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DAVID FOSTER WALLACE SPECIAL ISSUE

The Importance of Habits in Meredith Rand and Shane Drinion's 'tête-à-tête' in *The Pale King*

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This article utilises pragmatist philosopher John Dewey's concept of habit to explore Wallace's habit-based definition of character through a close reading of the long, confessional 'tête-à-tête' between Meredith Rand and Shane Drinion in *The Pale King* (2011). Analysis of this scene shows the distinction between personal habits and societal customs, and the role of the observer in interpreting such habits and customs. A focus on habit demonstrates how Wallace advocates for a liberal democratic process of evolution and change. Dewey's ideas are also shown to be a useful means to navigate the burgeoning field of Wallace Studies, and the habits and customs that have come to define the field.

David Foster Wallace described his magnum opus, *Infinite Jest* (1996), as an exploration of what the future could hold if the United States proceeds along the same 'continuum', largely in regards to ecological policy and the reification of entertainment (Lipsky, 2010: 81). Wallace's posthumously released, unfinished novel, *The Pale King* (2011), is set in the early 1980s. If *Infinite Jest* speaks of a perilous future that might come about if things do not change, *The Pale King* looks to the source of this prospective social and cultural crisis. In *Post-Postmodernism, Or, the Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism* (2012), Jeffrey Nealon suggests that the 80s does not refer to a particular decade, but rather – following Fredric Jameson's example of defining 'the 60s' as a period that begins in the mid-50s and ends in the early 70s – to a specific type of cultural and economic production that is still being experienced.¹ Nealon suggests the present is defined by an intensification, rather than a break from, the precepts developed during this decade (3–4). By setting *The Pale King* in the early 80s, Wallace positions the novel at the starting point of the period Nealon outlines; as Marshall Boswell (2012), Jeffrey Severs (2016), Mark McGurl (2014), and Richard Godden and Michael Szalay (2014) note in a variety of ways, the 1980s setting enables a critique of the economic and cultural ideas developed and adopted during this period – namely, what has come to be called neoliberalism. Wendy Brown defines this nebulous concept as 'a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms' (2015: 17). Brown goes on to suggest that neoliberal reason modifies the 'habits of citizenship' of those who live under it (2015: 30). Wallace's characters in this novel are defined by individual and collective actions that are repeated unthinkingly. *The Pale King* therefore suggests these actions are really *habits* that can always change. The 1980s setting, then, evokes a time when societal habits radically changed, in order to suggest such a shift could happen again.

In order to explore the ways in which such habits form, this article explicates Wallace's habit-based definition of character through a close reading of the long, confessional 'tête-à-tête' between Meredith Rand and Shane Drinion in *The Pale King*

¹ Jameson defines this concept in the essay 'Periodizing the 60s' (1984).

(2011: 472).² To illustrate this, I utilise pragmatist philosopher John Dewey's concept of habit. Dewey is particularly pertinent as he defines habits as central to a 'social psychology' (1922: 63). Similarly, many Wallace critics note the sociality and connectivity his fiction posits. Wilson Kaiser situates Wallace's social understanding of being as an 'ethological' perspective (2014: 53), Allard den Dulk highlights the importance of 'community' (2014: 160), and Elizabeth Freudenthal coins the term 'anti-interiority' to suggest a similar sentiment (2010: 192).³ Even when approaching Wallace's texts in markedly different ways, they all agree sociality defines Wallace's conception of character. In *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1922), Dewey uses the metaphor of 'roads that are already there' to evoke the sociality of habits: 'Few persons have either the energy or the wealth to build private roads to travel upon. They find it convenient, "natural", to use the roads that are already there; while unless their private roads connect at some point with the high-way [sic] they cannot build them even if they would' (1922: 59).⁴ By 'private roads', Dewey means forming isolating personal habits, rather than relying on what he terms 'customs' to guide habit formation. Dewey defines customs as 'collective habits', but that is not to say they are 'the consolidation of individual habits'. Instead, he suggests customs form in two ways: first, they 'exist because individuals face the same situation and react in like fashion', and second, 'customs persist because individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs' (HN 58). Wendy Brown defines neoliberalism as a form of reason that 'governs as sophisticated common sense'; Wallace suggests this conception of reason is a custom, and therefore, like personal habits, can always be modified (2015: 35). To return to Dewey's road metaphor, what Brown terms the habits of citizenship form in line with these roads, and the challenge is to realise these routes are not the only paths to follow.

I focus on the scene between Rand and Drinion in particular as it elucidates Dewey's distinction of habits – as explored through Rand's affected ways

² *The Pale King* is cited by page number in subsequent references.

³ Kaiser goes on later in the article to use a Spinozan concept of an 'ethics of affinity' to explain Wallace's focus on habit and pain in especial reference to the stretching boy in *The Pale King* (2014: 56).

⁴ Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* is cited as *HN* in subsequent references.

of smoking – and customs, which are demonstrated via Drinion's complete lack of understanding of social conventions. Indeed, Drinion is also seemingly without habits, which is in stark contrast to Rand's affected, habit-ridden demeanour. Furthermore, I contend that David Wallace narrates this passage. In the 'notes and asides' section containing the real Wallace's notes about the possible direction of this unfinished text, he states this narrator was supposed to disappear '100 pages in' (546). However, in editor Michael Pietsch's arrangement, this is clearly not the case, as the narrating Wallace's presence is evident throughout this section.⁵ His presence evokes the contingency at every level of habits; not only can habits always change, but the habits of the observer influence how those that are noticed are interpreted.

Dewey's concepts also have a wider relevance in regards to Wallace studies; indeed, the field has already developed many of its own habits and customs. There is a prevalent sentiment that Wallace's texts embody a shift in American literary culture. This has variously been dubbed post-postmodernism, The New Sincerity, and poststructural realism.⁶ Adam Kelly defines this aspect of Wallace criticism succinctly: 'perhaps the most striking feature of Wallace studies ... [is] the implicit agreement among so many critics with Wallace's professed premise that fiction should act as both "diagnosis and cure", that it should be viewed not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention' (2015: 49). While I agree Wallace's work can be seen as an ethical intervention, by focusing on habits my aim is somewhat more modest than saying his work offers a 'cure'. While many of Wallace's characters show the effects of destructive habits, he does not attempt to offer a specific new mode – or new road, in Dewey's terms – for fiction to follow. Instead, his texts depict certain behaviours as habitual, unquestioned, and explores how these came to be. Wallace's *oeuvre* is not a definitive account of what fiction should be, and if one

⁵ In *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (2016) David Hering makes a persuasive case that David Wallace narrates the entirety of *The Pale King*. Moreover, he suggests David Wallace is an iteration of Wallace's 'nonfiction persona', meaning that in '*The Pale King*, Wallace ... attempts to stage a mediation of *both* his fiction and non-fiction voice by adopting a version of his now equally established non-fiction persona to comment on his writing processes within his third novel' (2016: 144, italics in original).

⁶ For post-postmodernism, see Robert McLaughlin (2005), for The New Sincerity, see Adam Kelly (2010), and for poststructural realism, see Mary K. Holland (2013).

accepts that he advocates that we construct meaning socially it is contradictory to attribute such substantial change to a single author. Lee Konstantinou puts Wallace in the context of Mark McGurl's hugely influential *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009) and Jameson's canonical formulations about postmodernity to make a similar point: 'in an era of the program or the system the solution to America's "anti-worldly" literary field must be collective and institutional, not individual and private. Even the most talented single writer cannot, by definition, change the field alone' (2013: 86). As Konstantinou articulates, a single author cannot transform the entire literary landscape; such an event can only be achieved through the program or the system. Similarly, as Dewey would put it, such change can only be achieved socially, through new 'highways' of habits and customs.

Wallace and Pragmatism

Wallace mentions pragmatist texts and ideas numerous times in his fiction and non-fiction. In *Infinite Jest*, Randy Lenz has hollowed out a huge, large-print combined version of William James' *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) to store his cocaine, and intermittently quotes James to justify his behaviour.⁷ In *The Pale King*, the Jesuit substitute teacher who so affects Chris Fogle quotes James's maxim 'The Moral Equivalent of War' – from the essay of the same name – during his accountancy lecture (220). In a *Salon* interview with Laura Miller from 1996, Wallace also picks out James's *Varieties* as a text that 'sort of rung my cherries' (2012: 58). In addition to the classical pragmatism of James, Richard Rorty's defining work of neopragmatism, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), lends its name to a short story in *Oblivion* (2004).

Critics regularly follow these references, and read Wallace's texts alongside pragmatist thinkers. In his important early study of Wallace, Marshall Boswell assesses the ideas of James vocalised by Hugh Steeply in *Infinite Jest* (2003: 162). Clare Hayes-Brady situates Wallace's work as a new form of neopragmatism, proposing that 'Wallace began, at least implicitly, to espouse a philosophy of his own', and by taking

⁷ Casey Michael Henry's genetic criticism of *Infinite Jest* explicates the process in which explicit references to James were gradually edited out of Lenz's scenes in later drafts of the novel (2015).

'account of deceit', his philosophy is more 'realistic than [Richard] Rorty's' (2010: 31–33). David H. Evans explores the influence of William James on Wallace's depictions of Free Will and the *possibility* of faith being a recourse to positive action. Evans argues: 'One of the things that drew Wallace to James, I would argue, is the latter's lifelong conviction that philosophy should be of some use in the life of the individual' (2014: 186). Evans's analysis largely relates to James's *Varieties*, and so, like Boswell's and Hayes-Brady's, it is criticism grounded in a pragmatist text Wallace explicitly cites. As Evans' argument epitomises, critics often posit a congruity between the belief that Wallace's work explores the existential consequences of ideas – what Wallace terms in his review of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) 'the *practice of theory*' – and the pragmatist method (2012: 78, italics in original). As James outlines in *Pragmatism* (1907): 'The pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable', by looking at the 'practical consequences' of such disputes (1991: 23). The diagnosis and cure Wallace's work supposedly provides is therefore a distinctly pragmatic approach, and this is a major reason for why he is regularly read alongside pragmatist writers.

Thomas Tracey's biographical reading usefully outlines Wallace's numerous encounters with pragmatism. He points out that Wallace's father, James Wallace, is a proponent of Dewey's ideas, and that Wallace is an acknowledged proof-reader for James Wallace's monograph largely concerning Dewey. Furthermore, both father and son studied at Amherst in a philosophy department with a strong pragmatist tradition (2014: 158–159). When summarising pragmatism more broadly, Tracey also places habit as a foundational concept to Wallace's work – '*Habit* is fundamentally related to the acquisition of human meaning, something Wallace thematically develops most thoroughly in *Infinite Jest*' (2014: 161, italics in original). There is a tendency in Wallace studies to assert the validity of a reading on the basis of the idea he has read or cited a text – especially since the opening of the Wallace archives – and that the direct influence of those he references is evident in his fiction. For instance, in her otherwise admirable *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (2016), Hayes-Brady stops short of discussing Wallace and the early pragmatism of Charles Sanders Pierce 'as he is not directly referenced in Wallace's work' (2016: 85). While

she does go on to suggest other scholars should explore this correspondence, there is no need to establish such a clear, biographical 'connection' between Wallace and other writers. This embodies what Kelly contends is the return of the author prevalent in Wallace studies, as is evident in Evans' contention about what drew Wallace to James, or Tracey attempting to establish the connection of Wallace to Dewey through his father (2015: 51). Rather than attempt to unify Wallace and pragmatism, or to situate Wallace's work as a new form of pragmatism, this essay focuses on a strain of pragmatist thought that illuminates how Wallace's characters are defined by their habits.

My argument follows the path set by contemporary pragmatist philosopher Richard Bernstein, which fellow philosopher Inna Semetsky summarises thus: '[it] is based on the idea of freely juxtaposing ... two thought processes so as to be able to construct a commonly shared plane between the two' (2010: 233).⁸ I juxtapose Wallace's concept of character with Dewey's conception of habit, in order to elucidate what it might mean for Wallace to formulate his characters in such a way. For instance, there is a moral, almost utopian liberal democratic political project that undergirds Dewey's pragmatism, as Larry Hickman and Thomas Alexander suggest: 'Dewey understands democracy as a way of life, that is, as something that is realized in action. Institutions are necessary, but the heart of democracy is interaction, transaction, and communication' (1998: 2). By seeing Wallace's characters as defined by their habits, and in constant interaction with their environment, his work evokes a similarly liberal democratic idea of interaction, transaction, and constant societal evolution. As Dewey argues: 'The fact that each act tends to *form*, through habit, a self which will perform a certain kind of acts [sic], is the foundation, theoretically and practically of responsibility. We cannot undo the past; we can affect the future' (1998: 351, italics in original). That Wallace's characters act habitually means their behaviours can always change, and this is why his texts can be productively read alongside Dewey. Wallace's work is not a diagnosis and cure, but instead – as the 80s

⁸ For Bernstein's development of this approach, see *The New Constellation: The Ethical Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (1995).

setting of *The Pale King* evokes – suggests the *possibility* that both personal habits and societal customs can change.

By defining his characters by their habits, Wallace depicts them as affected by, and affecting, their environment. As Dewey outlines: 'Human nature exists and operates in an environment. And it is not "in" that environment as coins are in a box, but as a plant is in the sunlight and soil' (*HN* 296). Wallace's characters are like the plants of Dewey's metaphor; they engage with their outside stimuli, and have the ability to dramatically change depending on what they are interacting with. As my close reading of Rand demonstrates, her habits are a product of her social environment and how her beauty affects those around her. Wallace's characterisation therefore supports both a spatial and temporal understanding of existence; habits are defined both spatially – as in by their environment – and temporally – by previous, historical roads. Dewey argues: 'Attitude and, as ordinarily used, disposition suggest something latent, potential, something which requires a positive stimulus outside themselves to become active' (*HN* 40). Similarly, in Wallace's texts, habits are not latent: they are not unchangeable coins, with the world as an unchanging box, to use Dewey's metaphor. The constant interaction of the character and their environment means both can change. Characterologically, Wallace's fictional worlds are defined by contingency.

To contend that Wallace's conception of character is largely contingent is not to say Wallace's texts are devoid of characters who display inherent behaviours, which I, following the Dewey quote just cited, broadly categorise as *dispositions*. In *The Pale King*, Chris Fogle counts words automatically rather than interpreting and understanding them – an example of a 'private road' that leads nowhere – and Claude Sylvanshine is a 'fact psychic' (118). The narrating David Wallace describes Sylvanshine's ability dismissively: 'Most of what others esteemed or valued in him was unwilling, simply given, like a person's height or facial symmetry' (14). While valuable for his work, the narrating David Wallace dismisses Sylvanshine's fantastical ability because unlike a habit, it is not learnt, but genetic. Similarly, slightly earlier in Wallace's career, in the short story 'Good Old Neon' from *Oblivion*, the protagonist, Neal, proposes: 'Although we are seldom conscious of it, we are all basically just instruments or expressions of our evolutionary drives, which are themselves

the expressions of forces that are infinitely larger and more important than we are' (2004: 174). Neal has committed suicide – consequently, his belief that 'we are all basically just instruments or expressions of our evolutionary drives' is explicitly linked with a sense of helplessness and despair. The story concludes by zooming out to the 'real' Wallace coming to terms with the death of a classmate, suggesting Neal's denial of free will is how Wallace tries to explain Neal's suicide. For Wallace, dispositions are unchangeable, and to see the self solely as the product of evolutionary drives is explicitly linked to a loss of agency.

To return to Dewey: 'We have just to do the best we can with habits, the forces most under our control; and we shall have our hands more than full in spelling out their general tendencies without attempting an exact judgment upon each deed' (*HN* 51). A focus on the habits of Wallace's characters illuminates the malleable nature of the forces most under his characters' control, and their interaction with 'the objective environment': 'For every habit incorporates within itself some part of the objective environment, and no habit and no amount of habits can incorporate the entire environment within itself or themselves' (*HN* 51). Unlike dispositions, habits are contingent, and it is these aspects Wallace's characters seek to change. As Gertrude Stein – who studied under William James and whose writing investigates the 'repeating' nature of habits – points out in *The Making of Americans* (1925), to see behaviours as habits, and therefore changeable, is a distinctly positive way to depict humanity: 'Another form of having virtuous feeling is to think what any one is doing is only a habit in them' (2006: 503). By casting behaviours as learned, by making them habitual, Wallace suggests the virtuous, utopian possibility of decisions affecting change. By having characters who internalise the habits suggested by popular culture – many of which Rand demonstrates – Wallace shows the detrimental habits that form, and the practical results of these repeated acts. His characters are always acting habitually; it is only by being otherworldly – like the fantastical, levitating Shane Drinion in *The Pale King* – that habits are negated. Wallace's work can therefore be seen as depicting the importance of habits in defining the self. Furthermore, his texts bring into focus and question how these habits and customs have developed into what Brown describes as neoliberalism's 'sophisticated common sense'.

Meredith Rand and Shane Drinion's 'tête-à-tête'

Habit has been a topic in philosophy from Aristotle to the modern day, and has a rich history of study in the fields of psychology and sociology.⁹ Sean O'Toole has recently detailed how a habit-based understanding of being was central to the English novel of the late nineteenth century.¹⁰ Eve Sedgwick persuasively argues that, throughout the twentieth century, habits became increasingly moralised, and habitual behaviour has become synonymous with notions of addiction, compulsion, and a lack of self-control (1993: 138–39).¹¹ Dewey would agree with Sedgwick that the concept of habit has no moral import in itself, and that habits are not inherently negative. Instead, Dewey argues habits are 'arts':

We may borrow words from a context less technical than that of biology, and convey the same idea by saying that habits are arts. They involve skill of sensory and motor organs, cunning or craft, and objective materials. They assimilate objective energies, and eventuate in command of environment. (HN 15).

By arts, Dewey means that habits are learned, worked at, and perfected. Wallace depicts habits similarly in *The Pale King*. For instance, Toni Ware's manipulation of the impression she gives to others is described explicitly as an 'art': 'She played on this knife-edge most of the time – giving a false impression that was nevertheless concrete and tightly controlled. It felt like art' (511). The repetition of traumas she experiences throughout the novel – having to pretend to be dead as her mother is brutally murdered next to her, or being raped by a man who ostensibly was there

⁹ For an in depth look at the role of habit in literary criticism, see Philip Fisher (1973). For a summary of the study of habit in philosophy, read *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu* (2013).

¹⁰ O'Toole's *Habit and the English Novel* (2013) offers a detailed analysis of characterological habits in late nineteenth century fiction. There is no space to discuss it here, but this habit-based definition of character could also explain the congruity Zadie Smith notices between Wallace and George Eliot; Smith fleetingly suggests the 'Victorian' nature of Wallace's work (2010: 13).

¹¹ I am indebted to Wilson Kaiser's discussion of Sedgwick and Wallace for suggesting this congruity between their concepts of habit (2014).

to help her get in her locked car – has led to the formation of certain protective habits; how others interpret her is therefore 'concrete and tightly controlled'. While having the troubling implication that her sexual assault has empowered her in some way (which is a point Wallace also appears to make in the final interview of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), in which a woman is brutally raped), her habits are learnt coping mechanisms, which stem from a certain type of repetition within her external environment. Her habits have thus become 'like art', giving her, in Dewey's terms, the command of her environment.

Toni Ware's guardedness stems from the repetition of her traumas; repetition is foundational to the formation of habits in Wallace's works. In Toni Ware's case, it is an unwilling habit, born of circumstances outside of her control. Wallace also depicts characters who consciously attempt to make certain behaviours habitual. For instance, in *Infinite Jest*, Hal's tennis ability – described as being like 'ballet' in the novel's introductory section (2006: 14) – has been harnessed and worked at through repetition: 'His serve, now, suddenly, after four summers of thousand-a-day serves to no one at dawn, is suddenly supposed to be one of the best left-handed kick serves the junior circuit has ever seen' (2006: 260).¹² Similarly, earlier in the novel Hal, 'Hit about a thousand serves to no one while Himself sits and advises with his flask' (*IJ* 172). This image of a son practising his serve to become a habitual 'art' as his father drinks from his flask shows both sides of repetition in habits. They can help – like Hal's kick-serve – or hinder, like James's alcoholism. Kendall Gerdes points out that in *Infinite Jest* repetition regularly falls into addiction: 'forming a habit is not (contra Aristotle) simply the result of repeated practice. Habit, especially in *Infinite Jest*, verges into addiction' (2015: 338). In *Principles of Psychology*, William James urges: 'The great thing, then, in all education, is to *make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy*. It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and live at ease upon the interest of the fund' (1950: 122, italics in original). Wallace depicts habitual behaviour as the product of repetition – both willing and unwilling – and formulated in interaction with a character's environment.

¹² *Infinite Jest* will be cited as *IJ* in subsequent references.

Rand is a POTEX, 'the prettiest of the examiners', an echo of the acronym PGOAT (prettiest girl of all time), used to describe Joelle Van Dyne in *Infinite Jest* (480). She is constantly being watched, and constantly aware of being observed. The narrator notes the effect she has on men specifically: 'Suffice it that Meredith Rand makes the Pod's males self-conscious' (447). Consequently, Rand bears many reflexive habits she has adopted as so many are evidently self-conscious around her. Her manner of smoking is her largest social crutch: 'You can see that Meredith Rand would have a hard time quitting cigarettes, since she uses the way she smokes and exhales and moves her head to convey a lot of affect' (484). Her habits in *how* she smokes – not just the habit of smoking itself – are, like Toni Ware's habits, learnt, perfected, and 'like art'. Moreover, that she smokes further implies the possibility of societal change. As art historian Benno Tempel explains, views on smoking shifted in the 80s: 'As a result of the tightening up of legislation and negative publicity, smoking began to lose its attractiveness around the 1980s and its image has since changed drastically. What once was a model now became an outcast' (2004: 216). That smoking is now viewed so negatively compared to the relatively recent past of Wallace's text further evokes that a shift in habits and customs can occur.

The scene between Rand and Drinion echoes the long debate between Hugh/Helen Steeply and Remi Marathe that punctuates much of *Infinite Jest*.¹³ The connections with this scene are numerous: the narrator also terms it a 'tête-à-tête', and how Steeply smokes – the feminine character in the conversation – is documented throughout (*IJ* 489). Steeply's smoking is portrayed as a performance of femininity with varying success – 'M. Hugh Steeply of B.S.S. was standing then with his weight on one hip and looked his most female when he smoked' (*IJ* 430) – and, 'Steeply's use of the body to shelter the lighting match for his smoking was not feminine' (*IJ* 427). Steeply's smoking is a conscious performance of gendered behaviours; Marathe even sees echoes of femme fatale figures from 'black and white films' in Steeply's smoking (*IJ* 430). Unlike Steeply, Rand is not smoking to affect femininity,

¹³ This scene is also another instance of what Kelly outlines as Wallace's persistent construction of scenes almost entirely from dialogue. See Kelly's 'David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas' (2014).

nor does she use the act to fill 'silent pauses', which are 'integral parts' of Steeply's 'techniques of interface' (*JJ* 108). Instead, Rand's smoking habits are a metonym for a wider conception of character evident across Wallace's work; his characters are constructed on habits, which are formed through a person's interaction with their ever-changing environment, and are therefore in a constant process of becoming.

The scene Wallace sets for Rand and Drinion's conversation is characterised as a work custom; the narrating David Wallace even works out the attendance records of each member of 'Pod C' to this weekly event as if it is a baseball batting average (444). That someone can chronicle this pattern suggests another key aspect of habits and customs: that, by being repeated, they become observable. This repetition of habits helps the narrator explain, and the reader to map and understand, Rand's experience with Drinion. The narrator's documentation of Rand's habits gives her communications with other characters a deeper subtext. When Rand begins speaking with Drinion, the narrator suggests this conversation is partly happening because she is more intoxicated than she is accustomed to: 'Meredith Rand has had two gin and tonics and is on her third, slightly more to drink than normal but has not yet smoked' (449). The pointed note that she has not yet smoked suggests the 'affect' she conveys through smoking is not yet needed.

The conversation with Drinion begins concurrently with her smoking. Rand initially blows smoke rings, as if to impress him, even though 'the vent overhead tears the smoke ring to shreds the moment she shapes and exhales it' (455). Rand is habituated to having a certain effect on people, and Drinion does not provide this reaction – the vent destroying her smoke rings suggests how ineffectual her techniques are. Drinion is still blank by the time she has started her third cigarette: 'Drinion still hasn't spoken or fidgeted or changed his facial expression much at all. This now right here is cigarette number three since 5:10' (465). The narrator suggests Rand gives up on the rings – a means of affecting a person – as Drinion blankly stares at her, seemingly unmoved by her self-conscious habit: 'Drinion's facial expression isn't blank, but it's bland and neutral in a way that might as well be blank for all it tells you. Meredith Rand has, without being quite aware of it, quit trying with the rings' (455–456). She is portrayed as frustrated at not affecting Drinion, and

her irritation reaches its peak when he interprets one of her questions too literally about whether he usually stays at the bar that long: 'She extinguishes the cigarette a bit more thoroughly and emphatically than she usually does, in order to reinforce a certain tonal impatience in what she says as she puts the cigarette out: "All right then"' (459). Drinion's face is still blank, and she begins to directly question Drinion on whether he has had any sexual feelings, ever; questioning Drinion's sex-drive in this manner gives the smoke rings a new sexualised context in which to interpret them. When Drinion affirms he has never had any such urges, Rand tries to read *his* habits, his affect, to see if this is true: 'Rand is very good at reading affect on people's faces, and as far as she can tell there's nothing here on Drinion's face to read' (462). Her interaction with her external environment is usually marked by how others react to her appearance; therefore, it is not her looks that define her habits, but how others interact with her. Earlier in the novel, the narrating Wallace suggests that beauty is a genetic disposition – 'a given, like facial symmetry'. That beauty is a social concept – as any basic understanding of the different values of beauty across cultures demonstrates – is emphasised by how she affects those around her; this reaction is repeated, reinforced by the name POTEX, and this collective reaction in turn defines the formation of her habits. As Dewey suggests: 'A genuine appreciation of the beauty of flowers is not generated within a self-enclosed consciousness. It reflects a world in which beautiful flowers have already grown and been enjoyed' (HN 22). Through Rand's habitually defined being, Wallace offers a contingent, fluid conception of identity, which is markedly similar to Dewey's contention that self and environment are in constant interaction: 'Selfhood is not something which exists apart from associations and intercourse' (1998: 348). Consequently, Rand's habits do not stem from her appearance, but, instead, from her interactions with others.

The majority of this section involves Rand sharing with Drinion how she met her husband as an adolescent while she was being treated at a psychiatric hospital. Before she begins her story, her habits convey an initial internal debate about whether to tell Drinion such a personal narrative – 'Meredith Rand taps her cigarette lighter experimentally against her front teeth' – the operative word here being *experimentally*, as she deliberates on using the lighter, and therefore using her prop

of smoking, to tell Drinion her story (466). Throughout this conversation, Rand's smoking is continually catalogued: 'Every time she taps ash, it's three taps of the same speed and angle with a red-nailed finger' (471) and, 'Meredith Rand has a set of routines for putting the cigarette out, all of which, whether fast or stabbing or slow and more grinding from the side, are quite thorough' (474). As she uses her cigarette as a prop for affect, the habitual control over how she smokes is reflective of how she attempts to control the interpretation of the narrative. She has learnt her smoking can help exercise some control over her interactions, and now she does so habitually. For instance, 'She has a definite style of averting her head to exhale and then bringing it back. Most people think she's very direct' (483). In utilising the act of exhaling as a means to zoom in and out of the conversation, she creates a sense of intimacy, of directness in how she speaks. Rand also uses her cigarette as a means of emphasising and affecting irony: 'She makes a sardonic flourish with her cigarette hand as she says presto change-o' (486). The tone of the conversation is suggested by her habits, especially how she feels about Drinion: 'Again she uses the same number of stabs and partial rolls to extinguish it, although with less force than when she's appeared impatient or angry with Shane Drinion' (489). Rand's cigarettes act like a guide, an indication of what direction she wishes the narrative to go, and to elicit the responses she desires. However, her viewers have their own affective drives, and this means these interpretations cannot be absolutely controlled. Furthermore, the intensity of these habits also betrays her feelings about whom she is speaking with, about who she is trying to affect.

Drinion does not react in the way people usually respond to her, which she describes as being seen as a "piece of meat" (484). The narrating Wallace confirms this assumption early in the chapter; he misogynistically states the 'consensus' at the IRS is that Rand is a 'cut of pure choice prime' (447). This once again points to his presence, as here he cites his interviews of Rand's co-workers, something he mentions in his first narrative interjection (72). Consequently, she has an innate distrust of Drinion's nonreaction to her, so every so often checks that Drinion was telling the truth when he says he has had no sexual feelings in his life – 'Rand looks briefly right at Drinion to see whether there is any visible reaction to the word *blowjob*, which he

does not appear to provide' (487, italics in original). When Rand first tells Drinion her husband is dying she outright asks "did you think that finding out he was dying might mean you've got some kind of sexual chance with me?" When he replies negatively, she responds "Good. That's good" (466). The entire narrative is interspersed with her checking this is still the case. She states that the repetition of being viewed as the POTEX, as 'a piece of meat', means she has internalised the idea that "the only thing you've got is your looks and the way you affect, boys, guys. *You start doing it without even knowing you're doing it*" (484, italics added). Like Toni Ware, repetition in her interaction with others has led to the formation of certain habits. Drinion is the first person she has encountered who does not – indeed, cannot, as he has no sexual desire – have this reaction. Larry Hickman and Thomas Alexander contend Dewey 'rejects the idea of a substantive soul or ego', and that instead 'consciousness is a dynamic construction of habitual responses' (1998, x). Similarly, Rand's character is shown to be a product of her environment, and her habitual responses have formed in reaction to how many respond to her. In constructing characters in such a way, *The Pale King* suggests the challenge is to question common sense assumptions, and effect a societal shift in habits and customs.

Drinion is not a typical person for Rand to be conversing with; he levitates, has no sexual desire, and seems to be almost completely without habits. Rand and the narrator constantly search him for something, and there is nothing there: 'Drinion nods, one hand around the base of his glass. He is very still, Meredith Rand notices. He doesn't fidget or change positions in his chair. He's a bit of a mouth-breather; his mouth hangs slightly open. With some people the mouth hanging open thing makes them look not too bright' (450). That the narrator adds the caveat 'with some people' indicates Drinion's countenance on another person would signal unintelligence, but for Drinion it projects that he is blank, still, and comfortable. As mentioned earlier, Rand is already on cigarette number three before he has even 'fidgeted or moved', and this is a product of their starkly different histories. She was one of the popular, most attractive girls in high school, one of 'the foxes'; Drinion is an orphan, and nicknamed 'Mr. X', an ironic moniker short for 'Mr. Excitement', as he is so dull. She is constantly the centre of attention; he is often forgotten, and regularly sits alone

at these Friday visits to the bar. Being constantly viewed and being aware of being viewed, Rand's behaviour is littered with the habits documented above; in contrast, Drinion, the forgotten orphan, seemingly has none. In Wallace's texts, self-awareness, the awareness of yourself as an object for others, leads to the formation of habits. This is shown by the distinct contrast of Rand's and Drinion's demeanours, and how their own knowledge of being viewed defines their external behaviour, their habits.¹⁴

Drinion's lack of connection with the world results in a lack of certain *customs* which, as mentioned, Dewey defines as the cultural habits that are shared. Drinion's misunderstanding of sociality – his disconnection from the highway, in Dewey's terms – manifests in a series of ways. For instance, the narrator states 'Drinion has a way of nodding where the nod has nothing to do with etiquette or affirmation', which indicates Drinion is devoid of not just habits, but also the customs, the 'etiquette' of social interaction (455). Indeed, Rand's initial annoyance with Drinion is a product of his inability to converse in a more customary manner: "'I'm talking about loneliness and people paying attention to you or not and you launch into this whole long thing about radio expense protocols and it turns out the point of the whole thing is only that there's procedural stuff you don't know'" (464). Rand learns she has to conversationally nudge Drinion to interact appropriately. For instance, as she tells him she was sent to a psychiatric hospital she suggests his reaction: "'You might be asking how I got in there, since we definitely were not rich or from the Heights'" (469). While this partly betrays how Rand would like the story to be understood – i.e. to emphasise her modest background – his lack of customary conversational graces mean he has to learn them anew, and Rand tries to act as his guide. In Dewey's terms, Rand has to show him how to connect to the public highway. Counter to Wallace's own note that 'Drinion is *happy*', his lack of customs emphasises his isolation, which runs counter to the sociality that Wallace advocates for across his *oeuvre* (546, italics in original).

¹⁴ Chris Cusk's pathological sweating also suggests this, as it is a product of seeing himself as an 'object-for-others': 'the understanding of himself as also an object-for-others was in his case deferred to the very cusp of adulthood – and, like most repressed truths, when it finally burst through, it came as something overwhelming and terrible, a winged thing breathing fire' (92).

After her long exposition regarding her husband's diagnosis of why she self-harms, Rand 'looks sharply up at Shane Drinion' and asks him "Does that seem banal?" (498). Here, she fears appearing cliché, or banal, a concern that plagues Wallace's characters across many of his texts. To take just two examples of many, during her attempted suicide Joelle Van Dyne in *Infinite Jest* dismisses her last thoughts about her friends and family as 'banal' (*IJ* 239). Similarly, in 'Good Old Neon' Neal relentlessly defines most of his life as banal. However, Drinion, without customs, cannot understand her concern; earlier in the conversation Rand discovers 'he has no natural sense of whether something was sarcastic or not', and so he cannot understand why her story would be considered banal (457). Consequently, Drinion answers, "I don't know" when she expresses this customary fear (499). Drinion's lack of any sense of the conversational customs of the time extends, in this case, to the customary dismissal of clichés. It is notable that the character without this fear has to be a fantastical, levitating, otherworldly figure; only a character beyond possibility is shown to be habitless and customless.

Towards the conclusion of the conversation, Rand asks Drinion his interpretation of her husband's diagnosis, and Drinion puts forth: "As I understand it, though, your actual experience is that someone else *was* being nice to you and treating you as worthwhile" (507, italics in original). The reader knows she is pleased with this response through her affect-laden ways of smoking: 'Rand smiles in a way that makes it seem as though she's smiling in spite of herself. She's also smoking her cigarette in a more thorough, sensuous way' (507), and: 'She puts out her cigarette without any of the previous stabbing aspect, almost sort of tenderly, as if thinking tenderly of something else' – and after this climactic moment she inconclusively finishes her story (508). The narrator implies here that she tells the story until she gets her desired reaction. Through a mixture of Rand's habits and Drinion's almost complete lack of habits, this conversation is emblematic of the role habits play not just in conveying personal feelings and responses, but also the dependence on habits to be social, and to connect to the public highway. Usefully for Dewey's road metaphor, Drinion literally cannot drive; in the novel, he does not drive down any physical road,

and, culturally, he does not drive down private roads or the public roads, as he lacks both habits and customs (463).

Operating in the background of this discussion is the narrator, David Wallace. As mentioned, his presence is made apparent when he tangentially alludes to his interviews of Rand's IRS colleagues.¹⁵ Furthermore, there are constant allusions to how his habits inform the story. This section highlights how habits must be noted by an observer, and also can be interpreted – and in some cases misinterpreted – by that same viewer. Rand even comments on the possibility of an observer as they begin their conversation: “Well, I don't know how private it is” (450). This is partly a metafictional joke on the part of the narrating David Wallace – who is a metafictional device for the real David Foster Wallace – alluding to the lack of omniscience in the narrator, but it also suggests her constant awareness of being ogled, and seen as a 'piece of meat'. The theme of observation is further explored when Rand intimates how her very presence affects those around her in terms of the observer effect in quantum mechanics: “If you're pretty ... it can be hard to respect guys ... if they've decided you're beautiful, they change. It's like the thing in physics – if you're there to look at the experiment, it supposedly messes up the results” (482).¹⁶ Dewey states that habits 'distort' our understanding of the external environment, and the habits of the narrating David Wallace 'distorts' the reader's understanding of this section (*HN* 32). The repetition of habits is necessary for the narrating voice to recognise their existence, but once seen, the narrator's habits distort how such habits are interpreted. There is therefore contingency at every level of habits: in how they can form and

¹⁵ The awkward syntax and infelicities in the Steeply/Marathe sections of *Jest* – i.e. 'Steeply produced from his handbag Belgian cigarettes of a many-mm. and habitually female type' (*IJ* 91) or the aforementioned 'silent pauses as integral parts of his techniques of interface' – betrays the narrator's first language is not English, and so is almost certainly Quebecois.

¹⁶ Wallace lamented how he feels fiction always overlooks this fact to Larry McCaffery back in 1993: 'It's interesting that most serious art, even avant-garde stuff that's in collusion with literary theory, still refuses to acknowledge this, while serious *science* butters its bread with the fact that the separation of subject/observer and object/experiment is impossible. Observing a quantum phenomenon's been proven to alter the phenomenon. Fiction likes to ignore this fact's implications' (2012: 40, italics in original).

change, and how they are interpreted. Again, a habit has no moral import in itself; they are defined in practice, and in the ways they are interpreted. For instance, the aforementioned dismissal of Claude Sylvanshine's 'fact psychic' ability, as 'a given, like facial symmetry', and the narrator's evident hostility to Rand's attractiveness, has a wider meaning when the narrative voice is accounted for. Considering David Wallace has 'pemphigoid cysts' along the line of his jaw, it is no surprise he uses facial symmetry as an example of a dismissive given (300). The narrator's habits have been formed by his interaction with his environment – his facial disfigurement partly defines his experiences in the world – and so this brings distortion into how he describes others habits and abilities, and how he conceives of societal customs such as beauty.

Throughout their conversation, the narrator depicts Rand's habits as trying to affect Drinion in a certain way; he forms a narrative out of her habits, and the narratological ideas of 'showing' and 'telling' are central to so much of this section of *The Pale King*. When introducing himself early in the novel, David Wallace describes his wish to be seen as an 'artist', and this section demonstrates his conscious desire to be seen so – he 'shows' rather than 'tells' what Rand is thinking (73). But often his distortions do clearly enter the narrative, and he does explicitly 'tell' the reader what to think. For instance, he infantilises Rand's habits: 'Sometimes now Rand will every so often toss her head back and to the side a tiny bit, very rapidly, as if rearranging her hair's feathering without touching it, which certain types of adolescent girls do a great deal without necessarily being aware of it' (475). The narrating David Wallace uses this habit to liken her to an 'adolescent girl', and a couple of pages later, he emphasises this again: 'Her eyes have changed; she puts her chin in her hand, which makes her seem even younger' (477). He reads into her habits based on his own preconceptions and information he acquired during interviews with other members of her workplace: 'Rand's rep at the REC is that she's sexy but crazy and a serious bore, just won't shut up if you get her started; they argue about whether they ultimately envy her husband or pity him' (489). The narration is both inconsistent, and accusatory of Rand trying to affect Shane Drinion in certain ways. As detailed above, her habits do imply certain facts of her being, and Drinion's lack of habits

indicates many things about him. However, a distinct observer catalogues this interaction, and his distortions colour the entire section. By spelling out the habits of all those involved in this section, a reader can see how their behaviour is learnt from their external environment, and how habits and customs dictate their interactions with – and interpretations of – others.

Conclusion

Wallace's conception of character suggests that an individual is not always constricted to the actions that have become habitual to them. Rand's habits suggest certain societal norms surrounding sex, gender, and beauty that are incredibly detrimental to her interactions. Drinion embodies how habits and customs are central to the sociality Wallace indicates is integral to being; only a supernatural, levitating character is depicted as habitless and customless. The narrating David Wallace demonstrates each of Wallace's characters have habits, and so these habits distort perceptions. Dewey asserts: 'it is impossible for the self to stand still; it is becoming, and becoming for the better or the worse. It is in the *quality* of becoming that virtue resides. We set up this and that end to be reached, but *the* end is growth itself' (1998: 353, italics in original). *The Pale King* is not a revolutionary text, but is instead suggestive of a contingent, habitual concept of the self and society, and therefore a liberal democratic philosophy of evolution and change.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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