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RESPONSE ARTICLE

David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts

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This essay responds to the critique of my work advanced by Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts in "White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest's* New Sincerity," published in *Orbit* in March 2017. In addition to refuting their misrepresentations of my work, I provide a positive re-articulation of my core reading of the New Sincerity aesthetic, outlining its connection to concepts such as affect, intention, undecidability, literature, and neoliberalism.

In the nearly nine years since David Foster Wallace's death in September 2008, interest in his work has steadily increased. The period has witnessed a series of cultural and critical milestones: the posthumous publication of a Wallace novel, a book of non-fiction, a commencement speech, and an undergraduate philosophy thesis; a best-selling biography, three books of interviews, a number of dramatic performances, and two movies; multiple academic conferences, monographs, edited essay collections and journal articles; the opening of an archive, the establishment of an international society and a journal devoted solely to Wallace's work. Amid this rush to canonise such a relatively contemporary author—there is no comparable figure of Wallace's generation or younger whose writing has received such critical and popular attention—it is no surprise that voices have been raised querying the process. As early as 2011, the phrase “Wallace backlash” was being employed in online publications (Giardina 2011, Warnica 2011) in response to articles criticising Wallace's writing and literary influence that had begun to appear in mainstream outlets including *Prospect Magazine* and *The New York Times* (Dyer 2011, Newton 2011). In the wave of responses that followed the release of the biographical film *The End of the Tour* in 2015, some commentators turned their ire on the “Wallace Industry” for an alleged hijacking of Wallace's reception and public image (Shechtman 2015, Lorentzen 2015). More recently still, these two themes have sometimes combined in feminist commentary that connects the perceived maleness of Wallace's writing with the makeup of his readership and his place within a broader patriarchal culture (Fischer 2015, Coyle 2017, Crispin 2017).

Within the academic reception of Wallace's work, such a critical turn has taken longer to develop, but it has recently become a notable phenomenon. It appears to have been generated by two coalescing trends. As Wallace has entered into the mainstream of American literary culture, his writing has come to the attention of established scholars in the field (and in related fields), not all of whom have been impressed by what they see (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, McGurl 2014, Hungerford 2016). Meanwhile, a younger generation of critics, whose graduate studies were undertaken in a milieu already steeped in Wallace's influence, have begun to question

elements of his work that have come to seem problematic from a political point of view (Williams 2015, Hayes-Brady 2016, Thompson 2017). While it has been interesting to see arguments about the “Wallace Industry” occasionally migrate from the broader culture into the assessments of academics—most notably in Mark McGurl’s diagnosis of Wallace’s readership in the *Infinite Summer* project (2014: 41–43) and Amy Hungerford’s complaint that *Infinite Jest*’s success owes more to clever marketing than to genuine literary merit (2016: 158–59)—it has been unusual to see specific individuals other than Wallace himself be held accountable for his commercial and critical prominence. Most of the recent scholarly critiques of Wallace have been directed squarely at his own writing, rather than at those who have offered prior readings of it. While interpretative disagreements have certainly emerged, it has been rare to see one scholar of Wallace being forcefully called out by another for what s/he has put into print.

Against this background, it was more than a little disconcerting to encounter the charges levelled against me and my work by Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts in “White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest*’s New Sincerity,” published by *Orbit* in March of this year. Reading the abstract to this article, I learned that I am a proponent of “an elitist understanding of the ‘literary’ text,” that I “misconstrue Jacques Derrida’s notion of iterability and undecidability,” that my work supports “forms of racist and sexist exclusion,” that my reading “works to restore white men to positions of representative cultural authority” (2017: 1). Continuing on through the piece, I found myself taken to task for additional sins: my treatment of affect, my alleged disdain for popular culture, my formalism. The first half of Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts’s article consists of a reading of my 2010 essay “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” with some glancing references to work I’ve published since that essay appeared. The second half marshals this reading in the service of a critique of the racial politics of *Infinite Jest*. Throughout, the authors’ target appears to be a dual one: their sights are trained both on Wallace himself and on a critic whose “influential reading” is taken (rightly or wrongly) to be celebrating Wallace’s writing (2017: 1).

When the initial shock of confronting such an aggressive attack on my work began to abate, the question of how best to respond necessarily raised itself. The issue of how Wallace's fiction represents and handles racial and sexual difference is clearly a serious and important one, and it is a subject that has been taken up sensitively by a number of scholars (Fitzpatrick 2006, McGurl 2014, Morrissey and Thompson 2014, Araya 2015, Cohen 2015, Hayes-Brady 2016, Thompson 2017). In my current book project I devote individual chapters to the complex relationship between New Sincerity aesthetics and questions of gender and race, and had I the space here to respond fully to all aspects of Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts's article I would explain why their approach to this political subject matter—which involves employing categories drawn from Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Toward a Global Theory of Race*—seems to me less persuasive than approaches that emphasise historical and cultural context (e.g. Cohen 2015), style and genre (McGurl 2014), or archival research (Thompson 2017). In working on this response, however, I have found it impossible to approach these broader political questions without first addressing the specific technical and theoretical claims made by the article's authors about my work on New Sincerity. Since Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts have elected to premise their critique of *Infinite Jest's* racial and gender politics over the second half of their article on a reading of my work over the first half, it seems appropriate that my attention be directed to the part of their essay in which the key claims against my writing are made. In what follows, therefore, I have put the direct critique of Wallace to one side, and focused on correcting what I see as the article's misrepresentations of my argument. In doing so, I have also taken the opportunity to re-articulate the core ideas of my position in positive form. Because the authors overlook so much of what I have published on New Sincerity in the years since 2010, I have found it necessary in this response to cite my own work far more frequently than I would normally consider doing. I hope that, in the circumstances, the reader will forgive such an approach.

Affect, Intention, Performance

My first qualms with Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts's article emerge as early as its opening sentence. Here and throughout, the authors mobilise the term "affect" in a specific and symptomatic way. The reader is informed that in my early overview of

Wallace studies as an emerging field (Kelly 2010b), I argued that an essay by A. O. Scott “helped engender the common understanding of Wallace’s work as an attempt to renew sincere affect in the face of postmodern affectlessness” (2017: 2). However, the notion of “postmodern affectlessness” (or further down the authors’ first paragraph, “affectless self-consciousness”) is nowhere to be found in my writing. This is an exemplary case of something that happens more widely in Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts’s article, where they conflate my account of New Sincerity with claims made by Wallace, particularly in his non-fiction but also in some of the more seemingly didactic passages of *Infinite Jest*. It may appear as if, in Wallace’s description of irony in “E Unibus Pluram” or his depiction of Hal in *Infinite Jest*, the primary target of his fiction is “postmodern affectlessness,” but even if one can argue that (and I think it’s a dubious argument), this is not for me the focus of New Sincerity writing. As I have argued in many places, New Sincerity primarily names an aesthetic response by a generation of novelists to the challenge to older forms of expressive subjectivity that coalesced in the period during which they began writing.¹ In the original essay the authors discuss (Kelly 2010a), I focused on two contexts for understanding this challenge: the impact of “theory” (specifically Derrida’s theory of “general writing”) and the rise of advertising to central prominence in Western, and particularly American, culture. In work published since then, I have expanded this dual focus to enumerate and explore further contexts for understanding New Sincerity writing, contexts that are variously intellectual, institutional, technological, political and aesthetic.² Rather than “postmodernism,” which has been the most prominent term used by critics to historicise the fiction of Wallace’s generation of writers, the term that I now think best encompasses all of these contexts is “neoliberalism”: hence the title of my monograph-in-progress, *American Fiction at the Millennium: Neoliberalism and the New Sincerity*.

What I have never implied in any of this work is that the self-consciousness dramatised and explored so thoroughly in Wallace’s fiction is somehow “affectless”:

¹ “Expressive subjectivity” is not a term I will treat in detail here: I define it in Kelly 2014 and explore it further in Kelly 2017a.

² Some of these contexts are enumerated and briefly sketched in Kelly 2016.

rather the opposite. By highlighting the intersubjective and social consequences of the historical situation he saw facing his generation, Wallace was led, I argue, to place great emphasis on the trope of sincerity, which Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal helpfully describe as “an indispensable *affective* (hence, social) process between subjects” (2009: 5, emphasis in original). But this turn to sincerity is not a renewal of affect from a non-affective state: my work is not “premised,” as Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts suggest, “on an unexamined binary of sincere affect versus affectless irony” (2017: 8). Rather, subjects in Wallace’s fiction are depicted as what we might call *originally affected*: they enter the world not as the autonomous and free subjects imagined by many traditions of philosophical and political liberalism, but as always already in a highly affective relation to themselves, to others, and to the conditions of their world. If they go on to perform an affectless pose, this is only as a pre-emptive defence against being further affected. I therefore agree fully with the line the authors quote from David Rando’s 2013 article – that affectless irony can be “described as a *product* of emotion, specifically the emotions of anxiety or fear about emotional vulnerability itself” (qtd. 2017: 8) – but would point out that it has a precursor in this passage from my 2010 New Sincerity essay:

David Foster Wallace’s fiction, in contrast, asks what happens when the anticipation of others’ reception of one’s outward behaviour begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic. Former divisions between self and other morph into conflicts within the self, and a recursive and paranoid cycle of endless anticipation begins, putting in doubt the very referents of terms like “self” and “other,” “inner” and “outer.” (2010a: 136)

Perhaps I don’t make fully explicit here that this “recursive and paranoid cycle of endless anticipation” is an affective and emotional experience, as much as it is a structural outcome of life in a neoliberal order. But in a 2012 article I refer to what I call the “anxiety of anticipation” that Wallace appends to the Dostoevskian dialogic model he otherwise relies heavily upon. “Wallace adds an extra element to the mix,” I write, “which rests in the anticipatory anxiety his characters feel when addressing

others. Speakers in Wallace's fiction are often depicted as desperate for genuine reciprocal dialogue, but find that their overwhelming need to predict in advance the other's response blocks the possibility of finding the language to get outside themselves and truly reach out to the other" (2012a: 270–71).

While I hope these quotations make my point, I would also say that one reason for leaving relatively implicit a discussion of affect in passages such as these is that I have always been wary of reducing Wallace's literary intervention to his depiction of psychological or bodily states. Individual psychology is evidently a big part of his focus as a writer, but in my view an overemphasis on this aspect of his work risks overlooking other dimensions of his engagement with contemporary life, dimensions through which we might more clearly begin to derive a politics from the New Sincerity aesthetic. I have placed particular emphasis, in this regard, on reading Wallace's fiction in relation to van Alphen and Bal's call for a "new theorization" of sincerity, one that can rethink sincerity's rhetorical basis "outside of its bond with subjectivity" (2009: 5) (or, as we might put it more precisely by importing the language of Lionel Trilling, outside of its bond with a certain conception of subjective authenticity). Van Alphen and Bal stress the formidable influence of a present-day media-sphere in which "performance overrules expression" (2009: 5), and it is precisely this shift from expression to performance that Wallace sees as both a threat to sincerity but also its condition of possibility in a "new" form. As I argue in my 2014 "Dialectic of Sincerity" essay, the epitome of this shift from expression to performance is the AA model in *Infinite Jest*.

Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts are broadly right to suggest, therefore, that on my reading of Wallace, "Performativity, then, is all there is" (2017: 5). Performativity is indeed the vehicle through which Wallace enacts his vision that—to quote the title of a course taught at Enfield Tennis Academy—"the personal is the political is the psychopathological" (1997: 307). But the claim that the authors twin with this insight about performativity, that in my reading of Wallace "there is no intentional subject either to know or to be known" (2017: 5), is a simplification of my argument about the role of intention in New Sincerity fiction. In order to explain why Wallace and his generational colleagues might be searching for a form of sincerity that does

not reinstitute a traditional notion of expressive, authentic subjectivity, I have found it useful to reconstruct an implicit distinction made in *Infinite Jest* between “intent” and “motive.” These two poles of the broader category of intentional subjectivity capture concisely the problem Wallace saw with the version of the subject prevalent in his own time. On the one hand, there can be no sense of human agency without “intent”: this is the horror that lies behind the description of the eyes of those subjects who have viewed the “Infinite Jest” film as “Empty of intent” (1997: 508). “Intent” here names something like the minimal orientation towards the world presumed by phenomenology; it is a correlative of being “originally affected.” The victims of the film have lost intent and become affectless – in that they no longer respond to stimuli as brutal as having their fingers forcibly removed – only because they have been affected to a truly terrifying extent. On the other hand, Wallace’s narrator employs the term “motive” – in phrases like “*sincerity with a motive*” (1997: 1048) – to suggest a form of intention that sets out to manipulate the other in the service of self-interest. For Wallace the problem of resisting this form of intention – of identifying intent without motive – was less a conceptual conundrum than a historical one: the central anxiety his fiction performs and interrogates is that all relations towards the other exhibit only motive, that all characters (including the author himself) are no more than neoliberal entrepreneurs of the self. As we shall see more fully in my conclusion to this response, in Wallace and other New Sincerity writers this worry about motive leads them, in their representation of key characters and in the rhetoric of their narrative voice, to perform the negation of conscious intention altogether. This aesthetic negation of intention—which often doubles as a direct appeal to the reader to fill the gap left by this negation—is what makes sincerity impossible while simultaneously marking the possibility of its renewal.

This language of possibility and impossibility moves us inescapably into Derridean territory, which is where the thinking of New Sincerity began for me.³ But

³ As Jeffrey Severs notes in a careful engagement with my work in his excellent recent book on Wallace, my 2010 essay undertakes its analysis by “[d]escribing *Infinite Jest* and parts of *Brief Interviews* in the language of double binds that populates both texts” (2017: 120). In much of my subsequent writing on New Sincerity I have moved away from Derridean terminology, preferring a less technical and specialist vocabulary where

before fully embracing this move, it is worth observing that Wallace was hardly alone in his historical moment in taking up the trope of performativity against a perceived cultural overemphasis on the authenticity of the expressive, intentional subject. Around the same time, many radical theorists of gender were doing much the same thing. Judith Butler is perhaps the most celebrated exponent of an argument that places performativity at its centre, identifying in the repetition of acts both the naturalisation of oppressive gender norms and the means of subverting those norms. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's vision seems less politically optimistic than the early Butler's, in that the performative horizon for AA subjects is not the overturning of sociopolitical structures that oppress them but simply the possibility of surviving from day to day under those structures. Wallace therefore displays scepticism concerning the socially subversive or emancipatory qualities of performativity, and can be seen in this regard to share more with the humanist leanings of the later Butler. Wallace's New Sincerity aesthetic can also be compared fruitfully to the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and particularly her highly influential argument for "reparative reading" against "paranoid reading" (the earliest version of this argument was published in 1996, the same year as *Infinite Jest*). Wallace's fiction consistently dramatises the negative consequences of paranoid reading—how it leads to the kind of solipsistic loop Sedgwick identifies—alongside the difficulties that attend any move to reparative reading. Indeed, it is particularly the way reparative reading can be mobilized and exploited by white males that is the central focus of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Throughout this collection, the hideous men being interviewed have an overtly paranoid relation to their own behaviour, interrogating what they have done in the past and are likely, on that basis, to continue doing in the future. Yet this self-analysis simply allows them to evade responsibility for their actions and turn a false power of decision over to the woman they address (often the silent interviewer Q.), asking for a reparative response.⁴ The move from paranoid to reparative reading is made

possible. The present response re-articulates my arguments through a Derridean language primarily because it is on this ground that Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts have chosen to critique my work.

⁴ I deal in more detail with this narrative structure, and ask more generally whether and how we might read *Brief Interviews* as a feminist text, in Kelly 2017b.

particularly problematic in the final interview, “B.I. #20,” which concerns a female hitchhiker who tells the male interviewee a story of how she was raped and almost killed by a “mulatto.” Gender and race are clearly a big part of the subject matter for this story, and the interviewee’s attempts to mobilise the hitchhiker’s reparative reading for his own reparation—“I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story” (1999: 318)—are evidently meant to be read in a paranoid or suspicious manner by the reader. In her essay, Sedgwick argued that the traditional epistemological question, “Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know?” should be displaced by the questions, “What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving-again of knowledge of what one already knows? *How*, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?” (2003: 124). This displacement is something that likewise occurs in Wallace’s writing: it is where much of the ethical energy of his fiction resides.

In my original essay on New Sincerity, I made many of the above points about Wallace’s relationship to the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (or “paranoid reading”) in connection with Derrida rather than Sedgwick (2010a: 138). This was largely because I preferred (rightly or wrongly) to stress the more theoretical side of Wallace’s innovations rather than the “touching feeling” side.⁵ My sense was that Wallace critics had mostly emphasised the latter, partly in recognition of the fact that Wallace’s readers so clearly responded to his fiction in surprisingly personal ways despite its intellectual complications. These critics had therefore failed to focus clearly enough, to my mind, on explaining what was new in Wallace’s treatment of sincerity, philosophically but also aesthetically. My primary interest when it comes to Wallace has always been in how he creates his effects (and affects) through singular sentences and complex story structures, and what larger lessons we might draw from his aesthetic experiments for our understanding of literary form in the twenty-first century. Each in their own way, his peers and inheritors—including figures like Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan, Tom McCarthy, George Saunders, Colson Whitehead and

⁵ Lest there be any ambiguity, I am quoting here the title of Sedgwick’s book containing the final version of her essay.

Zadie Smith—have responded both to the affective quality of his fiction and to its technical brilliance, and I don't think we can fully understand their work without reckoning with Wallace's impact on contemporary writing.

Popular Culture, Literature, Iterability

If we now return to Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts's mischaracterisation of my reading of Wallace "as regenerating sincere affect in the face of unemotional affectlessness," we can see how this mischaracterisation leads directly onto their next charge against my work, which is "the cultural elitism that motivates the New Sincerity" (2017: 8). This cultural elitism has two related strands in their account: on the one hand my assumed disdain for "popular culture"—"the irony Kelly misreads as affectless is also an irony that he associates with popular culture" (2017: 8)—and on the other hand my supposed overemphasis on the literary text as the key site for encountering the New Sincerity aesthetic.

In addressing the first of these strands, I deliberately place "popular culture" in quotation marks because I'm not at all certain what Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts mean to signify in their use of the phrase. Early in their article, they contrast my "cultural elitism" with "a popular postmodern irony" that appears to be exemplified by "advertising in particular" (2017: 3). The phrase "popular culture" or "pop culture" comes up a few times over the next few pages, but each time it lacks positive content and seems only to name something I'm taken to be averse to. Later in the essay there is some implication that Wallace's non-fiction—as opposed to his fiction—could count as "popular culture," but none of this is very clear. A good example of how the authors use their own lack of clarity to tar me as a cultural elitist comes at the top of page 6, where I am taken to be promoting a distinction between "on the one hand, a pop culture irony that alienates the subject and, on the other hand, a literary irony that takes the death of the subject as a given." They go on immediately to reiterate that "Kelly associates pop culture irony particularly with advertising," which makes it seem as if, since I am critical of advertising, I am critical of all pop culture. But given that I never use the term "pop culture" or "popular culture" in any of the work they cite, the assumption that my critique of advertising is a critique of popular

culture more generally is simply the authors' invention. If it's the case that Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts want to defend advertising as an exemplar of popular culture, adopting a once trendy but now dubious cultural studies approach that stresses the benign face of capitalism, then I would be comfortable lining myself up with the plethora of Marxists, from Horkheimer and Adorno onwards, whose critique of advertising as an enabler of the consumer society probably needs no glossing.

I would also point out that the phrase "New Sincerity" is itself drawn from what one could legitimately describe as "popular culture." The authors acknowledge this in their first footnote: "Kelly's use of the term 'New Sincerity' as the primary descriptor of his reading of Wallace (and various other writers he considers to be writing in Wallace's wake) nonetheless situates it within this zeitgeist" (2017: 2n1). I would put this slightly differently: my impulse to use the term—capital letters and all—came from my encounter with it in various online manifestations during the mid-to-late 2000s. My sense then, as now, is that its application to Wallace's fiction could help to explain both why so many critics and commentators seem compelled to describe Wallace as sincere (or as caught up with the problem of sincerity), and how his fiction might relate to a broader interest in sincerity within contemporary culture. Rather than dismiss popular culture as a sea of misinformation, in other words, my instinct is to assume that popular "memes" arise for good reason, and that if enough people are talking about a phenomenon then that phenomenon must be at least partially valid as a description of something real.⁶ So while I am glad that the authors think my work represents "the most thorough attempt to theorize how literary sincerity might operate in the aftermath of the purported death of the subject" (2017: 2n1), my initial aims were in fact more modest. I simply wanted to take a term that seemed to be prevalent in contemporary culture, and give it some historical weight and conceptual rigour. The positive response to my work in "popular" as well as academic

⁶ I feel the same way, incidentally, about the term "neoliberalism," which is more ubiquitous today than "New Sincerity" ever was at its popular peak. I'm aware that there are critics on the left who would like us to stop using a term that so often seems to be cited as the explanation for all contemporary ills, yet it seems to me more productive to take a term with popular valence and help to give it depth, rigour and clarity. With "New Sincerity" I had to do some necessary groundwork; with "neoliberalism" there are thankfully many other scholars leading the way.

venues has therefore been a gratifying development for me, which would hardly be the case if I were a card-carrying cultural elitist.

But the charge of cultural elitism brought by Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts contains a more substantial element than is present in their vague references to popular culture. This element is tied to my supposed misunderstanding and misapplication of the work of Jacques Derrida. The authors are in some ways quite careful in their reconstruction of my reading of Derrida. However, having outlined that reading in a mostly accurate way, they then attempt to correct my understanding of two key Derridean concepts, arguing that I “corral” the implications of iterability and undecidability “within an elitist understanding of the ‘literary’ text” (2017: 1). For them, this serves illegitimately “to tame the implications that Derrida’s work has for the formal boundaries [Kelly] seeks to uphold” (2017: 9).

The claim the authors’ argument rests upon here, that the distinction I make between literary and non-literary contexts is inconsistent with Derrida’s notion of general writing, is simply wrong. There is nothing in the theory of general writing that prevents making such a distinction, as long as we do not cast it as a hard-and-fast one, ignorant of institutional histories, social norms, and political projects. As is well known, Derrida himself set out to write a doctoral thesis on “The Ideality of the Literary Object,” and devoted a large number of essays to exploring the peculiar qualities of literary texts. A selection of these essays are collected in *Acts of Literature*, and in his introduction to that volume Derek Attridge quotes Derrida remarking in an interview that “my ‘first’ inclination wasn’t really towards philosophy, but rather towards literature, no, towards something that literature accommodates more easily than philosophy” (qtd. 1992a: 2). This “something” is best understood as a particular relationship between the singular and the general which is also the core of iterability, and which the texts we call “literary” enact in a particularly vivid way. So while, as Derrida writes in “The Double Session” (a text DT Max tells us Wallace “reveled in” while at Amherst [2012: 38]), “there is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no literary-being or being-literary of literature” (1992a: 177), there is nonetheless a distinctive kind of reading that literature asks for. In Attridge’s helpful gloss, literature names a “linguistic practice in which we habitually celebrate the unique, instead

of finding it a hindrance, in which we usually have little objection to the impossibility of abstracting a detachable meaning or moral" (1992a: 14). Moreover, this involves a particularly self-conscious performance of iterability by the literary text, which should be understood not as a static object but as an event: "it does not possess a core of uniqueness that survives mutability, but rather a repeatable singularity that depends on an openness to new contexts and therefore on its difference each time it is repeated" (1992a: 16).⁷

This "eventness" of literature is what I have in mind when I draw on Wallace's distinction between "environment" and "tool." Iterability is an "environmental" condition of language that literary texts thematise in their eventness, in a way that complicates the clear route to meaning implied by the notion of a "tool." Derrida alludes to the difficulty of using literature as a tool when he observes that "poetry and literature have as a common feature that they suspend the 'thetic' naivety of a transcendent reading" (1992a: 45). In other words, when we read a literary text we know that we cannot simply move from the language on the page to some non-linguistic referent. This feature is what gives literature its anomalous political status, what makes it a "strange institution," since it simultaneously allows an author to "say everything" while having his/her words risk not being taken seriously for their referential force. "In the end, the critico-political function of literature, in the West, remains very ambiguous," Derrida remarks. "The freedom to say everything is a very powerful political weapon, but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction" (1992a: 38). As a result, Derrida stresses that the questioning force of literature must lie not so much in its propositional content—although this is clearly not irrelevant—as in its form:

Sometimes this questioning occurs more effectively via the actual practice of writing, the staging, the composition, the treatment of language, rhetoric, than via speculative arguments. Sometimes theoretical arguments as such, even if they are in the form of critique, are less 'destabilizing,' or let's just say alarming, for 'metaphysical assumptions' than one or other 'way of writing.'

⁷ For a fully developed account of literature as a "singular" event, see Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*.

A work laden with obvious and canonical 'metaphysical' theses can, in the operation of its writing, have more powerful 'deconstructive' effects than a text proclaiming itself radically revolutionary without in any way affecting the norms or modes of traditional writing. (1992a: 50)

By emphasising Wallace's "way of writing" as the key to his New Sincerity aesthetic, I am not, as Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts claim, "straightjacket[ing] the sign's iterability as only applicable to literature" (2017: 9). Like many other critics influenced by deconstruction, I find the sign's iterability not to be *solely* applicable to literature but to be most interestingly explored by looking at what we call literary texts, and specifically at modern texts that, as Derrida puts it, "all have in common that they are inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature" (1992a: 41).⁸ But perhaps it is time to explain in more detail what I mean when, as I've done many times already in this essay, I describe New Sincerity as "an aesthetic." Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts would no doubt see this choice of term as another sign of my "cultural elitism," so it's worth pointing out that taking an interest in the specific character of the aesthetic hardly represents a marginal pursuit in literary criticism. One only has to glance at the key texts of Russian formalism, New Criticism, the Frankfurt School, as well as criticism influenced by deconstruction, to see that my engagement with the particularity of literary and aesthetic contexts places my work squarely in the mainstream of literary-critical history. Perhaps in their defence of "popular culture" the authors would be willing to disdain many of these critical schools for their "cultural elitism." But what would they do with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose celebration of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and his World* is one of the most famous anti-elitist

⁸ Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts claim in a footnote that my privileging of Wallace's fiction as the site of his New Sincerity aesthetic is inconsistent with my claim in another essay that "Wallace's non-fiction need not simply be read in the shadow of his fiction" (Kelly 2010b, quoted Jackson and Nicholson Roberts 2017: 9n4). Whether deliberately or not, the authors have taken this quote out of context: what I go on to show in the sentence and paragraph in question is that Wallace's non-fiction has been receiving attention from scholars on its own terms and as a contribution to canons of non-fiction, i.e. not simply as a key to his fiction, or even in relation to that fiction. More broadly, I see no contradiction between acknowledging the value and interest of Wallace's non-fiction and arguing that it cannot explain everything that goes on in his fiction.

arguments in the history of literary criticism, but who nonetheless thought that the novel represented a special case of discourse? Indeed, the dialogism and polyphony specific to the novel were precisely where the form's anti-elitism lay for Bakhtin, since the novel was a place where discourses could enter into dialogue with one another on a level plane, and a character could even, as Bakhtin argued in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, gain enough autonomy to challenge the all-knowing and potentially tyrannical power of the author. This challenge to the author's dominance of the text is partly what I think Wallace appreciated in Dostoevsky; as I'll argue below, it is also how he came to conceive of the role of the reader in relation to his work.

Turning now more squarely to the question of the aesthetic in Wallace will allow me not only to clarify how New Sincerity aesthetics operate in the specific environment of the literary text, but also to address Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts's critique of my application of another key Derridean term, undecidability. Undecidability is indeed central to New Sincerity writing as I interpret it, although not in the way the authors outline in their article. In the next section of this response, I will show how they misconstrue the role of undecidability in my work; this contributes to their misunderstanding of the role I conceive for the reader of Wallace's texts, addressed in my final section. The misunderstandings in question then lead to the political charges the authors bring against New Sincerity writing and my account of it, charges I will not address directly here but which I plan to speak to in my future writing.

Gift Aesthetics, Undecidability, Sincerity

At the heart of Wallace's aesthetic practice lies the figure of the gift. His devotion to Lewis Hyde's book *The Gift* is well known: a copy of the original 1983 text is one of the most marked-up books in his library at the Harry Ransom Center archive, and in a blurb written for the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition in 2007, Wallace claimed that "No one who is invested in any kind of art, in questions of what real art does and doesn't have to do with money, spirituality, ego, love, ugliness, sales, politics, morality, marketing, and whatever you call 'value,' can read *The Gift* and remain unchanged."⁹ To the already lengthy list in this sentence one could add

⁹ Excerpted on the book itself, this blurb (which is longer than I have quoted here), appears in full on Hyde's website: <http://www.lewishyde.com/publications/the-gift/comments-reviews>.

“sincerity,” which Wallace argued as a primary “value” of art in essays such as “E Unibus Pluram” and “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” and which he thematised consistently in his fiction. Wallace can be understood to inherit this triangular relationship among art, gift, and sincerity directly from Hyde, in a process the latter describes in *The Gift*: “The future artist finds himself or herself moved by a work of art, and, through that experience, comes to labor in the service of art until he can profess his own gifts” (1983: 47). Here, *The Gift* would be the proto-artwork, teaching Wallace to “labor” in the service of art and of his own gifts. Significantly, Hyde distinguishes the term “labor” here from the term “work.” While work is something “we do by the hour” and “if possible, we do it for money,” labour represents an act of creation for its own sake, where time and money are far less central, and the ego is displaced: “Things get done, but we often have the odd sense that we didn’t do them (1983: 50).¹⁰ In his copy of the book, Wallace underlines this sentence, marks most of the passage it comes from, and circles the number at the top of the page, actions which indicate the special significance these arguments have for him.

Yet while throughout Hyde’s text the gift is understood to be something inherently positive and even transformative, and while Wallace’s private and public commentary on the book seems to align him with this view, the latter’s fiction suggests a more complicated, more double-edged conception of the gift. For a start, it is a conception much less sanguine about the separation of work (and pay) from the labour of creation. As Zadie Smith remarks in her incisive essay on *Brief Interviews*, “In these stories, the act of giving is in crisis; the logic of the market seeps into every aspect of life” (2009: 258). Take, for instance, the poet in “Death is Not the End,” who appears less interested in labouring to share his gifts than in accumulating recognition for those gifts through scholarships and prizes. Or take the screenwriter Ovid the Obtuse in “Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko,” whose sole criterion is that he gets paid and who, when his screenplay is killed at the end of the story, suffers not a whit: “Ovid the

¹⁰ Confusingly, this is something like the reverse of how the terms “work” and “labor” are used by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, a text that also resonates strongly throughout Wallace’s writings, though there is less direct evidence for its influence on him.

Obtuse ended up making out okay on the whole thing; don't you worry about Ovid" (2000: 255). But while Wallace is clearly offering here examples of artist figures as comically cynical narcissists, this does not mean that it is necessarily straightforward to give a gift, nor for the artist to treat his/her work as one. Indeed, as Derrida argues, giving a gift may in fact be impossible.

In *Given Time*, his most extended treatment of the gift, Derrida asks whether a gift must be something that "interrupts economy," whether "[f]or there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt" (1992b: 7, 12). If we accept this premise, then any appearance of the gift must negate its ideal status, because recognising the gift as a gift already exposes it to a kind of exchange. Derrida explains this idea from the point of view of both the receiver and the giver of a gift. For the receiver, recognising a gift already implicates him/her in a debt relation: "If he recognizes it *as* gift, if the gift *appears to him as such*, if the present is present to him *as present*, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent" (1992b: 13). For the giver, likewise, the gift must not appear as a gift, "otherwise he begins, at the threshold, as soon as he intends to give, to pay himself with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give" (1992b: 14). For these reasons, Derrida argues that "[a]t the limit, the gift as gift ought not appear as gift: either to the donee or the donor" (1992b: 14). In other words, the gift is impossible: it can only come into being by negating its ideal form. Furthermore, even the ideal form of the gift would be what Derrida calls "undecidable": rather than inherently good, as it is for Hyde, for Derrida the good of the gift is inextricable from the harm it can do:

if giving is spontaneously evaluated as *good* (it is *well* and *good* to give and what one gives, the present, the *cadeau*, the gift, is a good), it remains the case that this 'good' can easily be reversed. We know that as good, it can also be bad, poisonous (*Gift, gift*), and this from the moment the gift puts the other in debt, with the result that giving amounts to hurting, to doing harm. (1992b: 12)

In Wallace's fiction, we can see the consequences of this joint impossibility and undecidability played out in a story such as "The Devil is a Busy Man," again from *Brief Interviews*. "Three weeks ago, I did a nice thing for someone," the story begins. "I can not say more than this, or it will empty what I did of any of its true, ultimate value" (2000: 190). Throughout this short text, the nameless narrator worries that revealing his identity as the giver of the gift "would infect the 'motivation' for my nice gesture," replacing his intended generosity with "desiring gratitude, affection, and approval" (2000: 190). As is typical of a Wallace story, this self-reflexive situation soon escalates vertiginously: the narrator finds that he wants desperately to be "acknowledged as a 'good' person" (2000: 191) while still remaining anonymous; meanwhile the receiver of the gift alludes to it in a tone "transmitting gratitude, approval, and something else (more specifically, something almost hostile, or embarrassed)" (2000: 192). These emotions operate at an unconscious level in the interaction, governed by the undecidability Derrida outlines, with the gift simultaneously causing pleasure and pain, and revealing the inextricability of good and harm in the reactions of both giver and receiver. In the story's closing sentence, the narrator concludes that his attempts to be a "'good' person" have failed:

Thus, I showed an unconscious and, seemingly, natural, automatic ability to both deceive myself and other people, which, on the "motivational level," not only completely emptied the generous thing I tried to do of any true value, and caused me to fail, again, in my attempts to sincerely be what someone would classify as truly a "nice" or "good" person, but, despairingly, cast me in a light to myself which could only be classified as "dark," "evil," or "beyond hope of ever sincerely becoming good." (2000: 193)

This tortuous sentence is typical of how Wallace handles not only the gift, but also the trope of sincerity in his fiction. Employing a style that accentuates the cerebral approach by the narrator to these ethical questions—the many commas lend the effect of both hesitancy and pedantic precision to what is being said, echoing the "can not" in the story's second line—the sentence eventually converges on a double appearance of the term "sincerely," the second of which occurs in quotation

marks. Trilling's classic definition of sincerity as "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (1972: 3) is here undermined in a variety of ways, since the narrator's "actual feeling" is shown to depend crucially on how he believes others will "classify" his behavior, while his "avowal" is complicated by his constant importation of scare quotes into his own analysis. These scare quotes evacuate words like "nice," "good," "dark" and "evil" of any stable ethical reference, while the quoted phrase "beyond hope of ever sincerely becoming good" displaces the speaker's internal conscience onto the voice of the other, a kind of postmodern superego or Law of the Father. The speaker seems both to be suspicious of the ethical vocabulary he is employing and to need desperately to affirm it, while some of his quotations—for instance "motivational level"—even suggest that he may be drawing his vocabulary from popular texts in self-help or business (one might think of Maslow's motivational hierarchy of needs). The "sincerity" of the narrator's use of all these terms becomes both an overriding consideration in reading the story—indeed, it is the story's central theme—and, for structural reasons, something that is impossible to determine with certainty, for both the narrator himself and for the reader.

In their article, Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts question my invocation of undecidability in describing stories like the above. They appear to assume that my underlying purpose in highlighting moments of undecidability staged by Wallace's fiction is to validate the author's sincerity at a higher level, to make readers believe (in) him. Just as I apparently "straightjacket" the concept of iterability, here I introduce unwarranted "proscriptions" into the application of undecidability, with the aim of "theoretically legitimating Wallace's endeavour to facilitate sincere affect" (2017: 9, 10). The authors counter that this surreptitious project of theoretical legitimation must in fact come at the expense of undecidability: "If the 'epistemological humility' of Wallace's texts aims to generate a decision in favour of New Sincerity, then it is not undecidable" (2017: 10). Despite my claims to the contrary, then, generating a decidable decision in favour of New Sincerity is what Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts see my work as really all about.

But what does "to generate a decision in favour of New Sincerity" actually mean? If it means to generate a decision in favour of sincere affect, then this seems

incoherent, since affect is not the result of a decision. If it means to generate a decision in favour of the author's sincerity, then this can hardly be the purpose of New Sincerity fiction. It is difficult to imagine why one would write fiction if convincing the reader of one's own sincerity was the prime motivation: it seems like a category error to treat the form in that way. Moreover, the whole point here is to question the possibility of understanding sincerity as a simple good. Even if one were somehow to achieve sincerity, would this necessarily be a good thing? Would sincerity's effects always be good? And can good intentions ever be fully divorced from the consequences of actions?¹¹ New Sincerity fiction is defined by the way it raises and scrutinises questions like these, not by the way it answers them in support of the imagined sincerity of the author. Amid the problems in Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts's argument here is their misunderstanding of the relationship between undecidability and calculation. Seemingly convinced that they are exposing the dark underbelly of my method, the authors contend that my reading "elucidates an element of Wallace's fiction wherein a seemingly undecidable moment is in fact highly determined and already calculated" (2017: 11). But as the example of "The Devil is a Busy Man" demonstrates, there is in fact no opposition between undecidability and calculation. Calculation does not negate undecidability, but simply confronts us with its implacable quality at the structural heart of ethical concepts – sincerity, the gift – that orient our actions. This is not primarily a matter of affect, although Wallace certainly generates affect from it. Such affect is in turn described more accurately by the term "anxiety" rather than "sincerity." Sincerity is something like the subject of these stories; anxiety is a good description of their form.

Yet perhaps this talk of form will not convince Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts, since "formalism" turns out to be among the charges they bring against my work. They claim that my employment of Derridean concepts serves to "validate [my] own formalistic approach" and "enable [my] own formalism," which "translates into a cultural elitism" (2017: 10, 3). I have already indicated why their aspersions of elitism are

¹¹ This question lies at the heart of my analysis of Dana Spiotta's New Sincerity novel *Eat the Document* in Kelly 2012b.

unwarranted, but in order to address the formalist objection directly, I will conclude my response by gesturing more firmly to the historical dimension of New Sincerity writing. While a full historical account is evidently beyond my scope here, I want nonetheless to indicate how history contaminates the form of New Sincerity fiction, and how this contamination of form by history produces undecidability by representing the possibility of the future as both chance and threat.¹² I also hope that concluding in this way can help to address what I believe to be the most fundamental error in Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts's article, namely the authors' misrepresentation of the role I posit for the reader of Wallace's fiction.

History, Contamination, Reading

The move towards history can be made with the help of a recent essay by Lee Konstantinou, which aims to “subsume both Hyde and Derrida into a larger, sociologically informed literary history of recent gift discourse” (2016: 125). Konstantinou sets out to historicise Derrida's concept of the impossible gift in order to highlight what in Hyde's model might have proven so attractive to contemporary authors like Zadie Smith and Wallace. Rather than offer “a political economic vision for a future gift economy,” Hyde in *The Gift* emphasises the possibilities of the present: “he instead seeks to articulate the conditions of compatibility of capitalism and the gift economy for the individual artist. He defends the claim that the gift might endure—even thrive—despite the ubiquity of the calculating disposition that dominates contemporary life” (2016: 126–27). On Konstantinou's reading, influenced here by Pierre Bourdieu, Derrida's image of the gift does not so much oppose this dominant “calculating disposition” as participate in it. Derrida is taken to exemplify a particular vision of the gift that marks “the waning days of the Cold War, after capitalism's

¹² The language of chance and threat here derives from Martin Hägglund's *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, generally taken to offer the most thorough available account of the logical basis of Derrida's philosophy. Emphasising the temporal co-possibility of chance and threat, Hägglund defines undecidability as “the necessary opening toward the coming of the future. The coming of the future is strictly speaking ‘undecidable’ since it is a relentless displacement that unsettles any definitive assurance or given meaning” (2008: 40). Or elsewhere: “undecidability elucidates what it means to think temporality as an irreducible condition” (2008: 97).

apparent global triumph" (2016: 126). Against this historical background, the strict theoretical division Derrida appears to posit between gift and exchange becomes for contemporary authors an unhelpful "economistic standard," "a view whose aporetic habitus actively forestalls the possibility of the gift" (2016: 125). Konstantinou thus sees the turn towards Hyde's version of the gift as an attempt by writers to ward off the threat represented by Derrida's model, which has in fact become identical with the threat of capitalist commodification. As he puts it: "If you are a literary writer who has been told that the gift is necessarily contaminated by exchange relations (and, correspondingly, that pure literature is impossible), but you also suspect that such an argument could become an alibi for the spread of cynical reason, you might be tremendously interested in Hyde's self-referential solution" (2017: 127).

Konstantinou's response to Hyde's self-referential solution is to highlight its logical outcome for the writer's psyche, with the lesson of *The Gift* turning out to be: "Make your art in the gift-sphere, but when entering the marketplace, you had better find a good agent" (2016a: 134). This opposition between the gift-giving creative artist and the market-traversing literary agent gets re-imagined by contemporary writers as a division within the self, a way of protecting the artist side of the psyche from contamination by the agent side. Hyde brings us this far, but Konstantinou takes us further by introducing into this division—which seems to preserve the gift as a purely positive force—the insights of recent work on the creative economy that identifies the autonomous artist figure as the ideal neoliberal worker. "Hyde's account of the gift participates in the idealizing discourses of the 'artist-author,'" Konstantinou writes (2016a: 128), and as such the imagined split between pure creator and literary agent turns out to be unsatisfactory, because the pure creator side of the dichotomy cannot in fact escape the taint of neoliberal interpellation. You may think you are a pure creator—or at least that part of you is a pure creator—but what you actually are is a good neoliberal subject, an example of how one should love one's work and produce one's wares for a capitalist market that is indifferent to use value except as an indirect route to keeping labour costs down. Konstantinou's analysis here presents a version of what has become familiar in contemporary scholarship as the "neoliberal knot," whereby any imagined escape from the knot only ends up reinforcing neoliberal

entrapment at a higher level.¹³ The purity of artistic intention, then, becomes irretrievable in the face of contamination by capital, of commodification. Rather than embrace “Hyde’s *dispositional* Third Way” (2016a: 134), Konstantinou thinks that we should radically rethink our political and cultural institutions to counteract these forces of capitalism and commodification.

While I support this general proposal, my analysis nevertheless has a different emphasis. I want to see New Sincerity fiction less as an unwitting symptom of the problems Konstantinou identifies in Hyde’s model than as a determined struggle to respond to those very problems. In other words, fiction like Wallace’s is highly self-conscious not only about its own implication in a neoliberal logic, but also about the difficulty of diluting that implication by reverting to a division within the self whereby an autonomous creator could be separated off from a canny literary agent. While much of Wallace’s non-fictional rhetoric might point towards the possibility of this separation—I’m thinking particularly of the well-known interview statements to Larry McCaffery on the differences between art and entertainment and on “having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved” (1993: 148)—Wallace’s fiction tells a different, more anxious story, where the cross-contamination of love and money becomes the inescapable condition of writing in a neoliberal age. If New Sincerity fiction is sincere about anything, it is this cross-contamination, this basic threat to a pure sincerity, in life and art. But the dialectical move on which New Sincerity is premised involves a deconstruction of these two poles—the pure and the contaminated—so that the former is no longer the positively valued term. And it is here that the final piece of the puzzle, the reader, becomes crucial. The reader is the figure via whom purity and autonomy can be questioned, and contamination can be rethought as something not to be resisted but embraced.

¹³ I borrow the phrase “neoliberal knot” from Jedediah Purdy (2014: 15), whose essay “The Accidental Neoliberal” offers a useful account of how this knot operated for would-be critics of neoliberalism during the pre-2008 period.

It is the insights of deconstruction that allow us to see contamination not as an inherently negative trope, but as a necessary condition for existence. “Contamination is not a privation or a lack of purity,” writes Martin Hägglund in his account of Derrida’s work, “it is the originary possibility for anything to be. Thus, a pure gift is not impossible because it is contaminated by our selfish intentions or by the constraints of economic exchange; it is impossible because a gift must be contaminated in order to be a gift” (2008: 37). In New Sincerity fiction, the writer articulates a desire for contamination—“the very desire for a gift is a desire for contamination” (2008: 37)—by invoking a reader who can acknowledge and even co-produce the gift of writing. The key split in the authorial consciousness dramatised in these texts is therefore not between artist and agent, but between writer and reader. The reader becomes the internalised figure that can contaminate the pure autonomy of the writer, an autonomy that has come to serve an ideological function under neoliberal capitalism.¹⁴ This is a highly affective process, and the undecidability of the gift—its haunting by debt and indebtedness—accounts for the fraught psychodynamics of the writer/reader relationship staged in New Sincerity fiction. The reader is consistently imagined to represent a future beyond what the writer can anticipate, and thus to offer the only possible relief from solipsistic self-consciousness and neoliberal autonomy. But this relief is also a risk. In becoming the internalised figure of history beyond the endless neoliberal present, the reader figures the chance but also the threat of a future that can negate the self-interested gains made by the writer in that present.

¹⁴ There is a broader argument here—taken up in the second chapter of my book-in-progress—about the function of the figures of purity and autonomy for neoliberal ideology. On the one hand, the neoliberal subject is imagined (originally in Gary Becker’s work) as autonomous in the sense of owning their personal feelings and having responsibility for their personal wellness, and acting in an entrepreneurial fashion so that all the gains of their actions return to themselves. On the other hand, the market is imagined (in Friedrich Hayek’s vision) as a spontaneous social aggregator that allows for the pure articulation of preferences and the frictionless movement of capital to feed those preferences, with financialisation instituting a temporal logic in which the future is imagined as a pure product of the present. Underlying both of these dimensions is a faith in economics as a pure and disinterested science. In Bourdieu’s summary, neoliberal discourse imagines that “the economic world is a pure and perfect order, implacably unrolling the logic of its predictable consequences” (1998).

This is the historical situation in which the impossibility and undecidability at the heart of New Sincerity fiction open themselves up to being read dialectically, as expressive of a deep impasse. With this in mind, where Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts err most in their article is in assuming that my articulation of the role of the reader *imagined* by Wallace's texts is coextensive with the role of *actual* readers of those texts. If this were somehow the case, then Wallace's fiction could indeed be accused of coercing its readers into adopting a decidable outlook—"burden[ing] readers with responsibilities," as Mark McGurl has it in his critique of Wallace (2014: 42). Presuming that this is the model of reading I have in mind, the authors try to show that my conception of undecidability is a ruse, and that I am in fact working in league with Wallace to coerce the reader into accepting his sincerity. But Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts are wrong in their implied assumption that I see the role imagined for the reader by New Sincerity fiction as a liberatory one, or one that the reader should be eager to take up. Rather, my argument is that *this is the reader that New Sincerity texts must imagine in the historical situation in which they are written*: in other words, the "reader" of these texts is positioned as the writer's necessary other, because the vertiginous self-consciousness that attends the writing of fiction in the neoliberal age structurally requires an other to relieve it of its burdens. This other must represent a future that goes beyond the limitations of the determining horizons of the present of writing. Highlighting structures of undecidability in his fiction therefore becomes Wallace's way of gesturing to an outside to the historical situation in which he finds himself, without fully pre-empting – as neoliberal capitalism tries to do – what the future may hold. It is the imagined reader who is called on to decide on and in this future, as the famous closing imperative of "Octet" makes explicit.¹⁵

How the *actual* reader responds to a New Sincerity text is of course a different matter to how that text imagines its reader. In my work, I do implicitly propose a role for the reader of New Sincerity texts, but it is hardly the passive and constricted one assumed by Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts's critique. Rather, it is a critical role that

¹⁵ For a brief overview of the way New Sincerity fictions so often end with pleas and questions to an imagined reader, see Kelly 2016.

struggles to establish the historical distance from neoliberal norms that the texts themselves find so hard to imagine. This imaginative difficulty is figured not only in direct appeals to the reader for dialogue and decision, but in the common motif of evacuating conscious intention from the subject who acts. This is a motif I have explored in my most recent published work on New Sincerity, a chapter in the first edited collection on George Saunders.¹⁶ Discussing the dramatised escape from consciousness that concludes so many of Saunders's stories, I attempt to articulate the general meaning of this motif in a formulation that I think it makes sense to quote here in bringing this response to a close:

But this escape—like the escapes from consciousness that structure, in varying ways, the imaginaries of novels like Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001), Dave Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002), Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision* (2005), and Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006)—should not be taken as a positive recommendation or prescription for action in a neoliberal world. Gestures such as these in contemporary US fiction must instead be read both critically—as informed by skepticism of earlier modernist solutions offered through an emphasis on individual consciousness—and dialectically, as an admission of uncertainty about “actual feeling” and actual solutions, as a symptom of the imaginative limits imposed by the dominance of neoliberal capitalism and the “end of history” in these writers' time and our own. In this way, New Sincerity writing frames the outlines of a political project, albeit one not fully articulated but waiting to be taken up, as Zadie Smith has put it, “*off* the page, *outside* words.” As has always been the case, then, these writers in their time can frame the questions. It is up to us, the readers of the present and future, to find the answers. (2017a: 54)

¹⁶ It is also a motif alluded to in Severs's discussion of the gift in his book on Wallace, which deserves far more engagement than I am able to offer here: “people do it, people give, and one path to being sincere and generous for Wallace seems to lie in remaining absorbed in work and not recognizing a need to avow an intention at all” (2017: 121).

The point for the *critical* reader of these fictions, the reader who moves from participating in the text's own imaginary to articulating a critical position on the text, is not to inhabit continuously an undecidable moment, but to read that moment dialectically as expressing a form of historically situated contradiction. This is the direction in which my "formalism" points: this is the historical inter-articulation of neoliberalism and the New Sincerity. In a final irony, it is in fact Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts who evacuate historical context from their approach, particularly when it comes to considering the questions of race and gender over the second half of their article. But substantiating this point, and thereby addressing their critique of Wallace's work rather than my own, is a task that will have to wait for another day.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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