
Becoming Free from Your Own Skull:

David Foster Wallace's Description of Depression

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[キーワード Keyword] David Foster Wallace, depression, suicide, empathy

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[要旨 Abstract] This study examines David Foster Wallace's description of depression in his fictional writing, focusing on his dual figuration of "breaking one's skull": suicide and empathy. This study investigates the compatibility between these concepts through a close reading of Wallace's writing and consider his life, which ended in suicide. Although previous studies have examined Wallace's writing from the perspective of mental disorder, the dual nature of suicidal tendencies and empathy contained in the expression of "breaking one's skull" has not been explained to date.

Empathy and suicide are connected in the sense that a depressed person's suffering needs an exit. However, one's suffering is verbally inexpressive; the logorrheic narrations of severely depressed people show only a constipated impasse. Nevertheless, only such an impasse can evolve into silent empathy, with another person being silently present beside oneself. Although Wallace eventually destroyed his own head, the possibility of finding someone who experienced similar depression exists, which is a "redemptive" role of publishing fiction.

1. Introduction

In his interview, David Foster Wallace describes the default human setting as being caged in one's own skull: "sort of marooned in her own skull" (127). This is from the sentence in a paragraph which he tries to explain his belief in "good" fiction, stating, "I guess a big part of serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves" (127). In this context, being caged in one's own skull signifies that "[w]e all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible" (127). According to Wallace, fiction that "can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain" has a "redemptive" role to such human default loneliness (127). Thus, breaking one's own cerebral cage and gaining access to another's brain is explained as a desirable role of fiction that generates empathy.

In contrast, "breaking one's own skull" connotes a different meaning in Wallace's writing: suicide. Jim Incandenza in *Infinite Jest* destroys his head in a microwave (142). *This Is Water* includes an argument regarding shooting one's own head due to boredom with everything in their lives (58, 130). The fact that Wallace himself committed suicide looms here, as many of his characters have clinical depression and end up committing suicides. This study examines the reason Wallace's figuration of "breaking one's skull" has two meanings: suicide and empathy. Moreover, it investigates the compatibility between reading/writing fiction, in which Wallace engaged all his life, and killing oneself, which Wallace fought against but eventually conceded in.

This study attempts a close reading of Wallace's descriptions of depression, which is a mental disorder with potential for suicidal tendencies, as a central figuration of his writing. Wallace has written many characters with depression leading to suicide or suicidal attempts, including the narrator of "The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing": Kate Gompert, Joelle van Dyne, and Jim Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*; the narrator of "The Depressed Person"; Neal in "Good Old Neon"; and Meredith Rand in *The Pale King*. As discussed below, these characters have common characteristics in their description of, and struggles with, depression.

Wallace's relationship with mental illness or disorder is argued in various points. Mary K. Holland remarks that

addiction is at the center of Wallace's characteristic "pathological recursivity of narcissism" (232). Elizabeth Freudenthal focuses on oppressive compulsive disorder (OCD) exhibited in his characters. Matt Tresco suggests reading *Infinite Jest* as an "autistic" text (116). Áine Mahon argues that the "suffering" Wallace depicts has a Wittgensteinian background. Moreover, Jamie Redgate's study, *Wallace and I* (2019), is deeply insightful, as it describes how the image of a caged inner self is crucial to Wallace's writing, indicating Sylvia Plath's influence. Rob Mayo also grapples with the problem of depression and dysphoria in Wallace's works with a glance at empathy. However, the relationship between the suicidal drive and empathic access to the other, cohabiting in a figuration of "breaking one's own skull," remains unclear. This study investigates this curious combination in Wallace's description of depression in his fictional writing.

2. Sickness Locked Inside Me

As Jamie Redgate emphasizes, Wallace describes depression as something *inside* a subject, a feeling that the very sickness is locked in the body. The nameless narrator of Wallace's earliest short story, "The Planet Trillaphon," declares that the disorder is in his cells, or the atoms of his body:

Imagine that every cell in your body, every single cell in your body is as sick as that nauseated stomach. Not just your own cells, even, but the e. coli and lactobacilli in you, too, the mitochondria, basal bodies, all sick and boiling and hot like maggots in your neck, your brain, all over, everywhere, in everything. All just sick as hell. Now imagine that every single atom in every single cell in your body is sick like that, sick, intolerably sick. And every proton and neutron in every atom.... (10-11)

Kate Gompert in *Infinite Jest* provides a similar explanation for this sense of sickness inside one's body:

[I]magine if you felt that way all over, inside. All through you. Like every cell and every atom or brain-cell or whatever was so nauseous it wanted to throw up, but it couldn't, and you felt that way all the time, and you're sure, you're positive the feeling will never go away, you're going to spend the rest of your natural life feeling like that. (74)

For these two characters, depression feels like nausea in every part of their bodies, and it cannot find any exit. The sickness in their bodies comically, and exaggeratedly, extends to where their sense organ cannot reach. Neither of them describes any outer cause for their depression, such as stress, loss of something or someone valuable, change of environments, accident, harassment, or abuse. They find something wrong *inside* themselves. Their depression is not sufficiently simple to be treated by removing an external cause.

Furthermore, both quotations invite the reader to "imagine" their sickness as "your" own. This empathy invitation seems to be in line with Wallace's mention of serious fiction's skull-cracking moment, which is motivated by the desperate wish to become free from one's own head and find a haven in another's head. In other words, for Wallace, empathy means an exit from oneself and "suffering alone." Thus, depression and a need for empathy are intertwined in the figuration of a cerebral cage. Moreover, as the need for empathy is the role of serious fiction, depression and mental suffering—being in a cage—provide a base for Wallace's need of writing and reading fiction.

Here, it is necessary to consider another important figuration of depression in Wallace's writing: a jumping from a burning building. In *Infinite Jest*, Gompert describes depression as a situation in which a subject is *inside* the burning building:

The person in whom Its [depression's] invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. Their terror of falling from a great height is still just as great as it would be for you

or me standing speculatively at the same window just checking out of the view: i.e. the fear of falling remains a constant. The variable here is the other terror, the fire's flames: when the flames get close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors. It's not desiring the fall. It's terror of the flames. And yet nobody down on the sidewalk, looking up and yelling 'Don't!' and 'Hang on!', can understand the jump. Not really. You'd have to have personally been trapped and felt flames to really understand a terror way beyond falling. (696-97)

Considered with the above-mentioned quotations, a burning building can be considered a metaphor for the body in which a depressive subject feels locked. The fire is felt only by the subject, and the only exit is jumping out the window, that is, committing suicide. Wallace's depressive characters repeatedly assert this impossibility of finding way out.¹

Furthermore, as their troubles cannot be observed from the outside, the one locked in feels all the more desperate, and thus commits suicide. The sickness being inside, invisible to others, exacerbates the situation. Only people with similar depressive experiences can imagine their sickness; however, such people may not be available nearby. Thus, the presence of people who can empathize with the jumper is unlikely. Ironically, a subject's desperate need to receive empathy from others leads to a dead-end with everyone—including themselves—locked in their own heads. In other words, suicide is motivated by the desire to get out of oneself and gain access to others, which is destined to be impossible. Thus, the search for empathy and suicide are paradoxically connected in the figuration of breaking one's own skull.

3. Dilemma of Expressing Depression in Words

Wallace's dual figuration of "destroying one's skull" contains another impasse. In the same interview, Wallace states that "true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with character's pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own" (127). Despite recognizing the impossibility of empathy, Wallace believes in the possibility of fiction and verbal expression. However, his works are filled with depressed characters who realize the impossibility of verbally communicating their suffering. Verbal communication in his works does not seem to provide an exit for depressive narrators as he imagines.

Nevertheless, Wallace gives the space to verbally communicate the impossibility of verbal communication. As "The Depressed Person" emphasizes, she

really felt that what was *really* unfair was that she felt able [...] to share only painful circumstances and historical insight about her depression and its etiology and texture and numerous symptoms instead of feeling truly able to communicate and articulate and express the depression's terrible unceasing agony *itself*, an agony that was the overriding and unendurable reality of her every black minute on earth—i.e., not being able to share the way it truly *felt*, what the depression made her *feel like* inside on a daily basis, she had wailed hysterically, striking repeatedly at her recliner's suede armrests—or to reach out and communicate and express it to someone who could not only listen and understand and care but could or would actually feel it with her. (59, note 5; original italics)

The nameless depressive narrator repeats how she cannot express her agony in words, which Wallace emphasized using italics. These verbose expressions paradoxically demonstrate the impossibility of expressing herself, of breaking her own skull using the power of words. Jamie Redgate observes that the narrator is not clinically depressed but rather narcissistic, as she ignores the mental trouble of her counselor (96). Nevertheless, her pathological narcissism is highly related to depression, as one can see the mental maelstrom without a vent in the quotation above. Moreover, her neglect of the counselor's suffering accumulates, or endorses, the conviction that verbal communication for true empathy is impossible,

¹ Another Wallacean expression for committing suicide is "deleting one's own map," used throughout *Infinite Jest*.

Individuals "delete their own maps" because they cannot find an exit on their "map"; thus, they are forced to choose an entirely destructive option to negate the "map" itself.

and that each of them remains caged in their own skulls. Thus, the narrator cannot break her skull in the sense of enabling empathy—this wall is too difficult to destroy—and realize again that she is locked in herself, with a continued desire to commit suicide, or physically destroy her head.

Another narrator with suicidal tendencies narrates the impossibility of verbally describing his suffering in “Good Old Neon”:

This is another paradox, that many of the most important impressions and thoughts in a person’s life are ones that flash through your head so fast that *fast* isn’t even the right word, they seem totally different from or outside of the regular sequential clock time we all live by, and they have so little relation to the sort of linear, one-word-after-another-word English we all communicate with each other with that it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out the contents of one split-second’s flash of thoughts and connections, etc. [...] Words and chronological time create all these total misunderstandings of what’s really going on at the most basic level. And yet at the same time English is all we have to try to understand it and try to form anything larger or more meaningful and true with anybody else, which is yet another paradox. (150-51; original italics)

The narrator, Neal, denies the possibility of verbally describing his feeling, although such denial must be verbally described. The narrator attempts the modern literary strategy of the stream of consciousness; however, his hope to show his inner thoughts is thwarted by the very streaming-consciousness technique. The words inside the subject’s head, even if extracted, lack the potential to relate true experiences. These long sentences and paragraphs are only potent to express the impossibility of seeing through the inner-circling, forever-constipated depression.

Thus, Wallace’s description of depression contains the impasse that one cannot access to another’s thoughts without any experience of depression, while showing this predicament to the other is impossible when one is trapped in unexplainable suffering. The sense of a dead-end described above restricts the subject to act, but only to commit suicide. We may question why Wallace continued to write if verbal expressions cannot help depressed people and whether no exit exists from a locked brain other than committing suicide. Wallace’s own suicide suggests that the answer is “no exit other than suicide,” as Wallace abandoned seeking the impossible solution to alleviate loneliness. However, a few, rare moments exist in which depressive subjects can avoid suicide. Next chapter probes this narrow possibility.

4. Someone to Sit Aside

Here, it is necessary to focus on Geoffrey Day—an Ennet House resident and recovering addict who wrote an article on a Quebecois terrorist group, the A.F.R. Existing studies on Wallace have largely ignored Day²; however, he survived depression, although it was minor and lighter than Kate Gompert’s or Jim Incandenza’s. *Infinite Jest* contains a scene in which Day and Gompert discuss his childhood experience of “total horror” (649), when “the fan’s vibration [was] combined with some certain set of notes [he] was practicing on the violin” (649). A terrible thing occurred, which Day refers to as “a large dark billowing shape” (649). From this experience, Day says, “I understood on an intuitive level why people killed themselves. If I had to go for any length of time with that feeling I’d kill myself” (651). However, he did not end up committing suicide. He remembers the last time the “horror” came, when he was in the second year of college: “I thought I’d have to hurl myself out of my dormitory’s window. I simply could not live with how it felt” (650). Then, he expresses what prevented him from committing suicide:

Some boy I hardly knew in the room below mine heard me staggering around whimpering at the top of my lungs. He came up and sat up with me until it went away. It took most of the night. We didn’t converse; he didn’t try to comfort me. He spoke very little, just sat up with me. We didn’t become friends. By graduation I’d forgotten his

² Only Redgate and Mayo mentions him in a relationship with Kate Gompert (Redgate 116 and Mayo 84).

name and major. But on that night he seemed to be the piece of string by which I hung suspended over hell itself. (650-51)

For Day, the nameless boy beside him was his salvation. Verbal communication held little importance; no sign of a close relationship between them existed. Rather, the fact that the boy stayed with Day almost all night prevented him from literary cracking his skull.

In the same scene, Gompert's action is similar to the nameless boy staying with young Day. In their conversation at the lobby of the Ennet House, Gompert says several times what she knows from her own experience: "But it was inside you, though" and "Was it triangular? The shape?" (650-51). She does this without comforting him nor displaying her own experience. Here, a brief moment of empathy is realized: they can tentatively understand that the other had similar depressive attacks and survived them without cracking their own skulls. Although they do not share the same experience or feeling, as "true empathy is impossible," imaginatively, or virtually, they feel not alone inside because another person—whom they do not know well—exists and is beside themselves. Such ephemeral existence of empathy holds the greatest possibility of preventing suicide in Wallace's writing.

Another example of being narrowly saved from suicide is in Kate's compassion for Mr. Ernest Feaster, whom she was known from her hospital days. As Rob Mayo rightly spots, Kate *can* empathize with the co-sufferer, although she says that she cannot (84). Ernest's psychotic depression is almost incurable; therefore, the "man's case gave Kate Gompert the howling fantods" (697). She imagines, despite stating that it is "beyond her ability to imagine" (697), that

[t]he protest of radical psychosurgery was the dangled carrot that Kate guessed still gave the man's life enough meaning for him to hang onto the windowsill by his fingernails, which were probably black and gnarled from the flames. That and his wife: he seemed genuinely to love his wife, and she him. He went to bed every night at home holding her, weeping for it to be over, while she prayed or did that devout thing with beads. (698)

For Ernest, the existence of his wife—whom he can cling to—saves him. Specifically, Kate, who draws a figurative comparison of a burning building ("hang onto the windowsill by his fingernails"), indirectly guarantees the existence of someone who sits beside him. In the ending paragraph of this episode, Kate wonders whether Ernest would obtain peace of his mind, concluding that she "could barely stand to think about them [Ernest and his wife], even at the best of times, which the present was not" (698). However, this negative expression demonstrates that she does have empathy, and at the moment of narrative—as far as Kate knows—Ernest has not committed suicide.

These subtle affects and actions in Wallace's writing present an alternative to destructive desire to find an exit from oneself and access another. Skull-cracking suffering of depression can be alleviated only through the knowledge that another depressive person is present, somewhere else along with oneself. Verbal expression and physical intimacy are unnecessary, as merely knowing that another person is also locked in their own suffering is sufficient. Wallace's descriptive prose paradoxically express only the presence of another depressive person, locked in his skull, desperately trying and failing to find an exit.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the significance of Wallace's descriptions of depression. Empathy and suicide are connected in the sense that a depressed person's suffering needs an exit, in which receiving empathy can prevent suicide. However, one's suffering is verbally inexpressible, similar to a fire being invisible outside the burning building. The logorrheic narrations of severely depressed people show only a constipated impasse; nevertheless, only such an impasse can evolve into silent empathy, with another person being silently present beside oneself.

Wallace's writing mostly exhibits the impossibility of verbally expressing depression and sharing one's suffering. However, expressing these impossibilities functions as a silent companion. Few people can find that the suicidal wish to

break one's own skull is the only way to realize empathy between people who cannot fully know each other. Although Wallace eventually destroyed his own head, the possibility of finding someone who experienced similar depression exists, which is surely a "redemptive" role of publishing fiction.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 22K13070.

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