The ghosts of Elizabeth Wurtzel and David Foster Wallace: Depression, Sincerity, Hauntology

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ABSTRACT
This essay explores the relationship between Elizabeth Wurtzel and David Foster Wallace, two writers who are in different ways representative of the 'in-between' status of the 1990s, and who both pioneered different modes of writing which remain influential today: Wurtzel's 'obscene' (in Baudrillard's terms) confessional style, and Wallace's post-postmodern aesthetics of sincerity. In particular it considers Wallace's short story 'The Depressed Person' (from his collection Brief Interviews with Hideous Men), which is widely understood to be 'about' Wurtzel. While somewhat cruel and misogynistic on the surface, the hauntological dimension of this text – ie the effect created by the posthumous context of reading it now, when both writer and alleged subject are no longer with us – opens up a different reading, one which enables us to explore the association with depression which is central to understanding both authors. The essay compares 'The Depressed Person' to Wurtzel's own rather circumspect memorial of Wallace, 'Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble', published in 2008 shortly after his death. Read posthumously, both texts come to seem unlikely companion pieces. For all their substantial differences, both effectively advance a similar, bleak yet carefully considered, conclusion about what it means to suffer with depression which casts new light on Wallace's notion of sincerity and Wurtzel's 'obscene' approach to autobiography.

Elizabeth Wurtzel once described David Foster Wallace as the second smartest David she ever met (Wurtzel 2013). Perhaps she was being precise, or perhaps this was a subtle response to the widely-held view that Wallace used her as the inspiration for his dark, misogynistic, story 'The Depressed Person' (2012, 212). But Wallace and Wurtzel were certainly friends once, perhaps more than friends, and shared a mutual empathy and admiration, a recognition that, as two iconic Generation X/Nineties writers, both were in a similar position. That they are both now dead preserves the mystery of what exactly they meant to each other, and signifies the loss of two distinctive literary voices. But their passing also signals the end of a moment which defined distinctive modes of writing at the end of the Twentieth Century and influenced aspects still prominent now, in the second decade of the Twenty-First.
This essay takes the ways in which both writers were connected personally and are associated now in cultural memory as the foundation for an examination of the ‘hauntological’ quality of two of their shorter pieces, each written by one about the other (at least, as far as we can tell): Wallace’s ‘The Depressed Person’ (1999b) and the short memorial to Wallace which Wurtzel published shortly after his suicide, ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’ (Wurtzel 2008). My interest is in the impression of confused temporality created by reading the work of particular writers who died prematurely or unexpectedly. In some cases, as hard as we try to respect the original context of the work, or to avoid biographical reading, our interpretation becomes conditioned by a future event, the death of the writer, which ‘activates’ or re-shapes elements of the text which would not have been significant before, and which the authors in question themselves did not anticipate.

This is why I consider Derrida’s notion of hantologie, or ‘hauntology’ – a term which reinterprets its near-homonym ‘ontology’ – as especially apposite (Derrida 2006, 20). Where ontology is about presence and being, hauntology – as the connotation of spectrality indicates – is about an ontology which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive. It is about being present in the way that a ghost would be present. The effect is a temporal one because the spectre’s identity is not purely coincident with the moment of apparition but brings into the present simultaneously both past and future. As Martin Hägglund puts it, hauntology counters and shadows traditional ‘ontology’, to demonstrate that ‘since time – the disjointure between past and future – is a condition even for the slightest moment, spectrality is at work in everything that happens’ (Hägglund 2008, 82). One might therefore speculate that reading is always hauntological in this sense, in that not only is the reader inhabiting multiple temporalities at the same moment (ie when the text was written, the time of the narrative, the present context for reading, etc.) but the author is neither fully present in his or her writing as we read, but not fully absent either. Like everyone, writers die, and exploring the impact of the knowledge of their death on the reception of their work could merely seem to validate Hägglund’s statement that ‘spectrality is at work in everything’. But in the case of writers like Wurtzel and Wallace, whose demise really seems to condition any subsequent reading of their work, the spectral effect is more pronounced. We read with hindsight. The fact of, or the details of, or even – in Wallace’s case, it would seem – the likelihood of the writer’s premature death is not known at the time of writing, but it is at a posthumous time of reading. When we read work in the light of that knowledge it is as if a secret is unlocked.

In what follows, my chief aim is to read ‘The Depressed Person’ from this hauntological perspective in order to examine the association with depression which is central to understanding the work of both writers. My reading is founded on a conviction that Wurtzel’s and Wallace’s biographical personae – as two depressed persons, two depressive writers – haunt any contemporary reading of Wallace’s story, in a way which takes reading beyond the normal bounds of biographically-oriented criticism.

Provenience: Wurtzel meets Wallace

In ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’ Wurtzel described her brief friendship with Wallace
I never knew David well, but during the last fin de siècle era of New York City existence I got to know him a little bit: He was experiencing a literary rise at the same time that I was going through a more generalized kind of fall. Somehow, we collided at the nexus of these opposing trajectories . . . (Wurtzel 2008).

She explains that she originally met him at a New York party, a drug-fuelled ‘mess’ hosted by the novelist Robert Bingham.² She suggests enigmatically that she was impressed either by his openness and curiosity or by ‘the way he was so taken with the silver lamé leotard I was wearing’. Subsequently she ‘took him around with [her] some time after that’. The last time she recalls meeting him was in 1998. ‘Looking back’, she writes,

I am just so very sorry he was not less fragile and I was not less crazy. Looking back, I’m not sure which philosophy of life is more sound: the person who is full of regret, or the one who says je ne regrette rien. I am even less sure which mode of thinking finally leads one to say enough is enough, which approach is at long last more tiring. (Wurtzel 2008)

‘Beyond the Trouble’ is both moving in its understatement and quintessentially ‘Wurtzelian’ in its self-conscious narcissistic exhibitionism, its dual focus on Wurtzel herself and the subject of the piece, Wallace. She conveys the sense that she was in control of the relationship, that although ‘impressed’ by him she was the one who was desired. It was she who ‘took him around’. But most significant is her acknowledgement of how intertwined their careers and biographies are. This entangling makes her conclusion mysterious. Which one of them regrets, and which says je ne regrette rien? One would assume the latter was Wurtzel, but can we be sure? Wallace is clearly the one who says ‘enough is enough’, but is this because of his being full of regret? And if so, about what?

Wallace never published anything explicitly about Wurtzel, but from what we can ascertain, he was also aware of their parallel trajectories. D. T. Max’s biography of Wallace, Every Love Story is a Ghost Story (2013) corroborates the details in ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’. Bingham’s New York party was a gathering for the literary journal Open City in 1995 in Manhattan. As Max tells it, Wurtzel figured in Wallace’s mind as a counterpart, ‘a breathing symbol of temptation’: ‘He had never met anyone as self-involved as he was, someone, moreover, with a history of depression, yet whom fame and drugs had not pushed into collapse.’ (Max 2012, 179) He tried, unsuccessfully, to get Wurtzel to invite him upstairs to her apartment after the party. He then wrote her a manipulative letter, one which invites comparison with the unpleasant, transparent, and self-serving ‘seduction stories’ told by the subjects of the ‘Brief Interviews’ sequence in Wallace’s collection, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (Wallace 1999c), through which Wallace exposes the disingenuous self-reflexivity of modern masculinity. In the letter he comes clean about his ‘self-centred and careerist’ nature and his need for ‘some smidgeon of some gratification I feel I simply can’t live without’ but accompanies this with a redeeming meta-statement of his ‘integrity’: ‘I think I’m very honest and candid, but I’m also proud of how honest and candid I am – so where does that put me.’ (Max 2012, 179). There followed what Wurtzel would characterise as the brief ‘grunge Salingeresque’ (Wurtzel 2008) period of their friendship, during which she was present
Hashtags before Twitter: sincerity and obscenity in the 1990s

Tracing the volatile pattern of slights and misidentification that characterise the relationship between Wurtzel and Wallace involves revisiting what was going on in the 1990s – and not just the world of literary launch parties and silver lamé leotards. This is the period which Brian McHale, in constructing a history of the postmodern period in American literature, has termed ‘the interregnum’ (McHale 2015, 2016). His point is that the period from around 1989 to 2001 was a cultural equivalent of the singular, transitional moment in British history from 1649 to 1660 when the nation was for the only time under republican rule. The very end of the Twentieth Century was a brief exceptional moment characterised by its ‘in-between’ status, its prevailing mood of uncertainty following the end of the Cold War. History seemed to lack direction or to be ‘multi-directional’, and literature, art, music, and culture were similarly multifocused, multicultural and subcultural (McHale 2015, 7).

It is in keeping with the notion of the interregnum that things can go either way, that the kind of writing that emerges in this short period can either be the dying embers of something on the wane, merely a temporary flaring-up of a fashionable genre or mode, or a prelude to something significant and enduring. The writing – and the public personae – of both Wallace and Wurtzel represent the latter, in different ways. Their modes of writing were part of something new which remains central to literary and cultural production now.

The value Wallace placed on sincerity, in his own fiction as well as in interviews (McCaffrey 1993) and in essays like ‘E Unibus Pluram’, became elevated to one of the most influential theories of writing fiction in the age after postmodernism. Labelled the ‘new sincerity’ (Kelly 2010), this approach valued Wallace’s determination to supersede the apparent inward-focused self-reflexivity of postmodernism with a new kind of respectful dialogue between writer and reader which broke from supposed postmodern authorial didacticism. This is rather problematic given that Wallace’s writing seems even more hyper-self-reflexive than postmodernism – a kind of postmodernism squared rather than postmodernism superseded – and he is clearly, sometimes systematically, drawing on the influence of postmodern forebears such as Barth and Pynchon (McCaffrey 1993, Boswell 2003, 12–13). But it is the ethical position which matters. Literary fiction now, still, could be said to be more ‘sincere’ in ‘Wallacean’ terms, characterised by a willingness to ‘think one’s way into a shared space between one being and another’ rather than an investment in ‘the wearyly “postmodern” conclusion that all life is a fiction, that we are all fictional characters in search of an author’ (Boxall 2013, 116).
For all Wallace’s literary influence, Wurtzel’s approach to writing and to public discourse is more obviously representative of the literary and media age we live in now. The modes of writing she favoured overlap significantly with forms of journalistic and social media expression which have become far more wide-ranging and influential socially and culturally in the Twenty-First Century. Her friend (another David), the writer David Samuels, wrote in her obituary that her ‘literary genius’ was to have invented

a new form, which has more or less replaced literary fiction — the memoir by a young person no one has ever heard of before. It was a form that Lizzie fashioned in her own image, because she always needed to be both the character and the author’ (Samuels 2020).

In reality Wurtzel was only one of a number of prominent Nineties practitioners of what I would call ‘obscene’ autobiographical writing: or confession which exposes something which one would normally expect to remain hidden. Others included the art critic Catherine Millet’s sexual memoir, The Sexual Life of Catherine M (2001), ‘misery memoirs’ such as Dave Pelzer’s A Child Called It (1995) and Kathryn Harrison’s The Kiss (1997), Bruno Dössékker’s pseudonymous fake Holocaust-survivor memoir Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood (1995) (originally attributed to ‘Binjamin Wilkomirski’), Chris Kraus’s work of autofiction, I Love Dick (1997), and Dave Eggers’s postmodern confessional memoir, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius (2000) (Nicol 2005). The spirit behind these confessional texts remains readily observable today as a glance at the best-of-year book lists from 2020 reveals: e.g. David Crow’s The Pale-Faced Lie (2019); Deborah Orr’s Motherwell: A Girlhood (2020); Alan Davies’s Just Ignore Him (2020); Tiffany Jenkins’s High Achiever (2020); Natasha Tretheway’s Memorial Drive (2020).

While there is something about Wallace’s ethics of sincerity which complements the emphasis on being authentic, genuine, passionate, which is one of the defining characteristics of the digital universe we inhabit now, Wurtzel’s style of confessional memoir, and her outspoken, combative, faith in the power of personal narrative expression, is even more in tune with the media age we live in in the 2020s. In using the term ‘obscene’ for this confessional approach, I am drawing on Jean Baudrillard’s idea that a culture of ‘obscenity’ has come to replace panopticism. Where the panoptic is a model of permanent surveillance and investigation based on a quasi-paranoid assumption that there is something hidden in everything, it is confounded by our contemporary culture of obscenity in which everything is already on display, everything is comfortably, even shamelessly, transparent.³ The culture of obscenity starts from an alternative premise that there is nothing hidden, nor should there be.

In such an environment, Baudrillard argues, self-expression – the ‘ultimate form of confession’, as Foucault understood it – becomes a reflex action in our society, an impulse for everyone to ‘pass their time by perpetually telling themselves their story’ (Baudrillard 2005a, 182). One of Baudrillard’s ‘test-cases’, along with the French reality-TV show Loft Story, was the art-critic-turned-memoirist Catherine Millet, who features in the two companion pieces diagnosing obscenity in the media sphere which he first published at the end of the ‘interregnum’ period, in 2001 (Baudrillard 2005a) (Baudrillard, ‘Telemorphosis’ 2005b). But because of her wider, cross-media, celebrity, a more representative candidate still is Elizabeth Wurtzel. Although a public figure,
Millet has not indulged in the cult of antagonistic individuality which drives social media now. Wurtzel embraced it. She said more than once that the opposite of ‘irrelevant’ was ‘controversial’, ‘because that’s the closest you get to everyone agreeing with you – the other choice is no one is paying attention’ (Wurtzel 2018b) (Wurtzel 2015).

Perhaps surprisingly, though, Wurtzel was never a notorious star of Twitter the way that some have become, even though she used Twitter right up to her death, tweeting in 2019 about subjects as varied as her own discovery of her real parentage and the Democratic primaries. This relative ‘quietness’ may be because she was less fashionable to a younger post-Gen X, community, but is perhaps also because she had already engaged powerfully in precisely the kind of performance of self which pre-empted social media. As she once wrote, ‘I was a hashtag before there was Twitter.’ (Wurtzel 2018a).

Prozac Nation might be regarded, along with other memoirs of this decade, as a ‘macroblogging’ version of the kind of ‘sincere’ autobiographical constructions which have now become the norm on social media microblogging platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Wurtzel once wrote that ‘I am fortunate to have been well paid for an almost pathological honesty, and the only way I am able to write that way is by being that way’ (Wurtzel 2013). She epitomised the self-absorption of the social media age – or ‘obscene’ self-expression, in Baudrillardian terms – a self-absorption which extended to her ability (which Wallace shared) to be fully aware of herself and to provide a critique of her preoccupation with herself all the while she was being self-absorbed.

**Hauntology and posthumous reading: reading with hindsight**

Both Wurtzel and Wallace are influential writers who typify the pioneering literary developments of the Nineties cultural ‘interregnum’. The fact that Wurtzel is not afforded equivalent status to Wallace as a key late Nineties writer, despite my contention that she is more representative than he of what was to come, and on a broader scale, may be explained by the fact that assessing literary reputation often operates according to familiar hierarchies between ‘literary’ writing and its poorer cousin, ‘popular culture’, or associated assumptions about gender and literary influence. This would be a revealing line of enquiry, though one I prefer to keep beyond the scope of this essay. What I am more interested in here is the fact that the distinctive contributions each figure made to significant forms of writing emerging at the end of the Twentieth Century opens up a recognition that Wurtzel and Wallace are more intimately connected posthumously than just their shared 1990s, Gen X status, or their role as leading figures in new kinds of prose writing. They are further bound together by their commitment to writing honestly and their struggles with depression. At stake in analysing Wallace’s ‘The Depressed Person’ from a hauntological perspective, which I will soon go on to do, is firstly the degree to which it may in fact be a ‘sincere’, even autobiographical, text despite its appearance to the contrary, and secondly the way in which Elizabeth Wurtzel is summoned into being, like an apparition, by reading the story now, causing us to re-evaluate her own persona and her writing as well as Wallace’s.

Wallace’s aesthetics of sincerity – and the faith in it exhibited by literary critics seeking to document a post-postmodernist context for fiction – complements Wurtzel’s authenticity, her conviction that ‘the only way I am able to write that way is by being that way’, or ‘I only write what I feel like’ (Wurtzel 2013). Both stances demand trust on the part of
readers, an understanding that while they may not agree with what either author is confronting them with, they can be reassured that it is at least genuine. The expectation is that this trust is sustained even when the self-reflexivity of each writer short-circuits the logic of what they proclaim, e.g. in the distinctive ironic layered self-questioning of Wallace’s prose, or the metafictional dimension of his fiction, and in disingenuous admissions from Wurtzel such as this one:

Still, this story has the best possible ending, because I am telling it. […] I have been engaged in telling the truth about my life for most of my life now, and I believe everything I say. The events I describe are precisely as I remember them, and as anyone else who was there recalls. And still, I know: There are other versions. (Wurtzel 2013)

A remark like this is close to autofiction, even though Wurtzel cannot really be called a practitioner of autofiction. Her writing remains autobiographical, albeit a kind of autobiography which focuses less on telling a complete life story and more on exposing something intimate or private. The ‘autofictional pact’, as I have termed it elsewhere, is the contradictory commitment on the part of the writer of autofiction to tell the truth and to produce a work of fiction, without giving way on either (Nicol 2018). A memoir like Prozac Nation and essays like ‘Elizabeth Wurtzel Confronts Her One-Night Stand of a Life’ (Wurtzel 2013) still fundamentally operate according to Philippe Lejeune’s ‘autobiographical pact’, that stipulates that when reading autobiography the reader can trust the author to tell the truth (Lejeune 1989). Wallace’s sincerity might be regarded as a variation on both kinds of pact, ie as the point where an alternative to the ‘autobiographical pact’ operates in fiction, only rather than the author reassuring the reader he is telling the truth, he is promising that what he is writing is sincere, and not ironic.

The second aspect which binds both Wurtzel and Wallace together is an obvious one, one we have been considering obliquely so far but is worthy of greater scrutiny: the association with depression in both their biographies and public personae. The success of Prozac Nation in 1994 ensured that Wurtzel would thereafter be inseparable from the image of depression. This was clear from the obituaries which appeared after her death in 2020, which highlighted Prozac Nation as her most distinctive achievement (Samuels 2020). The association is only posthumous in Wallace’s case. His suicide in 2008 confirmed that he had been suffering from depression all his life. In stark contrast to Wurtzel, despite this long personal history, and even though depression figures in his fiction to a remarkable degree (Mayo 2021), he published nothing about his own struggle with the illness. As Wurtzel put it in ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’, his death was shocking because it would seem outwardly that he ‘was doing great, living in Southern California, writing terrific books and pieces, recently married, teaching at a prestigious college’, and that at 46 he was ‘at a safe age’, having survived ‘the mad search for sex and success that consumes one’s twenties, and then leaves a hangover into your thirties’ and not yet reached ‘the sense of failure, the feeling that it’s all been a waste, that hits after 50’ (Wurtzel 2008). Evidently he was not safe. The shared association with depression is one reason, besides the fact that Wurtzel knew Wallace personally, why ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’ was a notable publication: the writer who had so publicly been associated with depression since the 1990s was writing about a Nineties novelist whose suicide meant that he would forever be.
The shock that comes from someone committing such a destructive and violent act despite apparently having so much to live for is a common response to suicide. In the case of a writer like Wallace it has a powerful retroactive effect on responses to his work, which become overshadowed by the knowledge of what was to come. This retroactivity is what triggers the hauntological reading of work which I referred to at the beginning of this essay: writing which is haunted by knowledge of its author’s demise. The apparent origin or original context of the writing becomes altered by a subsequent period of time.

More than any other contemporary writer Wallace’s fiction cannot easily be disassociated from his biography. It is difficult to write about his work without also referring to his influence, his cool, his cult-like following, and his role as the pioneer of the new kind of sincere fiction and philosophy of writing which many readers and academics felt was badly needed. The intertwining of life and work also applies when considering Wallace’s style, too. He is the test case which proves that metafiction is, if not always the production of a particular kind of personality, then certainly a practice which resembles a kind of personality, one that is recursive, reflexive, self-questioning, always aware of the contingency of every utterance, and the potential for everything we state to be reversed into irony. Max’s biography makes it clear that this appears to have been Wallace’s personality, too.

The knowledge of Wallace’s suicide produces a distinctive form of double-reading that is not applicable in quite the same way (depending on the subject of a particular text, of course) to work by writers who have died of natural causes, even if they die early (like Donald Barthelme or Angela Carter). This knowledge, of the awfulness of the author’s action at the very point when he was at the height of his powers and his fame and influence, hangs over readings of everything Wallace ever wrote. It creates an effect similar to Freud’s nachträglichkeit, the ‘deferred action’ of trauma, when a secondary event reanimates a dormant, because repressed, initial ‘wound’. Reading Wallace now is to be tempted to consider a kind of reversal of nachträglichkeit (a ‘fortträglichkeit’?), when a prior event – a work of fiction – is transformed by what follows, rather than the other way around. Consider, as an obvious example, the extra poignancy conveyed in the story entitled ‘Death is Not the End’ in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (Wallace, ‘Death is Not the End’ 1999a), which mediates literary immortality through a hauntological depiction of a poet who is potentially both alive and dead at the moment of narration. More precisely, the effect is to create the kind of confused temporality when reading Wallace posthumously which I referred to earlier.

Elizabeth Wurtzel also died prematurely, though because her illness meant her death was not quite as unexpected as a suicide a less dynamic – though still discernible – hauntological function is in operation when we read her work now. The unhappy irony that comes from the fact that her very public struggle with depression throughout her writing career meant that readers would reasonably have expected her to be more likely to die at her own hand than Wallace, who remained silent about his own depression. As she wrote of depression, ‘It’s only a matter of how long you can live with it’ (Wurtzel, ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’ 2008). Prozac Nation documents an early suicide attempt. The possibility of her death – more precisely, her sense that the fact that having survived a seemingly inevitable death also means she did effectively die – is often invoked...
in her writing, such as her remark in ‘Elizabeth Wurtzel Confronts Her One-Night Stand of a Life’ that ‘this story is being written by someone else entirely because I am dead’ (Wurtzel 2013).

The nature of the disease that did in fact kill her, cancer, did mean that she was able to write directly about the prospect of her own death – and, typically boldly, she did. Her 2018 article ‘I Have Cancer. Don’t Tell Me You’re Sorry’ (Wurtzel 2018b) is an example of the masterful mini-autobiographies that she was capable of producing under the category of journalism. Its line ‘I have to live with not knowing what will happen’, while intended to play down the perception that cancer changes the way we must think of or live our lives (‘I have to live with not knowing what will happen. Which makes me just like everybody else’), now has a poignancy when read in the knowledge that Wurtzel did in fact die of cancer only 16 months later. Reading something as direct and intimate as this piece in the knowledge of what became of Wurtzel is a spectral experience. She is still present in her writing, yet absent. While she did not know what was going to happen, we do now. This is especially the case in her last published piece, the moving ‘I Believe in Love’, which, because it was published posthumously just the day after her death and mixes the past with the present tense, reads like a communication from beyond the grave: ‘Cancer is an ecosystem. It is a crime spree. Things broke. My radius. My fibula. My spirit.’ (Wurtzel 2020)

The depressed persons

In addition to Wurtzel’s brief obituary recollection of Wallace, ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’, Max’s biography of Wallace, Every Love Story is a Ghost Story, and its sources (such as the letters, presumably made available to the author from Wurtzel herself, who is listed in Max’s acknowledgements), the one other text which invites us to meditate the relationship between the two writers is ‘The Depressed Person’. The assumption that this story is about Wurtzel is now widely held, and probably dates back to Max’s biography. Yet as a work of postmodern fiction it is a far more complex and enigmatic form of communication than Max’s biography or Wurtzel’s essays, and a text which helps us explore further the intertwining of sincerity, depression, and hauntology I have been considering in this essay.

‘The Depressed Person’ initially appeared in January 1998 in Harper’s Magazine and was then republished, uncut and revised, in Wallace’s 1999 collection of short stories, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men. Max claims the story came directly from Wallace’s experience of his relationship with Wurtzel, describing it as ‘revenge fiction’: Wallace’s ‘way of getting even with Wurtzel for treating him as a statue’. Becoming a statue was Wallace’s metaphor for the situation where he felt controlled by the perception of the other, compelled to try ‘to be the person others saw him as’ rather than being the person he was, and finding himself frozen into the image they wanted. It was a particular fear at the height of the fervour surrounding the imminent publication of Infinite Jest. ‘Freed from desire’, Max writes, ‘he now saw that her love of the spotlight was just ordinary self-absorption.’ (Max 2012, 212). Wurtzel’s explanation was apparently more straightforward. Wallace was annoyed that she refused to have sex with him.
‘The Depressed Person’ shares *Brief Interviews*’s dark fascination with the inability of different people to relate to or communicate with one another, and is – as its title makes clear – preoccupied especially with the capacity of men to manipulate women and either deceive themselves about their motives, or disguise their manipulation as care for the other or as the inevitable consequence of their own unavoidable failings. The story is a counterpoint to this focus on masculinity, and examines the self-deceptions and manipulations of a person it apparently wishes to impress upon the reader is a particular female type: the narcissistic depressive. Like its companion pieces, ‘The Depressed Person’ skirts a line uncomfortably between black comedy and something genuinely dark and misanthropic.

Like many of the pieces in *Brief Interviews*, ‘The Depressed Person’ can only loosely be categorised as a story. Rather than a narrative the reader is provided with a clinical portrait in depression. It amounts to 15 pages which exemplify what Marshall Boswell has described as Wallace’s signature technique ‘of dramatizing the self-reflexive nightmare of hyper-self-consciousness’ (Boswell 2003, 204). There is no explanatory or sympathetic context, even though the story is written in the third person, and little sense of progression. It concentrates on the depressed person’s portrayal of herself to her therapists and the group of friends known only as ‘her Support System’, her pleas to them to understand her, and her continual questioning and second-guessing of the way these pleas and her framing of her dilemma will be received by them, apparently without any interest in these people as others and individuals. There is only one significant narrative event other than a gradual escalation of the central character’s mordid self-obsession and the loss of her friends: the suicide of her therapist. But even this seems less of a catalytic event and more a detail in the larger portrait of the protagonist’s narcissism. ‘The Depressed Person’ is more of an elaborate one-liner than it is short story. Did you hear the one about the depressed person and her Support System? She was so self-absorbed even her therapist killed herself.

The story finishes, however, on a suspended chord, as the depressed person pleads with ‘her now most single most trusted friend’ (presumably the only one from the Support System who has not deserted her, and someone who herself is terminally ill) for ‘her feedback […] even if that feedback was partly negative or hurtful or traumatic or had the potential to push her right over the emotional edge once and for all’. She urges her

> not to hold back, to let her have it: what words and terms might be applied to describe and assess such a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge as she now appeared to herself to be? How was she able to decide and describe – even to herself, looking inward and facing herself – what all she’d so painfully learned said about her? (Wallace 1999b, 46)

This question is never answered and leaves open the possibility for the kind of epiphanic moment of recognition the modern short story normally specialises in. The depressed person may be able to understand what she is and perhaps even change. This seems unlikely, however, and the loop of self-consciousness the story has depicted throughout (and is displayed in the short extract I have just cited) of the depressed person asking for something while reflecting on what she is asking for, will continue. The awkwardness of
the final convoluted question suggests there can be no end to the kind of continuous, humorous, but exhausting dialogic self-questioning and self-editing which typifies Wallace’s characters in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men.

Most readings of the story have debated the extent to which readers ought to or are able to empathize with the eponymous woman. The depressed person’s self-absorption has been described as ‘annoying’ (Goerlandt 2010) or ‘repulsive’ (Max 2012, 212). Some readers insist that the story is a portrait in ‘neediness’ (Benzon 2007, 190) or ‘narcissism’ (Boswell 2003, 205–6), rather than a portrait of real depression. There is undoubtedly a cruel edge to Wallace’s character study, and this intersects with its misogyny. We cannot know the gender of the third-person narrator, but this person either lacks or chooses not to indulge in any empathy of ‘his’ own. The misogyny also comes from the refusal to give the character a proper name. The clinical label used throughout – ‘The Depressed Person’ – divests her of her gender, even though she is clearly female. Why not ‘The Depressed Woman’? In avoiding any explanation of this naming practice, the story only serves to foreground the question of her gender all the more and to raise the suspicion that the anonymous interlocutor is another ‘hideous man’. Wallace apparently never deviated from this depersonalisation and degendering of the eponymous character as he worked on the story, and evidence from its various surviving drafts reveals changes he made from ‘she’ to ‘the depressed person’. Indeed the history of the story’s drafts indicate that this strategy was there from the start. It was initially titled ‘A Depressed Person’ or ‘The Very Depressed Person’, with a sequence of drafts favouring ‘PROVENIENCE (or, A Depressed Person)’ (Morsia 2015).

As plausible as Max’s account is, and as well-sourced as his biography is, we cannot declare definitively that ‘The Depressed Person’ is ‘inspired’ by Wallace’s friendship with Wurtzel, nor that it is ‘about’ Elizabeth Wurtzel. Nevertheless it is certainly a coruscating portrait of the kind of stance Wurtzel adopted in her writing, her media appearances, and interviews, which a male reader might fall into the trap of deciding is a specifically self-absorbed, hyper-conscious kind of femininity (overlooking the fact that a similar self-absorption and hyper-consciousness are defining characteristics of Wallace’s letters quoted in Max’s biography, and his interviews). It undoubtedly reflects a misogynist masculine perspective on a person like Wurtzel, a self-declared apologist for ‘difficult women’ (Wurtzel 1998).

Wurtzel’s Prozac Nation was instrumental in the increased cultural awareness of the remarkable rise of cases of depression in the 1990s (or the concomitant explosion of documented cases) which provides a context for the clinically-informed self-awareness of the eponymous character in Wallace’s story. The success of her memoir set in motion a passage similar to the evolution of Wallace’s title, its switch from indefinite to definite article, as Wurtzel herself moved from being ‘a depressed woman’ to ‘The Depressed Person’, as if it were a job title or a synonym for her status in contemporary American writing. At the time of the initial publication of Prozac Nation in 1994, the US was being referred to ‘The United States of Depression’ on some media platforms as a result of what Wurtzel referred to in her 1995 Epilogue to Prozac Nation as the ‘mainstreaming’ of mental illness generally and depression specifically. ‘[A] state of mind once considered tragic’, she declares there, ‘has become completely commonplace, even worthy of comedy’ (Wurtzel 1996). Rob Mayo suggests persuasively that this broader cultural awareness of depression is signalled by the quotation marks in the depressed woman’s
reference to ‘those people who are narcissistically obsessed with their “painful childhoods” and “painful lives” […] and insist on recounting them at tiresome lengths’ (Wallace 1999b, 32). They indicate ‘that her interlocutor will be familiar with similar stories from contemporary “misery lit” memoirs’ such as Prozac Nation (Mayo 2021, 100), the conventions of which provoke weariness and suspicion. One effect of the destigmatisation of mental illness in the Nineties is the suspicion that a public admission of having depression might be assumed to be evidence of self-absorption – worse, of having succumbed to a specifically feminine condition.

It is easy to fall into the trap of reading ‘The Depressed Person’ misogynistically. Boswell, for example, is determined to see the eponymous character as a ‘female counterpart’ to the ‘hideous men’ of the book, and decides that the source of the woman’s depression is really ‘her own voracious narcissism’ (Boswell 2003, 205). But more empathetic ways of reading the story have been suggested. After all, the narrator gives over the entire story to her narration of her experiences in a way which mirrors the ‘gift of therapy’ (Max 2012, 234). The narrator also stops short of providing his own conclusion, leaving it to readers to respond to the depressed woman’s final question, and ‘decide’ for themselves (Mayo, 103).

To expand on this empathetic way of responding to the protagonist’s situation we might examine two of its formal features: its narration and its footnotes. The central intrigue to the story is not the uncertainty about whether we are being presented with a portrait in depression or narcissism-disguised-as-depression, but about who is narrating, from which perspective, and why. Who is this third-person narrator? As I have suggested, he may be male. But to put the question of the narrator’s gender to one side, we might consider the diagnostic observational angle of the narration, the perspective revealed in a statement such as ‘here the depressed person nearly always inserted that her therapist concurred with this assessment’ (Wallace 1999b, 31). Who knows where this ‘here’ is? Who is observing so continuously, and why? This narrator clearly has, if not omniscience, a degree of knowledge which readers are not able to access. For example, the narrator refers at one point to ‘The therapist, who by this time had less than a year to live . . . ’ (Wallace 1999b, 39). Similarly, it is less important to decide who ‘the depressed person’ is, and more pressing to ponder why, if she is a recognisable type, she is being framed in this way. Why does the narrator remove identifying features, and why favour such a repetitive, cyclical style to discuss her?

A typical effect of Wallace’s prose is that his self-aware convoluted sentences continually reflect back on the process of narration rather than allow the reader a ‘pure’ unobstructed view into the fictional world. This is just as much a part of the postmodernism of Wallace’s writing as his irony, as it prevents the reader from ever assuming that his third-person narrator is an equivalent of the conventional realist narrator, one who produces a ‘transparent’ window on to the diegetic world. In ‘The Depressed Person’ the effect is to ensure that the focus cannot just be on the depressed person, even though she herself also frames everything in this kind of discourse. It has to be on the narrator, too. The story is thus an exercise in distraction: her circumlocutions cover up but draw attention to the narrator’s own.

The effect is intensified by the story’s footnotes. ‘The Depressed Person’ includes nine footnotes which begin to increase in length before reducing. This mushrooming pattern derails the process of reading the story. Footnote 5 is over four pages long. Wallace critics
have, unsurprisingly as it is one of the most distinctive features of his writing, considered the destabilising effect of his footnotes or endnotes (Holland 2013). It has been suggested that in ‘The Depressed Person’ they underline the excessive ‘hyper-consciousness’ of the character (Boswell 2003, 204–5) and induce ‘reader-annoyance’ by inviting (or forcing) the reader to ‘circle back and forth’ between the pages (Mayo 2021, 101). But in my view the effect here (and in many of the other stories in the collection too) is principally to shift the focus away from the subject of the story on to the role of the narrator. The narrative voice of the footnotes is consistent with the narrator’s voice in the main text but requires us to inhabit a different level of consciousness or narrative as the footnotes foreground the external, clinical, perspective he adopts:

The multiform shapes the therapist’s mated fingers assumed nearly always resembled, for the depressed person, various forms of geometrically diverse cages, an association which the depressed person had not shared with the therapist because its symbolic significance seemed too overt and simple-minded to waste their time together on. The therapist’s fingernails were long and shapely and well maintained, whereas the depressed person’s fingernails were compulsively bitten so short and ragged that the quick sometimes protruded and began spontaneously to bleed. (Wallace 1999b, 223)

One consequence of considering these footnotes is that it makes it easier to identify specific candidates for who the narrator might be. The narrator could conceivably be the depressed person herself, and therefore responsible for the footnotes. Writing about herself in the third person would be strange (and confound my assumption that the narrator is male), yet it would be in keeping with her propensity for self-analysis. A second, more plausible, candidate would be a member of the woman’s Support System, perhaps one of its ‘two currently most trusted and supportive “core” members’ (Wallace 1999b, 231), or ‘her very closest confidante’ (Wallace 1999b, 44) with whom she shares some details of the therapist. This would explain why this narrator might be especially keen to try to represent the depressed person’s reasoning so carefully by adding the footnotes. However, a third candidate for the narrator is both the most obvious possibility and the one whose status would entail the most radical reinterpretation of the story. It is most likely the implied author, a version of Wallace himself, one who is simultaneously, ambivalently, empathetic towards and scornful of (perhaps because of his understanding of depression) the depressed woman.

‘The miserable truth’

At this point the hauntological ramifications of analysing ‘The Depressed Person’ when its author and its likely ‘inspiration’ are no longer with us, makes itself felt. Reading this story after 12 September 2008 (the date of Wallace’s death) is an entirely different experience from reading it at any time between its initial publication in January 1998 and 11 September 2008. Most readers know now what only a handful of people knew or suspected before: that Wallace suffered from severe depression. This means that it is logical to conclude that any prolonged portrayal of what it feels like to suffer from depression would not be produced from a neutral position outside, even if the motive behind writing it was revenge. Wallace knew what it was like to suffer from depression, and, as his letter and his statue analogy reveal, was subject to the same kind of hyper-
conscious, second-guessing loops as his narrators. He would also have been aware that his own depression might well have been regarded as an expression of his own self-absorption. Mary Karr, the poet and memoirist, and a former partner of Wallace, told Max that she found him to be ‘spoiled, a mama’s boy using rehab as an excuse for self-absorption’ (Max 2012, 397).

Read before 2008 it would have been easy to assume that ‘The Depressed Person’ is simply making depression the object of amusement, the target for an attack on a particular person or a type of person, as if it is a personality flaw. The condition is not depicted in the pages of the story as something agonising, despite the eponymous character’s relentless descriptions of it to her Support System and her therapist. Reading it now it inevitably takes on a different tenor. Wallace may have been capable of cruelty, or ‘self-absorbed’. But he was obviously also a depressive. His suicide made that clear.

‘The Depressed Person’ is certainly not autobiography. It may or may not have been ‘about’ Elizabeth Wurtzel. But regardless of its specific inspiration or target, it has the potential to be considered a covertly autobiographical text at one level, one that implies a secret deep understanding of depression, and this carries with it a degree of empathy. More precisely, the posthumous reading of ‘The Depressed Person’ recuperates it as a text which, for all its cruelty and misogyny, nevertheless aligns with the value Wallace placed in writing sincerely. The text’s hyper-consciousness, its footnotes, make it an account of a ‘double doubling’: the mirroring of both the narrator and the depressed person, united in self-reflexive, self-questioning discourse and the shared fascination with her condition, and, by virtue of the origin story postulated in Max’s biography – its ‘provenience’, if you will, to use Wallace’s initial idea for its title – the doubling of Wallace and Wurtzel. The relevance of this word ‘provenience’, a near-synonym of provenance but which places the emphasis on precise origins, the specific place where something comes from, is not clear in the final version of the story, nor has it been explained by Wallace nor his critics. It would be a mistake to dwell too much on a deleted title, but regarding it as an implicit reference to a seminal instance of depression or depressive personality-type adds hauntological weight to the impression that the story is a form of displaced, covert autobiography.

Wurtzel’s short memorial to Wallace, ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’, is also haunted by the necessity of revising our understanding of Wallace’s life and work once we know how he died. It also, as I noted at the beginning of this essay, effects a doubling of the two writers. It is a meditation on a famous depressive by a famous depressive, one who understands the depressive personality of the other. This is why the question Wurtzel asks about who regrets and who does not, who says ‘enough is enough’, even though it may at first seem clear, can actually apply to both writers. Wurtzel explains that the very fact that someone as talented and successful as David Foster Wallace committed suicide means that his death contains a portentous message for those who are prone to depression, even if it is something – she implies – that is beyond the comprehension of those not predisposed to the condition:

So here is the miserable truth that those of us who are given to depression are forced to face when David Foster Wallace commits suicide: It didn’t and doesn’t turn out well. There is no happy ending to the story of sorrow if you are born with a predilection for despair. The world is, after all, a coarse and brutal and cruel place. It’s only a matter of how long you can live with it. (Wurtzel 2008)
This kind of perspective makes sense of the therapist’s suicide in Wallace’s story, another instance of doubling. It is a glimpse of a therapist unable to help – because those with a predilection for despair are unreachable, as Wurtzel explains in ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’. In this piece Wurtzel herself becomes ineffectual therapist: able to diagnose the illness but unable to alter its dreadful, inevitable outcome.

In a sense, then, ‘The Depressed Person’ and ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’ are counterparts, making the same points in very different ways. A depressed person is a depressed person, and is prone at any time to deciding they cannot live with depression, no matter their support system nor what they have to feel content about. This suggests that the open question at the end of Wallace’s story – ‘How was she to decide and describe’ what her continual discussions about her condition ‘said about her?’ – is already answered by the title. She is simply ‘The Depressed Person’, ie. someone with a ‘predilection for despair’. His careful degendering of ‘the depressed person’ has the effect of making the parallel applicable to Wallace himself. The story’s hauntology means that it becomes unmoored from a specific time and place – from initial draft to publication, 1996–1998 (Morsia 2015) – and ‘reactivated’ at a time in the future, after Wallace’s death and Wurtzel’s discussion of it. The position of author and subject become interchangeable, as the ontological status of each crosses over into the other. As much as they are companion pieces, ‘The Depressed Person’ and ‘Beyond the Trouble, More Trouble’ are pieces of dialogue conducted a decade apart but, read hauntologically, as a near-simultaneous accusation/confession and response. Wurtzel’s short obituary is another – in fact, her first – published rejoinder to Wallace. The depressed person apparently behind the story writes back and directs attention towards the real depressed person who should be the subject of analysis. To read both texts hauntologically is to recognise that in reading linear temporality collapses and everything exists at the same time. Wallace and Wurtzel are each simultaneously dead and alive, gone physically but having written the words we still read, and each text, though published ten years apart, is a companion piece to the other.

Wallace’s exploration of depression in his writing is the opposite of the ‘obscene’ kind of confession which Baudrillard highlights and in which Wurtzel specialised. The mysteries about how to interpret ‘The Depressed Person’, which I have been exploring in this essay, ensure that the story retains the element of seduction (secrecy, mystery, opacity) which Baudrillard valued most of all and what he considered absent from the obscene form of self-expression practiced by a memoirist like Catherine Millet. The obscene confessional memoir, he thought, results in language being emptied of its artistic element, until language becomes ‘nothing more than a medium, a visibility operator, losing its ironic or symbolic dimension where language is more important than what it is talking about’ (Baudrillard 2005a, 183).

Yet Wurtzel’s writing, though direct and performatively sincere, is more than just a visibility operator. The power of her language, which showed signs of becoming more poetic in the pieces she wrote before the end of her life, elevated her essays above journalism and more than simply an exposure of what should normally remain hidden. Her final essay, ‘I Believe in Love’, is at the same time a commentary on Trump and recent politics, an account of the end of her marriage and her experience with cancer – and therefore a typically direct and forthright ‘Wurtzelian’ exercise in autobiography – but also a moving, poetic insight into her state of mind as she writes. ‘I feel so much and
too much. Deep in my radiated bones’ (Wurtzel 2020). The enigmatic simplicity of lines such as these could not be further from the circumlocutions of Wallace’s Depressed Person. This final piece is also a reminder of Wurtzel’s ability to more deliberately and playfully sustain a mystery. As she reflects on the possible causes of why her marriage has failed, she notes ‘I have blamed several men named David’ (Wurtzel 2020). It is unclear – and never will be clear now both she and Wallace are gone – whether the candidates include the second of the smartest Davids she met.

Notes

1. Wallace was in second place to the lawyer David Boies, who Wurtzel worked for: ‘It has been a singular privilege to work for David and to get to know him as well as I have. It’s enough to make me believe in luck. He is the smartest person I have ever met, and it is a steep fall to second place. I knew David Foster Wallace pretty well, and he was pretty smart, but David Boies makes David Wallace look like, well, some other lesser David, maybe David Remnick’ (Wurtzel 2013).

2. Another writer who died tragically young, of a heroin overdose in 1999.

3. The most notorious example of this post-panoptic sensibility is the former President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump, whose utterances and published statements collapse the boundary between a public and a private life, indicate an apparent lack of interiority, and consequently signal that everything is already on display.

4. Max’s title is hauntological, in two senses: firstly because of its message about the temporal dimension of love stories, and secondly because it comes from a phrase in a letter Wallace wrote when a graduate at the University of Arizona in the mid-1980s and refers to his early story, ‘The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing’, as it is about a young man who is in hospital being treated for severe depression and is revived by meeting a young woman, a fellow patient, only for her to die in a car crash after being discharged (Max 2012, 44).

5. While a useful way of understanding autobiographical writing, the Baudrillardian opposition between obscene and seductive cultural production cannot be considered a straightforward opposition nor a generic category. The complexity of Wurtzel’s writing, especially her last work, complicates the opposition, as I suggest in this last paragraph.

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