

RE-POLITICIZING MENTAL ILLNESS: REFLECTIONS ON BOREDOM AND DEPRESSION IN AMERICAN POST- POSTMODERN FICTION

Kaveh Khodambashi Emami^{1*}

Hossein Pirnajmuddin^{1**}

Pyeaam Abbasi^{1***}

¹University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract

Figurations of psychological problems, mental illness, boredom, depression, addiction, and medication abound in post-postmodern fiction. David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* are cases in point. Apparently, what these works share in common are the material and psycho-biological explanations that they hint at or provide for the various mental problems and disorders experienced by the characters. These pertain to the specific socio-economic and cultural mode characterizing the contemporary scene. Drawing on the insights provided by Franco Berardi the present article tries to shed light on the significance of such figurations.

Keywords: Davis Foster Wallace; Jonathan Franzen; Franco Berardi; boredom; depression.

* Ph.D. candidate at University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran. He is also a lecturer of English Literature at some colleges in Isfahan. He is mainly interested in American post-postmodern fiction. Email: khodambashi@fgn.ui.ac.ir . ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9938-8265> .

** Associate professor of English at University of Isfahan, Iran. His interests include Renaissance English literature, literary theory, contemporary English fiction and translation studies. A book on Renaissance English literature (*East of Representation: The East in English Renaissance Literature*) and articles on Spenser, Milton, Conrad and DeLillo are among his publications. Email: pirnajmuddin@fgn.ui.ac.ir. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8349-2626>.

*** Ph. D. in English Literature from Shiraz University in 2011. He is currently an associate professor of English literature teaching at the English department, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran. He continues to work on literary criticism, English romantic poetry and postcolonial literature. Email: abbasi@fgn.ui.ac.ir . ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5873-4264>.



Among the large number of characters suffering from mental illness in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (2006), Kate Gompert is a case in point. Early in the novel, after being examined by a doctor, Kate is described in a language which more typifies a string of unconnected pure data rather than a human being:

Gompert, Katherine A., 21, Newton MA. Data-clerical in a Wellesley Hills real estate office. Fourth hospitalization in three years One series of electro-convulsive treatments On Prozac for a short time, then Zoloft, most recently Parnate with a lithium kicker. Two previous suicide attempts Depressions unipolar, fairly classic, characterized by acute dysphoria, anxiety w/panic, diurnal listlessness/agitation patterns, Ideation w/w/o Intent ... Two days on ventilation after a Pump & Purge ... the I.C.U. charge nurse had beeped the chaplain Almost died twice this time, Katherine Ann Gompert. (69-70)

This type of characterization which reduces characters to a long list of information provided in the form of prescription medication is a common practice in *Infinite Jest*, as it is in Wallace's fiction generally. Kate's mental instability is given a biological explanation; in short, her brain chemicals are out of balance, a point emphasized by Wallace's footnote which describes and categorizes different antidepressants in a scientific language¹.

This particular way of dealing with mental problems is a common feature in the fiction of writers such as Wallace and Franzen (the so-called post-postmodern writers²). In general, they tell of a large list of characters who take recourse to medical prescriptions and drugs to find relief from mental disorders such as severe depression, frustration, and boredom. Closely connected to this feature is the strong proclivity shown in these novels, on the part of the narrative and the characters, to medicalize all mental problems by pathologically explaining and defining them as "biological." The anxiety-ridden Caroline, in Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), exemplifies such a tendency as she understands and defines every behavior in terms of biomedicine and its related terminology. She believes that any change in a person's behavior is affected by a change in the chemical composition of the brain, and therefore emphasizes that the desired behavioral changes are created through the use of new drugs, such as "Correcktal", rather than through a change in the individual's approach to life or an innate desire to change. The primacy of biological explanations for mental disorders is also pronouncedly articulated in *Infinite Jest* in Orin Incandenza's watching of a TV documentary called "Schizophrenia: Mind or Body?" with its final conclusion stressing "Schizophrenia: Body" (47-48). The importance of these emphases on the bodily roots of depression and schizophrenia lies in that they put all the responsibility on the individual and his body, identifying the chemical imbalance of the brain as the root of all mental disorders.

Although it cannot be denied that depression, sadness, boredom or even the suicidal tendencies that characters in post-postmodern fiction experience are caused by an imbalance and change in the body chemistry, yet, as Eric A. Thomas

(2013) also observes, is it true that these characters “are simply born this way”, destined to feel the way they do? Or is there a better explanation (287)?

According to Mark Fisher (2009), what is actually happening in today’s capitalist systems is that mental illnesses in all variations are blamed on the biological-material changes and shortcomings, ruling out “any possibility of a social causation of [such] illnesses” (37). Fisher further points out that the “chemico-biologization of mental illness is of course strictly commensurate with its de-politicization,” adding that even if we accept the idea popularized through media and popular culture “that depression is constituted by low serotonin levels, what still needs to be explained is why particular individuals have low levels of serotonin.” “This,” Fisher concludes, “requires a social and political explanation” (37).

An instance of the insufficiency of biological explanations, a strong concern to connect mental illness with the contemporary scene is to be found in Jonathan Franzen’s fiction, especially *The Corrections*. The novel revolves around Alfred Lambert and his family (his wife Enid and their three children). Alfred is deeply influenced by the protestant work ethics and values and has brought his children up this way. In line with this ethic, he is also a man who has struggled emotionally to have an intimate relationship with anyone in his life, including his wife Enid, who feels unloved by and not allowed to love Alfred and is hurt by Alfred’s dictatorship in running the family. Being unable to fulfill their dreams despite following closely all the notions proposed by society, Alfred and Enid gradually distance themselves from life and experience severe depression.

The life stories of Lambert’s children exemplify the same story of failure and retreat (both in their career and emotional life). A university professor and the youngest child of the family, Chip Lambert’s career is ruined following his affair with one of his students. Although he enjoys a brief surge of success (in terms of material gain) in Lithuania, he loses all his money and returns home suffering from depression and drug abuse. Gary, the oldest son, on the contrary, seems to be the only one settled in life as a husband and father and a successful financier (at least as far as success is defined in capitalist society). However, as we read on the third chapter, a number of passages indicate that Gary is in trouble, probably suffering from depression. Though in a lame attempt, Gary tries to convince himself and others of his mental health saying that “[he] had been worrying a lot about his mental health, but on that particular afternoon, . . . the weather in his brain was warm and bright as the weather in Philadelphia,” (145) or “He was not the least bit clinically depressed” (146), nevertheless his illness is undeniable, as there is clear evidence to that: “His impulse on his birthday . . . was to weep. From certain pop-psychology books on Caroline’s nightstand, however, he’d learned to recognize the Warning Signs of clinical depression, and one of these Warning Signs, the authorities all agreed, was a proclivity to inappropriate weeping,” (148).

In addition, his wife, Caroline, directly warns him about this and asks him if he knows he is struggling with depression, a state which can be to no extent accepted or tolerated. Caroline, a successful and independent businesswoman (who is strongly influenced by the latest trends in psychology, as advertised by

the popular culture) believes that Gary can only be saved from his mental illness through treatment and medication. Caroline has a five-year history of receiving what she calls “successful” mental treatment, something which has ironically entitled her the right to view herself as an expert in the field of psychotherapy. As Gary notes, this gives Caroline “a lifelong advantage over [him] in the race for mental health” (159). In fact, Gary doesn’t want to accept that he is experiencing a mental problem for “if the idea that he was depressed gained currency, he would forfeit his right to his opinions” or “he would forfeit his moral certainties; every word he spoke would become a symptom of disease; he would never again win an argument” (168). Eventually his fears gain currency: when he “surrenders” to Caroline by admitting his depression, he loses all the control and place in the family and is even occasionally mocked by his wife and his two elder sons for his opinions or behavior (237).

Yet, despite all these, the reason for his suffering remains a mystery to Gary himself, since he has done everything in his life exactly as taught by society (and his family) and owns whatever is interpreted by society as signs of happiness and success, which he believes should have protected him from falling into depression. The title of the third chapter, “The More He Thought About it, the Angrier He Got”, indicates his confusion. Gary does not know the roots to his problem and as the title suggests, the more he searches, the more desperate and frustrated he becomes. On one occasion, he gets close to gaining an insight into the nature of his problem while self-meditating: “forty hours at the bank had become the only hours he could count on enjoying in a week” (203). Moreover, he realizes that “spending long hours at the office to escape unhappiness ... was exactly the trap his father had fallen into” (203). He has “set up his whole life as a correction of his father’s life” (189), but finally finds out that he is suffering from the same problems as his father.

As explained before, the danger of a biological reductionism of mental disorders is that it lifts all the responsibility from the society by directing it towards the individual and his body, which increases the already intolerable pressure that an individual bears. This point is a very telling one. Alfred and Gary’s participation into the rhythm and flow of capitalism is the real evil and the root to their feeling of depression and sadness. Unfortunately, Gary is deprived of the ability to see the capitalist structure of society as the root to his psychological problem as well as all his “sufferings” and loses his chance of being saved. Instead, he adheres to the “biological” explanations advertised by the capitalist system itself: “he and Caroline had long agreed that Alfred was clinically depressed, and clinical depression was known to have genetic bases and to be substantially heritable” (189), a blindness to the cause that eradicates any possibility of questioning or opposing the system. When Gary asks Caroline what she wants from him, she says “I need you to take responsibility for your mental health” (213), a responsibility that, ironically, she takes into her own hands when she forces him to use the latest products in the pharmaceutical market, including the *Correcktal*, something that causes him to feel even more miserable.

Correcktal, an imaginary drug presented in Franzen's *The Corrections*, is primarily produced as a new treatment to mental diseases, but has

proved so powerful and versatile that its promise extends not only to therapy but to outright cure, and to a cure not only of . . . terrible degenerative afflictions, but also of a host of ailments typically considered psychiatric or even psychological. Simply put, Correcktal offers for the first time the possibility of renewing and improving the hard wiring of an adult human brain. (189)

What distinguishes Correcktal from a host of similar products is its promise to “make any action the patient is performing” permanently “easier and more enjoyable to repeat and to sustain” (*The Corrections* 198), effects that are analogous to real world popular drugs such as Prozac, which, as Peter Kramer³ (1994) says, claims to help patients feel “better than well” (x).

That this is a total misconception, a false stance, is emphasized by Franzen at the end of his novel. Although Gary is using every type of branded medications that psychopharmacology can offer, he still fills empty, devoid of any sense of happiness or self-satisfaction, giving us a sense that he would face a “tragic” end in life. This type of biological-material solution is rejected by Wallace in one of his famous interviews: “Getting rid of the pain without addressing the deeper cause would be like shutting off a fire alarm while the fire’s still going” (McCaffery 2012, 23). This brings us to the second concern of this study, which is to illustrate the “deeper cause” or “social and political explanation” of mental disorders presented in post-postmodern fiction. That is, the focus is to investigate the complex reciprocal relations between these literary texts and the sociological, political, and economic context of the ideas and events depicted in them with recourse to theory.

A dominant tendency in contemporary theory is to see the change in cultural, political, and economic practices in a particular era as closely connected with the way concepts such as time and space are related, understood and “experienced.” David Harvey (1992) for instance proposes “that there is some kind of necessary relation between for example, the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of ‘time-space compression’ in the organization of capitalism” (VII). Similarly, in his groundbreaking study, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson also assigns the emergence of postmodernism to “a crisis” in the contemporary conception of space and time, which is caused by the predomination of “spacial categories” over those of time.

Another theoretical lens through which to look at the transformation in the modes of perception in the contemporary scene, specifically in the so-called postmodern condition, is that of Paul Virilio. Since the publication of *Speed and Politics* in 1977, Paul Virilio has maintained that speed is the decisive factor in modern history. Virilio maintains that technological progress is a medium for neo-capitalism and its totalitarian goals and critiques the fundamental role new

globalizing technologies such as television, computers and cyberspace play in shaping our collective perception of time and space.

In line with this, Franco Berardi also holds that a defining characteristic of the present capitalist societies or “Semiocapitalism”⁴ is the mass production and exchange of information. To Berardi “the direction of development” in semiocapitalism is above all the conquest of internal space . . . , the space of the mind, [the space] of the soul” (Berardi, *After the Future* 2009, 69). He contends that being prone to an unprecedented “acceleration of information exchange” has uncontrollable and unpredictable ramifications on the “human mind” both on “individual” and “collective” scales (*After the Future* 40). Berardi introduces “Cyberspace” and “Cybertime” as two concepts that can help define the process of mutation of human mind and how it perceives time. Cyberspace is used to describe the virtual world of computers wherein computers are linked via cables and routers which enable us to communicate, store and retrieve information.

What Berardi calls the universe of receivers or “cybertime” is the “mental time that is necessary to elaborate info-stimuli coming from cyberspace” (*After the Future* 142). But the problem is that practically our minds are “not formatted according to the same standards as the system of digital transmitters or cyberspace” (*After the Future* 39). The amount of mental time that an individual enjoys is limited by a number of “organic,” “cultural” and “emotional factors.” Each day, computers, cellphones, and TV sets expose us to a vast and ever-growing amount of information which is literally impossible for us to evaluate, process and understand. To be able to make decisions, we need enough time to evaluate the pile of information we receive, and that is exactly what we lack.

The resulting imbalance or disproportion between cyberspace and cybertime ultimately generates “hyper-complexity.” The too complex social systems developed during the last decades have made it impossible for the human beings to understand and decipher them, and that consequently has led individuals to use interfaces to reduce complexity and follow uniformed pathways, this is what Berardi calls “swarm behavior.” Hence to a growing extent the current crisis in today’s societies is a crisis in the social imagination that does not allow for linguistic, emotional, and behavioral autonomy. An excessively fast “info-sphere” does not allow for the information to be consciously elaborated, forcing people to follow and consent to a set of shared behavior. Berardi believes that as a result of this “acceleration” many human actions and interactions would inevitably fall into automatisms “as we are unable to create an autonomous sphere of expression in our info-saturated lives” (Berardi, “The Paradox” 2012, 4).

Berardi picks up on the issue of cognitive overload, commenting in detail that acceleration of the info-sphere produces an “impoverishment of experience” (*After the future* 89), because we are exposed to a mass of information which we cannot elaborate intensively or deeply know and perceive. Meaning only emerges when info-sphere is slowed down to a rate that can be grasped and understood by the mind. But when the information flow is too fast, meaning is lost and “chaos” surfaces. According to Berardi, “Chaos” refers to a complex environment

where there is no chance for meaning to emerge, and it is impossible to make decisions rationally. As the information flow invades our minds, we can no longer discriminate what is relevant and what is not. When the information flows slowly, rational decisions can be made by deciding between different options. However, when the mind receives information in a scale and speed that exceeds the rate at which it can elaborate and process that information, it is thrown into confusion and is unable to grasp any meaning. This lack of meaning, choice, and autonomy ultimately would lead to boredom and depression since all the information that an individual is exposed to neither makes sense nor contributes to who he/she is or what he/she feels as an individual.

All of these issues are addressed in detail in the novels under discussion. Through characters like Hal Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, or Claude Silvanshine and Chris Fogle in *The Pale King* and their obsession with data collection, Wallace probes the question of what exactly amounts to meaningful knowledge in his two encyclopedic novels; an idea also attested by the author figure David Wallace in *The Pale King* (2011) who asserts:

What logorrheic colleagues like Fogle failed to understand is that there are vastly different kinds of truth, some of which are incompatible with one another. Example: A 100 percent accurate, comprehensive list of the exact size and shape of every blade of grass in my front lawn is ‘true,’ but it is not a truth that anyone will have any interest in. (261)

That Wallace nicknamed his character Chris Fogle in *The Pale King* as “Irrelevant” represents the importance of such an issue to him as a writer. It is also an attestation to the loss of meaning and the resulting chaos of mind as well as the obliteration of individual identity and personality due to this continued exposure to an overload of “irrelevant” information:

What renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile, & c. is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to context, questions of value, and overall point—otherwise we might as well all just be computers downloading raw data to one another. (*The Pale King* 261)

Living under these changed and complex conditions of life brings about its own set of problems. Since their time is under constant pressure, people cannot devote it to perform their tasks attentively because the amount of information that they are exposed to at every single instant is far greater than their minds can meaningfully process. All they can do is to dedicate themselves to the fast rhythm of work. So, more and more, they feel that they have run out of time; that they must accelerate. And they feel that acceleration leads to a loss of life, of pleasure and of understanding. Increase of information and stimuli leads to a decrease of meaning and pleasure. “Sensibility is within time. Sensuality is in slowness” (After the 70). In such a context people have no longer the time to dedicate to

love, to tenderness, to affection, so that, as Wallace says in *The Pale King*, “every love story is a ghost story” (314) or a story about the impossibility of love.

However, we seem to be left with no other alternative than succumbing to the rhythm of information flow and internalizing it if we want to be part of the competition and successful in a society that assigns credit only to the successful and the “victorious” (*After the Future* 40).

Finally, Berardi points out that “the universe of transmitters, or cyberspace, now proceeds at a superhuman velocity and becomes untranslatable for the universe of receivers, or cybertime, that cannot go faster than what is allowed by the physical material from which our brain is made and the slowness of our body” (*After the Future* 41). This imbalance creates a gap in the mind which is the source of widespread pathological problems and mental illnesses suffered by an ever-growing number of individuals. The necessary condition to survive and live up to the demands of the society is to face the competition and participate in it fully, being uninterruptedly connected, which in turn puts unbearable pressure on the individual and his mind. These two tendencies, inseparably linked, “provoke an effect of devastation on the individual psyche: depression . . . , anxiety [and] the sense of . . . existential misery” (Berardi, *After the Future* 41).

Not surprisingly, depression spreads in a society where an entrepreneurial and competitive ideology prevails. In the late twentieth century, after the rise of neoliberalism and its new capitalist ideology, the idea that we should all be entrepreneurs enjoys social and political force. As Christian Fuchs (2008) observes, with the advent of “transnational informational/network capitalism”, information technologies have advanced in an unprecedented speed, which has consequently increased “the speed of global flows of capital, commodities, power, communication, and information” (113). Fuchs believes that the outcome is a new form of “global space” that entails “global technological systems and transnational (economic, political, cultural) organizations and institutions that enable global flows of capital, power, and ideology” which in turn “create and permanently re-create a new transnational regime of domination” (113). In such a context it is not possible to plan your time and life according to a pattern other than what society has imposed on you. As a person, you are either one who continuously serves the capitalist system in producing more capital, ignoring your human and personal needs, or you have no place in the social system and eventually you would end up on the side of the street. The zero and oneness nature and mentality of the information technology has been substantiated in the zero and oneness form of social life in neo-capitalist societies where you are either connected and functional or not.

The dominant capitalist ideology has crushed down “any possibility for a more relaxed and egalitarian manner in life” (Berardi, *After the Future* 119). It comes as no surprise that the technological jargon has found its way to the everyday language. Language shapes our identities; it reflects how we perceive the world around us as well as our priorities, which explains the dominant tendency in the present socio-economic context to view human beings as analogous to

advanced machines. Hence, it is very normal to hear people talking about the way they are “wired”, comparing their brains to computers that need an “upgrade”.

And it is very striking to know that, as David Zahl (2019) has noted, though before the advent of twenty-first century the word “optimize” was almost unheard of outside the domain of technology, we are constantly talking of optimizing “our time, our finances, our bodies, even our relationships” (*Seculosity* 70).

Apropos this, a number of characters in post-postmodern fiction is obsessed with what Wallace calls “data analysis” (*Infinite Jest* 504) and record keeping. They are constantly bombarded with a mass of data that their minds are incapable of understanding meaningfully. Wallace has constantly criticized the influence of media and advertisement on American culture, accusing it of causing information overload and its resulting distraction, having written *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* with this idea in mind. He was actually concerned with how our mind receives, selects and understands the huge mass of data it is exposed to and how it is negatively affected by it. Micheal Pietsch, Wallace’s editor/friend who took the burden of putting together his notes into a novel, *The Pale King*, observes that

[I]t became apparent as I read [the notes] that David planned for the novel to have a structure akin to that of *Infinite Jest*, with large portions of apparently unconnected information presented to the reader before a main story line begins to make sense. In several notes to himself, David referred to the novel as ‘tornadic’ or having a ‘tornado feeling’ – suggesting pieces of story coming at the reader in a high-speed swirl. (x)

And most of *The Pale Kings*’ chapters are complex “pieces” of information that put to test the perceptive and attentive powers of both the readers and the characters alike. Central to Wallace’s novels, as in many other post-postmodern fictions, is the investigation of the process of mass production of information in a semiocapitalist society and its effects on human mind as well as human life. What these novels depict is how boredom and depression are treated in such a society and “the myriad ways in which characters retreat into the ‘information society’ in order to try and escape from this ‘psychic pain’ of boredom and [depression]” (Bray 2014, 227). In *Infinite Jest*, as an example, Hal Incandenza’s obsessive reading and memorization of the Oxford English Dictionary, his deteriorating drug addiction as well as mental conditions vividly testify to the close tie between these issues. The destructive effects of a constant exposure to a load of information on Hal’s mind is climaxed in the final scene of the novel, where all Hal’s efforts at speech and communication tragically fail since they are understood by everyone as meaningless babbles or screams.

The more data these characters collect or catalogue, the more desperate and confused they become, losing the sense of who they are as well as their sense of control over things. This only leads to the spread of psychopathological problems. Boredom, and severe depression and schizophrenia threaten most of the characters in these novels, who futilely take refuge in pharmaceutical drugs⁵ for solution. In the 1990s, the time that saw the greatest expansion and influence

of neoliberal economic models and, consequently, the complete exploitation of mental energies necessary for production, a new set of brand-name drugs became the fashion and hit the market, including Zoloft and Prozac. And it is around this time that there occurred the most unprecedented outburst of abuse of cocaine and other illegal drugs around the world, even among the most active and the youngest members of societies, which is evidently a way of adjustment to the pace, “an adaptation to a condition of excitation without release” (Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody* 2009, 91). These new drugs cause people to feel high levels of energy and alertness; a kind of euphoric effect that prevents or delays the development of depression and boredom.

Although Kate Gompert, a data analyst, is a marginal figure among the characters in *Infinite Jest*, she plays a central role in portraying this process of “dis-identification.” After she talks to the doctor early in *Infinite Jest*, in a passage in which she is given a lot of narrative attention to, she disappears from the novel and we are not told anything about her fate until more than a hundred pages later, where, in a short text, vague information is provided about her rehabilitation and stay in Ennet House, while her name fades away on the page amidst a pile of information presented through a string of interconnected sentences. Finally, we read the first clear picture of Kate since the beginning of the novel in her first appearance at a special meeting organized by Alcoholics Anonymous: “Kate Gompert is totally by herself at a nonsmoking table over by a window, ignoring her pale reflection and making little cardboard tents out of her raffle tickets and moving them around” (*Infinite Jest* 363). And that’s the whole story; she disappears again for a few hundred pages. Kate is alone both in this meeting and in these pages. She is lost in a thousand-page novel, among a plethora of words and characters, where Wallace’s rhetoric has further isolated her and intensified her sense of depression. In a direct and practical way, through Kate Gompert, Wallace imitates and experiments with the process of mass production of information in capitalist society, revealing its negative impact on people’s minds and the role that this process plays in the loss of individual identity and consequently in the spread of mental illness.

In a closely similar vein, Wallace presents a detailed commentary on this issue in *The Pale King*. Arriving on his first day for his new job at an IRS office, David Wallace is mistaken for another David F. Wallace (a high ranked IRS executive transferred to that center to implement some structural changes) and gradually experiences a swallowing up of his individual identity as a result of both IRS’ administrative policies as well as his participation in a constant process of data collection which is part of his job.

He suffers from lack of self-esteem and dignity caused by his evaluation of himself as a loser who is incapable of participating in full force in the fierce competition fueled by the neoliberal capitalist society. This leads to his suffering from mental problems and consequently his taking refuge in drugs. That he calls himself a “wastoid” indicates both his drug addiction as well as lack of identity and self-esteem. Central to the undergoing reformation in the IRS is enforcing

changes in the work process so that human employees could perform their tasks with maximum efficiency or be replaced with computers. This mirrors the efficiency fever and optimization of work and energy provoked by the capitalist systems. §25, gives us a clear sense of the nature of work at IRS and exquisitely narrates the systematic dis-identification in process at large in a semio-capitalist context like that:

‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. ‘Groovy’ Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page. Anand Singh turns two pages at once by mistake and turns one back which makes a slightly different sound. David Cusk turns a page. Sandra Pounder turns a page. Robert Atkins turns two separate pages of two separate files at the same time. Ken Wax turns a page. Lane Dean Jr. turns a page. Olive Borden turns a page. Chris Acquistipace turns a page. David Cusk turns a page. Rosellen Brown turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. R. Jarvis Brown turns a page. Ann Williams sniffs slightly and turns a page. Meredith Rand does something to a cuticle. ‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. (*The Pale King* 172)

This extremely boring string of narration that continues for the whole chapter is nothing more than an unending repetition of the formula “X turns a page” that alludes to a kind of “swarm behavior” or a collective consciousness imposed on the characters involved. In fact, characters’ participation in IRS system has already flattened them into flawless copies of a fixed formula or computers and data processing machines devoid of any sign of free and independent identity and consciousness. Moreover, the frequent presence of these narrative moments in the post-postmodern novel seem to evince the distinction between “intermental thought” and “intramental thought” introduced by Allen Palmer (2005). Palmer defines intermental thought as, a “joint, group, shared, or collective” that runs counter to “individual, or private” qualities of “intramental thought” (427). As stated by Palmer, “[intermental thought] is also known as socially distributed, situated, or extended cognition, and as intersubjectivity” (427). The dedication of large narrative space to intermental thought in the novels of Wallace and Franzen indicates that “much of the mental functioning that occurs in these novels is done by large organizations, small groups, work colleagues . . . and other intermental units” (427). The technology-induced social and mental transformations have brought about a change in the meaning of human being and his consciousness.

Interspersed among the lines of §25, are also the rare cases of deviation from the repeated formula that catch the reader at first as strange and unconnected utterances of thought: “Olive Borden turns a page. Rosellen Brown turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Devils are actually angels” or “Ken Wax turns a page. Jay Landauer feels absently at his face. Every love story is a ghost story. Ryne Hobratschk turns a page” (*The Pale King* 173). These rare cases of deviation hint at the presence of an individuality suppressed by restrictive working conditions and information overload which provide little chance for the expression of subjectivity.

These conditions raise work pressure to an intolerably high level, as is the case for most of the characters in the novels in question, and inevitably boredom or the desire to abandon work (and even life) surges up. The description of Lane A. Dean's feelings about work is telling:

... he knew now that hell had nothing to do with fires or frozen troops. Lock a fellow in a windowless room to perform rote tasks ... tasks involving numbers that connected to nothing he'd ever see or care about, a stack of tasks that never went down, and nail a clock to the wall where he can see it, and just leave the man there to his mind's own devices. (*The Pale King* 212)

Probably Wallace's choice of narrating the story of *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest* from the point of view of different narrators attests to this experiencing of the present social and economic conditions as hell. It suggests that this is the kind of life that the majority live irrespective of their jobs. In §44, Fogle discusses boredom as the key element in modern bureaucratic societies and believes that the ability to transcend boredom would be "the key to modern life" (*The Pale King* 245), an ability to which he esteems much higher value than qualities such as "insight" or "wisdom". To Fogle, the only guarantee to the real success is the ability to curb boredom, "to deal" with it. Being endowed with such an ability is according to Fogle like being able "to breathe, so to speak, without air" (*The Pale King* 245). "The key" he comments "is the ability, whether innate or conditioned . . . to be . . . unborable" (*The Pale King* 245). Fused within these commentaries is an insight into the socio-economic process of dis-identification, a process of turning individuals into machines with the ultimate "efficiency" and of eventually abstaining all the vitality and livelihood from them. In other words, echoed through Fogle's narrative are the dark, dehumanizing and alienating aspects of new capitalist systems where the chances of living a human life, where there is enough "air" to breath, are no longer extant.

It is very interesting to note that the IRS administrative officers in *The Pale King* have designed a kind of recruitment test comprised of completing a set of tedious and exhaustive actions that put the attentive power of candidates to test. They believe that those who are easily bored and lose their attention are not fit subjects for the system since boredom is the sign of their creativity, their inner desire for novelty and change, qualities that are in fact harmful to a system like IRS. The Latin motto of IRS, "*Alicui tamen faciendum est*" highly praised by "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle, and roughly translated as "Nonetheless, the job must be done" testifies this type of mentality advertised by society which posits a kind of spiritual value or heroism in completing the mundane, the meaningless or the routine⁶.

This is a view commented on and criticized by Franzen in *The Corrections* as well as his collection of essays *How to Be Alone* (2003), where in dealing with loneliness and isolation as a self-resurrecting state he remarks that "depression presents itself as a realism regarding the rottenness of the world in general and the rottenness of your life in particular" (*How to Be Alone* 87). When as a result of constant acceleration and expansion of the "info-sphere" we are no more capable

of understanding and interpreting the meaning of all the mass of information we are exposed to, “then desire withdraws its investments, and this withdrawal gives way to depression” (Berardi, *How to Heal* 2020, 3).

Fortunately, all is not that bleak. Contrary to Fogle’s view, there might be no need to recoil from boredom or depression since there is, as the author figure David Wallace also observes, more to these states than actually appears. This is also promised by Berardi, who suggests that – paradoxically – a probable solution, a cure to many of the present social malaises or a way out is through depression and boredom.

Rather unexpectedly, Berardi interprets depression and boredom as potentially capable of liberating us from the processes of “subjectification” to semiocapitalism as well as “allow[ing] us a degree of autonomy” (Gardiner 2014, 43). Depression and boredom are in a way our body’s attempt to protect us from falling into pieces. They are human body’s natural defense against the constant connection of the mind to the flow of information production, a sign for the need to slow-down and relax. Finally, Berardi concludes that “it is only by reactivating a dynamic of slow affectivity, of freedom from work, [by recourse to depression and boredom] that the collective organism will be able to regain its sensibility and rationality, its ability to live in peace” (*Precarious Rhapsody* 71). In this light, rather than being categorized as illness, depression and boredom are interpreted as manifestations of an individual’s “frustration with the status quo,” and an inner “desire for a different way of living” (Gardiner 42). And there might be no need for further explanation that this freedom from work under semiocapitalism conditions at the same time means a freedom from the influx of information and its urge to permanent connection.

Following Berardi’s interpretations, it could be asserted that inherent in these mental states is the existential angst, that goes basically against the capitalist ideology, rendering it incapable of pertaining to its dehumanizing goals. Depression and boredom foster a kind of inner or “psychic” pain deep down a conscious mind. The pain that is rooted in man’s unfulfilled search for liberation from meaninglessness, a search for the meaning of life and identity, for a sense of completion. And it is exactly this pain that the semiocapitalist systems of today fear and try to eliminate or distract our attention from. As Wallace comments through the narrator figure David Wallace in his introductory chapters of *The Pale King*, boredom channels our attention towards this existential pain “which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling” (50).

Further in the novel, Wallace goes on to raise a question which in turn expresses his criticism of the existing social conditions, particularly the ever-increasing dominance and negative effects of information technologies on the individual’s mind. Suspecting a direct connection between a tendency to mask this existential inner pain and the growing emergence and widespread presence of mass media in all the domains and aspects of everyday life⁷, Wallace notes that “I can’t think anyone really believes that today’s so-called ‘information society’ is just about information. Everyone knows it’s about something else, way down” (*The Pale King* 50).

In his novels, Wallace ascertains that this “something” is the fear of the capitalist system of leaving the individuals disconnected. It is the terror of turning down (borrowing from DeLillo 1986) the “white noise” of information, a fear of individuals falling into a kind of silence that allows the mind a space of thought to ponder upon the question of identity, to create “moments of singularity” (Berardi, “The Paradox” 2012, 4) and search for the meaning or the reality of ourselves, which inevitably leads to the real freedom, something that grants the gift of meaning and purpose, a sense of completion to a human subject and his life.

The entertainment and information technologies, in Wallace’s parlance, are to divert our mind from these thoughts which are ripe with an oppositional power to the system, a power that boredom and depression inherently nourish. Feeling the compulsion (on the part of society) to avoid these “truths”, individuals inevitably take recourse to entertainment, TV, Internet and drugs as some forms of “escape”, which nonetheless “box [them] emotionally, spiritually, rhetorically, and civically” (Zahl, “Paying Taxes” 2011). In this view boredom and depression represent rejection of willful subjection to the information flow; they are the manifestations of a power to assert our true individualities into life. In fact, rethinking boredom and depression in this light gives us a new insight, that what appears at first as “devils” might “actually be angels”.

In his long interview with MacCaffery, Wallace asserts that “really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it’d find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it” (26). The elaborate figurations of boredom and depression in *The Corrections*, *The Pale King* and *Infinite Jest* reveal exciting similarities with the way Berardi interprets them and holds out the possibility that they can lead to something positive, perhaps even constructive, or they can be regarded as possible ways of “being alive and human” in a world where the chances are reduced to a minimum. As Wallace writes in one of his notes in *The Pale King*, regarding Shane Drinion, “[i]t turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing boredom” (546). Indeed, boredom could be the gateway to joy and happiness since it provides us with an opportunity to disconnect ourselves from the ebb and flow of capitalism, to realize our true selves and to oppose the ruling ideology, or as Jonathan Franzen puts it “there is, after all, a kind of happiness in unhappiness, if it’s the right unhappiness” (*Freedom* 2011, 447).

Infinite Jest, *The Pale King* and *The Corrections* depict the history of social changes in America, changes that shape the current structure of American society where the hopeless and the powerless majority is subjected every day to jobs that diminishes their sense of identity or personal worth, guaranteeing only the economic prosperity of the powerful minority. In the world of these novels where speed, work, production, and competition are the ultimate values putting constant pressure on each and every individual, paradoxically, depression and boredom provide characters with a chance to withdraw from such a world, giving them an ability to change that world. In *The Corrections*, it is Chip who, after

withdrawing from a life of “constant connection” and excessive consumerism (that could have once cost him his life), decides to stay in the small town of St. Jude to take care of his seriously ill father, from whom he was alienated all his adult life, and thereby begins to show signs of improvement in mental health, indicating to readers what a true “correction” might be.

In *Infinite Jest*, Don Gately finds the same kind of escape from the constant pressures that comes from society and a life of addiction and severe depression by taking refuge in the seclusions of AA meetings. It is in such a withdrawal that he can find his true self and a kind of meaning or goal for his life. This is only possible since, as a participant of AA meetings, Don Gately is given the chance to be heard, to tell his own story, which gives him a true individual voice and a sense of being realized as a person.

The fact that *The Pale King*, a novel almost wholly dedicated to the theme of boredom, is left unfinished (and we have no real evidence that Wallace intended to finish it had he not committed suicide⁸) could be taken as an evidence to Wallace’s practical commitment to boredom and depression as politically potent choices. “We live in a reductively binary culture: ...you either function or you don’t,” comments Franzen in *How to Be Alone*, concluding that “if that flattening of the field of possibilities is precisely what’s depressing you, you’re inclined to resist participating in the flattening by calling yourself depressed” (72). In fact, this conclusion epitomizes the kind of social impact these writers have ideally set for the novel.

In their attempts to write “morally passionate, passionately moral fiction” (Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* 2006, 274), Wallace and Franzen as two leading post-postmodern novelists present us with a careful study of the connection between depression and boredom on the one hand and culture, economy, and society on the other. In doing so, they identify boredom and depression as solutions to the dehumanizing demands of competitive productivity and consumption, as practical ways to slow down the fast rhythm of life in a semiocapitalist age, thus re-politicizing “mental illnesses” and the novel itself in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. “Monoamine-oxidase inhibitors, a venerable class of antidepressants/anxiolytics, of which Parnate- SmithKline Beecham’s product-name for tranylcypromine sulfate- is a member. Zoloft is sertraline hydrochloride, a serotonin-reuptake-inhibitor (SRI) not all that dissimilar to Prozac, manufactured by Pfizer-Roerig.” (*The Pale King* 994)
2. It was in the early 1990s that Linda Hutcheon questioned the continuing validity of postmodernism by calling it “a twentieth-century phenomenon, that is, a thing of the past . . . Let’s just say: it’s over” (2002, 5). To Katrin Amian “Postmodernism, . . . is history” (2008, 1) as it has “exhausted its potential as a means of describing and understanding the shifting alliances of literary and cultural production in the new millennium” (2008, 3). Indeed, she and the likeminded critics believe that the term postmodern can no longer represent the essence of contemporary

literature in its full complexity and has lost its relevance to it. Though there is yet a heated debate over how to define the period after postmodernism, the term post-postmodernism, though an ungainly one, is given more weight by critics. Some critics claim that post-postmodernism has brought about a revival and restoration of many concepts that were once proclaimed as “dead” by postmodernism. Ulla Haselstein stresses this shift as central to post-postmodernism and states that “authenticity is making a comeback, in the guises of memory, ethics, religion, the new sincerity, and the renewed interest in ‘real things’ (2010, 19).

3. In his book *Listening to Prozac* (1994), Kramer discusses the possible philosophical, moral, and social consequences of the use of psychotropic drugs both on an individual and collective scale. Some of the questions he raises on this issue are: Is it ethical to use psychotropic drugs to help a healthy person attain more favorable career position and financial status? or on the contrary, is it morally correct to deny him that possibility?
4. Coined by Franco Berardi, the term “Semiocapitalism” refers to the latest phase of capitalism in which “full integration of linguistic labor with capital valorization” (*After the Future* 271) is made possible as a result of the dominance of information technologies. The pivotal elements of semiocapitalism are “immaterial labor” and the expansion of “info-sphere.” In other words, as a new capitalist system what defines semiocapitalism is “the fusion of media and capital” (*Precarious Rhapsody* 18). To Berardi “semio-capital, in fact, is not about the production of material goods, but about the production of psychic stimulation” (*Precarious Rhapsody* 45).
5. In *The Corrections*, Chip Lambert suffers from feelings of shame and distress, which he tries to eliminate by taking “Mexican A”, a new drug that only permanently redeems him from the pain that resurfaces with more intensity each time. Enid who suffers mentally from depression seeks help from Aslan, another new (although unapproved) prescription medication that ultimately has addictive effects. Finally, Franzen introduces *Correcktall*, produced through the latest advancements in psychopharmaceutical technologies, with its promise of eradicating all the mental problems and their effects. In *Infinite Jest*, addiction to marijuana and different types of drugs such as Zoloft and Prozac are commonplace. Different characters are also using a drug called DMZ which has an effect on memory, helping them to forget. For a detailed study of the connection between mental disorders, drug addiction and the increase in the speed and amount of the information we are exposed to, see Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody*, 41-46.
6. Fogle defines this ability to obstruct boredom as the ability to “serve” the system or “to keep the lifeblood of government healthy and circulating” (*The Pale King* 61).
7. “Admittedly, the whole thing’s pretty confusing, and hard to talk about abstractly . . . but surely something must lie behind not just Muzak in dull or tedious places anymore but now also actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets’ checkouts, airports’ gates, SUVs’ backseats. Walkmen, iPods, BlackBerries, cell phones that attach to your head. This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do.” (*The Pale King* 50)
8. In fact, in his introductory note to *The Pale King*, Pietsch suggests that based on Wallace’s notes to himself about the plot, “the novel’s incompleteness” was completely “intentional” (*The Pale King* x).

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