



## Article

# “My Whole Life I’ve Been a Fraud”: Resisting Excessive (Self-)Critique and Reaffirming Authenticity as Communal in David Foster Wallace’s “Good Old Neon” and Albert Camus’s *The Fall*

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**Abstract:** The themes of paralyzing, solipsistic self-critique versus the necessarily communal character of authentic, meaningful existence in the work of American novelist David Foster Wallace are best understood in light of existentialism. This article compares Wallace’s story “Good Old Neon” with Albert Camus’s novella *The Fall*, as responses to similar unproductive tendencies within the respective postmodernist and Marxist discourses of their times. Both works portray an absolutist self-critique that produces feelings of (inauthentic) fraudulence and exceptionality; and both include an interlocutor that ultimately makes the reader the direct addressee of the text. In doing so, “Good Old Neon” and *The Fall* confront the reader with the moral task of resisting excessive (self-)critique and reaffirming authentic, meaningful existence as always arising in connection to others.

**Keywords:** David Foster Wallace; Albert Camus; “Good Old Neon”; *Oblivion*; *The Fall*; authenticity; existentialism; self-reflection; self-critique; fraudulence; interlocutor; community



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## 1. Introduction

This article offers a comparative reading of David Foster Wallace’s short story “Good Old Neon” (2001/2004)<sup>1</sup> and Albert Camus’s novella *The Fall* (1956) (Camus 2004). Both philosopher-novelists emphasize the necessarily communal character of authentic, meaningful existence. Camus describes the importance of community as following from absurdity: because the world lacks the meaning the individual expects of it, the individual rebels to demand meaning and in this rebellion becomes aware of the connection to the other (Camus 1991, p. 22). Wallace repeatedly expressed his admiration for Camus and refers to the French author in several of his works, including the novels *Infinite Jest* (1996) and *The Pale King* (Wallace 2011). “It makes my soul feel clean to read him”, Wallace wrote in a letter; and in an interview he stated that “our job as responsible decent spiritual human beings” lies in the “existential engagement” that Camus advocates (Max 2012, pp. 298–99; Karmodi 2011).<sup>2</sup> I contend that such a cathartic reawakening to responsibility is the form of authenticity that both “Good Old Neon” and *The Fall* aim to generate in their readers.

In doing so, both texts respond to certain tendencies within the critical thought of their respective historical periods. Despite being a leftist himself, Camus regarded postwar Marxist critics as erecting “new, tyrannical divinities”, a “new absolute system” in which no one is “innocent” and, therefore, everyone is “absolutely guilty” (King 1964, pp. 83, 85, 90). Camus writes that the “absurd”, the loss of established values in a world without God, makes man “live in front of a mirror”. But the “initial anguish” of this confrontation “runs the risk of turning to comfort. The wound that is scratched with such solicitude ends by giving pleasure”. This misguided form of ‘rebellion’ ends up absolutizing the absurd and providing a feeling of superiority in the accusation of everyone’s guilt. But for Camus, the “absurdist sensibility” can only be a “point of departure”. Subsequently, “the mirror,

with its fixed stare, must be broken”, surpassing the absurd and creating new meaning (Camus 1991, pp. 8–10).

Almost fifty years later, Wallace saw popularized postmodernist discourses as having become similarly “oppressive”. To be sure, Wallace states that, initially, postmodernism was “downright socially useful”, constituting “sensible responses to a ridiculous world”, aimed at “explod[ing] hypocrisy—certain hypocritically smug ways the country saw itself that just weren’t holding true anymore”, and thereby leading to liberation. Wallace’s critique is aimed at the effect of postmodernist modes of reflexivity and irony having become “institutionalized” in today’s culture. Wallace criticizes the (mirror-like) assumption underlying postmodernist reflexivity and irony, namely that “etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom”. These postmodernist devices serve an “almost exclusively negative function”, as they are “critical and destructive, a ground-clearing”, and as such cannot contribute to “constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks”. Absolutized as a “cultural norm”, this (endless) critical ‘unmasking’ has gone from “liberating” to “enfeebling”, as it constitutes a loop of self-reflective irony that seems to prohibit any commitment or meaningful expression. Instead, Wallace suggests the need to “somehow [. . . ] back *away* from” endless reflexivity and irony, in order to foster new meanings—constituting a contemporary attitude of sincerity or authenticity (Wallace 2002, pp. 65–68, 81; Wiley 1997).<sup>3</sup> For Wallace, this above all takes shape through literature: he states that he wants to “reaffirm” that fiction is “about what it is to be a fucking *human being*”, and that it is a “living transaction between humans” (McCaffery 2012, pp. 26, 41).

In their responses to these unproductive critical practices and in their call for new meaning, “Good Old Neon” and *The Fall* display strong resemblances in content and structure. In *The Fall*, the protagonist Jean-Baptiste Clamence describes to a silent interlocutor how, after years of being a Parisian lawyer specializing in “noble cases”, he became aware of the (*inauthentic*) “falsehood” of his virtue and retreated to Amsterdam, “indulging in public confession as often as possible. I accuse myself up hill and down dale” (pp. 284, 325, 351). In the opening sentence of “Good Old Neon”, the main character Neal states: “My whole life I’ve been a fraud” (p. 141). He explains that this has led him to kill himself, and that he speaks to his addressee from beyond death. The rest of the story catalogues Neal’s self-diagnosed fraudulence, which consists of his actions being purely motivated by the positive impression they will create in other people, and his unsuccessful attempts—through, among other things, therapy, church and meditation—to overcome this fraudulence. Thematically, both fictions portray excessive self-critique, fueled by an absolutist self-reflection, involving feelings of both fraudulence and exceptionality.

Formally, “Good Old Neon” and *The Fall* function as a *mise-en-abyme* of the act of reading (cf. Ellison 1983, p. 325): both in their stories of self-accusation—itsself a form of ‘reading’ one’s own behavior—and in how they position the reader, these texts propose an idea of what it means to be a reader—what the importance and responsibility of the reader is with regard to the self-critique portrayed. This is facilitated by both fictions’ similar narrative layering—which merits clarification here, in service of the argument that follows. At first reading, *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon” present themselves as confession stories with first-person narrator-protagonists (Clamence and Neal, respectively). And to these narrating acts, both fictions posit a character-interlocutor, who remains largely featureless and voiceless, which can be said to ultimately make the reader the direct addressee of the text (cf. Fitch 1995, p. 98): Clamence speaks to someone he encounters in a bar, and Neal to someone next to him in a car. In both fictions, the implied reader—initially—assumes that Clamence and Neal are the narrators presented by the texts’ respective implied authors, ‘Albert Camus’ and ‘David Foster Wallace’ (as distinct from the real, ‘flesh-and-blood authors Albert Camus and David Foster Wallace). This changes in the final two or three pages of both *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon”. In *The Fall*, Clamence reveals that he has fabricated his identity to fit his audience; although this revelation does not introduce another narrative layer per se, it does further highlight that many features assumed by

'Clarence' are not just reflections of his presumed interlocutor but of Albert Camus's public persona (e.g., King 1962, pp. 661–63), reminding the reader of the (real-life) author and thus blurring the boundaries between narrator, implied author and author. The end of "Good Old Neon" features a similar, but more complex development, when Neal's narration is concluded in a footnote two pages before the story's ending, and the narrative gradually shifts to the third-person perspective of David Wallace. The interlocutor-reader is asked to imagine 'David Wallace' looking at Neal's high school picture (trying to imagine what led to Neal's suicide), and David Wallace is revealed to be the true narrator of the story (and, therein, Neal's interlocutor), which captures his attempt to indeed imagine what happened to the story's protagonist, Neal.<sup>4</sup> This additional layer, by naming the narrator David Wallace, also blurs the boundaries with the story's (almost eponymous) implied author and author.

So, how should the reader understand and respond to the protagonists' self-accusations of fraudulence that form the heart of "Good Old Neon" and *The Fall*? Robert Solomon writes: "The temptation, especially given his own embittered perspective on his own past, is to see Clarence as deeply flawed and as a 'two-faced' hypocrite" (Solomon 2004, p. 43). The acute reader, used to discerning the flaws that explain a tragic outcome, might draw from Clarence's and Neal's self-condemnations a clear justification of what led them to despair. But what if "Good Old Neon" and *The Fall*—as Solomon proposes with regard to the latter—are seen to invite the reader exactly not to accept Clarence's and Neal's diagnoses of their own essential fraudulence, and to instead look at their actions independent of their own condemnations?<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I propose that Wallace's "Good Old Neon" and Camus's *The Fall*, in response to dominant tendencies of the critical thought of their respective times, offer a comparable portrayal of absolutist reflection leading to an excessive (self-)critique that produces feelings of fraudulence and exceptionality. Furthermore, I examine the role of the other, more specifically the reader, in resisting such analysis and accusation. To this purpose, I first elaborate findings from the Wallace archive and general shared themes and motifs that connect "Good Old Neon" and *The Fall*. Then, I will analyze the dynamic and purpose of both narrators' self-accusations of fraudulence, and of the self-reflection that underlies it. Finally, I will analyze the similar ways in which "Good Old Neon" and *The Fall* implicate the reader in these processes and confront the reader with the moral task of resisting excessive (self-)critique and reaffirming connections to others.

## 2. General Connections: Archival Findings, Shared Themes and Motifs

Before focusing on the comparison of the fictions themselves, I will first briefly elaborate some findings from the Wallace archive that suggest that Camus's *The Fall* may have explicitly influenced Wallace's writing of "Good Old Neon".

As several scholars have pointed out, the genealogy of the short stories collected in *Oblivion*, including "Good Old Neon", and that of Wallace's unfinished, posthumously published novel *The Pale King* are very much intertwined (Boswell 2013, pp. 156–57; Burn 2013, p. 65; Hering 2018, p. 103). In *The Pale King*, the character Chris Fogle twice mentions having read "Camus's *The Fall*" for a "Literature of Alienation" class (pp. 184, 186). Neal, the narrator-protagonist of "Good Old Neon", bears several striking resemblances to Fogle—to name a few: both are first-person narrators, both confess having lived a life of fraudulence, both are long-winded speakers who repeatedly emphasize they are not explaining themselves well, and both experience crucial epiphanies in response to a line from a TV show (cf. Boswell 2013, p. 157).

Furthermore, in an early, handwritten draft of "Good Old Neon", Wallace notes that the narrator is "Speaking, not Writing → To Sylvanshine in car"—Sylvanshine being a character in *The Pale King*. In "Good Old Neon" Neal is indeed in a car, speaking to an interlocutor. Further down the same page of the draft version, Wallace adds a short dialogue in a separate box, seemingly outside the narrator's scope. This dialogue suggests that the narrator—Neal, in later versions of the story—was sent to pick up somebody described

as “Lehr’s aide”—which again refers to Sylva— and one of the dialogue’s speakers comments that the narrator is “demented”, and that “He’ll rant at the guy all the way here” (Wallace n.d., p. 17).<sup>6</sup> These comments about the narrator are consistent with how Fogle is described by his colleagues in *The Pale King*, namely as “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle, who bores everyone with his constant talking (e.g., 257n3). All in all, the development of Neal and Chris Fogle seems very much intertwined, and thus Fogle’s repeated reference to *The Fall* in *The Pale King* also relates Neal and “Good Old Neon” quite directly to Camus’s novella.

Let me now turn to similar themes and motifs in both texts, starting with the comparable symbolism of their protagonists’ names. The name ‘Clamence’ most obviously evokes ‘clemency’—‘*clémence*’, in French. But note how the insertion of the ‘a’ also makes the name resound with ‘*clamer*’—to proclaim, to express with force—and ‘*clameur*’—clamour, shouting. Clamence’s first name, ‘Jean-Baptiste,’ can be seen to echo this double meaning, referring, through John the Baptist, both to baptism—cleansing and forgiveness—and to a witness crying out. In turn, ‘Neal’ yields two homophones that stand in similar relation to each other: the name might be understood as ‘kneel’—evoking humility and surrender—or alternatively as ‘nil’—suggesting emptiness or absence. Additionally, in the story, Neal is associated with ‘neon’; he is described as having a “seemingly almost neon aura around him” in school. Neon is both a mesmerizing light and a weightless gas, an emptiness, a mere exterior—which appropriately captures how Neal is perceived by others and by himself, respectively (p. 180). Interestingly, Camus’s notion of “lucidity” entails both: lucidity is the illuminated awareness of absurdity; at the same time, in that awareness the world is emptied of meaning (Camus 2000, p. 109). ‘Neon’ might be Neal’s nickname, which would explain the title “Good Old Neon” as referring to the story of ‘good ole’ Neale.’ Finally, Wallace’s work abounds with thematically symbolic acronyms and, as Stephen Burn points out, “‘Good Old Neon’s’ initials”—G.O.N.—“yield the appropriately bleak homophone *gone*” (Burn 2013, p. 65). This reading suggests another kinship with *The Fall*: both titles suggest absence, a vacating of position or loss of meaning.

Another connection between “Good Old Neon” and *The Fall* is the theme of suicide, and specifically the question of suicide as a potentially justified response to the absurdity of the human condition. This question is the main topic of Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which concludes that suicide is a flight from absurdity, an attempt to “settle” it; for Camus, the only coherent, authentic response to the absurd is to face it, to rebel against it (pp. 53–54). In *The Fall*, Clamence describes having witnessed a suicide—he hears a woman throw herself of a bridge into the river—but failing to act. This description forms the climax in the middle of Clamence’s story, as the event that set in motion his realization of the absurd contingency of the truths by which he had lived his life, and made him contemplate suicide himself (cf. Viggiani 1960, p. 67). In “Good Old Neon”, Neal has committed suicide and seems to tell his life story from beyond death.

In “Good Old Neon”, Neal’s account—detailing how, in life, he was unable to rid himself of his feelings of fraudulence—might at first glance be taken to suggest that “only death can offer a reprieve from the embodied suffering of consciousness” (Hering 2018, p. 107). However, the story does the opposite: and it is not just, as David Hering suggests, through the introduction of the David Wallace perspective at the end of the story that the story avoids being a “glib advocacy of suicide” (Hering 2018, p. 107), but throughout, by the story’s portrayal of the continuation of the problem, of Neal’s continued suffering of consciousness, even beyond death. In this respect, Neal’s imagined perspective from the afterlife can even be taken as a response to *The Fall*. Therein, Clamence dismisses suicide as a possible solution to his fraudulence problem, ostensibly because there is no afterlife—or, at least, one cannot be sure there is—from which to enjoy that the fears about one’s fraudulence have finally been dispelled (p. 315). But what “Good Old Neon” dramatizes is that even with the existence of such an afterlife, suicide would not be a solution, exactly because it would entail a continuation of consciousness that opened up the absurd gap between man and world in the first place. In “Good Old Neon”, Neal, from beyond death, is still trying to impress his interlocutor, continues to dispute other people’s diagnoses of

his problem, and does not correct his view of his supposed fraudulence. The fact that Neal, despite his repeated promise that he will soon reveal “what it’s like to die”, focuses on elaborating his struggles with fraudulence until the last three pages of the 40-page story can be seen to symbolize this: even after death, Neal’s concern with his fraudulence has not dissipated (p. 178). The fact that, at the end of the story, Neal’s perspective turns out to be imagined by David Wallace does not discount this. All attempts to describe what happens to someone after suicide are imaginary, ‘fictional’—as is all ‘fiction’, by definition, and even all attempts to understand other people. That “Good Old Neon” makes explicit, through David Wallace’s metafictional frame, that it constitutes such an attempt (to imagine what happens, to imagine the other) does not falsify it or make it fraudulent. In fact, such a conclusion would constitute a form of the reflexive undermining of meaningful expression and empathy that the story, throughout and particularly through its ending, argues against.

These thematics and forms of excessive self-reflection and self-critique drive *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon” and are what the texts’ readers are invited to navigate and respond to.

### 3. Fraudulence: Self-Reflection and Self-Accusation

How should we understand the self-critique of the protagonists of *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon”? As readers, we might be tempted to accept their analyses and self-accusations of essential fraudulence as this would explain the protagonists’ despair. But, as Solomon suggests with regard to *The Fall*, the texts might be seen to invite the reader to reject these diagnoses and instead to look at their actions in order to discern the rationale and purpose of their self-analysis and critique (Solomon 2004, p. 43).

As a Parisian lawyer, Clamence had helped those in need, but he now argues he only did so in order to be seen as noble. Clamence provides several examples of this performativity, such as: “Whenever I left a blind man on the pavement to which I had conveyed him, I used to touch my hat to him”, and “To whom was it addressed? To the public” (p. 301). In “Good Old Neon”, Neal describes how in church he had merely imitated the behavior of other congregants, “being the one in the front row whose voice in the responses was loudest and who waved both hands in the air the most enthusiastically to show that the spirit had entered me”. Similarly, in meditation class “I could only sit and appear quiet and mindful and withstand the unbelievably restless and horrible feelings when all of us were doing it together in the class—meaning only when there were other people to make an impression on” (pp. 157–58). For the two men, such examples prove their fraudulence. However, as to Clamence’s example: touching one’s hat, even to a blind man, is a gesture of polite habit, not a clue to a hidden fraudulence (cf. King 1962, pp. 666–67; Solomon 2004, p. 47). In Neal’s case, imitation of others is a normal step on the road of developing faith—think, for example, of Pascal’s description of how one becomes religious. And while Neal emphasizes that he can only hold yoga poses for long, painful periods in order to be seen as the best student, he brushes over the fact that he is able to use meditation exercises, alone, before going to sleep, to help him deal with his sleeping problems (pp. 160, 168).

To be sure, both narrators are deeply flawed men. And both texts contain more serious examples of their flawed behavior. Above all, their attitude toward women is highly problematic—even for the ‘standards’ of their respective publication periods. Clamence’s treatment of women is exploitative and manipulative: “Sometimes I went so far as to make them swear not to give themselves to any other man”; and “the oath they swore to me liberated me while it bound them. As soon as I knew they would never belong to anyone, I could make up my mind to break off”.<sup>7</sup> These exploits are solely for his own enjoyment of himself: “For more than thirty years I had been in love with myself exclusively” (pp. 309, 330). Neal’s attitude toward women is similarly exploitative and deprecating, as can be discerned, for example, in his comment on the “perfume of loneliness that hangs around unmarried women around age thirty”. He describes how a former girlfriend once compared him to “some piece of ultra-expensive new medical or diagnostic equipment”: “the equipment doesn’t care”, and “What the machine understands about you doesn’t

actually *mean* anything to it” (pp. 153, 165). Neal, too, is not interested in the other, but only in himself.

However, it is not from such structural problematic behavior but exactly from the “small oddit[ies]” in seemingly virtuous behavior—touching one’s hat to a blind man, speaking in tongues and holding meditation poses in order to be seen doing so—that these characters’ “accusations of hypocrisy are quickly forthcoming”: “Thus the seeming virtue of the entire behavior, not just in this incident but in all such incidents, is undermined” (Solomon 2004, pp. 46–47). Clamence and Neal have been struck by what Camus calls “absurdity”: both characters have realized the contingency of the truths by which they have lived their lives (Camus 2000, p. 19). By being placed at the front of one’s awareness, truths lose their naturalness. Subsequently, when regarded in comparison with the old illusion of natural essences, one’s supposed values and motives can start to feel false instead.

Here, we can also observe a difference between Camus’s novella and Wallace’s short story. Whereas Clamence is still granted a state of supposed innocence (for the first part of his career as a lawyer), such a state seems to have become impossible in Wallace’s fictional world: in “Good Old Neon”, Neal traces a first instance of his supposed fraudulence back to when he was four years old (pp. 147–48). With this difference, Wallace’s work might be seen to make the point that, compared with Camus’s time, we are now practically born self-aware, susceptible from a young age to the feelings of fraudulence that *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon” portray.

But they also clearly reveal that this feeling of fraudulence or falsity is produced by a “wrong kind of reflection”, as Solomon describes it, a “reflection that was already tainted with the other-worldly, with comparisons and contrasts to perfection, and consequently with the seeds of failure and resentment” (Solomon 2004, p. 53).<sup>8</sup> This type of reflection turns on implicitly upholding traditional metaphysical standards after rejecting such metaphysics. It relies on upholding that truths and values need to be absolute—that is, natural, non-chosen, objective—in order to be deemed true or valid or authentic. Then critical reflection will, by comparison, find all the individual’s layered, reluctant, subjective motivations to be lacking, and thus false. This “dichotomous worldview, which rejects any doubt and vagueness and concludes that anyone who is not wholly innocent is completely guilty” lies at the heart of what Camus regarded as the “perversion of rebellion in the contemporary world” that has “failed to come to terms with the loss of established values” (Marcus 2006, pp. 331–32; King 1964, p. 85). Therefore, it is important to see that, for Camus, Clamence’s self-accusations of fraudulence are not the inevitable result of absurdity, but, to the contrary, that Clamence’s absolutist, endless self-critique misinterprets and misappropriates the absurd realization that truths are always ‘merely’ man-made. Camus’s description of misguided rebellion, and its portrayal in the figure of Clamence in *The Fall* specifically, is aimed at the dominant—mostly Marxist—critical thought that developed after the Second World War. As Adele King summarizes, “According to Camus”, this form of rebellion instantiates a “new absolute system” that leads to “moral degeneration” (King 1964, p. 88).

Here, an insightful comparison can be drawn with the criticism of contemporary critical thought in “Good Old Neon”. As Patrick Horn describes, narrator Neal engages in a “hyper-intensive self-deconstruction” (Horn 2014, p. 253). In his essay “E Unibus Pluram”, Wallace contends that the endless critical analysis of postmodernist discourses has, by now, turned out to be “not liberating but enfeebling” (Wallace 2002, p. 67). Elsewhere, I have already argued (den Dulk 2015, pp. 97–108, 150–54; den Dulk 2022, p. 115) that for Wallace, popular deconstructive practices seem to rely on first positing metaphysical essences in order to then expose and undermine these, leading to an endless postponement of meaning, and that his work portrays the problematic consequences of such a view of thought and language, and advocates a Wittgensteinian alternative of curing ourselves of this “bewitchment” by metaphysical essences (Wittgenstein 2001, p40e [§109]). According to Horn, “Good Old Neon” shows that the “postmodern fascination with the ‘limits’ of language places confused expectations on language, expectations which can only be

supported by the very metaphysics that postmodernism is supposed to have driven away” (Horn 2014, p. 258).

Throughout the story, Neal can be seen to express such a confused view of language that follows from a ‘wrong kind of reflection,’ to use Solomon’s formulation. It parallels Clamence’s absolutist view of fraudulence, that is, of guilt and the impossibility of innocence, for example, when Clamence says “we cannot assert the innocence of anyone, whereas we can state with certainty the guilt of all”, and “I realized this all of a sudden the day I began to suspect that maybe I wasn’t so admirable. From then on, I became mistrustful. Since I was bleeding slightly, there was no escape for me” (pp. 317, 335). Neal makes repeated claims such as “What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of” (p. 151). When Marshall Boswell reads “Neal’s description of thought and associations that outpace the linear structure of language” as representing the story’s “pessimistic vision of language” and Wallace as thereby moving away from his “long held belief that language can bridge the gulf between us”, Boswell mistakenly equates Neal’s view of language with the view expressed by the story and held by Wallace himself (Boswell 2013, pp. 166–67). Instead, we should understand the story as criticizing Neal’s view of language, which is another version of his fraudulence argument: words, by definition, fall short of what they are supposed to express. When we look closer at Neal’s descriptions of why he cannot adequately put his thoughts into words, we can see that this is not because of anything fundamental to language.

For example, he claims he cannot describe the day before his suicide in any adequate detail because “For one thing, it was intensely mental and would take an enormous amount of time to put into words, plus it would come off as somewhat cliché or banal in the sense that many of the thoughts and associations were basically the same sorts of generic things that almost anyone who’s confronting imminent death will end up thinking”. First of all, while it would take anyone a long time to describe their thoughts, at any given moment, that is not a flaw of language per se. Moreover, Neal himself remarks several times that for him, after death, linear time does not exist anymore; and for the interlocutor time is said to stand still, the whole story being conveyed in the blink of an eye. So, apparently, time is not a consideration: Neal could have taken as long as he wanted, if he wanted. That brings us to Neal’s second consideration that his thoughts would come off as “cliché or banal”, that he had the same thoughts as anyone else facing death. What we see here is—again—the excessive self-critique that detects fraudulence as the result of an impossible criterion, in this case having experiences that are purely one’s own, not an imitation of others or gleaned from a TV show or novel. We can see that even more clearly in what Neal says later about the day before his suicide: “Basically I was in that state in which a man realizes that everything he sees will outlast him. As a verbal construction I know that’s a cliché. As a state in which to actually be, though, it’s something else, believe me” (pp. 174, 175, 179). There is nothing wrong with language, with the ‘verbal construction,’ here. In fact, the statement itself and the surrounding story provide a harrowing impression of that state of being. It is just that Neal’s reflection tells him that it is all a cliché, and this is exactly the self-perception—of being some sort of performative, empty shell—that drove Neal to suicide in the first place.

Clamence’s and Neal’s self-accusations of fraudulence are driven by their desire for exceptionality. We have already seen this desire in Neal’s complaints about language. In *The Fall*, Clamence states, “We are all exceptional cases. We all want to appeal against something! Each of us insists on being innocent at all costs, even if he has to accuse the whole human race and heaven itself”. At the end of his confession, Clamence even explicitly admits that the whole purpose thereof has been to regain his superiority, to set himself apart: “How to get everyone involved in order to have the right to sit calmly on the outside myself?”; “The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you”; and “I have a superiority in that I know it and this gives me the right to speak” (pp. 319, 350, 352). Solomon summarizes Clamence’s reasoning as follows: “If everyone is guilty, then, by his

dubious logic, he who acknowledges that first has the right to condemn and rise above all of the others" (Solomon 2004, p. 58).

Similarly, Neal derives a sense of exceptionality and superiority from his persistent self-scrutiny. As was already noted above, even after death, Neal does not disclaim his supposed fraudulence, is still insisting on his exceptionality and trying to impress his interlocutor. Neal is an example of Wallace's belief that diagnosis and critical analysis does not automatically lead to a cure—to being authentic. In performing his self-criticism, even though he sometimes partly grants other people's claims about him, Neal remains unwilling—even in death—to accept that others might see him more accurately than he himself does. For example, Neal refers to his therapist's "unspoken point" that he "could discern things about my basic character that I myself could not see or interpret correctly, and thus that he could help me out of the trap by pointing out inconsistencies in my view of myself as totally fraudulent" and states that this insight "was not only obvious and superficial but also wrong" (pp. 154–55). Neal's contradictory claim that the insight is simultaneously "obvious" and "wrong" is another illustration that he cannot accept a "clichéd" truth applying to his life. Additionally, we might ask: what exactly is deemed to be wrong here, the insight itself or (what Neal assumes to be) the cure? The latter, that simply pointing out inconsistencies will help Neal out of his fraudulence trap, might indeed be understood as "wrong", in line with Wallace's belief that diagnosis does not equal cure because the problem is not that Neal is wholly unaware of these inconsistencies. However, what Neal does not realize is that the cure might not lie in him being aware of his own inconsistencies, but in acknowledging that others see these inconsistencies and the rest of his self more accurately than he himself does—suggesting a view of authenticity as intersubjective—as this would unravel Neal's 'exceptionalist' assumption that his experience is fundamentally private and impossible to put into words by and for others.

Meanwhile, "Good Old Neon" demonstrates this ability of others throughout, for example, in Neal's therapist perceiving that "who and what I believed I was not what I really was at all", and that his meditation instructor "had actually in all likelihood seen right through me the whole time"—even though Neal always tries to undercut these intimations of others' access to his experience (pp. 155, 160).<sup>9</sup> And "Good Old Neon" also demonstrates this point in how the story positions the reader to realize that they see Neal more accurately than he himself does in his excessive self-critique. This brings us to how "Good Old Neon" and *The Fall* position the reader and outline the reader's importance and responsibility.

#### 4. Resisting Excessive (Self-)Critique, Reaffirming Connections to Others

Thus far, this article has focused on analyzing the rationale and purpose that underlies the narrators' self-critique. We now turn to the specific and similar ways in which "Good Old Neon" and *The Fall* implicate the reader in these processes of self-reflection and critique. First, I discuss how the reader fills the place of the uncharacterized interlocutor, and how Clamence and Neal seek the interlocutor-reader's complicity to confirm these protagonists' exceptionality; then, I unpack how *The Fall* and "Good Old Neon" reveal the 'fictionality' of their protagonists, how this impacts the reader, and how, in doing so, the texts indicate an alternative to the protagonists' thinking.

Both "Good Old Neon" and *The Fall* feature a narratee, a 'you' to whom the first-person narrator tells his story. In both texts, these interlocutors remain silent, their responses merely reported or suggested by Clamence's and Neal's narration. Both addressees remain largely uncharacterized, only conjured in general terms. Brian Fitch explains that in *The Fall*, the inclusion of this "shadowy presence", of a silent interlocutor lacking clear definition, incites the reader to "provide the shadowy listener with an identity and fill in the empty form"; Fitch further explains, "that identity will be none other than his or her own identity", although the reader will not become fully aware of this until the final pages (Fitch 1995, pp. 98–99). In this way, the reader, without necessarily realizing it, is drawn into the empty space of the addressee in both *The Fall* and "Good Old Neon". The texts' narrators subject

themselves to excessive self-critique. According to Fitch, the reader, feeling this confession is addressed to them, might respond by experiencing “sympathy and understanding”, perhaps admiration for the “lucidity” with which the narrator scrutinizes himself, or even a certain “complicity”, as the reader realizes they might not be much different and might thus deem themselves subject to similar critiques (Fitch 1982, pp. 75, 78).

This complicity is actively sought by Clamence and Neal in how they engage their silent interlocutor, by—as Fitch writes about *The Fall*—“constantly seeking his agreement”, “to the point of flattering him shamelessly”, and “appealing both to his intelligence and to his sensitivity” (Fitch 1982, pp. 73–74). In “Good Old Neon”, Neal engages his addressee, by speculating about the interlocutor’s experience (possible boredom), by appealing to intelligence through apology, repeatedly admitting “I’m not explaining this very well”, and by flattery with recurring formulations such as “I know that you know as well as I do” (pp. 148, 150). In *The Fall*, Clamence similarly remarks “I lose the thread of what I am saying”, “I fear making your head swim somewhat”, and “as soon as I open my mouth, sentences start to flow” (pp. 282, 315). Even this supposed digressiveness is calculated: while both narrators promise to quickly get to a certain point—Neal about what happens after death, and Clamence about being a “judge-penitent”—, both claim they have to offer some other elaborations first. But it is during these supposedly preliminary explanations, which take up the majority of both stories, that these narrators lay out their self-scrutiny, thereby drawing in the reader.

Here we should keep in mind the purpose of Clamence’s and Neal’s confession: that they seek the interlocutor’s—and in the end the reader’s—affirmation of their self-accusatory logic in order to set themselves apart, to feel confirmed in their exceptionality. From the reader’s standpoint, initially accepting these narrators’ self-critiques might seem to let the reader “off the hook” because the narrators’ despair can be explained as a result of their flaws, but in the end, following through this critique, the reader will find themselves equally flawed and confronted with similar nihilist conclusions: the narrative seems to be a “personal confession of guilt, but it’s actually setting a trap” (Solomon 2004, pp. 43, 55). As Clamence says toward the end, “Admit, however, that today you feel less pleased with yourself than you felt five days ago” (p. 353).

Moreover, what is crucial in this process of affecting the reader is that, toward the end of both texts, the elaborate confessions of fraudulence provided by Clamence and Neal, are revealed to be fiction: Clamence has made up his story to reflect the identity of his audience (as well as that of Camus’s public persona), and Neal’s story turns out to have been imagined by David Wallace. Given that the reader, as stated above, has been filling the ‘empty’ role of the interlocutor, the reader is now drawn into the center of the story, together with a narrative entity that at least seems to refer to the author. Below, I unpack how *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon” stage these similar processes, and to what purpose.

At the end of *The Fall*, Clamence admits that he has modelled his portrait on his audience: “I adapt my words to my listener”, “I choose the features we have in common”, and “the portrait I hold out to my contemporaries becomes a mirror”. It turns out that his ‘shadowy’ listener is a Parisian lawyer, as Clamence claimed to have been: “You practise in Paris the noble profession of lawyer! I sensed that we were of the same species” (pp. 351–52, 356). These revelations remind the reader of earlier comments that may have hinted at Clamence’s “method”, for example, when he says, early on in the story “I confide in you without caution on the sole basis of your looks” (p. 281).

In “Good Old Neon”, Neal’s narration is concluded in a footnote two pages before the story’s ending, and the narrative gradually shifts to the perspective of David Wallace when “David Wallace blinks in the midst of idly scanning class photos from his 1980 Aurora West H.S. yearbook and seeing my photo and trying [ . . . ] to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to my death in the fiery single-car accident he’d read about in 1991, like what sorts of pain or problems might have driven the guy to get in his electric-blue Corvette and try to drive with all that O.T.C. medication in his bloodstream”—note how the pronouns referring to Neal shift from first-person (‘my photo’, ‘my death’) to third-person

(‘his Corvette’, ‘his bloodstream’) (cf. [Ardovino and Masiero 2022](#), p. 76). This, in turn, reminds the reader of Neal’s earlier comment that “it doesn’t really matter what you think about me, because despite appearances this isn’t even really about me” but about why Neal’s suicide “had the impact it did on who this is really about” (pp. 152, 180)—that is, on David Wallace, as it turns out.

Like Clamence having modelled himself on his Parisian lawyer addressee, Neal’s portrayal shares clear features of his imaginer and interlocutor. For example, in the final two pages, David Wallace remembers standing in his “parents’ kitchen ironing his uniform and thinking of all the ways he could screw up and ‘strike out looking’ or drop balls out in right and reveal his true pathetic essence”. This calls to mind Neal’s earlier description of “genuinely loving ball”, including “the steam and clean burned smell of ironing my Legion uniform”, but how at age fourteen “all that had disappeared and turned into worrying”, and “being so worried I’d screw up that I didn’t even like ironing the uniform anymore before games because it gave me too much time to think” (pp. 156, 181).

We can understand David Wallace to have been the story’s silent interlocutor to whom Neal had been telling his story. Two pages before the eventual perspective shift, it is revealed that Neal is sitting in a car with the interlocutor who is considering to commit suicide, while David Wallace is later described as “having emerged from years of literally indescribable war against himself”, suggesting that he has contemplated suicide. The situation in the car seems identical to how Neal has just described his own suicide (for example: the descriptions of the fog, the same road, the watch hanging from the rearview, the time being 9:17).<sup>10</sup> Here, the descriptions also switch to present tense, which may be seen to preface the shifting perspective. For example, Neal has just described that “I watched the sun begin to drop down over the townhouse developments [ . . . ] and realized that I would never see the newest homes’ construction and landscaping completed, or that the homes’ white insulation wrap with the trade name TYVEK all over it flapping in all the wind out here would one day have vinyl siding or plate brick and color-coordinated shutters over it”. And then we read: “All right—and there’s the construction and all the flapping TYVEK wrap on houses that if you really do do it you’ll never see anyone live in” (pp. 175, 177, 181).<sup>11</sup>

Here, the descriptions in “Good Old Neon” again have interesting parallels to *The Fall*. In “Good Old Neon”, the following description in the car marks the transition to present tense: “The ground fog tends to get more intense by the second until it seems that the whole world is just what’s in your headlights’ reach. High beams don’t work in fog, they only make things worse. You can go ahead and try them but you’ll see what happens, all they do is light up the fog so it seems even denser” (p. 177). In *The Fall*, when Clamence and his interlocutor are on a boat, Clamence comments similarly on the landscape: “lost in the fog, there’s no knowing where it begins or ends. So we are steaming along without any landmark; we can’t gauge our speed. We are making progress and yet nothing is changing” (p. 328). This similar imagery of “fog”—like neon<sup>12</sup>, something that is both dense and evanescent—may be seen to symbolize the suffering of reflexivity portrayed throughout *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon”: fog as movement without landmarks, finding no meaningful markers to navigate the world, and as a total consciousness (dense like fog), immersed in itself and emptying itself out. Clamence’s description of the fog as a “negative landscape”, and as “universal obliteration, everlasting nothingness” is particularly applicable to “Good Old Neon”, where it is deployed as part of the description of suicide, the desire to obliterate consciousness, which connects Neal and David Wallace (p. 314).<sup>13</sup>

As stated above, this imagery of ‘fog’ in “Good Old Neon” appropriately accompanies the shift toward and revelation of David Wallace as narrator. The result of this narrative layering—of protagonist Neal having been imagined by narrator David Wallace—and of their blurring of identities—that Neal seems to have been invested with David Wallace’s thoughts and experiences (e.g., feeling anxiety over baseball, driving through the foggy landscape)—is that Neal ‘evaporates’ as a result of having modelled himself on his interlocutor, just as Clamence does. As Fitch writes with regard to *The Fall*, the reader’s

interpretation of Clamence has “disappeared into thin air together with the very object of that interpretation, Clamence’s life”. Likewise, Neal has been shown to be a fiction, or, to be precise, “doubly fictive, a fiction within a fiction” (Fitch 1982, pp. 77–78).

At the same time, in both texts, the interlocutor (who in “Good Old Neon” has also turned out to be the narrator)—in whose place the reader, as discussed above, has projected himself into the story—also remains a figure without substance. David Wallace—exactly because to the reader he merely appears to be ‘like’ Neal—remains a character without any real definition, still as shadowy a figure as when he acted as the unnamed interlocutor. The same holds for the interlocutor in *The Fall*, whom Clamence describes as an “image of all and of no one” (p. 352). We might even say, given the co-dependence of the shifters ‘I’ and ‘you’ in a first-person narrative, that with the evanescing of Clamence and Neal as narrators, their interlocutors also evaporate (cf. Fitch 1995, pp. 98–100)—and this even affects David Wallace as narrator, whose identity is fully bound up with those of Neal and his addressee—leaving the reader behind, facing this story of suffering. Because, despite the disappearance of the protagonists, the reader does not “escape the problem of attempting to resolve the enigma” of these characters and their self-reflective critique and that for the reader “the mirror-portrait has become a mirror and nothing but a mirror” (Fitch 1982, p. 83). As discussed above, in considering Clamence’s and Neal’s self-critique, the reader is ultimately forced to consider their own flaws and which conclusions to draw from them.

But the reader is not alone because after the narrators and interlocutors of *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon” have evaporated, what remains of their identities most clearly refers the reader to these texts’ authors. This is most obvious in the case of “Good Old Neon”: while we should make sure not to equate David Wallace with David Foster Wallace, the (implied or real-life) author of the story, the character-narrator does “remind” us of the author (Hering 2018, p. 107), as an “indication of the source of the text we are reading” (Ardovino and Masiero 2022, p. 71). As Boswell notes, “by casting Neal’s monologue as ‘David Wallace’s’ projection, Wallace both invites and dares his readers to read Neal’s story as thinly disguised autobiography” (Boswell 2013, p. 157).<sup>14</sup> Though not as explicit, Clamence’s ‘borrowed’ identity bears many similarities to Camus and the (Marxist) criticisms that were waged (by Sartre and others) against him. Adele King mentions, among other things, that “Clamence excels in physical activity, dances well, and is extremely attractive to women: all characteristics of Camus”; his life in Paris is “the easily recognizable world of ‘existentialist’ intellectuals”; and the “subjects that Clamence accuses himself of treating superficially reads like a list of Camus’s principal themes” (King 1962, p. 662). In both *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon”, these references, after their fictional ‘carriers’ have disappeared, remind the reader of the author, who has imagined these characters and has identified with them partly through these traits, like the reader has identified with them by partly filling in their role. This reminds the reader that, together with the author, they have been part of a real act of imagining from the start, regardless of the doubt that has been cast on Clamence, Neal and their ‘shadowy’ interlocutors within the story. Thus, the revelation of an author-like consciousness in “Good Old Neon”—an explicitly metaleptical structure that *The Fall* lacks—does not lead to a solipsistic implosion of the story, as it would be seen to do in traditional postmodern metafiction (Hering 2018, pp. 107–8). As Christopher Kocela states, “Good Old Neon” employs “metafictional strategies to instill rather than challenge belief”, and “breaks down traditional distinctions between reading and writing” (Kocela 2018, p. 68). The appearance of the author underlines the urgency of the story’s existential thematics and enters into dialogue with the reader.

Via the disappearance of their protagonists and the simultaneous reference to their authors, *The Fall* and “Good Old Neon” acknowledge the difficulties of trying to understand and empathize with another through language and writing, but also that the attempt to do so is more important than criticizing or deconstructing and thereby impeding that attempt. This perhaps seems clearest for “Good Old Neon”, given the above discussion of Neal’s view of language as another iteration of his fraudulence argument. But it is also

an important theme in *The Fall*: Clamence's absolutist reflexivity leads to the assumption that everyone is, by definition, guilty and that there is no way to satisfactorily explain oneself and motivate one's actions. He states, for example, "Yes, hell must be like that: streets filled with shop-signs and no way of explaining oneself. One is classified once and for all" (p. 300). Clamence has characteristics that remind us of (criticisms of) Camus (by Sartre), but Camus ultimately uses Clamence to launch a critique of Sartre, above all, of the Marxist "tyranny" of guilt and of the "abstention from action" that Camus ascribes to Sartre (King 1962, p. 663). The reader is positioned to scrutinize and to discern the fallacy of Clamence's conclusions in a 'dialogue' with the author and the rest of Camus's oeuvre.

In "Good Old Neon", the reader is similarly positioned to consider the issue of self-critique leading to disconnection from others and meaningful action by the two narrative lines that split off from each other toward the end of the story. One continues in a footnote two pages before the end of the story and might be said to 'remain' Neal's perspective, further describing the run-up to the car crash suicide; the other narrative line, in the remainder of the main text, gradually reveals David Wallace as the imaginer of Neal's story. The footnote continues to express Neal's convictions with regard to the supposed incommunicability of individual experience, due to language and time, and this solipsistic mindset (and the assumption of fraudulence that accompanies all expression) is also embodied by the blunt "THE END" with which Neal concludes the footnote. Thus, this narrative line leaves no dialogical room for the interlocutor or the reader. Conversely, the other narrative line in the main text seems to shift toward disarming the excessive self-critique that imbued Neal's perspective. The first line after the footnote reads "The truth is you've already heard this", which can be seen to embrace the seemingly "clichéd" character of certain truths. This is followed, slightly further on, by an explicit questioning of the fraudulence claim: "And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees?" These more dialogical phrasings gradually reveal David Wallace, and thereby the author and, ultimately, the reader, trying to imagine Neal's story. For example, slightly further on, the line "So cry all you want, I won't tell anybody" still seems to be (Neal) addressing the interlocutor, while the following line reads "But it wouldn't have made you a fraud to change your mind". Here, the use of the past conditional suggests a different perspective, addressed to Neal, regarding his past action of having committed suicide. The line suggests a possible response from the (here still unrevealed) perspective of David Wallace, the author, or the reader, disagreeing with Neal's analysis of his own fraudulence (pp. 179, 180).

This appeal to the role of the reader that "Good Old Neon" shares with *The Fall*, in resisting Neal's (or Clamence's) self-critique is definitively captured in the sentence that concludes the main text's narrative line (and thus the story as a whole). As doubt starts to rise in David Wallace's mind about whether it is at all possible to imagine someone else's experience, but then trying to suppress that doubt from undermining the attempt, David Wallace says to himself "Not another word" (p. 181). In the comparison with *The Fall*, we could perhaps read this line as a reference (or a response) to Clamence's comment "Somebody has to have the last word", which in its context seems to refer to power and judgment (words as assigning guilt) (p. 299). The final sentence of "Good Old Neon" carries a double meaning. First of all, the sentence obviously means 'don't say another word', which, as Horn describes, is a sort of "moral rebuke", an injunction to stop doubting—reflectively undermining—the empathetic, imaginative act. This injunction implies an awareness that such endless self-reflection will only bring on suspicions as to the inadequacy of language, namely that language is 'just' words, incapable of facilitating the attempted connection—an awareness Horn describes as the final line's second meaning (Horn 2014, pp. 253, 255–56). However, what can be regarded as a further layer is that the phrase also suggests 'not just another word.' That is, words and especially these final words of the story, are not just signs that can successfully refer to something or not (Neal's story, Neal's full experience, David Wallace's fictional imagining). Rather, they constitute a meaningful act: the story's final words are not just its ending but an act of 'handing over'

to the reader—and as such this final line symbolizes the underlying dialogic character of the whole story’s dynamic. This also casts new light on the line from *The Fall*: its emphasis may seem to lie on “the last word”, a judgment that, for Clamence, can only assign guilt. But with “Good Old Neon”, we might instead emphasize the role of “Somebody” and see the line as an (implicit) acknowledgment of the role of reader, that a last word is not a final judgment that closes off the text, but an entry into dialogue with the reader’s act of empathetic imagining.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article I have argued that Wallace’s “Good Old Neon” and Camus’s *The Fall* offer a similar portrayal of absolutist reflection leading to an excessive (self-)critique that produces feelings of fraudulence and exceptionality, and have discussed the role of the other, more specifically the reader, in resisting such analysis and accusation. With these works both authors wanted to address the despair they saw as following from the respective Marxist and popularized postmodernist discourses of their times. The differences between “Good Old Neon” and *The Fall* also shed light on the different perceptions of the task of literature, of writing and of reading, in their respective periods. The fact that “Good Old Neon” includes a metaleptical layer—the appearance of the author figure—and an ending that explicitly emphasizes the meaningfulness of the imaginative and dialogic activity of the reader, signals the impact of discourses on language (such as the death of the author) that arose during the period between the publication of these two fictions. But both these stories’ narrative layering ultimately serves to reaffirm the humanistic and moral value of literature as a source of authentic meaningfulness and communication with the other.<sup>15</sup> These ‘traditional’ literary values were still largely obvious in Camus’s time, but then became de-emphasized and perhaps even seen as outdated (*The Fall* can be regarded as already critiquing the suspicion and “resentment” that would start to work against these values; cf. Solomon 2004, p. 53), values that can subsequently be seen to be reaffirmed in Wallace’s work. The comparative reading with Camus’s *The Fall* helps us further understand “Good Old Neon” as an embodiment of those literary values, of dialogic exchange between the author and reader as a form of authenticity.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Good Old Neon” was originally published in *Conjunctions* 37 and was subsequently included in Wallace’s story collection *Oblivion* (Wallace 2004). The current article will refer to the latter version.
- <sup>2</sup> For a general philosophical analysis of Wallace’s oeuvre in light of Camus, see: (den Dulk 2015, pp. 229–60).
- <sup>3</sup> I have argued elsewhere (den Dulk 2015, pp. 162–79) that one might meaningfully distinguish sincerity from authenticity based on sincerity’s necessarily communal, intersubjective character (versus the individual focus, tending toward autonomy, of authenticity), and that sincerity may thus be taken to be the proper term for the attitude advocated for by Wallace, as well as by most existentialist philosophers, including Camus (but also, for example, Sartre); however, given the canonic character of the term of authenticity for this (existentialist) virtue, I will, for the purposes of this article propose this striving for meaningful communality as a form of authenticity.
- <sup>4</sup> Contrary to most scholars, Ardovino and Masiero suggest that, rather than concluding that it’s David Wallace who has imagined Neal, we may also interpret this narrative shift the other way around, namely as Neal “looking at himself through David Wallace’s

- perspectival positioning” (2022, p. 76). While I find their reading insightful and original, I believe the use of the name ‘David Wallace’ clearly reminds us of the author and thereby of the imaginative act of literature, and as such encourages the reading that it is (David) Wallace imagining Neal. However, Ardovino and Masiero’s suggestion underlines that, through this shift, Neal and David Wallace end up being indistinguishable. For a further elaboration of this point, see below, in Section 4 of the current article.
- 5 For similar readings of *The Fall*, see e.g., (Ellison 1983; Fitch 1982, 1995; Hartsock 1961; King 1962, 1964; Marcus 2006).
- 6 This handwritten draft is titled “Fraud”. The brief dialogue is included, almost verbatim, as §41 of *The Pale King*, except that the person sent to pick up Sylvanshine is now specified to be “Cardwell” (p. 425).
- 7 This passage can be seen as another connection between *The Fall* and Wallace’s *The Pale King*: in §36 of Wallace’s novel, the “tortured father” has an increasing number of affairs, because, like Clamence, in each affair he “longed to detach from the woman, but he didn’t want the woman to be able to detach”. However, differently than Clamence, the father continues all the affairs in order to keep the women bound to him (“not one of the women could be let go or given cause to detach and break it off”), while constantly starting new affairs “on the side” (p. 406).
- 8 cf. “This is the cost of what Nietzsche called the ‘shadows of God’; our continuing insistence to hold up superhuman ideals of perfection and then declare ourselves failures or frauds in their reflection” (Solomon 2004, p. 53).
- 9 In the case of the preceding two quotations, Neal says that his therapist’s insight “was in fact true” but equivocates by adding “although not for the reasons that Dr. Gustafson [...] believed”, and while Neal admits that his meditation instructor had “seen right through” him, he chooses to let that pertain to the “performativity” of his meditation ability and claims “Of course, what [the meditation instructor] seemed not to have divined was that in reality I actually seemed to have no true inner self” (pp. 155, 160).
- 10 For a comparison of “Good Old Neon” with Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, centred around the ‘respicem finem’ watch, see Thompson (2017), pp. 106–11.
- 11 Here, it could seem as if Neal may have been talking to—a version of—himself throughout, functioning as his own interlocutor, and that after the whole run-up we now switch to present tense for the description of his suicide, if it weren’t for the fact that a preceding passage has clearly signaled that Neal’s suicide and his conversation with the interlocutor takes place at different points in time: “you’re thinking here’s this guy going on and on and why doesn’t he get to the part where he kills himself and explain or account for the fact that he’s sitting here next to me in a piece of high-powered machinery telling me all this if he died in 1991” (p. 169).
- 12 Interestingly, *The Fall*’s first reference to fog (“Oh, do you hear the foghorns in the harbor? There’ll be fog tonight on the Zuyderzee”) is almost directly followed by a passage that links fog with *neon* (the only time the term is used in Camus’s novella) and consciousness: “see where their heads are: in that fog compounded of neon” (pp. 281–83).
- 13 The opening sentence of the handwritten draft of “Good Old Neon” uses the image of fog to explicitly convey the density of self-consciousness rendering it inaccessible, both to oneself and others: “This is the bad part, the foggy part, where there’s way more than I can ever make you see” (Wallace n.d., p. 1).
- 14 This autobiographical reference has of course acquired even further poignancy by what we now know about the life and self-chosen death of David Foster Wallace.
- 15 Also see my comparative readings of the opening sections of Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and his short story “The Depressed Person” with, respectively, Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (den Dulk 2021; den Dulk 2022).

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