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On the Notion of 'Failure' in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*: A Consideration of Joelle van Dyne's Character and the Figure of St. Teresa of Avila

The year 2016 marked the twentieth anniversary of the publication of David Foster Wallace's *magnum opus*, *Infinite Jest*, a sizeable book that remains a favourite among Wallace devotees and literary critics alike. However, in spite of two decades' worth of critical analysis, and with many critics choosing *Infinite Jest* as the focus of such analyses, surprisingly little attention has been given to the novel's female characters. Arguably, the same can be said of Wallace's fiction in general, where characters such as Lenore Beadsman (*The Broom of the System*), Avril Incandenza (*Infinite Jest*), 'Q.' (*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*), and Toni Ware (*The Pale King*), for example, have received comparatively little in the way of sustained critical engagement.

This article aims to address such imbalance by giving a voice to *Infinite Jest*'s Joelle van Dyne, a character who wears a veil to disguise either her facial beauty or her alleged disfigurement: a matter fraught with ambiguity. Joelle's importance to the structure of the novel will be noted, and Clare Hayes-Brady's recent work, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*, will be used to consider the 'play of potentialities' of 'symbolically productive' failure that Hayes-Brady feels is evident in *Infinite Jest* (2016, pp.2–3). Hayes-Brady's work on Wallace will also be critiqued with respect to her own failure to view Wallace's women, and primarily Joelle van Dyne in this instance, as anything other than evidence of Wallace's 'misogyny' (2013, p.134).

Joelle is important to the narrative, and she is one of only a handful of characters that traverse the two main locations of the novel: Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House [sic] and Enfield Tennis Academy. Appearing as Madame Psychosis, she is the sole actor in the film *Infinite Jest*, in which she peers down a 'wobbly', out of focus camera lens, while repeatedly uttering the words 'I'm sorry' (Wallace, 1996, p.939). The attempt to find a copy of the film cartridge is one of the novel's major plots, as the film is believed to render viewers paralysed with pleasure, until they die as a result of not being able to avert their eyes from the screen. Terrorists wish to find the film so that they can distribute it to an unsuspecting public, causing untold deaths. Meanwhile, Government officials try to prevent this from happening by locating the film cartridge ahead of the terrorists. As well as starring in the film, which lends its title to the novel, Joelle's presence can be felt in the circular structure of its narrative. The opening chapter sees its protagonist, Hal Incandenza, suffer a form of seizure (the novel ends just prior to this event). Marshall Boswell suggests that this seizure is brought on either by Hal's accidental watching of *Infinite Jest*, or alternatively by his taking of the drug known as DMZ (street name 'Madame Psychosis', which happens to be one of Joelle's aliases) (2003, p.139).

Throughout the critical literature on *Infinite Jest*, Joelle van Dyne has been largely overlooked and undervalued as a tool with which to analyse Wallace's novel. Eminent Wallace critics Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn have not yet produced sustained readings of Joelle's narrative: Boswell refers to Joelle/Madame Psychosis as 'a pornographic object of masturbatory desire' (2003, p.133), which seems to diminish her importance as a character, while Joelle receives only passing commentary in Burn's reader's guide to *Infinite Jest* (2012). Looking elsewhere for perspectives on Joelle, Andrew Delfino claims that the novel 'marginalis[es] female characters' but states that it does have 'one or two strong characters that cannot help but influence the male protagonists in the novel', which, similar to Hayes-Brady's viewpoint, does little more than point at Wallace's text as exhibiting misogynistic tendencies (2008, p.4). Likewise, Elizabeth Freudenthal dismisses female characters such as Avril Incandenza and Joelle, stating that they are hampered by a 'political clout [that] goes no further than their domestic spheres' (2010, p.200), and later refers to Joelle as a 'less prominent' character (p.205). Freudenthal's approach seems to accuse Wallace of reifying notions of an outmoded patriarchal structure, that seeks to condemn women to the confines of the domestic space.

Shouhei Tanaka provides a recent example of a sustained reading of Joelle's narrative, by viewing Joelle's use of 'the veil as the key counter-hegemonic apparatus to defer the stability of the gaze through a kind of visual evasion by continually refusing to give a clear answer on the actuality of her physical features' (2013, p.152). While Tanaka focuses on the ways in which Joelle 'den[ies] her body any mode of representational imaging' (p.153), this reading will now consider a link the veil has with a recurring motif accompanying Joelle's narrative: St. Teresa of Avila. Nancy J. Hirschmann states that the habitual wearing of a veil seems alien to Western culture 'precisely because veiling is "other" to most Westerners', and that the practice of veiling 'may be able to reveal aspects of the West to which

Westerners are blind, such as assumptions about individuality, agency, and difference' (1998, p.348). The majority of *Infinite Jest's* critics have certainly shown a degree of blindness to the importance of Joelle's narrative thus far.

Ambiguity surrounds the character of Joelle van Dyne. Throughout the novel it remains unclear whether she wears a veil because she is facially disfigured following an incident involving a flask of acid, or whether she is so 'pretty' that others struggle to function in her presence. Either way, the important aspect of such ambiguity is that it requires her to be veiled at all times when in the company of others. When we are first introduced to Joelle it is in the guise of 'Madame Psychosis', and at this stage we do not know that she is indeed Joelle (Wallace, 1996, p.181). Our first sense of Joelle's voice comes later, as her point of view influences the novel's free indirect discourse, which discusses at length Joelle's ambivalence towards attending her flatmate Molly's party prior to her impending suicide attempt. When we meet Joelle she is said to be 'at the end of her rope and preparing to hang from it', in a figurative, not literal sense, for we will see that Joelle favours overdose above hanging.

Visually, Joelle's appearance is likened to that of a child as she sits with feet that 'dangle well off the floor', and we are told of her 'pale knees and white rayon kneesocks and feet in clogs that are hanging half off, legs swinging like a child's, always feeling like a child in Molly's chairs'. Following this description, we are told that Joelle is 'a lot of fun to be with, normally, if you can get over the disconcerting veil': here we have our first clue as reader that Joelle is Madame Psychosis, who also wears a veil (pp.219–220). The veil acts as both physical and cultural barrier, forcing the reader to consider that some work must be done in order to access Joelle's 'fun' aspects, while 'a lot of fun' also hints at the use of drugs throughout the novel: Joelle uses the phrase 'too much fun' to describe her impending attempted suicide by overdose (p.238).

Shortly after meeting Joelle for the first time, we find her locked in a bathroom preparing to commit suicide. Here Wallace invites us to associate the veil with St. Teresa, because while attempting to overdose on freebase cocaine Joelle is reminded of the figure of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture 'The Ecstasy of St. Teresa':

The 'base frees and condenses, compresses the whole experience to the implosion of one terrible shattering spike in the graph, an afflated orgasm of the heart that makes her feel, truly, *attractive*, sheltered by limits, de veiled and loved, observed and alone and sufficient and female, full, as if watched for an instant by God. She always sees, after inhaling, right at the apex, at the graph's spike's tip, Bernini's 'Ecstasy of St. Teresa', behind glass, at the Vittoria, for some reason, the saint recumbent, half-supine, her flowing stone robe lifted by the angel in whose other hand a bare arrow is raised for that best descent, the saint's legs frozen in opening, the angel's expression not charity but the perfect vice of barb-headed love (p.235, emphasis in original).

Just as Joelle keeps herself behind a veil while in public, Bernini's Teresa, according to the narrator, is kept behind glass at the Vittoria: a 'fact' that does not appear to be true ('Ecstasy of Saint Teresa by Bernini'). We must remember here that this is Bernini's vision of St. Teresa, and of her ecstasy, and that our first experience of Teresa is a mediated one, in the form of sculpture fashioned from rock. Just like Kate, the protagonist of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (who is discussed at length in Wallace's essay 'The Empty Plenum') and Wallace's Joelle, Bernini's St. Teresa is the product of a male mind. Historically, male visions of women have often wilfully tied women to the body, which in fact speaks of the Madonna-Whore complex and notions of the Fall. Such willingness to place emphasis on the female body can be seen in Diane Evans's critique of Bernini's statue:

[M]any have mistakenly taken Bernini's interpretation as being on par with Teresa's original translation. Mieke Bal writes, 'although sculpture is not a set of words, iconographic analysis treats it as if it were just that'. Lacan and Bourgeois have fallen into the trap of only analytically and artistically

interpreting Bernini's work, rather than focusing on Teresa's writings which emphasized Christ-centred practicality, prayer, compassion, piety, reform, and humility over and above mystical experience and have therefore created incomplete translations (2015, p.15).

The veiled body of St. Teresa, in the form of Bernini's sculpture, has obscured our view of St. Teresa's writing, according to Evans. She suggests that the actual felt experience written about by St. Teresa has been lost in the act of translating it into a readable form, albeit through 'iconographic analysis'. In a parallel sense, it could be argued that Joelle's importance to *Infinite Jest* has been obscured from view because of her use of the veil. Joelle's veil can perhaps be seen to act as a barrier, preventing the majority of critics from providing a sustained engagement with her narrative. Such failure may indeed speak of the blindness that Hirschmann associates with the veil and Western culture.

As for our discussion of St. Teresa, it could be argued that, as Evans suggests in her discussion of Bernini's statue, there is always some aspect of meaning that is lost in the process of turning felt experience into art. This concept is present throughout Wallace's *corpus* in the form of apparent failures of communication. Examples of this can be found in the failures that manifest themselves through the characters' interactions with one another: the essential miscommunication of the 'professional conversationalist' episode between Hal Incandenza and his father, for example (Wallace, 1996, pp.3–10). It also informs the structural layout of Wallace's texts: *Infinite Jest's* 388 endnotes can arguably be seen to provide ever more information in an attempt to avoid such failure. William Shane Tucker views *Infinite Jest's* endnotes

... as a way for [Wallace] to elaborate on aspects of his text while self-consciously challenging the validity of his notions. Despite the impossibility of transcending the physical boundaries of the main narrative, *Infinite Jest* attempts to utilise 388 endnotes appearing in the section titled 'Notes and Errata' as a way of structurally undermining the totality of its content. The

endnotes within *Infinite Jest*, ranging in role from short expository add-ons to full-fledged narrative passages, simultaneously fracture and marginalise the main narrative as much as they support and synthesise it. In this sense the endnotes are a subversion of the text through sub-versions of the text (2014, p.8).

The endnotes may well function as a form of subversion, but in realising the 'impossibility of transcending the physical boundaries of the main narrative' we may well come to view such subversion as a form of failure.

Clare Hayes-Brady has discussed the importance of failure in Wallace's work:

Failure itself was a recurrent theme of the writing: *Infinite Jest* went under the working title of *A Failed Entertainment* because for Wallace 'the book is structured as an entertainment that doesn't work. Because what entertainment ultimately leads to, I think, is the movie *Infinite Jest*', which implicitly positions entertainment ... in opposition to communication ... [F]ailure marks the continuation of human thought, whereas success leads to atrophy of will and the inevitable choice of death by pleasure. By contrast, the central failure of the novel is ultimately a symbolically productive one: ... the central absence of the novel becomes a repository of possibilities, not a univocal object but a play of potentialities (2016, pp.2-3).

One such 'play of potentiality' might be to destabilise Hayes-Brady's optimism in the notion of failure by noting the commercial and critical success that Wallace's 'failed entertainment' brought him. It is clear that Wallace has a suspicion of the moving image, as he makes plain during an interview with Larry McCaffery (1993).¹ Wallace's somewhat romantic view of literature, as a form of art that ultimately seeks to foster communication between humans, fails to consider that mass-produced books, like *Infinite Jest*, are forms of entertainment that produce significant amounts of profit.² In fact, they cater to the same demand for entertainment as films and television shows do with respect to their audiences. If *Infinite Jest* can be thought of as a critical and commercial success, then surely this gives rise to

the potential that Wallace's *magnum opus* may also lead to an 'atrophy of the will': consider all the anecdotal evidence that suggests that *Infinite Jest*, in part due to its length and challenging typography, is a book that sits unread, largely, on people's bookshelves (Fischer, 2015). Such thoughts are not meant to diminish the importance of Hayes-Brady's contribution, which in this respect may yield interesting lines of enquiry, but are put forth in order to make clear the seemingly never-ending problems associated with our use of words and the multiplicity of meanings that can be interpreted from them.

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida discusses at length the difficulty we face in ever trying to capture 'true meaning'. Derrida traces the origins of the sign, finding it embedded in theological roots, stating that 'the very idea of the sign ... refers to an absolute logos to which it is ultimately united' and that '[t]his absolute logos was an infinite creative subjectivity in medieval theology: the intelligible face of the sign remains turned toward the word and the face of God' (1967, p.12). He goes on to state that:

The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never *end*. Its historical *closure* is, however, outlined. ... Treating as suspect ... the difference between signified and signifier, or the idea of the sign in general ... is not a question of doing so in terms of the instance of the presence of truth, anterior, exterior or superior to the sign, or in terms of the place of the effaced difference. Quite the contrary. We are disturbed by that which, in the concept of the sign—which has never existed or functioned outside the history of (the) philosophy (of presence)—remains systematically and genealogically determined by that history. It is there that the concept and above all the work of deconstruction, its 'style', remain by nature exposed to misunderstanding and nonrecognition (pp.13–14, emphasis in original).

Derrida seeks to exploit the distance, the space between signifier and signified, highlighting the ways in which meaning can never truly emerge while adhering to such a system. Wallace, familiar with Derrida's works, notes that for Derrida and his contemporaries language is 'not a tool but an

environment. A writer does not wield language, he is subsumed in it. Language speaks us; writing writes; etc.' (1997, pp.140–141). Borrowing from Hayes-Brady's notion of failure, while remaining mindful of Derrida's thoughts on the roots of the sign, may here prove useful in a consideration of Wallace's description (via the narrator of this section of *Infinite Jest*) of Bernini's St. Teresa. This approach highlights the ways in which original 'meaning' becomes lost and/or modified as the signification that accompanies the act of writing—whether literal or figurative—begins to wield its influence.³

Derrida states that the sign originates from a desire to connect with the word and the face of God. Bernini's St. Teresa, in her moment of ecstasy, can be seen as an attempt to encapsulate this very connection. Evans's critique of Bernini's St. Teresa identifies how Bernini's statue actually misrepresents St. Teresa's writings, and the experience of her connection with the face of God. As such, Wallace's use of the figure of St. Teresa becomes an even more apt means of discussing such an issue. Wallace's inclusion of Bernini's mediated image of St. Teresa in *Infinite Jest* represents a productive failure to achieve this connection: the inevitable gap between signified (St. Teresa's experience) and signifier (Bernini's statue). In short, the image of the statue makes evident the distance between signifier and signified, acting in this instance as a symbolically productive form of failure. Here, it is worth stressing that St. Teresa's inclusion in *Infinite Jest* has been thus far overlooked. Arguably, this is because Joelle's character has been overlooked and undervalued as a tool with which to interrogate the text. Indeed, it can be argued that the majority of critics fail to look past Joelle's veil in this instance, and thus her pairing with Bernini's St. Teresa also remains obscured from view.

Returning once more to the description of the apex of Joelle's freebase cocaine-high, 'an afflated orgasm of the heart that makes her feel, truly, *attractive*, sheltered by limits, deveiled and loved, observed and alone and

sufficient and female, full, as if watched for an instant by God', we see that Wallace conflates the idea of the orgasm with an intense feeling of the heart (1996, p.235, emphasis in original). This creates something at once sexual in origin, while elevating it to a level of purity: the feeling manifests itself not through a sexual organ but through a part of the human body (the heart) that is meant to convey emotions such as love. In itself, this can be considered to be a fallacy if we are willing to view the heart as an organ that helps supply blood to a body's extremities purely for reasons of survival, and to dispel the conventional notion of the heart as the primary organ where human feelings are 'stored' and/or 'felt'. Wallace elevates the sexual act of orgasm in order to link Joelle's feelings with that of St. Teresa's, but we must be mindful that this is Bernini's interpretation of St. Teresa's experience. Where St. Teresa's writing is characterised by Evans as emphasising 'Christ-centred practicality, prayer, compassion, piety, reform, and humility over and above mystical experience' (2015, p.15), Wallace, via Bernini, presents us with a sexualised being in the middle of an unholy rapture, recumbent and half-supine.

Wallace's version of Bernini's vision of St. Teresa becomes ever more disturbing and farther away from the person herself as the narrator describes the angel's hand lifting her 'flowing stone robe', while her legs appear 'frozen in opening'. This speaks of a familiar narrative of the female in a sexualised role: passive, not active, waiting to receive that which is given. Viewers of Bernini's statue will note that the angel does indeed appear to be lifting St. Teresa's gown, but closer to her breast. It is also the case that Bernini's statue depicts St. Teresa in the state of transverberation: St. Teresa is no longer waiting for the arrow of God to penetrate her heart, for that has already happened. Instead, the angel is believed to be replacing the folds of her robe following the piercing: 'Bernini's sculpture does not depict the piercing, only its after-effects. The backward drapes of the folds of the angel tell the viewer that the arrow has been withdrawn; Teresa is now beyond herself, burning, and in a state of ecstasy' (Evans, 2015, p.8). Viewers of the statue will also

notice that her legs cannot be seen under the weight of her gown: only her feet are visible (Fig. 1). In this respect, it can only be considered a misreading to suggest that her legs are 'opening'. Here, Wallace's use of language makes obvious the failure of words to describe what is happening in Bernini's art.

With respect to St. Teresa's form becoming, for some, sexualised in Bernini's representation of her experience, Evans notes the influence of masculine imagery within the Christian tradition:

Psychological research into the triggers of mystical religious experience ... confirmed that individuals use similar gender-based descriptions to describe both mystical and erotic experiences. Females described both erotic and mystical experiences in receptive terms, but males described only their sexual experiences in agentive terms. Research suggests that the compatibility of erotic and mystical experiences for females is aided by masculine imagery common in the Christian tradition, which facilit[ate]s congruent expression of eroticism and mysticism for females but inhibits it for males (2015, p.8).

Importantly, here, the patriarchal iconography of Christianity links expressive acts of eroticism and mysticism with female experience, while expressly prohibiting males from such acts. In so doing, such expressive acts are there to be witnessed or viewed by an other: that 'other' being the males who are inhibited from this form of 'congruent expression'. Here we have one origin of the male-female gaze, with males occupying the position of the privileged gaze, while the females are the objects of that gaze. Simon Schama speaks to this when he states of Bernini's sculpture: 'what we are looking at could hardly be less sly or furtive, and this startling candour precludes a snigger rather than provokes it. Staring is mandatory' (Schama, 1996, cited in Evans, 2015, p.9). In Bernini's representation, St. Teresa is certainly the object of such a gaze.

In this instance, we may consider Wallace's narrator's description of Bernini's St. Teresa to be merely another example of the idea of the 'sexual' consuming the female form, albeit via the mind of the male: a fate similar to

that of Markson's Kate. However, Wallace differs in his use of the female in the subtle associations that can be drawn from his pairing of Joelle with St. Teresa throughout the novel, and in his choice of St. Teresa as a point of reference: both of whom are linked by the veil. And note, here, how far we are removed from St. Teresa herself by this very act of mediated imagery, perhaps in itself a form of veiling. Wallace's narrator describes Joelle's vision of St. Teresa's vision, which is actually Bernini's interpretation of that vision in the form of sculpture. In fact, we know that this is not something that Joelle has seen first-hand, because Joelle, in the process of attempting to commit suicide, laments the fact that she has never been to Rome: "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa" is on perpetual display at the Vittoria in Rome and she never got to see it' (Wallace, 1996, p.238). The image that she brings to mind, therefore, must be an image of Bernini's statue. Wallace's use of the image of St. Teresa represents a symbolically productive form of failure, making clear the failures inherent in our present language system when attempting to describe an experience. Here Wallace exposes the gap between the original experience and that which it signifies. The question we must ask here is: why St. Teresa?

If we consider Alison Weber's thoughts on St. Teresa's writing then we are provided with a description that could almost equally describe Wallace's writing style:

Teresa's writing does indeed impress one as spontaneous, since its syntax appears much closer to the oral than the written norm. There are sentence fragments, as well as frequent interjections, asides and digressions. Lexically, there is also much to suggest oral language, such as diminutives, superlatives, and low-register colloquial turns of phrase (1990, p.5).

This is interesting when one considers how critics have viewed Teresa's writings, where [t]he corollary assumption is that Theresa's style is derived from a gender-determined predisposition to certain linguistic characteristics. Spontaneity and colloquialness have thus been subsumed

under the rubric of “feminine affectivity” (Weber, 1990, p.7). In the wake of recent studies, however, ‘[g]ender alone appears to account for very few discrete differences in language use. Many observed differences were in fact the result of coincidental correlations between sex and other social variables, such as age, discourse role, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity’ (p.12). With such thoughts in mind, it must be possible to consider that written markers of femininity and masculinity, whatever they may be, are equally available to males and females when writing.

Wallace’s use of St. Teresa is spread throughout *Infinite Jest*, as is Joelle, although to a much larger extent than has been recognised in the wider critical sphere. Indeed, in similar fashion to that of Delfino and Freudenthal, Hayes-Brady continues to promote the notion that Wallace has an ‘apparent reluctance or inability to write strong female characters ... despite an almost pathologically repetitive invocation of ... femininity’ (2016, p.19). One problem with Hayes-Brady’s argument here is that she does not define what she means by the word ‘strong’, nor does she provide concrete examples of why she considers Wallace’s female characters, such as Joelle, to lack such strength, or indeed why she feels it is important that they exhibit strength in the first instance.

Hayes-Brady appears to have reached such a conclusion without conducting a close textual analysis of Joelle’s inclusion in the text, and of her importance to the text. Again, perhaps the veil is responsible for Hayes-Brady’s failure in this respect. Feminism in Western culture often has fixed views on the use of the veil as something that speaks of repression and as an obstacle to liberation (Hirschmann, 1998, p.345). Joelle’s use of the veil may indeed speak of such repression, yet there is also the possibility that it can act as a form of liberation, where the woman, so often tied to the body, can wield a form of control with respect to what others see of her, as Tanaka suggests is the case (2013).

Another problem with Hayes-Brady's conclusion here is her insistence on only ever viewing the female as feminine, while also viewing the male as always masculine: a mode of thought that Jack Halberstam takes to task in *Female Masculinity* (1998). Though there is not the scope to discuss such matters here, it could be argued that Wallace tends to blend aspects of masculinity and femininity throughout certain main characters in *Infinite Jest*: Don Gately, though huge and capable of extreme violence, is shown to be tender and caring more often than not; Avril and Jim Incandenza are almost doppelgangers in terms of their appearance; Hugh/Helen Steeply morphs from an unconvincing 'transvestite' disguise into a role where he 'passes' as a woman in front of a good number of people (even erotically so, for some); and there are other minor characters too numerous to mention.

Such failure from Wallace critics to allow Wallace's female characters a voice leads to our failure to give proper consideration to the entirety of Wallace's *oeuvre*. Again, there are echoes here of St. Teresa and the ways in which her voice was silenced, save for a few who thought her worthy of championing (Weber, 1990, pp.3–5). Perhaps it will be the case that over the coming decades Wallace's female characters, although fewer in number than his male characters, will cease to be overlooked as a result of identifying such failures. Arguably, Wallace's use of the veil and the figure of St. Teresa may well reveal aspects of our blindness where his female characters are concerned. If we allow ourselves to be guided on the matter by the silence of eminent Wallace critics such as Boswell and Burn, or even by the failure of the critics mentioned throughout the article who choose not to properly engage with such characters in the first instance, then surely we are failing to read Wallace's *oeuvre* in its entirety. As one of the first articles to date to give a considered response to St. Teresa's inclusion in the text, and of her association with Joelle and the veil, it is hoped that new criticism will emerge that will lend voice to Wallace's female characters and the symbolically productive failure that surrounds them.

Notes

¹ Wallace discusses TV's limitations on a number of occasions during the interview, as the following two extracts demonstrate (the second of which also hints at Wallace's views on the superiority of fiction over TV):

What TV is extremely good at—and realize that this is *all it does*—is discerning what large numbers of people think they want, and supplying it. And since there's always been a strong and distinctive American distaste for frustration and suffering, TV's going to avoid these like the plague in favour of something anesthetic and easy (p.128, emphasis in original).

And:

With televised images, we can have the facsimile of a relationship without the work of a real relationship. It's an anesthesia of *form*. The interesting thing is why we're so desperate for this anesthetic against loneliness. ... I'm not sure I could give you a steeple-fingered theoretical justification, but I strongly suspect a big part of real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny (p.136, emphasis in original).

² In his essay 'Greatly Exaggerated', Wallace makes plain his feelings on the purpose of fiction when he asserts that there are 'those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another' (1997, p.144).

³ Here it is worth noting Wallace's knowledge of poststructuralist and deconstructionist arguments with respect to meaning, and the complications that arise from a detailed examination of 'signified' and 'signifier'. For a brief example of this see 'Greatly Exaggerated' (Wallace, 1997).

Images



Fig. 1. Bernini, G. L., 1652. *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. [Sculpture]. (Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, Italy).

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