflict and with Hope as an adversary certainly precludes the possibility of intimate, untainted communion between them. Indeed, Napier is so thoroughly consumed by his antagonistic concept of Hope that he constantly "conceiv[es] new ways to present or arrange evidence or catch Hope in a logical contradiction, sometimes going so far as to interrupt work in order to jot these ideas or cutting rejoinders down in the margins of my professional Day-planner for possible future use" (205). In the most illustrative image of Napier's distance from Hope, he describes "the way Hope's dry, dark, narrow, increasingly haggard face across the breakfast nook sometimes becomes nearly unrecognizable to me, twisted, distorted and even somewhat repellent in its anger and stony suspicion" (205). At this

point, the conflict-concept has become such a great obstacle that Napier is often entirely cut off from the immediate experience of his wife, which is to say the sensation of recognition, the empathic projection, that he feels in their encounters.

When the positions of Hope and Napier harden, Napier's belief that Hope's delusion is an inauthentic expression of her suffering is replaced by the sense that Hope is simply delusional, psychotic, living in an inauthentic world. This anxiety illustrates two fundamental, intertwining problems that Cavell presents in his exploration of our communication with the other. In his analysis of Wittgenstein's rule-following principle, the idea that there is no way to ensure that someone will understand a rule or convention since a rule can only be expressed through other rules, Cavell says, "We know that he is not completely unintelligible to us; we feel he *must* be able to follow our directions. And we know we are impotent in this moment to get him to. The cause of our anxiety is that *we cannot make ourselves intelligible* (to him)" (Cavell 115, emphasis his). Napier experiences this anxiety due to what he perceives as Hope's "strange, stony, bitter and irrational obdurance with which she would flatly refuse to consider – to acknowledge even the bare possibility, despite all of the reasonable rebuttals, rejoinders, reasoned arguments, evidence, facts not in dispute and citations of precedent" (*Oblivion* 205). Like the rule-teacher in Cavell's example, Napier finds himself in the anxious, impotent position of fundamental unintelligibility. Napier therefore develops the concept that Hope is psychotic, the repercussions of which Cavell describes when he says, "[psychotics] do not live in our world. Whether, in such a case, we can still respond to them as *persons*, *remains problematic*. Part of the difficulty in treating psychotics is the inability one has in appreciating *their* world, and hence in honoring them as persons" (Cavell 90, emphasis his). By internalizing the concept that Hope

is psychotic, Napier creates a barrier between his world and hers. His judgment that her world is inauthentic renders his experience of her equally inauthentic.

In this chapter and that which precedes it, we have mapped out *Oblivion*'s labyrinthine interrogation of authenticity. Similarly, the first and second chapters expose the nature of the body as performed by *Oblivion*. In the next and final chapter, we will shift from our interrogation of the body and authenticity, and we will use our findings to inform an exploration of the focal point of *Oblivion*'s conception of freedom: a fundamental choice that the text presents as crucial.

Conclusion

A Choice of Oblivion

To structure the conclusion of our philosophical exploration of *Oblivion*, I will refer to *This is Water*, a commencement speech that David Foster Wallace gave at Kenyon College in 2005. *This is Water* is widely understood to be a condensed version of the principal philosophical position that informs Wallace's fiction and essays. The commencement speech has become such a popular cultural phenomenon that when I tell people that I have been writing about David Foster Wallace, they tend to respond with something like, "Didn't he do *This is Water*? I love that speech." Indeed, the emotional appeal of *This is Water* seems universal. A few months ago, I was at a friend's house, and we found out that his little brother Chris had just crashed his parents' car. The parents were terrified that Chris might be physically injured or traumatized, and perhaps in spite of themselves, they were also furious that their son had been so irresponsible. When Chris arrived home in a cab, I was an unlikely witness of a reunion of extraordinary emotional depth and range: relief, anger, joy, shame, and resolution were just a handful of the moment's passions. This catharsis came to a head when Chris and his parents listened to the

audio recording of *This is Water*, which can be found on YouTube. The three family members embraced each other and cried as my friend and I observed the touching spectacle.

Although both I and my friend, who is also an avid reader of Wallace's work, certainly found Chris's drama to be a beautiful instance of Wallace's power to communicate meaningfully with his audience, we also could not help but crack a few jokes about the cliché nature of the scene. "Nice move, Chris," we laughed, "Way to pull the classic '*This is Water*' card." With this anecdote, I mean to call attention both to the poignancy of *This is Water* and to the fact that the speech has become somewhat of a cliché in certain social spheres. Those who are likely to read this essay, for example, probably perceive the cliché aspect of my implementation of *This is Water* as a summary of Wallace's most crucial philosophical position. However, in *This is Water* itself, Wallace proposes, "Think of the old cliché about 'the mind being an excellent servant but a terrible master.' This, like many clichés, so lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses a great and terrible truth" (*Water* 3). In "Good Old Neon," Wallace illustrates the meaningfulness of the cliché with the cliché-paradox that Neal describes when he reflects on the moment where he writes his suicide note:

the reason scenes like this will seem stale or manipulative to an audience is that we've already seen so many of them in dramas, and yet the reason we've seen so many of them in dramas is that the scenes really are dramatic and compelling and let people communicate very deep, complicated emotional realities that are almost impossible to articulate any other way. (*Oblivion* 176)

With these redemptions of the cliché in mind, I find it appropriate, or even necessary, to engage in the cliché of employing *This is Water* as a literal outline of the philosophical didacticism performed by *Oblivion*. Just as phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy have

structured our understanding of *Oblivion*'s human subject, *This is Water* will help us determine which aspects of subjectivity are of utmost concern in *Oblivion*.

In *This is Water*, Wallace argues that the most vital element of our phenomenological freedom-in-transcendence is our capacity for “choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of [our] natural, hard-wired default-setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and interpret everything through this lens of self” (*Water* 2). The existential pain caused by our self-centered default-setting, or in phenomenological terms, our style of being-in-the-world, is encapsulated in *Oblivion* by the term “long suffering,” which connotes the interwoven concepts of the drudgery of adult life and the obsession with self as political image. In this essay, “the political” does not merely refer to citizenship and governance but, more importantly, to the sense of ourselves in relation to the mass of others that composes the society in which we live. Our political existence leads us to perceive the self as an image, an identity to be evaluated by the anonymous masses. In “Good Old Neon,” this product of the political is encapsulated by Neal’s concept of “the statue,” which we discussed in chapter 3. The realm of the political is the general milieu of our adult life, but this milieu contains moments of its own interruption: moments of the ethical sphere, unity with a singular other(ness). Wallace promotes the worship of otherness in *This is Water* when he says:

The only choice we get is *what* to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship – be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles – is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. (7, emphasis Wallace’s)

Although Wallace does not include the other in his list of objects of worship that can free us from our default-setting, Stanley Cavell suggests that the concept of God symbolizes our relation

to the other. Cavell writes, “When you have thrown out your signals and I have had the opportunity to be apprised of your inner world, then *do* I really know it (know *it*) or do the signals come from a source I can never check, hence signify something I can never know? (Another’s mind as God)” (Cavell 97, emphasis his). This question leads us to understand God as synonymous with otherness, the unknowable, which also characterizes our imagination of another human’s world. Given this understanding of spirituality, ethical worship is our communication or unification with otherness. The tension between the political and the ethical mirrors the choice between our default-setting and the transcendence of self. In the course of reading *Oblivion* and pondering the relation between title and text, we may also come to equate the choice between political worship of self and ethical worship of otherness with a choice of oblivion. We can remain trapped in our self-centeredness and remain oblivious to the “force that lit the stars – compassion, love, the sub-surface unity of all things,” or we can perform a sort of self-obliteration, an oblivion-of-self, that allows us to experience this transcendental unity (*Water* 6).

Several of *Oblivion*’s characters endure diverse forms of long suffering that reflect their inability to overcome their default-setting. Terry Schmidt’s long suffering is characterized by the gradual ossification of the idea that he cannot make a difference, or more specifically, by the “fears and thoughts of failure and impotence and terrible and thoroughgoing *smallness* within a grinding professional machine you can’t believe you once had the temerity to think you could help change or make a difference or ever be more than a tiny faceless cog in” (*Oblivion* 31-32, emphasis Wallace’s). These thoughts have dominated Schmidt’s style of being-in-the-world for years, and he has become bitter and violent. Schmidt’s suffering stems from his failure to solve the problem that Wallace highlights in *This is Water*: “How to keep from going through your

comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default-setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone, day in and day out” (*Water* 3). Just as *Oblivion* illustrates the essential phenomenological significance of the ways in which its characters derive meaning from their factual situation, *This is Water* champions the belief that “you get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn’t” and that “everybody worships” (6, 7). Wallace warns the Kenyon students of the dangers of self-worship, which can take many different forms. In “Mr. Squishy,” Schmidt performs a type of self-worship: the worship of himself as capable of making a difference. The humanistic difference that Schmidt initially hopes to make is to “persuade tablesful of hard-eyed corporate officers that legitimate concern for consumer wellbeing was both emotionally and economically Good Business,” or in other words, to promote authentic marketing. However, Schmidt’s changes in the face of long suffering reveal that his self-worship overshadows his desire to be a positive force in the lives of others (*Oblivion* 29). Intent on making a difference, Schmidt plans to poison a *Felony!* snack cake for the sake of influencing the U.S. market. Schmidt’s violent desire demonstrates the dehumanizing effect of being trapped within our default-setting, which Wallace describes when he says, “it’s going to seem, for all the world, like everybody else is just *in my way*, and who are all these people in my way? And look at how repulsive most of them are and how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem” (*Water* 5). Schmidt’s long suffering therefore originates from the tyranny of his default-setting of self-worship, a form of phenomenological intention defined solely by the political sphere.

Despite his entrenchment within his default-setting, Schmidt is nonetheless aware of the therapeutic power of ethical relations, which he imagines in the form of marriage. In fact, the

aforementioned passage where Schmidt reveals his sense of “*smallness*” and inconsequentiality is imbedded within his imagining of other-worship:

Schmidt had a quick vision of them all in the conference room as like icebergs and/or floes, only the sharp caps showing, unknown and –knowable to one another, and he imagined that it was probably only in marriage (and a good marriage, not the decorous dance of loneliness he’d watched his mother and father do for seventeen years but rather true conjugal intimacy) that partners allowed each other to see below the berg’s cap’s public mask and consented to be truly *known*. (*Oblivion* 31, emphasis Wallace’s)

Schmidt’s desire for a redemptive ethical relation indicates that, on some level, he realizes the damaging consequences of his obsession with his self-image of political insignificance. With Schmidt’s imaginable but unattainable respite from suffering, “Mr. Squishy” demonstrates the tragic difficulty of transcending self-worship.

In his commencement speech, Wallace takes care to clarify that our self-centered default-setting is not synonymous with selfishness, which has a connotation of immorality. He explains, “Again, please don’t think that I’m giving you moral advice, or that I’m saying you’re ‘supposed to’ think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it, because it’s hard, it takes will and mental effort, and if you’re like me, some days you won’t be able to do it, or you just flat-out won’t want to” (*Water* 6). Wallace illustrates this distinction in *Oblivion* by creating characters who are sympathetic despite their worship of self. Schmidt is certainly pathetic, and he may be sympathetic if we focus on his tragic impotence rather than his alienating bitterness and violence. “The Soul is not a Smithy” continues this discourse with two long-suffering characters who are bound to incite sympathy: Mr. Simmons and the narrator’s father. Mr. Simmons, a character in the narrator’s fourth-grade fantasy, is introduced as “the kind of poor but honest father who makes his living with physical labor rather than poring over facts and

figures all day” and is later described as “long suffering” (*Oblivion* 80, 81). The narrator captures the Sisyphean adult drudgery that constitutes Mr. Simmons’ long suffering when he says, “The driveway is so long that by the time the father has finished snowblowing the whole thing he will have to start back at the beginning again” (84). In a horrific turn of events, Mr. Simmons accidentally severs his hand in the snow-blower, a catastrophe that the narrator explains by saying, “Normally a careful worker who paid good attention and followed directions, this time he was so distracted that he forgot to disable the Snow Boy’s spark plugs” (90). Since Mr. Simmons is presumably distracted by his ethical empathy for his daughter, whose dog has just gone missing, this moment shows that the political sphere, the realm of Mr. Simmons’ employment, requires conscientious self-centeredness. In *This is Water*, Wallace notes the destructive pressures of the political sphere when he says, “the world will not discourage you from operating on your default-settings, because the world of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self” (*Water* 7). This notion also underpins the narrator’s description of his own father’s long suffering:

I knew something of boredom by then, of course, at Hayes, and Riverside, or on Sunday afternoons when there was nothing to do – that fidgety type of childhood boredom that is more like worry than despair. But I do not believe I consciously connected the way my father looked at night with the far different and deeper, soul-level boredom of his job, which I knew was actuarial. (*Oblivion* 105)

Again, the political sphere of society is presented as the perpetuator of our default-setting. In stark contrast to the narrator’s fourth-grade self, who is free to worship the otherness of his fantasy, the father must limit his thoughts to his own boring factual situation, day in and day out, in order to provide for his family. The narrator illustrates the tension between the political realm

and the ethical sphere when he explains that he did not really know his father, who died when the narrator was sixteen. In the course of imagining his father eating lunch on the bench where he took his lunch breaks year after year, the narrator says:

Sadder still was trying to imagine what he thought about as he sat there, imagining him perhaps thinking about us, our faces when he got home or the way we smelled at night after baths when he came in to kiss us on the top of the head – but the truth is that I have no idea what he thought about, what his internal life might have been like. (107)

Here, the father's entrenchment in the world of his career prevents him from fully expressing himself to his children in the ethical space of their mutual love and worship. It is clear that the father's distance from his children reflects the social schema rather than a lack of will to connect with his children because in one of the descriptions that renders the father sympathetic, the narrator says, "Even when my brother and I were small, we were aware that he spent more time with us and took the trouble to show us that we were important to him a good deal more than most fathers of that era did" (104). Thus, through sympathy for long-suffering characters in "The Soul is not a Smithy," *Oblivion* conveys the tremendous difficulty of transcending our default-setting in the face of our politically oriented society.

In contrast to *Oblivion's* accounts of inescapable long suffering, "Good Old Neon" is the collection's most detailed illustration of successful self-obliteration. In chapter 3, we explored an interpretation of Neal's death as his acceptance of the fact that his humanity is conditioned by a miraculous world of signification that unites him with all other living beings and informs his inner universe, which is too profoundly complex to be expressed in language. In the language of *This is Water*, chapter 3 showed that Neal's ethical unity with otherness undermines his self-worship and his consequent sense of inauthenticity. Then, in chapter 4, we saw how Neal's

experience of paradox leads him to overcome the language through which he has constructed his damaging self-concept. Although both of these arguments elucidate the nature of Neal's self-obliteration, they may seem to contradict each other. While chapter 3's argument hinges on the idea that signification constitutes an authentic spiritual unity, chapter 4 asserts that paradox demonstrates language's inherent inauthenticity. This contradiction is actually a further paradox: language is both meaningful and meaningless. Neal offers a classic paradox that illustrates this point: "The paradox is that *the very smallest number that can't be described in under twenty-two syllables*, which of course is itself a description of this number, only has twenty-one syllables in it" (*Oblivion* 168). Here, the paradox's language renders itself logically meaningless, yet the language's self-desensitization still signifies *something*, perhaps a sense of confusion or awe. The meta-signification (or significance) that underlies and unifies all linguistic signification is encapsulated in Neal's explanation of "what it's like" when he says, "But at the same time it's why it feels so good to break down and cry in front of others, or to laugh, or speak in tongues, or chant in Bengali – it's not English anymore, it's not getting squeezed through any hole" (179). The distinction between language and signification has been at play since the first chapter of this essay, where we explored the body's various forms of signification, only one of which is linguistic. This deeper signification is what Wallace refers to in *This is Water* when he identifies "the sub-surface unity of all things" as the essence of ethical other-worship.

Since Neal only transcends his self-worship in death, "Good Old Neon" seems to reinforce the pessimistic message of "Mr. Squishy," that our default-setting may be inescapable. However, Neal destabilizes the concept of death in "Good Old Neon" when he says, "you're thinking here's this guy going on and on and why doesn't he get to the part where he kills himself and explain or account for the fact that he's sitting here next to me in a piece of high-

powered machinery telling me all this if he died in 1991” (*Oblivion* 169). In this passage, Neal denies the assumption that this post-suicide narrative is told through a disembodied voice. Neal’s suicide thus becomes a metaphor for his self-obliteration through acceptance of sub-surface unity. The tragic cycle of Neal’s suffering that occurs before his metaphorical suicide certainly contributes to *Oblivion*’s illustration of the extreme difficulty of learning to worship otherness, but the fact that Neal escapes his self-worship through ego-death rather than actual death shows that self-transcendence is possible through “will and mental effort,” as Wallace argues in *This is Water*.

In “The Suffering Channel,” Skip Atwater also successfully obliterates himself, but in this case, the oblivion-of-self seems much less permanent than in “Good Old Neon.” We have already explored Atwater’s self-obliteration in chapter 1 as part of our investigation of *Oblivion*’s illustration of our freedom to modify our phenomenological style of being-in-the-world, our default-setting. In this section, the interpretation that Atwater indeed succeeds in overcoming his default-setting centers on the fact that Atwater is described as “well adjusted” (*Oblivion* 298). This term also appears in *This is Water* when Wallace says, “People who can adjust their natural default-setting this way are often described as being ‘well adjusted,’ which I suggest to you is not an accidental term” (*Water* 2). Unlike Schmidt, who clings to the idea of his ability to make a difference in society, Atwater manages to free himself from the notion that he will someday write “a syndication grade human interest column for a major urban daily” (*Oblivion* 270). Since this desire, this form of self-worship, contributes to Atwater’s sense of identity, he must destroy his self-concept to eliminate a certain form of suffering. This self-destruction is accompanied by the birth of a new identity, though, and with this new identity come new forms of self-worship and suffering. For instance, Atwater is deeply upset by the fact

that his coworker Ellen Bactrian thinks that he is “not really quite as spontaneous a person as he liked to seem” (258). The narrator adds, “Nor was Atwater stupid, and he was aware that his being so disturbed over what Ellen Bactrian apparently thought of him was possible evidence that she might actually have him pegged, that he might be not only shallow but at root a kind of poseur” (258). Even though Atwater has performed an adjustment through self-obliteration, he still has a harmful self-concept, similar to that of Neal, where he perceives himself to be inauthentic. “The Suffering Channel” thus emphasizes the cyclical nature of self-transcendence, which is a lifelong process of adjusting.

Though Atwater certainly continues to suffer from his investment in his political identity, his self-adjustments correspond with his attunement to the ethical sphere. Atwater’s relative comfort with his self-concept as a “polished, shallow, earnest, productive, consummate corporate pro” allows him to direct his attention to the otherness that he confronts in his line of work. Much of “The Suffering Channel” is driven by Atwater’s commitment to promoting Brint Moltke’s art, by which he feels “moved and redeemed” (282). This spiritual experience of art is a worshipping of otherness that interrupts Atwater’s anxiety about his identity. Furthermore, during Atwater’s sexually-charged discussion with Amber Moltke, the narrator explains that Atwater’s own work is also motivated by otherness: the otherness at the heart of philosophical questioning. After Amber reveals her desire to exploit her husband’s art in order to become famous, the narrator says, “The truth is that what Amber Moltke was confiding seemed to Atwater very close to the core of the American experience he wanted to capture in his journalism...The paradoxical intercourse of audience and celebrity...The conflict between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance” (284). Insofar as Atwater’s journalism expresses a philosophical, universalized idea of “what it’s like,”

as Neal puts it, this work constitutes an ethical moment of accessing a transcendental spirit or truth through self-erasure.

In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell offers a crucial paradox: “I must disappear in order that the search for myself be successful” (Cavell 352). Philosophy can be understood as an ethical worshipping of the otherness that characterizes the unknown or the question, and the act of writing philosophy may constitute an ethical relation of communication between philosopher and reader. *Phenomenology of Perception*, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, *The Claim of Reason*, *This is Water*, and Atwater’s journalism all have this ethical quality of communicative description, but *Oblivion* is a much more immersive act of communication. *Oblivion* is composed of stories, fictional realms populated by characters who are products of the author, certainly, but are not the author himself. In creating these characters and their world, Wallace exercises literary empathy; he loses himself so completely in the otherness of his work that in *Oblivion*, the word “I” no longer refers to Wallace. In *This is Water*, Wallace portrays literary empathy, the act of imagining narratives of which the self is not the center, as the quintessential form of self-obliteration. When he describes his method for overcoming the frustration caused by being stuck in traffic among environmentally destructive SUV’s, Wallace says:

The thing is that there are obviously different ways to think about these kinds of situations. In this traffic, all these vehicles stuck and idling in my way: It’s not impossible that some of these people in SUV’s have been in horrible auto accidents in the past and now find driving so traumatic that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive; or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he’s trying to rush to the hospital, and he’s in a way bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am – it is actually *I* who am in *his* way. (*Water* 6)

Throughout this essay, we have seen how *Oblivion* illustrates phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy, and this illustrative capacity shows that Wallace is so thorough in his empathetic creation of fictional worlds that their inhabitants share our complex philosophical struggles. The depth of Wallace's fiction also allows us to empathize with the characters of *Oblivion*, to forget ourselves and become immersed in the narratives through our vicarious desire to know what happens next. With *Oblivion*, Wallace not only illustrates the value of the ethical worship of the other; he also *performs* this worship and invites us to perform it with him. When we read *Oblivion*, we unite with David Foster Wallace in our mutual, ethical self-obliteration, and in the exploration of the human subject that comprises the bulk of this essay, we search for ourselves through our disappearance into *Oblivion*.

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