

# **“They’re literally shit”’: Masculinity and the Work of Art in an Age of Waste Recycling**

**Olivia Banner**

“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 literally what they are.”

—David Foster Wallace

This opening conversation of David Foster Wallace’s 2002 “The Suffering Channel” establishes the multiple registers on which art, waste, and their figuration will function throughout the novella. The works of art under discussion are at once both sublime, even sacred, and literally made of shit: and the enunciation (and denunciation) of them through dialogue brings into question how one can characterize, or articulate, the difference between the literal and the figurative within the representational space of print literature. The conversation, which, we soon discover, takes place between two men, also crystallizes the novella’s fundamental concern with how men are figured within the economy of an American print and visual media system obsessed by waste and with how that obsession delimits the possibilities for the male artist.

In “The Suffering Channel,” Wallace reflexively addresses his position as a male writer in a feminized televisual culture through the character Brint Moltke,

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whose shit emerges from his asshole as fully formed sculptures with the intricate and delicate detail of artistic masterpieces. In figuring contemporary artistic production and masculinity through the representational framework of the scatological, Wallace registers the contemporary scene of artistic production through a symbol that, while at once hilarious and disgusting, literalizes the common insult levied on art and artists—"they're shit." Contemporary media culture in the novella has ensured that the male artist/writer not only feels like shit but is also expected to produce waste as fodder for the media system. Such waste production is fundamentally entwined with narratives about a wounded white masculinity. It is, in fact, so entwined that one could say white masculinity is marked for the waste bin, a waste product recycled for mass consumption in a televisual age.

As in his bestselling 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, in "The Suffering Channel" Wallace is very much concerned with the systems of representation that produce and define contemporary narratives, including cultural scripts of gender. The recursive loops of the mediated forms in which these narratives operate—in which the media, both print and televisual, demand that narratives about gender and identity are structured through a prism of wounding—paralyze his male characters and call into question the efficacy of the artist's efforts. The novella includes a tenuous suggestion that the artist's aesthetic response could allow a way out of the self-paralysis that accompanies the stubborn recursivity of contemporary modes of representation. This suggestion, however, is moderated by the recurring background motif of 9/11 and the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers. The continual reminder of a crisis moment in national identity suggests a void, an empty space to which the aesthetic can only respond, not fill. Thus "The Suffering Channel" picks up on and expands one of the themes of *Infinite Jest*, that the self-obsession and narcissism of U.S. media culture inflict a larger set of wounds on global society; it also suggests that such self-obsession and narcissism operate to paralyze particularly men's aesthetic productions. The novella leaves open two possibilities: that, on the one hand, as a product of male artistry, it too is shit, nothing more than a mark of the self-cannibalizing mode of anything produced in the contemporary media market; on the other, that in marking out the system it exists outside its parameters, thus ensuring the elite status of the male author. Either way, what William G. Little has identified as crucial to the American fascination with waste—that the trope of waste provides a mode of seizing the sacred, that it functions to ensure redemption—fails to adhere to this narrative, in which the plot's forward movement is always haunted by the foreknowledge that the events of September 11 will affect its characters by literally turning them into so much waste.

### **The wounding of white masculinity, failed patriarchs, and monstrous mothers**

For William G. Little, American narratives trope waste both in its literal and figurative forms in order to participate in its eventual expulsion. This move promises that waste will be put to good use and "restore individual and commu-

nity to a state of prelapsarian unity” (Little 4). American culture is therefore obsessed with waste because expunging waste allows the system to define itself as clean and proper. Yet there is always something left over in this system, something that exceeds its boundaries and its self-cleansing economy—something wasted, if you will, that hovers at its edges, that will not fit into the neat categories of consumption/production, of self/other, of clean/dirty. Little calls this left-over, this Derridean *différand*, “virtual waste [which] places American consumer culture in an anxiety-producing fix.” For Little, “the nation has rushed to get out of this fix by repeatedly promising to produce solidly masculine bodies and texts” (Little 10).

This promise, though, is one on which the nation repeatedly reneges. As work in masculinity studies has shown, the drive to construct one ideal for masculinity—held aloft in, for example, the vanquishing figure of the strong warrior—obviates a more complicated reality, for there is nothing solid about masculinity in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992), Kaja Silverman, breaking with traditional psychoanalytic theories of masochism that theorized it as a trait specific to female subjectivity, discovers masochism fully operational within male subjectivity. In *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (1998), David Savran, following Silverman’s lead, argues that masochism structures contemporary masculinity. Savran traces the beginnings of an historical “genealogy of the fantasy of the white male as victim” (5) to the works of the 1950s male Beats, who self-positioned as antiestablishment and thus formed a lasting image of the white male hipster as a figure of subversion. This motif grew through the decades until it could be built even into such icons of American masculinity as the action heroes of 1980s blockbuster films, such as Sylvester Stallone in the *Rambo* films, in which his character represents rebellion against oppression. In these situations, the masochistic tendencies of the male protagonist, as well as the victimization he has undergone, first feminize him; in response to such feminization, he then must remasculinize himself, often through violence or a sadistic response to a feminized other.

Similar to Savran’s work, Sally Robinson’s *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (2000) sees representations of the emotional and physical wounding of white men as the response to a perceived historical crisis; in her analysis it is the minority social movements of the 1970s—those of African Americans and women, in particular—that prompt this crisis, which is as much fantasized as real; what is important is that the perceived crisis demands that masculinity respond to allay the crisis. White men welcome the violence that ensues and that may damage their bodies. In fact, they may even masochistically desire it, because it instantiates their desire to claim the same sort of particularized identities claimed by ethnic/racial minorities and women. On the other hand, it is unwelcome, for it is a marker of the price of the embodiment of masculinity, a marker of the loss of power (see also DiPiero). For Robinson, literary representations of emotional and physical wounds often serve as symbols of masochistic positioning, of the male body as victimized at the larger collective level of the group.

“The Suffering Channel” is, to all appearances, aware of the prevalence of narratives of masochistic wounding, encoding these narratives deep within its own. The novella opens with the dialogue quoted in the epigraph between journalist Skip Atwater and one of his editors at *Style* magazine, in which they discuss the shit sculptures of Brint Moltke, which, according to a wire service report, are on display at a county fair in Atwater’s home state of Indiana. Atwater travels there to meet Moltke, who appropriately enough works for Roto-Rooter, and his wife, Amber, in order to convince the Moltkes to let Atwater feature them in his “What in the World” column in *Style*. Because Brint barely speaks—indeed, Amber smacks him in the chest to signal it’s his turn to contribute to the conversation—Atwater is forced to negotiate with Amber over Brint’s appearance in his column. Brint, who, due to his flattened, paralyzed affect, seems to Atwater to be tortured by his artistic skill, conveys no desire to have his very private skill at sculpting his defecation become public. Later, alone with Atwater in the cramped space of his rental car, the obese Amber performs a seduction of the journalist that leaves him badly bruised. During this seduction it becomes clear that Amber desperately wants her husband to appear in the media spotlight of the magazine, so that the couple can rise in importance over their neighbors.

Back at the headquarters of *Style* magazine, the staff, all women, has received some of Moltke’s shit sculptures that Amber has sent them. Awed into silence by the disgusting and yet thrilling nature of the works, they cannot convince the executive editor of the magazine, Mrs. Anger, to publish a feature on Moltke. Instead, the editors decide, they can report on a controversy surrounding Moltke’s art. To create such a controversy, they arrange to have Moltke’s defecatory artistic act broadcast over a new cable channel, The Suffering Channel, whose mandate is to show broadcasts of people at moments of extraordinary pain. The story ends with Amber and Brint at the studios of The Suffering Channel, Skip Atwater observing the proceedings. The artist is perched on top of a toilet outfitted with a video camera, with his wife providing audio commentary that will accompany the video.

Both men clearly suffer, both literally and figuratively, from Amber’s attentions. Her mammoth body badly bruises Atwater’s knee as they couple in his car. Her husband’s shit sculptures are assumed, by all those who see them, to express an inner woundedness and suffering; the novella never explicitly articulates what might have caused psychological trauma, but allows that it could be the product of Amber’s dominating personality or of a childhood made traumatic at the hands of an overbearing, abusive mother. Thus an overwhelming feminine force has backed both Skip and Brint into masochistic positions. However, unlike in Savran’s and Robinson’s analyses, in “The Suffering Channel” masochism is not an internally generated desire of white masculinity so much as what external cultural scripts desire and demand of white men. They are wounded, and they passively submit to such wounding, paralyzed before it.

Both Savran and Robinson note a similar structure in the narratives they analyze: often a wound to masculinity has been caused by the failure of authority to protect men and their positions of power, which provokes a response to reinvigo-

rate masculinity (or, to use another provocative term, to “remasculinize”). The narrative of a failure of authority rose to ascendance in cultural representations in the 1980s and 1990s: it reappeared again and again in visual and literary representations of masculinity, especially in big-budget Vietnam films in which the Vietnam vet is positioned as a victim, left unprotected by the U.S. government (Modleski; Jeffords). It also found voice in popular discourses of masculinity under siege such as that promulgated by the so-called men’s movement, especially in poet Robert Bly’s Iron John mythos, through which Bly bemoaned the perceived lack of a strong father figure for young boys (Pfeil; Robinson). These popular narratives moved to resuscitate a feminized, powerless male figure by remasculinizing him.

“The Suffering Channel” builds on this narrative with a twist: fathers, as symbols of masculine authority, are everywhere dead in the novella, a symbol of the failure of the paternal, but their sons lack the desire and will to remasculinize themselves so that they can take on positions of authority. The sons become just like their fathers, who are likewise demasculinized by their wives. When Atwater travels to meet the Moltkes, his visit inspires him with memories of his own early years in Indiana. He notes that “Mr. Moltke emitted [a scent of Old Spice] in great shimmering waves. Old Spice had been Skip’s own father’s scent and, reportedly, his father’s father’s before him” (248). Stitched into this genealogical narrative of paternity and the paternal—one that stretches farther back than one generation and suggests an unchanging nature to Midwestern masculinity—Brint also resembles Atwater’s father in being dead, paralyzed, to the world:

Atwater [...] noted that [Brint’s] eyes were flat and immured despite his constant smile. The lone time that Atwater had believed he was seeing his own father smile, it turned out to have been a grimace which presaged a massive infarction that had sent the man forward to lie prone in the sand [...] while [he] and his twin brother had stood there wide eyed and red eared, looking back and forth from the sprawled form to the kitchen window’s screen, their inability to move or cry out feeling, in later recall, much like the paralysis of bad dreams. (251)

Atwater experiences his father’s death through a paralysis of action, and Brint Moltke suffers from the same sort of paralysis. A later passage emphasizes Moltke’s ties to a field of dead patriarchs:

When Atwater and his brother had been in the eighth grade, the father of a family just up the road in Anderson had run a length of garden hose from his vehicle’s exhaust pipe to the interior and killed himself in the home’s garage, after which the son in their class and everyone else in the family had gone around with a strange fixed smile that had seemed both creepy and courageous; and something in the hydraulics of Brint Moltke’s smile on the davenport reminded Skip Atwater of the Haas family’s smile. (254-5)

While this passage links Moltke to another dead father, it does so through the specific comparison of Moltke’s smile to the smile of the *son*. In this way Moltke comes to embody at once both the death of the patriarch and the effect of the

patriarch's death on his sons.

The tale of the failed patriarch extends to include a tale of failed brotherhood. Skip Atwater and the intern who oversees him at *Style*, Laurel Manderley, note their confusion over the Moltkes' address at "fourteen and a half Willkie" (281). Skip decides that he should find out who lives at the other half of number fourteen, but he never does so. This failure to follow up narrative threads mirrors the tale's other absent half, Skip's twin brother, who is mentioned twice but never receives any follow-up: he simply disappears from the narrative. The narrator does, however, provide further information about the Willkie address: "Omitted through oversight above: Nearly every Indiana community has some street, lane, drive, or easement named for Wendell L. Willkie, b. 1892, GOP, favorite son" (255). Omitted, indeed: one of the sons is gone from the scene, while those who remain are losers, like the historical Willkie, who lost the presidential election of 1940 to Franklin Roosevelt. In "The Suffering Channel," paternal authority has failed in the Midwest, and the next generation will not bring it back to life. The fraternal as well has slid into a zone of absence. Later in this story, male bonds fail again, when Moltke leaves a sculpted message for Atwater—one of his masterworks, which reads, in cursive, "HELP ME"—to which Atwater can only respond by being overwhelmed with disgust.

As the reference to Willkie as a "favorite son"—that is, a regional favorite—indicates, "The Suffering Channel" distinguishes between a rural Midwest in which people and bodies consume and a metropolitan, sophisticated, culturally productive East Coast—a distinction of which the characters are aware. At one point, Atwater can't figure out whether Amber condescends to him by "playing up a certain stereotype of provincial naiveté—he did this himself in certain situations at *Style*," since he himself came from the Midwest, or whether "she was sincere in deferring to him because he lived and worked in New York City, the cultural heart of the nation." Amber uses these distinctions when she manipulates and seduces Atwater, for "he was absurdly gratified by this kind [of deferring]" (276). Skip Atwater's sartorial style (or lack thereof) "betrayed his Midwest origins to those interns who knew anything about cultural geography" (239). The Midwest functions as a marker for the type of audience that consumes Atwater's writing. Amber states, "Well, I look at *Style*. I've been looking at *Style* for years. I don't bet there's a body in town that hasn't looked at *Style* or *People* or one of you all" (274-5).

Thus Amber, the rural Midwest, consumes; the management of *Style* (made up mostly of women), cosmopolitan New York, produces. This becomes important to the story's figuration of the feminization of culture by the media, as the East Coast women are the producers of a cultural form that Midwestern women then consume, and between the two groups circulate representations of masculinity as wounded. In addition, these differences become represented in the women's approaches to their bodies, which in the case of the East Coast women occurs through ritual activities very different from the passive, wounded acceptance that characterize Atwater and Brint Moltke. Amber's enormity contrasts with the thinness of the female employees of *Style*, where Laurel Manderley,

who is “slender almost to the point of clinical intervention” (245), follows a caloric regimen that “included very precise rules on what parts of her Niçoise salad she was allowed to eat and what she had to do to earn them” (264). Ellen Bactrian, another staff member at *Style*, and the unnamed executive intern conduct a lengthy conversation while working out, side by side and in syncopated strides, on elliptical trainers in the corporate gym. During their workout and subsequent conversation in the locker room, the narrator explores the dynamics of their relationship, in which Ellen Bactrian surveils the executive intern’s physical perfection while the executive intern modifies her behavior to minimize that perfection, so as not to demoralize her employee. Taking the interns’ bodily discipline one step further, R. Vaughn Corliss, head of the cable channel, follows a routine [that] was invariant and always featured a half hour of pretend rowing on a machine that could simulate both resistance and crosscurrent, a scrupulously Fletcherized breakfast, and a session of the 28 lead facial biofeedback in which microelectric sensors were affixed to individual muscle groups and exhaustive daily practice yielded the ability to form, at will, any of the 216 facial expressions common to all known cultures. (272)

In cosmopolitan centers, bodies are carefully disciplined, scrupulously maintained, their appearance constantly policed, and their boundaries rigorously established.

At the same time, such discipline masks not only the cosmopolitans’ anxieties over the possibility of losing control of such bodies but also inner traumas. That same executive intern whose appearance mirrors the seeming perfection of her career trajectory and promise, who is “acknowledged as more or less defining the standard of excellence for interns at *Style*” and “managed to seem at once worldly and ethereal, and moved through the corridors and semiattached cubicles of the magazine like a living refutation of everything Marx ever stood for” (293), bears the traces of inner, private turmoil:

What neither Ellen Bactrian nor anyone else at *Style* knew was that the executive intern had had a dark period in preparatory school during which she’d made scores of tiny cuts in the tender skin of her upper arms’ insides and then squeezed reconstituted lemon juice into the cuts as penance for a long list of personal shortcomings. [...] Those days were now behind her, but they were still part of who the executive intern was. (319)

Even the models of perfection in this story—the celebrities who Atwater later identifies as being key to the management of feelings of insignificance in American culture—must have their private sufferings: R. Corliss dreams of having a cable channel dedicated to celebrities in the act of shitting. Body discipline that masks underlying traumas finds further expression in scenes of toilet training. The Atwaters’

own [toilet training] had been early, brutal, and immensely effective—it was actually during toilet training that the elder twin had first learned to pump his left fist in self exhortation. Little Roland Corliss [...] had experienced no formal toilet training at all, but rather just the abrupt unexplained withdrawal of all

diapers at age four. This was the same age at which he entered Holy Calvary Lutheran Preschool, where unambiguous social consequences motivated him to learn almost immediately what toilets were for and how to use them, rather like the child who is rowed way out and then taught to swim the old fashioned way. (296)

Bodies thus reflect the disciplining meted out to them.

The strictly policed bodies of the urban women stand in stark contrast to Amber Moltke, whose physical appeal to him, Atwater writes in his notes, is due partly to the fact that Amber, “the sexiest morbidly obese woman Atwater had ever seen,” was “a relief from the sucking cheeks and starved eyes of Manhattan’s women. He had personally seen *Style* interns weighing their food on small pharmaceutical scales before they consumed it” (250). What Atwater doesn’t realize but quickly becomes clear to the reader is that Amber resembles Atwater’s mother. When Amber seduces Skip, she wears the same style of clothes as Atwater’s mother wore (274). Explicitly belaboring the obvious, the narratorial voice comments of that night:

A person who tended to have very little conscious recall of his own dreams, Atwater today could remember only the previous two nights’ sensation of being somehow immersed in another human being, of having that person surround him like water or air. It did not exactly take an advanced clinical degree to interpret this dream. At most, Skip Atwater’s mother had been only three fifths to two thirds the size of Amber Moltke, although if you considered Mrs. Atwater’s size as it would appear to a small child, much of the disparity then vanished. (311-12)

Amber Moltke represents the maternal; in addition Atwater’s mother resembles Brint Moltke’s mother, the former described as a churchgoing woman who “had made little [Skip] go and cut from the fields’ edge’s cople the very switch with which she’d whip him” (250), and the latter described also as physically abusive (268-69). Amber, then, and her Midwestern roots are linked with these other Midwestern mothers to form a group of maternal figures that threaten, wound, surround, and swallow up the story’s two central male characters, its artist and its writer.

This woundedness, which, to recall, the novella tells us Moltke’s shit sculptures express, then, ties the novella’s artist and writer figures to a monstrous maternal. The feminine body, as linked to the maternal, becomes in most instances a culture’s other, what Julia Kristeva calls its abject. Purification rites are then brought to bear around acts of defilement—Kristeva’s two favorite such examples are menstruation and defecation. These acts “shift the *border* [...] that separates the body’s territory from the signifying chain; they illustrate the boundary between semiotic authority and symbolic law” (Kristeva 73), or in other words, between the maternal and the paternal. In Brint Moltke’s art, however, the typical purification rites of our culture around defilement and defecation do not hold. Skip Atwater claims that “everyone has personal experience with shit” and thus can relate to Moltke’s sculptures. Intern Laurel Manderley disagrees, saying, “It’s done in private, in a special private place, and flushed. People flush



so it will go away” (244). Thus Moltke’s shit sculptures do not uphold the boundary between the feminine and the symbolic. His sculptures define him as abject, feminized, caught within the realm of the maternal.

This ability to make art out of shit raises the question: is he abject or abjecting? That is, is his art consciously subversive, consciously presenting a cry of rebellion? *Why* does he make art out of shit? Again and again, those who view his art ask: How does he do it? Atwater tells him, “I think I speak for a lot of folks when I say how curious I am to know how you do it [...] Just how the whole thing works.” Moltke, in his one moment of speech, answers Atwater: “I’m not sure” (252). In light of ongoing questions about the core originating experience that produces such a skill, the Moltkes at first prefabricate a story that Brint’s talent was discovered while he was stationed overseas in the first Gulf War, when other soldiers noticed his sculptured shits during latrine duty. However, Amber later provides a different “primal scene,” in which Brint’s skill results from the overzealous toilet training and physical brutality of his mother, a monster of controlling behavior who, after finding Brint masturbating in private, forces him to masturbate in front of the whole family. Amber tells Atwater:

Skip, between just us two now, what we’ve got here is a boy whose folks beat him witless all through growing up. [...] His daddy was all right, it was more his mother. One of this churchy kind that’s so upright and proper in church but back at home she’s crazy evil, whipped her own children with cords and I don’t know what all. [...] What do you suppose a little boy’s toilet training is going to be like with folks like that? (268-69)

Moltke’s art and body, forced out into the public arena, thus register a traumatic maternal authority, one that has imprinted Brint’s body with her own vicious authority. His art, in bringing what has been expelled and should be expunged back into the realm of the symbolic, places Moltke as abject. Yet this is a position Amber has forced him into, not one of his own making. For it is Amber who has arranged for her husband’s skills to be brought into the public arena, and it is Amber who creates this background story about maternal cruelty as the motivating force in Brint’s artistic skills. Thus Brint Moltke is twice marked as abject by the story’s representations of the maternal. His skills are also mediated through these stories that construct him as a bearer of the wounds of childhood, a mediation that Amber supplies in her fervor to ensure that their story receive media coverage. Indeed, Amber constructs her husband’s story according to the demands of televisual and print media, which want his story to be one of pain. Atwater prods her with a comment designed to elicit the generic elements of the script of male wounding: “[Brint’s] woundedness,” he offers, “must be complex” (273). Indeed, such a comment begs for Amber to participate in the pop psychological narratives on offer in contemporary televisual narratives of trauma.

### **The feminization of the televisual**

In the 1990s artists in visual media trafficked in the abject with such frequency as to create a genre of abject art. Hal Foster argues that this traffic in obscenity was the aggressive act of artists attempting to reinstate material reality

into a system of representation that had been dulled by the televisual's hegemony in determining the parameters and substance of the field of representation, and of contemporary experience. "'Obscene' does not mean 'against the scene,'" writes Foster, "but it suggests an attack on the scene of representation, on the image-screen. As such it also suggests a way to understand the aggression against the visual so evident in contemporary art and the alternative culture—as an imagined rupture of the visual-screen, an impossible opening onto the real" (Foster 113-14).<sup>1</sup> In "The Suffering Channel," the ascendancy and triumph of the electronic media, of the "visual-screen," has already divested art of rebellious content. Whether such art takes the form of Brint Moltke's shit sculptures or Wallace's detailed literary scatology, it cannot overcome the dictates of the televisual marketplace or the consumptive desires of the public for more of it: it cannot "open onto the real." Because television turns private moments of suffering into public displays, because the business of television demands that its broadcasts construct narratives of trauma and wounding, the system prefigures a space for the male artist for which he must produce artworks of spectacles of suffering and abjection.

Such a representation of art's space in the age of televisual representation picks up on an anxiety about literature's status outlined by Kathleen Fitzpatrick. For Fitzpatrick, contemporary male-authored narratives consistently bemoan the impending obsolescence of literature in light of the ascendancy of visual media, but such a complaint reveals more about the complainant than it describes the actual state of things. This anxiety of obsolescence in fact "requires social privilege to be mobilized as a discourse and conceals the repressed anxiety that the threatened disappearance of that privilege engenders" (Fitzpatrick 20)—an anxiety about threats to the privilege of white male authors. In "The Suffering Channel" Skip Atwater suffers severe anxieties about the meaningfulness of his journalistic pieces in a literary world being taken over by audiences of the broadcast medium, an audience that constantly demands that men be offered up as spectacles of suffering, by both the female audience and production team alike.

In his well-known essay "Mass Culture as Woman," Andreas Huyssen reads modernism as an aesthetic project of high culture artists determined to define their work against and away from mass culture, which was positioned as female, beginning with its roots in nineteenth-century industrialization and continuing in its enlargement with the advancement of capitalism:

the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-optation, commodification, and the 'wrong' kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture. (Huyssen 53)

Such a nightmare haunts Atwater, who never believes that he occupies the status of the modernist artist, but yet sees his commodification played out in Moltke's artistic struggles. The well-educated staff of *Style* takes up Huyssen's graph of the valuation of modern art—wherein painting occupies the status of an elite modernist art object, the photo that of the devalued mass cultural object—at

their gym sessions. The executive intern asks: "Do we all really value a painting more than a photograph anymore?" Ellen Bactrian responds: "A great painting certainly sells for more than a great photograph, doesn't it?" (317). This tension in valuation supplies the novella's opening lines (is it shit or art?); it also underwrites its closing scene, whose climactic question centers on whether Moltke will produce a reproduction of a pop culture phenomenon (the famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe standing over a grate) or a high culture sculpture (the *Victory of Samothrace*).

For Moltke, the arrival of mass cultural media in his private world becomes a nightmare wherein his private art is made public and his private act is mediated. The "nightmare" of mass culture is its channels of suffering, which construct artistic experience as trauma so that it can be brought to the widest audiences. The name of the novella's cable channel, The Suffering Channel, parodies contemporary talk show culture, which treats pain as its fodder, and where the driving narrative of the transformation wrought through witnessing becomes a process that demands the production of an ordinary trauma that needs to be healed. In this popular culture discourse that Mark Seltzer identifies as "commonplace" and "self-evident," it follows that "the contemporary public sphere represents itself to itself, from the art and culture scenes to tabloid and talk TV, as a culture of suffering, states of injury, and wounded attachments" (Seltzer 254). Moltke and Atwater, as cultural producers, are trapped within this self-recycling system, in which they must represent themselves (or the subjects of their art, in Atwater's case), or be represented as, wounded.

Mirroring Huyssen's argument, "The Suffering Channel" clearly marks the audience for such mass cultural productions as feminine, especially as Amber embodies that audience for print media and the televisual. Amber's anecdote about wanting to be on TV was "a completely perfect representative statement of what it was like to be one of the people to and for whom he wished his work in *Style* to try to speak" (287). Later Amber tells Atwater that when she once saw a soap opera star during a shopping mall appearance:

She had realized then that her deepest and most life informing wish [...] was to someday have strangers feel about her mere appearance someplace the way she had felt, inside, about getting to stand near enough to [the soap opera star]. (287)

This anecdote, told during the rental car seduction, pushes Atwater over the edge: "Almost tremendously keyed up and abstracted by Mrs. Moltke's confidences, he found himself nearly overcome by the ingenuous populism of the [soap opera star] anecdote" (287). While Atwater sees this tale as ingenuous, the narrator calls its artlessness into question: "What Amber *appeared* now to be confiding" (284; my emphasis). Amber evinces a knowingness about her function and importance as an audience, about how she, as an audience, is constructed by television and by the magazine, and about the uses to which she can put such knowledge.

Such knowingness about her mass cultural participation follows Wallace's expository description of the contemporary television viewing audience, laid out

in his 1997 essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." Wallace describes his anxieties as a postmodern writer in the televisual age—that the televisual has engulfed and destroyed his audience, and that the literary artist no longer has any effect. Unspoken in Wallace's analysis is another underlying fear: that the specifically masculine aesthetics of postmodern literature have been destroyed by the dominance of the televisual, and that writing may once again return to a pre-postmodern, feminized mode. In his analysis, contemporary television addresses its viewers in a manner that acknowledges how savvy and well-versed they are in televisual culture, creating a system of spectatorship in which media consumption recycles back to itself, by creating an audience that, through television, is able to watch itself watching itself. This has had a specific, and worrisome, effect on the practice of high-culture fiction writers, who can no longer assume that an ironic mode will assure a distanced readerly response, one in which the reader engages in a form of critical reading—one that helps get the reader to, in Foster's words, an opening onto the real. Irony has been divested of any political or social efficacy through its usurpation by the televisual. "Television," Wallace writes, "has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism that television requires of Audience in order to be commercially and psychologically viable at doses of several hours per day" (49-50). What, then, is a writer to do? While Wallace notes that "my plangent noises about the impossibility of rebelling against an aura that [...] vitiates all rebellion [may] say more about my residency inside that aura [...] than they do about the exhaustion of U.S. fiction's possibilities" (81), he offers up the possibility that the "new rebel" writers:

might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching [...]. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. [...] The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. [...] The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how *banal*.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. (81)

This concluding description in his essay sets up a category of writers who sound suspiciously like female fiction writers, whose predominant genres have historically been the sentimental novel and the melodrama, who as viewers of television and as consumers of culture are often figured as "overcredulous" and "soft." Importantly, the postmodern writers whom Wallace documents in his essay—those who "risked the shock and squeal"—are almost all male. Thus the unacknowledged anxiety driving Wallace's construct of U.S. fiction's predicament—a fantasmatic construct, I might note, much like the fictional, perceived "crisis" that Sally Robinson sees in the narratives of the wounded male she analyzes—is that such fiction may have to return to feminine modes.

In describing the television viewing audience as a feminized group that sits

and accepts television's instructions to consume more of it, Wallace echoes early twentieth-century modernism's anxious response to feminized mass culture, as Huyssen has described that response. For Huyssen, however, postmodernism's claims to vitiate against the feminization of culture obscured a deep system of patriarchal relations that produced mass cultural forms obsessed with gender violence, and that placed control of mass cultural productions in the hands of men. But "The Suffering Channel" flips this equation. The tale's multiplicity of female interns at *Style*'s offices—the sheer number of times we are reminded of the existence of women in high-level staffing and decision-making positions, as well as their machinelike replication of each other—all have attended the Ivy League "Sister schools"; "no fewer than five of the interns [...] were named either Laurel or Tara" [261])—constructs the publishing arm of mass culture as under women's control. It is the men in the story on whom the televisual performs its violence; the televisual threatens white masculinity, and specifically white male artistic production. In this sense, "The Suffering Channel" perhaps does say more about Wallace's "residency inside that aura" than he intended.

### Masculinity as void

Let me return to the scene of Atwater's seduction, which leaves him with a wounded knee, a "kind of sexual injury" (312), wherein the act itself confuses pleasure and pain: "a very muffled set of what could have been either screams or cries of excitement began to issue from the tilted vehicle" (288). Furthermore, "anyone trying to look in the either side's window would have been unable to see any part of Skip Atwater at all" (288). Amber thoroughly engulfs Atwater with her sizable self. Much like the dynamics Sally Robinson unearths at work in U.S. narratives of white masculine authorship from the late 1970s and 1980s, in which the "aesthetic separation of the masculine high and feminine low culture is the separation of the creative imagination from the material body, that body will always return with a vengeance ... [and it is] primarily women, the feminine, or feminism that initiates the return of the body" (18), here Amber embodies the devouring nature of the televisual—she has just confessed her desire to be on TV—that swallows Atwater up in an embrace by the televisual marked both painful and pleasurable. In the narratives Robinson investigates

there is something *pleasurable* in the wounding of the white male body, a pleasure not unlike that produced by the spectacular staging of wounds in masochistic narratives. This surplus of pleasure keeps the representations from being geared entirely toward the revenge of masculinity on the feminine; and the fact that [these novels do not end] with an entirely triumphant and newly empowered male body suggests that this is not possible even if it were desirable. (18)

Similarly in Wallace's story there is no such revenge; rather, masculinity is reduced to the paralyzed state of reflecting on its own potential paralysis. As Atwater lies in his motel room post-seduction, his eyes continually return to a picture that sparks a nightmare vision about more paralysis—a paralysis induced by its horrific aesthetic:

There was something essentially soul killing about the print of the vegetable head clown that had made Atwater want to turn it to the wall, but it was bolted or glued on and could not be moved. [...] Standing angled at the bathroom's exterior sink and mirror unit, it occurred to him that these were just the sorts of overabstract thoughts that occupied his mind in motels, instead of the arguably much more urgent and concrete problem of finding the television's remote control. (313-14)

Caught up in the paralysis of meta-abstraction, Atwater's recourse out is the desire to subsume himself in the televisual.

What distinguishes Wallace's narrative from so many American texts of the wounded male is this lack of a reenergizing narrative that would restore a phallic dominant masculinity at its end, whether such resuscitation comes through male bonding or through the triumphing of the masculine over the feminine. Instead, the traumatized male ends the tale in a state of uncertainty, poised between possibilities that the narrative does not fix one way or the other. In its final section the novella details a production crew's efforts to prepare Moltke to be videotaped atop a camera-rigged toilet. While the crew has told Moltke they'll broadcast his excretory act live—and while “a special monitor taking feed from below will give the artist visual access to his own production for the first time ever in his career” (328)—in fact

the piece's physical emergence will not really be broadcast. [...] Edited portions of [an interview with Amber Moltke about Brint's childhood and shame] will compose the voiceover as TSC viewers watch the artist's face in the act of creation, its every wince and grimace captured by the special camera hidden within the chassis of the commode's monitor. (328)

The positioning and arrangement of Moltke conclude the story:

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 this case would see, not his own emergent *Victory*, but a searing and amorphous light. (329)

High culture has won out—Moltke has been asked to produce that high-cultural icon of the female form, the *Victory of Samothrace*—but his experience of it is muffled, indeed whited out through a technology that loops back on itself. The system obliterates the artist himself, its technological process of production and consumption bypassing him completely, making of him so much virtual waste.

The novella's final phrase—“a searing and amorphous light”—hearkens to traditional conceptions of the sublime in its suggestion of the arrival of a moment of enlightened vision that transcends material reality. In doing so it joins this moment of narrative uncertainty to the sublime as a response to the televisual's incursions into the private realm of the artist. Yet the sublime here serves as an empty signifier, a gesture, only a possibility (“the artist *would see*”). For Joseph Tabbi, American narratives of the technological sublime have often represented it as the failure to signify. “What the sublime exceeds,” he writes, “is the very

possibility of symbolization” (Tabbi 13). Thus this possible moment of sublimity within the closed circuit of the televisual gestures to the emptiness of signification in the era of production and consumption, of waste recycling.

This paralysis and recursivity infects many of the story’s characters—indeed, interiority does not characterize those figures working within, or ruling over, the media system. Just as in *Infinite Jest*, in “The Suffering Channel” characters are self-aware to the point of self-parody; for example, at the magazine’s year-end party, Mrs. Anger, the magazine’s executive editor, makes her

annual essay at self-parody. [...] Bedecked in costume jewelry, mincing and fluttering, affecting a falsetto and lorgnette, holding her head in such a way as to produce a double chin, tottering about with a champagne cocktail like one of those anserine dowagers in Marx Brothers films. (249)

R. Corliss makes a similar impression: “The sense Skip Atwater had gotten [...] was that the producer’s reclusive, eccentric persona was a conscious performance or imitation” (273). There is no subjectivity to these characters: instead they play out scripts already created for them, just as Brint Moltke must play out a masculinity scripted for him by the needs of the televisual marketplace. Such recursivity is built into the structure of the art system that Corliss and Anger control; it founds the system of televisuality as well. For *Style* will not risk running a story on Brint Moltke’s obscene art, but it will cover a controversy about the art—Mrs. Anger calls upon R. Corliss to include coverage of Moltke on his cable channel. The system that creates individuals who imitate and parody themselves also remediates its art objects to the point of feedback glare. Rather than suggesting that this possibility of a sublime moment, of an encounter with the aesthetic itself—that is, for example, an encounter with the act of reading the novella—might provide an exit from the endless Mobius strip of this feedback loop, this “searing and amorphous light” suggests a nihilism that extinguishes the system itself.

### **U.S. masculinity’s haunting by its global others**

Reminders of another explosion haunt the novella, one that points to a broader set of cultural relations outside the story’s primary emphasis on America. *Style* is published from the 16th floor of 1 World Trade Center; its next issue is planned for July 10, 2001; work will soon begin on a September 10 issue; and of the executive intern, Wallace writes, “she had 10 weeks to live” (326). These markers of 9/11, and its consequences for this media company headquartered in the World Trade Center, bring into focus that the story’s circulation of wounded masculinity is intrinsic to the United States, where 9/11 functioned as a crisis moment in national identity and was mobilized to reinvigorate narratives of nationalism and masculinity. The novella gestures to a web of interconnected multinational relations, where narratives about the paralysis and woundedness of Anglo-American masculinity have consequences beyond the private realm of one man’s toilet training.

This is the larger field to which Wallace points: the American televisual obsession with trauma and suffering has larger ramifications than just within a

circuit of, as Atwater puts it, “the single great informing conflict of the American psyche[:] the management of insignificance” (284). The novella’s insistence on these reminders of events that sparked a national crisis of identity situates such a mode of masculinity as specific to the Anglo-American scene while it indicates that such pathologies spread through the world and are visited back onto the U.S. national scene. The videotaping of Moltke for *The Suffering Channel* occurs on July 4, which again indicates this psychology’s specificity to Anglo-American masculinity and to the national makeup.

Thus “*The Suffering Channel*” provides a subtle critique of one dominant narrative of wounded masculinity. The novella’s two artist figures follow a trajectory of wounding through which they encode the author’s aesthetic dilemmas and difficult position as a writer in a televisual culture. Yet Wallace does not, as do many authors of narratives of wounded American masculinity, “conclude with an almost magical restitution of phallic power” (Savran 37), nor does he position the injured white male as an individual, particular symbol of injuries to a larger collectivity (Robinson 18). Rather, “*The Suffering Channel*” sets up a representational space from which to critique the cultural scripting of white masculinity as abject, only to show the failure of representation to provide any alternative to such a positioning. In a field of such recursivity, Anglo-American masculinity becomes a void, a lack that only inspires paralysis. The aesthetic response ensured by the artwork provides only a quick fix, the temporariness of uncertainty. The artwork itself functions within an economy that recycles narratives of waste, but not, as William Little has written of the American narrative of waste and redemption, in order to “deliver the modern individual from the temptations, uncertainties, and drags of a scene characterized by rapid proliferation of the virtual” (Little 4). This is not a tale of redemption, of second acts. Instead, such a culture’s future, Wallace’s narrative implies, lies in how the pathologies it broadcasts to the world are then visited back upon it. Its media system of waste recycling ensures that its own structural base—the very architectural form that supports it—will be reduced to rubble, to a void. Yet in its very performance of this circuit, Wallace’s work does not disavow the system: rather it lets us know that, even if they’re literally shit, artists still need us to witness their work. We are implicated in this endless void of waste recycling, but, of course, we are free to remain critical of the novella’s construction of a besieged masculinity, even encouraged to do so by the novella’s seeming self-consciousness of the popular narratives it mobilizes. What such a commentary on the text and its audience exposes—what the drive to author such a novella demonstrates—is just how fragile those “solidly masculine bodies and [their] texts” feel at the turn of the century.

## CODA

This article was completed prior to David Foster Wallace’s suicide. In light of the many articles indicating the extent of his depression, it is indeed an extraordinary achievement that he wrote at such length and depth about the struggle to produce work that might be of some value to reader and artist in a time when the general culture at large often seems to have little inclination for literary pursuits.



It is as well a tragedy to have lost a writer of such sensitivity.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Foster's argument circles around the rise of abject art in the early 1990s—perhaps the best-known exhibition of the time was the Whitney Museum's "The Abject: Repulsion and Desire in American Art." One such artist was John Miller, who made "compost paintings" and shit sculptures, the latter included in the Whitney's exhibition. Thus Brint Moltke's obscene artistry has a direct forerunner in the visual art of the 1990s.

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