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Consider the Invitation

Empathy in David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

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Abstract

This thesis explores the notion of empathy in David Foster Wallace's short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). Following a discussion of narrative empathy and theory of mind, an analysis of how empathy is portrayed on the diegetic level, i.e. between characters, is performed. Throughout this analysis, it is demonstrated that Wallace's collection presents a nuanced picture of different kinds of empathy as well as the less admirable consequences that a capability to empathize can have. Because of this nuanced picture, the collection can be read as an argument for the insufficiency of an approach to empathy as inherently good.

Furthermore, it is investigated how the use of the second-person pronoun affects the actual reader's possibility to experience narrative empathy. By comparing how the second-person pronoun is used both in the collection's second-person narratives and in a selection of the stories directing imperatives to an intradiegetic narratee, it is investigated how the use of the second-person pronoun can invite the actual reader to empathize with highly unsympathetic characters. Such narrative empathy, it is argued, can underscore an idea of human commonality.

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1. Introduction

In discussions of empathy today, it has become almost standard operating procedure to regard the ability to empathize as intrinsically and ethically good, as a capacity with pro-social action and altruistic behavior as foregone consequences. To be able to empathize is commonly seen as an admirable capacity which helps the empathizer to somehow become a better, more considerate, fellow human being. As Rebecca N. Mitchell observes in her contribution to the 2014 critical collection *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, in recent studies, “empathy is treated almost solely as an other-directed, altruistic gesture, and one which is inherently good” (123). If more people would be better empathizers, this approach seems to suggest, the world would be a better place.

Such a one-sided view of empathy is greatly challenged by David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.¹ Published in 1999, *Brief Interviews* is a collection of short stories focused on exactly what the title suggests: hideous men. The book is filled to the brim with men who are profoundly misogynistic, who take every advantage there is to be taken of the people around them, and who provide detailed descriptions of exactly how much they hate their own children. As contradictory as it might sound, however, *Brief Interviews* is also a collection focused on empathy. The hideous characters inhabiting the collection constantly appeal for empathy from fellow characters, narratees, and (possibly) readers, asking them time and again to try to understand their minds’ hideous machinery. In addition, several of these men appear to possess very highly developed capacities for empathy. The hideous men in the collection’s title story, as well as other characters from other stories, frequently make use of their ability to imagine other characters’ minds – i.e. of their ability to empathize – for everything but noble reasons. By portraying the less admirable consequences that a well-developed capacity for empathy can have, Wallace’s collection paints a pallet of the possible negative outcomes of empathy.

However, despite the bleak nuance of this pallet, empathy is not portrayed as inherently adverse in *Brief Interviews*. Rather, as I will go on to argue in my analysis, the collection can be read as presenting an alternative merit of narrative empathy. By a wealth

¹ From hereon referred to as *Brief Interviews*.

of intricate narrative strategies, Wallace's collection provides the actual reader with the possibility to empathize with highly unsympathetic characters. Several of the stories present the actual reader with the possibility to consider the invitation to empathize with the hideous men inhabiting the collection. Given this possibility, the book can be said to function as a test of the actual reader's capability to empathize with the most abominable of characters in the most extreme of situations.

What I intend to investigate in this thesis is, first of all, how the portrayal of empathy in *Brief Interviews* complicates a routine notion of empathy as inherently good. Furthermore, I aim to show how particular aspects of the narratives can be read as invitations for the actual reader to empathize with highly unsympathetic characters. More specifically, I will begin by presenting a brief overview of the scholarly work published on Wallace and empathy today, before moving on to a discussion of the concept of narrative empathy. I will then begin the textual analysis by presenting a selective overview of the characters' ability to empathize by analyzing their ability to use their theory of mind, accompanied by an examination of the different kinds of empathy they make use of. I will then go on to analyze two specific aspects from the wealth of narrative strategies that can influence the actual reader's possibilities to empathize with the collection's characters: the use of second-person narration and the use of imperatives directed to intradiegetic narratees. Through this investigation, I aim to show how these specific narrative strategies can invite the actual reader to empathize with the unsympathetic characters in the collection, and what merits a consideration of this invitation might have.

1.1 Earlier Research

As of today, *Brief Interviews* is a rather under-studied work in comparison with the current academic writing on Wallace's oeuvre. The focus in the thriving field of what is often called Wallace studies has, perhaps reasonably, been centered on Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996) and the posthumously published *The Pale King* (2011). Notably, several of these works attend to the question of Wallace and empathy. For one, Toon Staes' essay "Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach", published in 2014 in

David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels introduces fruitful ways of considering how Wallace creates empathy between reader, narrator, and (possibly) writer in his two last novels.² By analyzing Wallace's often demanding narrative strategies, Staes argues that his novels call for active reader participation in order to create both meaning and empathy. Similarly, in his book *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans*, Timothy Aubrey claims that the metafictional device, for Wallace, "is a simple plea for empathy" as he investigates the addictive qualities of *Infinite Jest* (124).

In addition, in the 2014 collection *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, Patrick Horn investigates Wallace's troubled relationship to the concept of solipsism. Drawing on the philosophical work of Wittgenstein, Horn argues for how Wallace's own fiction contradicts the author's view on the problem of solipsism, which he often discussed in interviews and essays. Horn analyzes the short story "Good Old Neon", published in the collection *Oblivion* in 2004, and writes that the story "does not simply haunt us with sincere empathy but rather robustly connects us to the reality of the moral virtue of empathy", and that "in this story Wallace displayed the true empathy that he thought was impossible" (248). In his article with the telling title "Acts of Empathy: David Foster Wallace's Fiction", Hugo Bowne-Anderson briefly discusses the very same short story. He mentions Wallace's famous commencement speech, which he gave to the graduating students at Kenyon College in 2005, and summarizes one of the speech's major points as "the importance of attempting to step outside of yourself, to put yourself in other people's shoes, to empathise" (220). Bowne-Anderson links this part of Wallace's speech to "Good Old Neon", and claims that the misery of the story's suicidal protagonist is partly due to his incapability to empathize in the manner exhorted in Wallace's speech. As can be seen by these examples, the question of empathy in Wallace's fiction is a recurring and recently flourishing subject across the field of Wallace studies.

However, even though the academic work on Wallace tends to focus on the novels, *Brief Interviews* has of course not been completely neglected by scholars. Dan

² An earlier version of this essay, with the title "Rewriting the Author: A Narrative Approach to Empathy in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*", was published in *Studies in the Novel* 44.4 (2012).

Tysdal discusses the opening story of *Brief Interviews* in connection to Raymond Carver and the school of minimalism in his article “Inarticulation and the Figure of Enjoyment: Raymond Carver’s Minimalism Meets David Foster Wallace’s ‘A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life’” (2003). Furthermore, Adam Kelly brings up the question of where sincerity might be found in Wallace’s fiction in part by analyzing selected stories from *Brief Interviews* in his article “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction”, published in the 2010 collection *Consider David Foster Wallace* edited by David Hering.

Just as was the case with the scholarly work focused on Wallace’s novels, a notable portion of the work on *Brief Interviews* is dedicated to the collection’s evocation and treatment of empathy. Marshall Boswell’s influential *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003) includes chapters on both of Wallace’s short story collections published at the time. Although he does not use the specific term narrative empathy, much of Boswell’s discussion of *Brief Interviews* is centered on the concept of empathy. He writes that “Wallace wants to test the boundaries of our willingness to ‘empathize,’ since the men we, as readers, interview are, as they are advertised to be, hideous” (189). This is a view that corresponds with my overall argument about *Brief Interviews* being a test of the reader’s ability for narrative empathy, and Boswell’s analysis will be introduced in more detail throughout the thesis. Charles B. Harris, who once hired Wallace as a professor at Illinois State University, briefly but importantly continues this discussion of empathy in *Brief Interviews* in his remembrance article “David Foster Wallace: ‘That Distinctive Singular Stamp of Himself’” (2010). “For David”, Harris writes, “other-directed acts of unostentatious empathy were an ethical imperative. And that ethic enfolds into his aesthetic” (172). Furthermore, in Hering’s collection mentioned above, Iannis Goerlandt discusses the function of Wallace’s different annotation systems in his fiction and non-fiction. Goerlandt writes about reader annoyance in *Brief Interviews* and, as I will discuss briefly in chapter 4.3, argues for how the lengthy footnotes in several of the short stories ultimately depend on reader participation to create meaning. A third piece from Hering’s collection worth mentioning in connection to *Brief Interviews* and empathy is Christoforos Diakoulakis’ “‘Quote unquote love... a type of scotopia’: David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*”. In this piece, Diakoulakis investigates the

question of love and its connection to narration and mediation in one part of the collection's recurring title story.

One essay of particular significance in connection to how a reader of Wallace might experience empathy in his fiction is Zadie Smith's "*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace*", published in her collection of essays *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (2009). Smith discusses Wallace as a moral writer and emphasizes the demanding effort any reader of Wallace has to put in when reading his fiction. She explains how "[t]o appreciate Wallace, you need to *really* read him – and then you need to *reread* him", and her analogy of a Wallace reader and a musician is especially striking (261, emphasis in the original). Smith describes how Wallace's "reader needs to think of herself as a musician ... electing to play. First there is practice, then competency at the instrument, then spending time with the sheet music, then playing it over and over", a description that appears very appropriate in the case of an author using as many demanding narrative techniques as Wallace (261).

Mary K. Holland provides detailed analyses of Wallace's short story collection in her book *Succeeding Postmodernism* and in her article "Mediated Immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*", both published in 2013. Holland offers an innovative way of regarding fiction produced in the wake of postmodernism – post-postmodern fiction if you so will – and her analysis of Wallace as a producer of such fiction is partly based on a discussion of narrative empathy. The focus of this thesis will not be on the much debated question of whether Wallace's fiction overcomes postmodernism or not, but Holland's discussion of this issue will nevertheless prove important because of her focus on the importance of the reader in any possible solution to what she perceives as the postmodern problem. This problem, as Holland sees it, is largely due to the fact that postmodern and poststructural fiction has somehow removed literature from the real world. According to Holland, this removal has resulted in a "need for a method of representation via language that can invoke the real we miss and need in order to reconnect literature to the world we live in, rather than just the one we theorize" (*Succeeding* 165). The proposed solution to this need, which Holland sees as emerging in a selection of contemporary literature, is closely connected to both the fiction and its readers' treatment of and relationship to emotions and empathy.

Holland introduces the term “poststructural realism” (sometimes termed “metafictive realism”), which she describes as a way to use narrative techniques traditionally connected to poststructuralism toward the ends of traditional realism (*Succeeding* 7). Poststructural realism, Holland claims, can “allow the reader the pleasures and meaningful products of realist fiction” in a poststructural fictional landscape that have “long seemed to substitute language tricks for meaningfulness”, but only if the reader chooses to read it in such a way (*Succeeding* 176). Literature can thus be reconnected to the world we live in, and not only “the one we theorize”, only if the reader actively *chooses* to aid in this reconnection. In a discussion of metafiction in the twentieth century, Holland asserts that “whether we read in it the solipsism or the longing for empathic connection depends on how we choose to read these complicated texts that struggle against themselves as much as they struggle against the humanism they aimed to break away from” (*Succeeding* 165). The question of whether postmodern techniques are used for what Holland would call anti-humanist purposes or whether they are used to create empathetic connections thus appears to depend very much on the reader. There are, of course, possible clues for how to interpret such techniques in the text itself (otherwise it would be rather difficult to produce an analysis of the text at all). However, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4, an active choice by the actual reader is as essential to a possible experience of narrative empathy as it is for the interpretation of metafiction.

Another scholarly work discussing Wallace in the context of post-postmodernism is Nicoline Timmer’s published dissertation, *Do You Feel It Too: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (2010). Timmer’s analysis concerns the sense of the self as presented in three contemporary American works of fiction, *Infinite Jest* being one of them. However, she also includes a discussion about the short story “Octet” published in *Brief Interviews*, as well as an overall discussion concerning the role of empathy in contemporary fiction. Similar to Holland, Timmer views the use of postmodern techniques in contemporary fiction as having “a different function” from the same techniques used in postmodern fiction (360). A part of this difference can be explained by examining how post-postmodern fiction tries to break away from what have become almost conventional postmodern techniques. One of the more significant techniques in this case is postmodernism’s tendency to foreground

the deception of how fiction can provide the reader access to a fictional mind. Timmer argues that:

it has always been a special feature of *fiction* that one is able to enter another (fictional of course) mind, get the ‘inside’ perspective, is able to think and feel *with* an ‘other’. This was a (modern) narrative convention, but one that was ‘mocked’ in postmodern texts ... Bewilderment at how to ‘go on’ from there is what seems to drive Wallace’s stories. (115, emphasis in the original)

This is of course a view on postmodern fiction that can be contested. However, the question of whether or not fiction can provide the reader with the opportunity of entering another’s mind will prove crucial to the idea of narrative empathy.

At the end of her dissertation, Timmer has created a list of some distinctive traits of the post-postmodern novel. Among other characteristics, she claims that “a ‘what if’ mentality oozes from the post-postmodern novel, a ‘willingness to belief’”, and that “the post-postmodern novel hinges on creating empathy (between characters, between narrator and characters, between narrators or characters and narratee, between fictional figures and the flesh and blood ‘real’ reader)” (359-61). The emphasis is placed on both the importance of empathy on different levels of the text and, again, on the reader’s crucial bearing on this construction. In her discussion of a short story published in *Brief Interviews*, Timmer claims that “[w]hether or not it works, whether or not the ‘communicative urgency’ is transferred at all, depends very much on the *reader* here. It is the reader who is called upon” (113, emphasis in the original). These post-postmodern texts can include cues for empathy and invitations to a “what if” mentality, but the “willingness to belief” always and ultimately has to be put in by the actual reader.

What these essays and articles on Wallace and empathy appear to have in common is a persistent emphasis on the importance of empathy and an active, effortful, choice made by the reader. Because of this emphasis, they all give reason and leave room for further investigation of more precisely *how* Wallace’s fiction might evoke empathy in the actual reader. What I will focus on in the following analysis is therefore, first, how empathy is portrayed in *Brief Interviews*, i.e. whether the characters are described as able to empathize or not. After such an analysis, it is possible to go into an investigation of how the actual reader might interpret the narratives. In order to do this, I will investigate what possible cues and clues there are in the text that might point in any direction as to

what interpretative choices the reader is asked to make regarding narrative empathy. As I will emphasize throughout the fourth chapter of this thesis, the question of whether or not Wallace's penultimate short story collection succeeds in evoking narrative empathy is strongly connected to the need for active reader participation.

2. Narrative Empathy

Before moving on to the textual analysis, however, a discussion of the term narrative empathy is needed. According to narrative theorist Suzanne Keen, "narrative empathy is the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation or condition" ("Narrative Empathy" paragraph 1). Throughout her influential book on the subject, *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), Keen explains how empathy is always dependent on the act of perspective-taking and imagining another's state of mind. She also stresses that the very fictionality of literature might in fact induce this act of perspective-taking, because "[w]hile the fact of human others' perspectives and motivations activates our caution, the fictiveness of characters' mental states invites our participation and playful engagement" (34). Another way of seeing this difference between fiction and real life is that the perspectives of human others in real life not only makes us cautious, but is in fact impossible, while understanding a character's mind in fiction might be possible. As Keen herself puts it, "[b]ooks often tacitly ask readers to step into a character's shoes" (*Empathy* 18). Since fiction is not only able to ask readers to step into characters' shoes and – I argue – minds, but actually makes this kind of stepping into shoes and its adherent mind-reading feasible, the perspective-taking induced by fiction might be a kind of perspective-taking that is not available outside the boundaries of fiction. Since fiction is able to provide its readers with representations of characters' minds, fiction might also be able to present the reader with a greater possibility for perspective-taking than real life situations. I.e., while fiction can allow us to, so to speak, read a character's represented thoughts at a specific moment, real life situations do not provide us with the representation of other humans' thoughts. We might still, of course, deduce the thoughts of other flesh-and-blood persons by reading their behavior, but these thoughts are not presented to us the way they can be presented by fiction.

A cognitive view on the differences and similarities of empathy as experienced in real life situations and in fiction reading is provided by Patrick Colm Hogan, who includes cognitive science in his study of narratives. According to Hogan, “[t]o know that something is fictional is to make a judgment that it does not exist. But existence judgments are cortical. They have relatively little to do with our emotional response to anything” (*Cognitive* 185). Hogan stresses the fact that our emotional system works very much in the same way whether we treat actual real-life situations or fictional narratives, because our responses to the different situations still rely “on the same cognitive architecture”, and “the human mind proceeds in the same way, whether it is dealing with nature or with art” (*Cognitive* 42, 116). In the same sense, E.M. Dadlez emphasizes that how readers understand fictional characters is strikingly similar to how they understand real persons by asking “[i]f the act of imagining a human situation, and construing it in a particular way in doing so, is not irrational in itself, what further ground is left on the basis of which to call emotional responses to fictions irrational?” (39). The understanding of flesh-and-blood persons always has to be based on guesses and deductions since any direct mind-reading is not possible, but, as mentioned, such mind-reading appears to be more readily provided by fiction.

A thorny question often brought up when discussing narrative empathy is the question of whether it can be said to serve a purpose since it seldom leads to altruistic action. The question appears to boil down to: if readers do not take action in the real world after having had an empathetic reading experience, then what is the point of narrative empathy? In her research on college students’ responses to fiction, Keen has found that successful instances of narrative empathy rarely lead to action or changed behavior after the reading experience (*Empathy* 107). She calls this the “underperformance of fiction” and blames it partly on the “very textuality of novels” (*Empathy* 108), and suggests that “the contract of fictionality offers a no-strings-attached opportunity for emotional transactions of great intensity” (*Empathy* 168). This opportunity, Keen argues, presents the novel-reader with the opportunity to “enjoy empathy freely without paying society back in altruism” (*Empathy* 168). However, to regard fiction that does not lead to altruistic, pro-social action as under-performing seems to me to be a case of both holding fiction to too high a standard and valuing what empathetic reading experiences actually *can* achieve too little. In a response to Keen’s worries that her reading about the victims

of the Rwanda massacre did not lead to anything more than the writing of a few checks (*Empathy* xxi), Hogan writes that this view of fiction assumes a heroic model and continues saying that:

heroism is the wrong model anyway. Cultivating skills in empathy and encouraging effortful simulation that promotes empathy are first of all valuable in ordinary acts of daily life ... Judging the benefits of emotional skills by heroism is like judging the benefits of jogging by reference to escaping unharmed from muggers. (*Affective* 246)

Hogan's emphasis on an "effortful simulation" that can affect the reader's everyday life indicates that fiction can be useful for the reader after the reading experience, even if it does not lead to altruistic action. In concordance with this argument, cognitive psychologist Keith Oatley states that his research group has "discovered that fiction at its best isn't just enjoyable. It measurably enhances our ability to empathize with other people and connect with something larger than ourselves", and that "[t]hrough stories, selfhood can expand" ("Changing Our Minds" n. pag.). In a similar fashion, Oatley also suggests that "[w]orks of fiction draw on our skills of empathy, and allow us to practice these skills" ("A Feeling for Fiction" n. pag.). While I do not mean to suggest that reading fiction automatically, necessarily, and somewhat mysteriously makes readers into better persons, fiction reading can at least theoretically be seen as a practice dependent upon the reader's capacity for empathy. As will be argued and exemplified in the forthcoming analysis, fiction reading can also, in particular cases, be understood as a potential developing of this capacity for empathy and perspective-taking.

Additionally, the connection between fiction reading and a developing of the reader's capacity for empathy is strongly connected to what Wallace has expressed about what he thinks great fiction can achieve. In a today rather famous interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace explains how, as he sees it, "[w]e all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy is impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own" (22). He goes on to claim that this process makes readers of this kind of fiction "less alone inside", a valid reason for why narrative empathy can serve a purpose outside the reading experience (22). Implied in both Oatley's and Wallace's comments is an emphasis on the human commonality that can be underscored by fiction that elicits empathy. Through empathetic reading experiences, it appears to be possible for readers

to acknowledge an affinity between themselves and (fictional) others and, as a consequence, to feel less isolated as they recognize an idea of human commonality. If successful, fiction that calls for empathy for particularly hideous characters would then be even more convincing of this idea of an underlying human commonality, as will be discussed in chapter 4. For now, it might suffice to invoke what Dadlez has discussed as fiction's ethical purpose. Dadlez argues that fiction is "ethically important" because it develops the reader's capacity of attention and perspective-taking (194-95). She writes that "[e]mpathetic engagement with fiction can be and often is ethically significant precisely because it allows us to explore experiences we have not had from perspectives that are not wholly our own but that we can make our own" (195). Again, emphasis is placed on how perspective-taking can allow the reader to, as it were, enter the mind of another through the representation of that mind provided by fiction, and how such perspective-taking can lead to a feeling of connection.

However, as mentioned in the introduction, to discuss empathy in ethical terms is not entirely unproblematic. As can be seen by the above examples, discussions of empathy often appear to take for granted that to empathize is a noble activity with automatically positive consequences.³ Such routine linking of empathy and the ethically good leads to discussions that risk overlooking several aspects of empathy. More specifically, such routine linking often neglects to consider the idea that the act of empathizing might have negative consequences. As Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim observe in their introduction to the already mentioned *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, "the romanticization of literary empathy as a straightforward ethical or political good is not only flawed but also potentially dangerous. Put simply, empathy has the potential to help *and* harm" (11, emphasis in the original). When regarding a work of fiction like *Brief Interviews*, the harmful potential of empathy soon stands evident. As will be exemplified in chapter 3.2-3.4, the characters in Wallace's collection frequently use their capacity to empathize with others and imagine these others' minds for everything but ethically noble reasons. It thus becomes evident that it is insufficient to regard empathy as inherently positive. In fact, when considering the possible negative outcomes

³ See Hammond and Kim's introduction to *Rethinking Empathy through Literature* (2014) for a comprehensive historical overview of the concept of empathy.

of empathy, it appears as empathy per se might not be suited to be judged by ethical measurements at all. If, instead of discussing empathy in ethical terms, one views it as plainly an ability to imagine somebody else's situation by perspective-taking, it becomes easier to focus on the actual act of imagining required for empathy to occur, and, in the case of narrative empathy, on the textual cues for it. It is not the fact of empathy, but the way in which empathy is exercised that determines the ethical value of the act. What determines the ethical value when it comes to narrative empathy, then, is how the actual reader exercises the opportunity to empathize with a fictional character.

There are two additional important aspects concerning narrative empathy that risk being overlooked if empathy is regarded as inherently good. One is the fact that there are different kinds of empathy. As I will discuss in chapter 3.4, Hogan introduces three kinds of empathy that provide fruitful ways of analyzing both empathy between characters and between readers and characters. All acts of empathy are not the same, and, consequently, all experiences of narrative empathy are not the same. The second aspect of importance here is what Eric Leake calls "difficult empathy" (175). Leake claims that empathy for "those who are seen as most deserving of our empathy", i.e. "victims of abuse and oppression", is an easy kind of empathy. Such empathy, Leake explains, might in fact have negative consequences as it makes readers complacent in their view of themselves as "caring people" and therefore does not challenge either the readers' identities or "the privileges of empathy that rest with the more powerful and more comfortable" (175). Difficult empathy, on the other hand, "pushes the limits of our understanding in reaching out to those with whom we might not otherwise wish contact or association" (176). A recognition of the possibility for readers to empathize with characters they initially would disregard as unworthy of their empathy is crucial to the understanding of a work such as *Brief Interviews*, which often places its characters' hideousness in the center. As Leake mentions, and as I will argue throughout chapter 4, this type of narrative empathy can furthermore have merits of its own.

One aspect often emphasized as important in the discussion of narrative empathy is character identification. In her list of hypotheses regarding narrative empathy, Keen states that "character identification often invites empathy", and that "spontaneous empathy for a fictional character's feelings opens the way for character identification"

(*Empathy* 70). However, character identification does not appear to require concrete similarities between the actual reader and the character empathized with. Since there presumably is a rather small part of *Brief Interviews*' audience who initially wants to regard themselves as similar to the often remarkably hideous characters inhabiting the collection, this aspect is of great importance. Keen describes how character identification invites empathy "even when the character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways" (*Empathy* 70). Similarly, in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Ralf Schneider mentions that "for the reader of a novel to relate emotionally to a character's hopes, joys, fears, plights, etc., it is not necessary that he or she share any trait with that character at all" (136). This argument is essential to the discussion of empathy in *Brief Interviews* for the simple reason that narrative empathy would be very much of an exception if it required strong similarities between character and reader in this case. Character identification might sometimes arguably play a great role for inviting the reader to experience narrative empathy, but it does not appear to be a prerequisite for empathetic reading experiences.

Ethical agreement with the fictional character empathized with does not appear to be a necessary condition for narrative empathy to occur either. This, again, is important for the discussion of empathy in a piece of fiction as preoccupied with ethically dubious characters as *Brief Interviews*. Dadlez writes:

Empathy with characters, while one's focus derives in part from one's evaluative beliefs, is not necessarily circumscribed either by an overall ethical assessment of a character or by some assumption of overall commonality between our normative judgments and those of a character. Empathy rests not on these factors but on our ability to imagine having the beliefs and experiences of another and thus on our ability to imaginatively inhabit the situations of others. (190)

It thus appears as imagination is far more important than ethical agreement for narrative empathy to be evoked. The fact that readers are capable of empathizing with morally dubious characters might even strengthen the theory that character identification does not demand significant similarities between character and reader, as Keen has suggested (*Empathy* 75-6). This sort of narrative empathy appears to depend on both authorial empathy and active focus by the reader. Keen suggests that "[i]f an author has felt with her creations as she imagines them, not just reserving emotional investment for favored protagonists, then the opportunity to bond temporarily with monsters, madmen, and

villains can be regarded not as anomalous, but as a standard feature of fiction” (*Empathy* 131). Although I do not believe that whether or not a reader empathizes with a character necessarily depends on the author’s feelings toward that particular character, the word “opportunity” is crucial here. This word choice implies that to empathize with a morally dubious character is a chance rather than a risk. Dadlez argues that “empathy can provide new insights into the experience and motivation of others, and can thus lead us to a new awareness of or alteration in our existing normative judgment” (191). To bond and empathize with fictional creations of morally questionable character can thus possibly be experienced as beneficial by the reader.

That, however, is not to say that empathizing with morally dubious characters is always beneficial, and thus positive, for the reader. Just as empathy per se might not be suitable to regard as inherently positive, the fact that a reader empathizes with a fictional character does not automatically lead to positive outcomes. What is interesting is to investigate how a piece of fiction is able to induce empathy with characters, both sympathetic and not. It should also be noted, however, that whether or not such requests for empathy for unsympathetic characters are successful heavily depends on several factors connected to the communicative situation of the narrative and how – and by whom – the characters are portrayed. The communicative situation of a narrative, together with the specific narrative strategies used, are indeed of immeasurable importance for whether the actual reader will experience narrative empathy or not. In this thesis, a selected portion of the narrative strategies with distinct possible consequences for narrative empathy in *Brief Interviews* will be analyzed in chapter 4.

In her investigations about narrative empathy gathered from email discussions about novel reading and empathy, Keen shows that to empathize with “unsavory characters” might be regarded as one of the more essential aspects of fiction reading (*Empathy* 74). Her conclusion from these reader responses is that such an “interpretation recuperates empathy for nasty characters to the broad project of character education for tolerance, by emphasizing the humanity of the vicious or the risible” (*Empathy* 74). While I do not wish to suggest that the function of narrative empathy in *Brief Interviews* is to close the gap between the reader’s ethical judgment and that of the indeed both nasty, unsavory, and vicious characters of the collection, the focus on a broadening of the

reader's mind and Keen's mentioning of how empathy for "unsavory characters" emphasizes humanity is crucial to the discussion of empathy in Wallace's collection. Dadlez introduces a theory of how readers' ability to empathize with a character whose moral standards differ considerably from their own depends on the actual reader's capacity to imagine this character's beliefs in isolation. If enough attention is paid to the fictional situation, Dadlez claims, "it is quite possible that even paragons of probity and virtue can imagine having some of the beliefs and desires of the blackest fictional villain" (190). As I will soon go on to discuss in chapter 3.2, this kind of selective imagining of another (in this case fictional) person's mind is frequently asked for by the characters and narrators in *Brief Interviews*.

What stands out time and again in the discussion of empathy, both narrative and "real", is the importance of perspective-taking and the act of imagining. Dadlez points out that "[i]magination is involved in empathetic emotion both when one empathizes with fictional entities and when one empathizes with actual persons. To empathize is to adopt a different point of vantage in the actual or fictional world" (7). She also argues that this act of "imaginatively inhabit[ing] the worlds of others" has significance not only in that it "permits us to imagine that a life could be lived in a certain way but in that it enables us to contemplate how it might be to live just such a life" (7-8). Narrative empathy thus appears to enable readers to view the world they inhabit from a perspective different than their own. The outcome of such perspective-taking need not be either unproblematic or necessarily positive, not the least since it can be argued that to imagine the beliefs and desires of cruel characters might in fact have negative consequences. Nonetheless, in order to understand more fully how narrative empathy functions, it is important to note that fiction can invite perspective-taking with unsympathetic characters of morally dubious standards as well. Oatley argues for how narratives can allow us, as readers, "to extend ourselves into situations we have never experienced, feel for people very different from ourselves, and begin to understand such people in ways that we may never have thought possible" ("A Feeling for Fiction" n. pag.). The extension of the self referred to by Oatley is similar to Leake's argument about how "[d]ifficult empathy fosters the development of more expansive identities that incorporate the best and worst of people" (184). Empathetic reading experiences, when successful, appear to allow the reader to enter into a game of "what if", where she for a moment is able to imagine the world from

a perspective not her own.⁴ If the perspective the reader is invited to share belongs to a character of the unsympathetic or even hideous kind, the act of empathy might become more difficult, but it might also have particular merits as it can extend the reader's notion of herself.

3. Characters and Empathy

To understand the empathetic appeal of a fictional work, I find it necessary to first of all understand how the work in question portrays empathy. Empathy in fiction can be said to work on two levels. Firstly, there is the diegetic level: the way in which characters are depicted as empathizing or not empathizing with each other within the narrative. Secondly, there is the question of how empathy is created in the reading experience: of how an actual reader might perceive the characters depicted, and hence whether or not the actual reader experiences narrative empathy. How empathy is created in the reading experience is, as mentioned, determined by several factors in the text, one of the more crucial being the mode of narration. The effects that different modes of narration might have on the actual reader's possible experience of narrative empathy will be discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis. Since such a discussion relies partially on how the characters are depicted in the fiction, an analysis of how (or if) the characters in *Brief Interviews* empathize will provide groundwork for that discussion. Although these two levels rarely stay separate, but rather tend to both depend upon and cross-fertilize one another, I will attempt to keep them separated and begin on the diegetic level. By investigating which of the collection's characters are able to empathize with others and which are not, my aim is to provide a lucid picture of how empathy is portrayed in *Brief Interviews*. For this reason, I will begin my analysis of empathy in *Brief Interviews* with an overview of empathy on the diegetic level and investigate how it is portrayed as experienced – and used – by the characters.

⁴ In concordance with established practice and because the diegetic "reader" in some of the collection's stories is referred to with the female pronoun, the actual reader will be referred to with the female pronoun throughout this thesis. However, this pronoun is used in a generic way and is not supposed to imply that the actual reader of Wallace's collection is gendered.

Given the emphasis on perspective-taking's importance for empathy discussed in chapter 2, the focus on perspective in the fiction appears to be a good place to start. Many of the characters and narrators in *Brief Interviews* are practically obsessed with perspective. They talk about it, they appeal for different kinds of it, and they (in the case of narrators) play with it. In her discussion about one of the collection's first stories, "Forever Overhead", Holland states that "[f]rom the end of the board and the story, perspective is everything" ("Mediated" 113). This turns out to be a statement that can be seen as fitting not only for the end of that particular story, but rather for the majority of the collection. When it comes to empathizing, perspective is indeed everything. Without the act of perspective-taking, or, to put it another way, without the act of stepping into somebody else's shoes, empathy simply is not possible.

As it so happens, the act of perspective-taking is closely connected to a concept often used in cognitive science when discussing empathy: theory of mind. In her book on the subject, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006), literary scholar Lisa Zunshine describes theory of mind as a sort of mind-reading (6). She explains the concept as our "ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires" (6), and argues that one reason why humans tend to enjoy reading fiction might be because it allows us to train and confirm our theory of mind ability (18). In addition, Oatley discusses how theory of mind "involves simulating the minds of other people: imagining what they are thinking and feeling" ("Changing Our Minds" n. pag.). This does indeed seem very similar to what fiction often invites and enables the reader to do, and the importance of the actual reader's theory of mind ability in the case of *Brief Interviews* will be discussed in chapter 4. For now, however, it is essential to note that successful theory of mind is dependent upon the person or character's ability to imagine someone else's perspective. In order to be able to explain another's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires, it is first of all necessary to imagine those thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires. In other words, it is necessary to imagine the situation of the one empathized with from his or her perspective. Whether or not this explanation of another individual's mind is accurate is of minor importance here, since the vital part of this discussion will be the act of imagining and perspective-taking, and not its potential concordance with the actual mind imagined. Furthermore, the concept of theory of mind can be considered

advantageous compared to the more usual concept of empathy when discussing the act of perspective-taking, since it moves away from empathy's positive connotations.

As will be argued in the following subchapters, the characters who are described as able to view situations from a perspective other than their own in *Brief Interviews* are also the characters able to use their theory of mind ability to empathize with others. Holland describes how the collection's "imagined acts of empathy begin by taking a perspective outside of the self, and in the end it is this shifting, even doubling or multiplying, of *vision* that the collection diagnoses and enables, that it greets with terror and gratitude" ("Mediated" 127, emphasis in the original). The mentioning of terror *and* gratitude is important here, since it implies what was briefly mentioned in the introduction: that instances of empathy by perspective-taking rarely are simple, one-sided, or even necessarily positive in *Brief Interviews*. Or, rather, the consequences of empathy are rarely depicted as simple, one-sided, or even necessarily positive in *Brief Interviews*. As will be seen by the examples provided below, empathy and a developed capacity for theory of mind is a complex issue in Wallace's collection and might, amongst other destructive consequences, cause depression and serve as a great means for manipulation.

3.1 Perspective Is Everything

The first story where perspective is frequently brought up and emphasized is the collection's third piece, "Forever Overhead". In this story, perspective is not only "everything" in that it is important to the main character, but also in that it is alluded to time and again by the narrator in this second-person narrative.⁵ The story describes the main character's thirteenth birthday at a public swimming pool and his decision to jump from a springboard into the water, and possibly also (metaphorically) into adulthood. When the boy has finally reached the board, the reader is told that "[t]he board is long. From where you stand it seems to stretch off into nothing", and the next paragraph begins

⁵ The necessary question of by what means the mode of narration in this second-person narrative affects the reader's possible experience of narrative empathy will, for reasons detailed above, be discussed in chapter 4.

with “[l]ooked at another way, the same board is just a long thin flat thing covered with a rough white plastic stuff” (13). The fact that the board is frequently described in relation to its surroundings underscores the idea that how something appears always depends on the perspective it is viewed from. Similarly, when the boy has finally climbed the ladder and is about to jump, his new perspective is accentuated when it is said that “you knew that from below you wouldn’t look nearly so high overhead. You see now how high overhead you are. You knew from down there no one could tell” (15). Such descriptions emphasize the new knowledge that can be provided by a new perspective, and the relativity of everything is made poignantly clear later on the same page when the narrator describes that “the water, of course, is only soft when you’re inside it” (15). This laconic observation is then followed by a series of questions, beginning “[s]o which is the lie? Hard or soft? Silence or time?” which is immediately answered with “[t]he lie is that it’s one or the other” (16). One way of reading this statement is to see it as a discussion of perspective. The water is neither soft nor hard, because the answer will always depend on who is asking, and from what perspective the question is asked. The answer, “[t]he lie is that it’s one or the other”, implies that the water is *both* soft and hard, that neither perspective is more true or false than the other. It all depends on if you are in the water or not.

The character referred to as “You” in “Forever Overhead” is also, in concordance with my hypothesis regarding perspective-taking’s importance for empathy and theory of mind in this collection, one of the few characters described as empathizing with others in the stories. Holland writes about “the boy’s own repeated, simply and deeply felt moments of empathy” (“Mediated” 113). These moments of empathy are perhaps most easily identified when it is described how the hurt-looking legs of a big woman in front of the boy on the ladder make “you feel like your own legs hurt”, but that is not the only example of the main character feeling with others (11). When the boy begins to climb the ladder to the board, the first steps are described as follows: “The dents feel deep and they hurt. You feel heavy. How the big woman over you must feel” (11). A clear example of this boy imagining what another character is feeling, these short lines can be read as an instance of a character trying to understand someone else’s feelings by using his theory of mind skills. Only a page later, the boy goes on to imagine the same woman’s thoughts instead of her feelings, as it is described how “[i]t does not seem good,

the way she disappears into a time that passes before she sounds. Like a stone down a well. But you think she did not think so” (12). Here, the boy is imagining another person’s thoughts by stepping out of his own perspective, an activity that will reoccur in the collection.

The second character able to imagine someone else’s thoughts is the man about to commit adultery in “Think”. This story, just over two pages long, is interesting because it portrays two characters with what could be called diametrically opposite capabilities of empathy and theory of mind. Perspective is not discussed in as verbatim a way as in “Forever Overhead”, but it is still of crucial importance to both the story and the main character, who appears to have a very fine capacity of using his theory of mind ability to understand someone else’s mind. As the woman with whom the man is about to commit adultery turns around to close the door, the narrator describes how the man in that moment “realizes she’s replaying a scene from some movie she loves” (72-3). Moreover, the man is actually able to imagine not only what the woman thinks in general, but what she thinks about him and his behavior as well. In the very beginning of the story, it is described how “[h]e thinks to kneel. But he knows what she might think if he kneels” (72). When the man has eventually knelt down, allegedly to pray instead of completing the adultery he is in the middle of, he tells the woman that “[i]t’s not what you think”, and then reiterates this assurance by adding “[i]t’s not what you think I’m afraid of” (73-4). The man appears to be able to view the admittedly rather absurd situation from the perspective of the woman and, thus, he is also able to use his theory of mind ability to imagine what she thinks of the situation.

As a contrast, the woman in the story does not show any willingness when it comes to understanding the man’s thoughts, feelings, and awkward behavior. The narrator describes how “[s]he could try, for just a moment, to imagine what is happening in his head”, but this is apparently not something that the woman has any ambition to try (73). Instead of attempting to understand what is happening in the man’s head as he kneels to pray, she asks “a three-word question” (73). Since it makes the man’s “forehead pucker as he winces”, it does not seem very likely that the question is of the understanding kind (73). The woman is aware of how the situation might look from an outside perspective, “[s]he’s now aware of just how she’s standing, how silly it might look through a window”,

but this is a very self-centered form of perspective-taking (73-4). She is willing to apply an outside perspective of how *she* would appear if anyone saw her at that particular moment, but she is not willing to step outside of her own perspective and consider the situation from the man's point of view. The story ends with a "what if" situation, where the narrator asks "[a]nd what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way" (74). By ending the story with what indeed seems to be a rather unlikely closure to the episode, due to the woman's resistance to imagine the man's mind, the merits that might come with considering a mind other than one's own are hinted at.

Another character who appears to be able to do just this, to consider a mind other than his own, is the narrator and main character in the collection's very next story, "Signifying Nothing". In this story, perspective is again brought up as a key ingredient needed in order to achieve this kind of consideration. As the narrator describes how he asks his father about the sudden and traumatic memory the story centers on, he underscores his awareness about how this must appear to his father by stating that "[i]n the van, out of (from his perspective) nowhere, I suddenly tell my father I just had recently remembered the day he came down and wagged his dick in my face when I was a little kid" (77). When the narrator eventually starts to come to terms with his father's reaction to this accusation, it is because he recognizes that other people, in this case his father, might view things from a perspective different than his own. He describes how he slowly begins to understand that:

It was possible that the whole incident was so weird and unexplained, that my father, psychologically, blocked it out of his memory, and that when I, out of (from his point of view) nowhere, brought it up to him in the van, he did not remember ever doing something as bizarre and unexplained as coming down and threateningly wagging his dick at a little kid[.] (79)

Explanations like this one show that this narrator is able to imagine the thoughts of someone else by stepping outside of his own perspective.

This nameless narrator might in fact be one of the collection's best examples of the merits a highly-developed capacity of theory of mind can provide. It is of course possible, and perhaps even probable, that he is an unreliable narrator wishing to portray himself in an admirable way. Yet, if bracketing that suspicion for a moment, one might

instead regard his alleged ability for theory of mind in more detail. This narrator is constantly trying to understand his father's behavior and thoughts by using his theory of mind skills, as can be seen in passages such as the following: "I kept trying to think about why my father would do something like that, and what he could have been thinking of, like, what it could have meant" (76-7). Time and again, this character attempts to understand his father's mind by considering the situation from his father's perspective and by reading his father's behavior. After describing the accusation in the van, the narrator mentions how his father "does not say one thing, however this *look* he gives me says it all", and then gives a detailed description of what the look on his father's face says about his thoughts and feelings (77, emphasis in the original). In the end, the narrator's theory of mind ability is also the reason why he is finally able to forgive his father, as he describes how "[i]t is not like I totally believed my father had no memory of it, but more like I was admitting, little by little, it was possible he blocked it out" (79-80). Smith describes this narrator's "empathetic imaginative leap" into his father's head as a rare example of a Wallace character escaping his self-centeredness by an act of perspective-taking. She argues that "[g]enerally, we refuse to be each other. Our own experiences feel necessarily more real than other people's, skewed by our sense of our own absolute centrality. But this young man in his simplicity does the difficult thing: he makes a leap into otherness" (282). The young man's ability to experiment with the possibility that his father perceives reality in a way different than he does, his ability to apply a "what if" mentality and imagine the situation of his father, thus appears to be the key to how he is able to forgive his father.

The focus on perspective persists all the way to the end of this story. When the narrator ultimately decides to contact his family after a year of complete and infuriated silence, perspective is emphasized again as he describes how "and so, out of (to them) nowhere, I call my folks' house and ask if I can come along for my sister's birthday" (80). These repeated descriptions of the narrator using his theory of mind ability can be seen as proof of how this character at least perceives himself as quite skilled at understanding the minds of others by considering a perspective not his own. The perpetual focus on perspective-taking in the stories depicting characters able to empathize illustrates the idea that an ability to consider situations from different perspectives is a prerequisite for using one's theory of mind ability to empathize with others.

3.2 Dubious Empathy

As mentioned in the introduction, even some of the hideous men in the collection's recurring title story appear to be able to use their theory of mind to understand the characters around them. The discussions of these characters in analyses of *Brief Interviews* often center on how they manipulate their audience to fulfill their cruel and egotistical desires. Holland for one discusses how these men "enact a mask of earnestness to work toward cruel, ironic purposes" and underscores their manipulative tactics ("Mediated" 117). She also suggests that the structure of the interviews, together with Wallace's assurance that it is the same woman conducting all of them (Stein 90), calls for readerly sympathy with this woman ("Mediated" 119). However, there is a possible alternative way of regarding these interviews. While I do not wish to suggest that these men are not both cruel and manipulative, or that the actual reader is not supposed to sympathize with the interviewer, such discussions miss out on something important, namely the men's frequent use of their theory of mind ability to understand the people around them. Because if one, as a reader, is able to bracket the (to say the least) morally dubious purposes of these men, it soon becomes evident that many of them actually possess a rather well-developed capacity for theory of mind. In fact, these men frequently step outside of their own perspectives to understand the minds of others. The capacity and the perspective-taking is of course most often used as attempts to manipulate the interviewer or some other character, and sometimes it might even be fake attempts, but the capacity is nevertheless there.

These men's well-developed capacities for theory of mind soon stand evident when analyzing some of the interviews in "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men". One example of a hideous character using his theory of mind ability is the man in interview #40. This particular character, who calls his undeveloped arm "the Asset" and uses it as a means to manipulate women into sleeping with him out of pity, gives the interviewer a detailed account of how his understanding of these women's minds gives him a chance to seduce them (82). Even more overtly, he is apparently able to understand the thoughts of the interviewer, as can be seen when he tells her that he "see[s] how you're trying to be polite and not look at it" (82). It might not require very much of imagining and perspective-taking to understand that your company does not want to openly stare at a

deformed body part of yours, but on the basic level it is nonetheless a use of the man's capacity for theory of mind. Similarly, the man in interview #48 is using his theory of mind ability to read his dates in order to determine whether they will participate in his intricate game of tying them up. This particular man is very aware of the importance of this kind of mind-reading. As he describes the women's reactions when he asks if they would allow him to tie them up, he mentions how the women "are looking at you because they are trying to read you. To size you up, as you have apparently sized them up, as the proposal appears to imply" (109). In fact, this whole story can be seen as a detailed description of how this man is using his theory of mind ability to determine whether or not his proposal will be approved. The man himself calls this process "[c]hicken-sexing", as a reference to how certain people in Australia and New Zealand allegedly are able to tell the sex of a chicken just by looking at it (100). This, one could argue, is perhaps not a very noble way of using one's theory of mind ability, but it is nevertheless a fairly developed analysis of the possible functions of the ability. As such, it is also an illustration of the fact that a well-developed capacity for theory of mind and empathy need not be ethically admirable.

Another similarly abject example of characters in the title story using their theory of mind ability to "understand" women can be found in interview #28. In this part of the story, what appears to be two grad students are discussing what they perceive as the paradox of what "today's women *think* they want versus what do they really deep down *want*" from a man (226, emphasis in the original). According to these two men, "today's postfeminist era" has somehow made women confused regarding their sexuality and, because of this confusion, "today's women" are very difficult to seduce and use for the sexual purposes these men are interested in (228). This, the men go on, has led to that "today's women" are unprecedentedly hard to understand. One of them describes his perception of the situation as:

a total mess. You can go nuts trying to figure out what tack to take. She might go for it, she might not. Today's woman's a total crap-shoot. It's like trying to figure out a Zen koan. Where what they want's concerned, you pretty much have to just shut your eyes and leap. (227-28)

However, his friend appears to be a little more optimistic. He agrees that understanding women today "takes some serious deductive fire-power and imagination", but goes on to

argue that “actually most of the time you *can* figure out what they want, I mean almost logically deduce it, if you’re willing to make the effort to understand them and to understand the impossible situation they’re in” (228, emphasis in the original). Again, I do not wish to go into a discussion regarding the moral repulsiveness of these men’s conversation, as that matter appears to be rather clear. What is important for my thesis is instead the fact that these men are discussing the possibility of understanding other persons’ minds by imagining their situations and the, in this case and as the men see it, complicated perspectives of these persons. The man who actually has belief in this kind of mind-reading stresses something crucial in this matter: that it takes *effort* to understand someone else’s mind. It is not something that comes naturally, since we, as Smith puts it, always are “skewed by our sense of our own absolute centrality” (282). Hence, even though the men in these interviews are not using their theory of mind ability with what the majority of *Brief Interviews*’ audience would call admirable purposes in mind, they still make use of it. By doing so, they at least attempt to understand a mind other than their own. The case of whether or not their understanding correlates with reality, which I think it is safe to say that it most often does not, is again of minor importance.

Another aspect regarding the interviews’ hideous men that risks being overlooked if one focus too much on their hideousness is the fact that many of them frequently ask for empathy by appealing to some other character’s theory of mind ability. In interview #11, which appears to be a conversation between the interviewer and a (soon to be former) partner of hers, the man in the story is about to leave the interviewer. While doing so, he is also blaming his partner for the fact that he is leaving by claiming that he leaves because he cannot stand that she thinks he will leave. What he also does, however, is appeal for empathy and for the interviewer to use her theory of mind ability. After the man has described how him leaving is not a confirmation of the woman’s fears about him leaving but, ironically, because of them, he admits that he understands how the situation will appear from her perspective: “It *is* ironic from your point of view, I can see that. Okay. And I can see you totally hate me now” (21, emphasis in the original). This, of course, does not make his manipulative and admittedly very selfish behavior any more excusable, but it does in fact suggest that he is able to step outside of his own perspective and attempt to understand another person’s thoughts and feelings. As the story is about to end, the man becomes more and more desperate in his attempts to get his soon ex-

girlfriend to understand the situation as he sees it. As he is trying to explain, he asks her “[c]an you maybe see you just *might* have been wrong, even *possibly*? Could you give me that much, do you think? ... Can you see I might be pretty torn up about it too? Can you? That you’re not alone in this?” (22, emphasis in the original). Whether or not the woman eventually can see this never becomes clear, since she is always silent in the story. More on the issue of the silent interviewer and her influence on the relationship between reader and text will be discussed in chapter 4. For now, however, it is important to notice the many appeals for empathy by such an unsympathetic character.

In interview #2, which is similar to interview #11 in several ways, the pattern is repeated. In this interview, a man is sitting down with his girlfriend to explain that he is afraid he might hurt her feelings because his “relationship record indicates a guy who’s bad news” (91). Just as was the case with interview #11, this man appeals for empathy by asking his conversation partner to try and view the situation as he views it. After one of the story’s omitted questions, he tries to explain how “[i]t’s not as simple as that. At least not the way I see it. And believe me my way of seeing it is not that I’m a totally decent guy who never does anything wrong” (98). After having revealed that what he is most afraid of is that he might not have the capacity to truly love another person, the man asks his girlfriend to identify with his pain:

Can you imagine what it takes to tell you this? That I’m terrified that after I’ve told you all this I’m going to feel so guilty and ashamed that I won’t be able even to look at you and stand to be around you, knowing that you know all this about me and now being constantly afraid of what you’re thinking all the time? (99)

What the man claims to be afraid of could be described as not being able to turn off his theory of mind ability. After asking her to imagine his thoughts and feelings, he is afraid that he will never be able to stop imagining *her* thoughts and feelings. Regardless of whether the man is actually honest here or if he, as he himself mentions might be the case and as Holland has suggested, “enact[s] a mask of earnestness” to get the woman to end the relationship, is not the point (“Mediated” 117). The point is that the man’s alleged fear indicates the idea that imagining someone else’s thoughts is not always something positive; it is the manner in which the capability to imagine someone else’s thoughts is exercised that determines the consequences. The man’s fear can be seen as indicating a part of the “terror” Holland refers to when mentioning how the “imagined acts of

empathy” in *Brief Interviews* are greeted “with terror and gratitude” (“Mediated” 127). This hint suggests that the ability to understand another’s mind by perspective-taking might sometimes have dire consequences for human relationships. In other words, it indicates that the capacity to empathize is not an inherently positive capacity.

The possibly most disturbing case of an interviewee appealing for empathy by perspective-taking is the man in interview #46, who argues for how rape might have “positive aspects for a human being in the long run” (117). Holland writes that this “pro-degradationist rapist . . . not only verbally accosts us but also elicits our empathy by asking us to imagine suffering the same brutality he implies he has suffered himself” (“Mediated” 119). While I hesitate to apply the use of “us” in this context, since the question of who the addressee of the interviewee is appears to be more complicated than the use of an “us” equating the text’s addressee with the actual reader suggests (a question that will be dealt with in chapter 4.4 of this thesis), Holland’s pairing of verbally accosting and an eliciting of empathy is significant. This story is completely crammed with “what if” scenarios. The interviewee is constantly trying to get the interviewer to change what he terms her “knee-jerk” attitude toward severely cruel and degrading acts. He is constantly playing with how the identity of the person victimized in the horrible ways he describes (the certainly disturbing examples he is using are gang rapes and the Holocaust) will affect the interviewer’s reaction with questions like “[w]hat if I told you that my own wife got gang-raped? Not so sure of yourself now are you” (120). Later on, the man further confuses the narrative situation by adding “[w]hat if I said I wasn’t even married? Then what? Then it’s show-time, believe you me baby” (123). When he finally tries with “what if I said it happened to me? Would that make a difference?”, and then adds “I’m not saying it happened to me or him or my wife or even if it happened but what if it did? What if I did it to you? Right here? Raped you with a bottle?”, what is true and what is not true in the story world is indeed unclear (124).

What is clear, however, is the fact that perspective plays an important role here. The interviewee is constantly appealing to the interviewer to make use of her theory of mind ability by asking her to imagine the different extreme scenarios he is describing, and he frequently asks her to apply other perspectives than her default, “knee-jerk”, one. When making the controversial claim that a horrendous rape might provide the victim

with a possibly enlarged world view, he explains that “[n]obody’s suggesting she was liking it while it was happening or that it should have happened. But let’s put two things into perspective here. One is, afterwards she knows something about herself she didn’t know before” (118). Again, this is of course an abhorrent argument in many ways, but it is also an extreme example of a character trying to convince another character to step out of her perspective to understand someone else. When it eventually becomes clear to the man that the interviewer does not seem to buy his argument, he thinks that the reason for this is that she is not able to step outside of her own perspective and empathize with someone different from herself. After suggesting that the horrible rape happened to him, the man asks:

Does it have to be a woman? You think, maybe you think you can imagine it better if it was a woman because her external props look more like yours so it’s easier to see her as a human being that’s being violated so if it was somebody with a dick and no tits it wouldn’t be as real to you? (124)

What becomes clear in a passage like this is that the man regards himself as having a rather excellent theory of mind ability. He sees himself as able to guess what the interviewer thinks, as well as the reasons behind her thinking this way. Moreover, he accuses her of having a poorly developed theory of mind ability, of lacking the ability to empathize because she cannot imagine the feelings of a person with a body too different from hers. The argument might be clouded by the man’s controversial opinions, but the question of with whom we are able, or willing, to empathize is a question central to *Brief Interviews*.

3.3 Problematic Empathy

Perspective and theory of mind is not only emphasized in the few stories where a character actually is able to empathize with others in *Brief Interviews*. In “The Depressed Person”, the main character is constantly ridiculed due to her inability to consider a perspective other than her own. Even though she (very) frequently calls the friends in what she terms her Support System “for sharing and support and just a few well-chosen words to help her get some realistic perspective on the day’s despair and get centered and gather together the strength to fight through the emotional agony of the next day”, she is never

able to consider a perspective not her own (39). She is constantly stuck in her own mind and her own self-conscious perspective on her surroundings, a fact that is ridiculed time and again.

The depressed person's inability to consider a perspective not her own stands evident when scrutinizing her relationship with her therapist. After the therapist has committed suicide, the inability becomes painstakingly clear as it is described how "[e]ven on top of the shattering abandonment-issues it brought up, the therapist's unexpected death also could not have occurred at a worse time from the perspective of the depressed person's journey toward inner healing" (52). Even after a tragic end to someone's life, the depressed person is apparently unable to step out of her own perspective. In a long description of how the depressed person perceives her therapist's habit to covertly look at her watch during their therapy sessions, it is described how this behavior "made it appear, from the depressed person's admittedly hypersensitive perspective" as an insult, as if the therapist believed the depressed person to be stupid enough not to notice this watch-looking (54n4). This habit, the depressed person feels, exposes the fact that the therapist is only professionally interested in her problems. This is of course likely to be true, due to the therapist's profession, but the depressed person fails to reconcile with the thought because of her inability to step out of her own perspective. Again, it is emphasized how this appears from the depressed person's perspective, as it is described how the therapist's behavior and gestures "from the depressed person's perspective looked to her more like emotional detachment" (55n4). Given that the depressed person is a deeply unhappy and pathetically portrayed character, her inability to consider situations from a perspective other than her own underscores the dangers of this inability.

One part of the depressed person's problem seems to be that she has a very well-developed theory of mind ability, comparable to the man in interview #2 discussed in chapter 3.2. This problem can be seen in how she dreads that the friends in her Support System – a group of friends she admittedly demands much of in terms of both empathy, time, and patience – might experience the depressed person as a burden. The narrator describes how the depressed person tells her therapist how she "almost always imagined she (i.e., the depressed person) could detect, in the friend's increasingly long silences

and/or tedious repetitions of encouraging clichés, the boredom and frustration people always feel when someone is clinging to them and being a burden” (42-3). This behavior is in fact described as occurring twice already in the depressed person’s school years. First, it is described how her “popular and attractive roommate” at a boarding school receives a phone call from a boy interested in her and how the roommate gestures to the depressed person to knock on the door to give the roommate an excuse to get off the phone (43-4). This develops into a traumatic memory for the depressed person, who forever after dreads being in the boy’s position. The same pattern is repeated when she, in college, overhears a group of male lacrosse players speaking in a very a demeaning manner about a young woman they know. Although the depressed person admits “she had not had much of a personal relationship or connection to the female student whom the men compared to a toilet”, this memory also becomes severely traumatic to her because she keeps imagining how it would feel to be the girl so cruelly made fun of (63).

At first sight, this kind of imagining of other people’s minds would seem like proof of a great theory of mind ability. Why, then, is the depressed person portrayed as such a pathetic character in such a ridiculing manner? First of all, to regard a well-developed ability for theory of mind as necessarily positive overlooks the idea that it is not the ability per se, but rather the way it is used, that can be measured in terms of “good” or “bad”, as discussed in relation to empathy in chapter 2. The problem appears to be that the depressed person is using this ability too much and, perhaps more importantly, always in a self-centered way. Smith discusses how Wallace frequently underscores the importance of awareness, but emphasizes the fact that the awareness has to be directed outwards in order to be beneficial (263). She writes that “[i]f Wallace insists on awareness, his particular creed is – to use a Wallacerian word – *extrorse*; awareness must move always in an outward direction, away from the self. Self-awareness and self-investigation are to be treated with suspicion, even horror” (268, emphasis in the original). The depressed person’s problem, the reason why her highly-developed theory of mind ability is ridiculed instead of celebrated, seems to be that her awareness is everything but *extrorse*. As Holland argues, “one fundamental problem here is the woman’s method of dealing with her narcissistic need, not by sincerely engaging herself in others’ present lives, but simply by asking them, from the solipsistic safety of a telephone conversation or therapy appointment, to fulfill her needs” (“Mediated” 116). This indeed appears to be

true, as becomes clear when regarding how the depressed person's thoughts always center on herself even as she is considering the lives and situations of others. When she imagines the traumatic memories discussed above, she is always imagining how she herself would feel were she put in their situation. It is described both how "the depressed person dreaded more than almost anything ever being in the position of being someone you had to appeal silently to someone else in the room to help you contrive an excuse to get off the telephone with", and how she even as an adult is "often preoccupied with the idea that laughing groups of people were often derisive and demeaning of her (i.e., the depressed person) without her knowledge" (44, 64). Because of her consistent focus on herself, the depressed person's theory of mind ability, albeit well-developed, leads into a spiral of deeper self-absorption and depression.

The depressed person is highly aware of her own self-centeredness, which is most clearly seen when her thoughts on her relationship with the therapist are described. It is detailed how demeaning the depressed person feels it to be that she has to pay a therapist to receive empathy, which she experiences as having:

to purchase what was in many respects a kind of fantasy-friend who would fulfill her childishly narcissistic fantasies of getting her own emotional needs met by another without having to reciprocally meet or empathize with or even consider the other's own emotional needs, an other-directed empathy and consideration which the depressed person tearfully confessed she sometimes despaired ever having it in her to give. (57n5)

The problem is thus clearly not that the depressed person is ignorant of her own flaws, and the story even ends with her asking one of her most empathetic friends "what kind of person could seem to feel nothing ... for anyone but herself?" (68). Rather, the issue appears to be that even when the depressed person expresses awareness about her possible inability to empathize with others, she still centers on herself. Even when she appears to be imagining another person's thoughts and feelings, she is in fact only imagining what she herself would feel under such circumstances. She is, it seems, caught inside herself, and therefore unable to step outside of her own perspective and truly imagine another person's mind. Because the whole story centers on the depressed person's self-centeredness, the consequences of this inability become painstakingly visible.

A character with similar fears and a similar self-obsession is the character named “X” in “Octet”. In the second of the “pop quizzes” that constitutes the story, it is described how X is infuriated with his good friend Y because “Y’s done some honorable/upright thing that X sees as a disloyal and/or hurtful thing” (132). Again, the importance of perspective is emphasized as it is pointed out that the situation might appear very different depending on what perspective it is viewed from. Seen from one perspective, whatever Y has done can be categorized as honorable, but from X’s perspective, the same act is experienced as disloyal. It is never made clear what really happened between X and Y, what perspective is the “accurate” one. On the contrary, it is described how “it’s not clear whether Y is pathetic and spineless or incredibly strong and compassionate and wise”, and that “[m]aybe Y is somehow both pathetic *and* strong” (133, emphasis in the original). This is important, because it underscores how diametrically different the same situation can be experienced from two different perspectives and accentuates the difficulty of deciding which of a set of multiple perspectives is most accurate. Perhaps the point is that neither perspective is more or less accurate than the other. Or, as it was put in “Forever Overhead”, that “[t]he lie is that it’s one or the other” (16).

Furthermore, in the story’s fourth pop quiz, titled “Pop Quiz 6(A)”, it is described how X has to actively make Y view a situation from X’s perspective in order to get Y to give advice:

X, by finally resorting to having Y conduct a thought-experiment in which Y pretends to be X and ruminates aloud on what he (meaning Y, as X) might do if faced with this malignant and horripilative *pons asinorum*, gets Y finally to aver that the best he (i.e., Y as X, and thus by extension X himself) can probably do in the situation is simply to passively hang in there[.] (141-42, emphasis in the original)

The emphasis on X’s trouble with getting Y to help him in his situation, and the fact that the solution is a thought experiment which helps Y to imagine himself as X and consider the troublesome situation from X’s perspective, suggests that perspective-taking often demands active effort. At the very least, such frequent discussions of the different perspectives available underscore the idea that what perspective one views a situation from is always a choice, and that there are most often different perspectives available to choose from. Whether or not the actual reader will participate in such exercises of perspective-taking, which seems to be something all of these quizzes hinge on, is further

developed in the latter part of “Octet” and will be discussed in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

The problem X asks Y for advice on is the burdensome fact that he is unable to empathize with his wife and family in their grieving over the wife’s father, who X highly dislikes, dying in cancer. Just as the depressed person, X worries that his self-centeredness makes him unable to truly empathize with others. He worries that the fact that he is only able to think of himself and his feelings of exclusion in a situation where he should empathize with his family “might constitute evidence of some horrific defect in his human makeup, some kind of hideous central ice where his heart’s nodes of empathy and basic other-directedness ought to be” (138). To reconnect to Smith, X’s awareness and worries are everything but extorose, which is described as the reason for his inability to empathize even with the people closest to him. And just as was the case in “The Depressed Person”, the fact that X is aware of this inability does not provide a solution to the problem. On the contrary, this awareness leads to X being “doubly ashamed and worried about the fact that the shame and self-doubt are themselves self-involving and thus further compromise his ability to be truly concerned and supportive toward his wife and kids” (138-39). Thus, the awareness of the problem cannot provide a solution in itself, since it makes the character even more self-centered and less empathetic as this awareness, too, is not extorose but focused on himself.

A third character too occupied with herself to be able to empathize with others is the wife in “Adult World (I)” and “Adult World (II)”. In fact, this character’s inability to consider situations from perspectives other than her own leads to the fact that she is not able to understand the true circumstances of the situation she is in. The young wife obsessively worries that her and her husband’s sex life is unsatisfactory for the husband because her lovemaking technique is “somehow hard on his thingie” (161). The wife’s worries take up such a great part of the first story as to almost make it a travesty. As with the earlier discussed examples of characters unable to step out of their own perspectives, this woman too is aware that this might be the case. The husband’s potential dissatisfaction with their sex life, the narrator reports, “could have been nothing but her own selfish imagination; the whole problem could be just in her head, she worried” (164). Only after the wife has had her so-called epiphany and rapidly matured so that she is

suddenly able to realize that the problem lies not in her but within her husband – who she eventually understands to be a “Secret Compulsive Masturbator” – is she able to step outside of her self-centeredness (184).

Before this epiphany, it is frequently described how the wife’s perspective is both immature and self-centered. The narrator describes how “this wife, being young, (and full of herself (she realized only later)), believed it was something about her”, and how her understanding of the situation she is in changes when she acquires a different perspective on it: “(she realized only later, when she had some mature perspective)” (161, 162). As is described in the second part of the story (which is structured as an outline of a story and is in itself one great exhibition of and play with perspective), it is only after her epiphany that the wife is able to see that her “own self-conscious anxieties have kept her from having any real idea” about the situation (184). As another example of the problems that self-centeredness and an inability to consider situations from different perspectives can cause, this story further underscores what can be seen as the collection’s argument of the dangers inherent in self-centeredness and a too focused introrse awareness. Although the story hardly can be said to end happily as it paints a rather bleak portrait of the marriage in question, the wife’s ability to view her situation from a perspective that is not self-centered is at least described as a mature capacity that helps her to cope with life.

3.4 Different Kinds of Empathy

Instead of regarding the wife in “Adult World”, X, and the depressed person as characters simply incapable of empathizing, it is possible to analyze their problem based on an acknowledgement that there might exist different kinds of empathy. In a discussion about the difference between compassion and pity in his book *What Literature Teaches Us about Emotion* (2014), Hogan introduces as many as three types. The basic form, Hogan claims, is “allocentric empathy”, which involves “imagining some other person’s experience as such” (284). Hogan’s two other types are termed “projective empathy”, which “involves imagining oneself in the position of the other person”, and “normative empathy”, which “involves imagining some normatively standard person in that position”

(278). Normative empathy rarely seems to be the case in *Brief Interviews*, if nothing else because the majority of the characters are everything but “normatively standard” characters (whatever that may be), and will not be discussed more in this thesis.

Hogan’s two first categories, however, provide a new way of considering the characters’ (in)ability to empathize with others. The problem for the characters unable to empathize with others due to an almost pathological self-centeredness could be regarded as an inability to experience allocentric empathy. Whenever these characters imagine another character’s situation, they do so by imagining themselves in the other character’s position: the depressed person feels sad when thinking about her traumatic memories of demeaning situations because she fears how she herself would feel in those situations; X is unable to empathize with his family in their mournful situation because he cannot step out of his own perspective and truly, on an emotional level, imagine the situation as it is experienced by them; and the wife in “Adult World” cannot fathom that her problems might not be caused by herself because she is far too filled with self-centered anxiety to consider the situation as it is experienced by her husband. In other words, these characters constantly and perhaps too frequently experience projective empathy while being depicted as unable to experience allocentric empathy. These examples can be contrasted with, for example, the boy in “Forever Overhead”, who imagines how the woman above him on the ladder must feel (and not how he would feel in her situation), and with the narrator from “Signifying Nothing”, who repeatedly tries to understand how the situation must appear to his father (and not how he would experience the situation, were he in the father’s position). The results of an inability to experience allocentric empathy depicted in *Brief Interviews* are, as discussed above, depression and tormenting anxiety.

The difference between these two contrasting kinds of empathy is in fact discussed in two of the stories (albeit not in Hogan’s terms): “Octet” and the last of the interviews, #20. In the last pop quiz of “Octet”, the question of how to empathize with others in a constructive way is discussed frequently and in detail. This part of the story, narrated in the second-person,⁶ begins with the line “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer” and centers on the conundrum of how to really connect with your readers as a

⁶ The mode of narration in this second-person narrative will be discussed in chapter 4.

writer (145). Its structure as a description of the process of writing the story's preceding quizzes, and the declared desire that this last quiz is supposed to work in order to get the reader to reconsider the earlier quizzes so that the story will end up as "a certain sort of 'interrogation' of the person reading them", leads to an intricate discussion of empathy (145, emphasis in the original). In a passage detailing the fiction writer's convoluted problem regarding how to truly know whether the story will work in the way desired, the narrator describes that this hinges on in what way the writer empathizes with the reader. After having described how "you" try to read the story just written with the eyes of an average reader, some "total stranger who's probably sitting down at the end of a long hard day to try to unwind by reading this belletristic 'Octet' thing", the narrator goes on to describe how:

you know that this is a very bad corner to have painted yourself into, as a fiction writer. There are right and fruitful ways to try to 'empathize' with the reader, but having to try to imagine yourself *as* the reader is not one of them; in fact it's perilously close to the dreaded trap of trying to anticipate whether the reader will 'like' something you're working on, and both you and the very few other fiction writers you're friends with know that there is no quicker way to tie yourself into knots and kill any human urgency in the thing you're working on than to try to calculate ahead of time whether that thing will be 'liked.' It's just lethal. (152-53, emphasis in the original)

Since the spelled-out purpose of "Octet" is to communicate an "ambient but univocal urgency" through the text, something that kills such an urgency is clearly not positive (153). What is described as such a negative and dangerous line of thinking could in other words be defined as projective empathy. To "imagine yourself *as* the reader" would equal the writer imagining himself in the position of the reader, i.e. of experiencing projective empathy. Such empathizing through imagining is not simply described as bad, or as a rather unproductive way of writing fiction; it is "lethal". Moreover, it is described as dangerous because of its egocentric quality. This way of imagining oneself as the reader is based on imagining whether or not the reader will like what *you* have produced. The focus is thus not actually on the imagined reader, but rather on how this imagined reader perceives "you"; the focus is not other-directed. Even though this particular quote and story centers on the specific situation of writing fiction, the argument still holds when applied to situations of empathizing outside of the particular episode described. As such,

this concrete example reiterates the warning for this kind of empathy presented in *Brief Interviews*.

One possible solution to this problem of self-centered empathy presented in *Brief Interviews* seems to lie in the characters' capacity to let go of themselves and their egos. In an observation of how Wallace always seems to ask the same question in his work (the question being “[h]ow do I recognize that other people are real, as I am?”), Smith claims that the answer to this question, also always the same, is that “[y]ou may have to give up your attachment to the ‘self’” (291, emphasis in the original). As it so happens, this practice of letting go of the self is both referred to and further developed in the last part of “Octet”. In a discussion of the, to the narrator, very problematic question of how to truly “be with” another person instead of just using that person for selfish needs, it is described how this sort of being with someone else requires “some nameless but inescapable ‘price’” (155, emphasis in the original). This price, it is described:

can actually sometimes equal death itself, or at least usually equals your giving up something (either a thing or a person or a precious long-held ‘feeling’ or some certain idea of yourself and your own virtue/worth/identity) whose loss will feel, in a true and urgent way, like a kind of death[.] (156)

In order to be with somebody else in an unselfish, other-directed way, which I will just assume includes empathizing with that particular somebody, it seems that a letting go of the self so total that it amounts to dying is necessary. Described this way, this capacity does not appear to be a very common one. And indeed, there are very few characters in *Brief Interviews* who seem to possess it. As Smith observes, “[m]ost of Wallace’s people refuse, even for a moment, to give up the self” (297). The vast majority of the characters inhabiting *Brief Interviews* seem incapable of giving themselves up due to their self-centeredness and their inability to step out of their own perspective. As argued above, this inability leads to their confinement to projective empathy, a confinement that does not have positive results.

One of the few characters depicted as able to give up herself emerges in the last of the collection’s 18 interviews, #20. This interview presents a monologue by a cynical young man who describes how his falling in love with a woman he first saw as “a strictly one-night objective” changed his whole world-view (288). As the man describes why he fell in love with her and how he changed, he also presents an embedded narrative of this

young woman and “the unbelievably horrifying accident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed” (287). In this embedded narrative, it soon becomes clear that the woman has succeeded with the controversial task of empathizing with her rapist. The man describes how this girl is able to “use her penetrating focus to attempt to feel and empathize with the sex offender’s psychosis and rage and terror and psychic torment” so successfully that she actually manages to “touch the beauty and nobility of the generic human soul beneath all the psychosis” (303). This extraordinary ability to empathize under extreme circumstances could be interpreted as the ultimate version of acknowledging the “queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness” that “Octet” asked for (157).

The woman in interview #20 is allegedly able to feel such interhuman sameness with the man raping her during the rape. It is described how she, during the horrible episode, found herself “feeling no longer paralyzing terror for herself but a nearly heartbreaking sadness for him, the psychotic mulatto”, and how suddenly “she felt terror but not her own” (306, 308). She is thus depicted as able to empathize with the most hideous of the collection’s men, which is not an easy contest to win considering the fact that Wallace’s book is crowded by characters despising their own children and taking every advantage there is to be taken of the people around them. The key is, allegedly, her ability to let go of herself and focus completely on the situation the brutal rapist is in, i.e. her ability to experience allocentric empathy. In the most extreme of situations, this woman is thus depicted as able to empathize with someone else in a bona fide extorse and allocentric manner.

Interview #20 is also, as Boswell observes, “a story about storytelling”, even though it deals with the subject in a perhaps more covert way than “Octet” (198). Apart from being depicted as the ultimate empathizer, the woman in this storytelling story further appears to be the ultimate narrator as she allegedly is able to communicate everything that is described in such a roundabout manner in “Octet”. Even more to the point, this woman is able to communicate her message of empathy and human commonality to a man who belongs to a very cynical audience and, consequently, to completely change his view of the world. In “Octet”, it is described how “you” hope that the metafictional strategies used in the last pop quiz will make the reader recognize that

a dismissal of these strategies as “postclever metaformal hooley ... would be based on precisely the same sort of shallow formalistic concerns she was (at least at first) inclined to accuse the octet of” (151-52). Through the telling of her story, the accosted woman is able to produce exactly this kind of revelation in her listener, i.e. the once so cynical man. This man describes how her way of telling the story helps him listen to it with “increasing attention” and reveals that “the qualities I found myself admiring in her narration of the anecdote were some of the qualities about her I’d been contemptuous of when I’d first picked her up in the park” (297). The woman’s narration is thus capable of presenting the man with a kind of revelation that resonates back through her character and story and makes him see both in a different light, just like the narrator in “Octet” hopes his narration will work. Moreover, the cynical man’s reconsideration of the woman and her narration helps him use his theory of mind ability to, for a moment, put himself in her situation and attentively imagine what she has experienced. He describes how the story “helped me focus almost entirely on the anecdote itself and thus helped me imagine in an almost terrifyingly vividly realistic way just what it must have *felt* like for her, for anyone” (297, emphasis in the original). Given the man’s cynical distance at the outset of the story, where he depicts the woman as a “Granola Cruncher” and accuses her of “emotional incontinence”, getting him to rethink his default cynicism seems like quite an achievement (288).

One major part of this achievement depends upon the fact that the woman is willing to take the risk of appearing sentimental. In his much quoted essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” published in 1993, Wallace discusses the possible directions of contemporary fiction produced in an era pervaded by cynicism. In the essay, Wallace tries out different solutions to the problem of a postmodernism that, he thinks, has lingered in the culture too long. In the end, he prophesizes that “[t]he next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles” (81, emphasis in the original). He then goes on to exemplify how these “new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of the gifted ironists, the ‘Oh how *banal*.’ To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness” (81, emphasis in the original). If disregarding the fact that it

is very difficult to accuse her brutal story of being banal,⁷ the woman in interview #20 seems to match very well with this description. She is constantly using terms that the man retelling her story makes sure that his interlocutor understands are not widely accepted as used in an un-ironic way in the story world. He mentions how she used “the, well, the quote L-word itself several times without irony or even evident awareness that the word has through tactical over-deployment become trite and requires invisible quotes around it now at the very least” (292-93). Furthermore, he describes how it is a trait of this type of woman to use a “specific blend of childish diction like *Hi* and *fib* with flaccid abstractions like *nurture* and *energy* and *serene*” (291, emphasis in the original). In other words, the woman is a very easy target for any gifted ironist setting out to make fun of her. However, due to exactly this sincerity and credulity, she is able to, in the end, make her listener step outside of his own cynical perspective and imagine the situation of someone else. As a result of being able to experience allocentric empathy in the most extreme of situations, and through risking ridicule when retelling her story, this woman emerges as both the narrator asked for in “Octet” and the new rebel described in “E Unibus Pluram”.

As the woman of the story emerges as both an ultimate empathizer and an ultimate narrator, it gradually becomes clear that the man retelling her story is neither of the two. When he is about to end his retelling of the woman’s story, he tells the interviewer that “I’m not putting it right. I can’t make you feel what I felt” (316). As the story ends with him getting upset – probably because the interviewer does not respond in the way he would have preferred – his failure as a narrator becomes painstakingly clear. To understand why the man fails with the mission to communicate the idea of human commonality when retelling a story that succeeded in communicating this idea to him, it is first of all necessary to notice the fact that he does not appear willing to risk being ridiculed. As mentioned, he cannot stomach using the “L-word”, but must insert a “quote” before it as a verification showing that he is aware of how ridiculous a sincere use of that word might come across. Similarly, when describing the woman’s “altered state of attention” during the rape, he details how this state made her realize that even the

⁷ In his lucid discussion about the connections between interview #20 and “E Unibus Pluram”, Diakoulakis does in fact argue that the woman in interview #20 “is the one that has a truly banal, sentimental, melodramatic story to tell” (149). While I concur with the claim that the woman tells her story in a manner which could be described as banal, sentimental, and melodramatic, I think that an interpretation of the story itself as banal overlooks the gruesome facts of the woman’s story.

intestines of the cruel rapist “were all made of precisely the same thing and were connected by something far deeper and more elemental than what we limitedly call quote unquote love” (309). These and the numerous other examples where the man inserts the word “quote” or otherwise indicates a cynical distance signal that he is not using specific expressions in a sincere and unguarded way. Additionally, the man is constantly trying to imagine what the interviewer, his audience of the retold story, thinks as he is narrating. In the very beginning of the interview, he explicitly states that “I’m aware of how it might sound, believe me” (287). Thus, contrary to the woman, this man is not able to avoid the trap of trying to imagine the thoughts of his “reader” in the dangerous way outlined by the narrator in “Octet”.

Furthermore, even when the man affirms that the woman’s story made him imagine the situation she experienced, it is always evident that he is still self-centered in these acts of imagining. This, as it seems, is largely due to his inability to let go of (the idea of) himself and, thus also, his inability to experience allocentric empathy. As he details the effect the story had on him, he describes how “I felt more and more sad, hearing it, trying to imagine what she’d been able to pull off, and felt more and more sad that on our way out of the park I’d felt that tiny stab of disappointment, maybe even anger, wishing she’d been more of a challenge” (314). Thus, even when he admittedly tries to imagine the gruesome situation depicted, he allegedly cannot help but to relapse into self-centeredness and ponder what the situation says about *him*. Holland accuses this man of being an “empathy-poser” (“Mediated” 120), which, regarding the frequency of which he asks the interviewer questions like “[d]o you see how open I’m being with you here?”, appears accurate (313). The man seems so focused on *appearing* open and honest that it becomes practically impossible for him to actually *be* open and honest. His ultimate self-centeredness is finally admitted in the end, when he describes how he started to cry as the woman told her story and how this made him feel embarrassed, “not for crying, but for wanting so badly to know how she took it, whether it made me seem sympathetic or selfish” (316). Thus, even as the man asserts that the woman’s narrative has fundamentally changed him, it eventually becomes clear that he is still too self-centered to truly experience allocentric empathy. He is not capable of imagining the horrible anecdote as it was experienced by the woman, because he is not able to let go of his own

appearance. This serves as a possible explanation for why this man fails as narrator where the woman succeeded, even as they are in fact retelling the very same story.

In conclusion, when analyzing the characters in *Brief Interviews* and their ability or inability to empathize, a versatile pallet of the possible consequences of empathy emerges. Many of the characters are portrayed as incapable of experiencing allocentric empathy – empathizing by imagining a situation as it appears to someone else – because of their inability to step outside of their own perspective. Yet, several of the characters do appear to be able to empathize with their fellow characters. The key to this ability is frequently described as these characters’ capacity to consider a perspective other than their own, which allows them to imagine the situation of someone else. However, as the results of the characters’ ability for perspective-taking and mind-imagining are far from necessarily positive, it soon stands evident that an approach to empathy as inherently positive is insufficient for an analysis of *Brief Interviews*. By presenting a range of examples of the less altruistic manners in which empathy can be utilized, the collection can be read as a suggestion for the need to broaden the understanding of empathy in order to attain a more complete picture of the complex machinery of the concept.

4. Readers and Empathy

After this selective survey of how empathy is portrayed in *Brief Interviews*, it is now possible to go into an analysis of how the mode of narration might affect the actual, albeit hypothetical, reader’s possible experience of narrative empathy. Narrative empathy, to rehearse Keen’s definition, is “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation or condition” (“Narrative Empathy” paragraph 1). It is thus the flesh-and-blood actual reader’s possibility to empathize with characters when reading narratives that will be referred to when discussing narrative empathy in the following chapter. Whereas the preceding textual analysis focused on empathy as portrayed on the diegetic level, the first level mentioned in the beginning of chapter 3, the focus of the following pages will be on the second level: on the question of what narrative strategies might induce narrative empathy in the reading experience.

As mentioned, the mode of narration is indubitably an aspect of major importance when it comes to how the actual reader perceives a narrative. Consequently, it is also an aspect of major importance when it comes to questions regarding whether the actual reader experiences narrative empathy or not. There are an abundance of narrative strategies connected to how the mode of narration might affect whether the actual reader experiences narrative empathy in such a multifaceted work as *Brief Interviews*: there is frequent use of metafictional devices (most notably in “Octet” and “The Depressed Person”), there is often great ambiguity as to who is narrating, and several of the stories lack resemblance to conventional narrative forms (e.g. “Datum Centurio”, which is structured as a lexical entry in a futuristic dictionary, or “Adult World (II)”, which presents what appears to be the writer’s technical notes for the narrative situation). Furthermore, there is also the intimate result of stories written as conversations or interviews where one conversation partner is most often silent. Interesting examples to be mentioned are the remarkably titled “On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand, the Acclaimed New Young Off-Broadway Playwright’s Father Begs a Boon” and, of course, the collection’s recurring title story (which will be investigated in chapter 4.4). All of these narrative aspects, and indeed many more not mentioned, markedly influence the way in which the actual reader interprets the stories and, thus, whether or not the actual reader experiences narrative empathy.

One narrative aspect of particular interest in *Brief Interviews*, since it both affects the relationship between reader and text and is strongly connected to the request for active reader participation often discussed in the case of Wallace, is the use of second-person narration. As narrative theorist Monika Fludernik points out, second-person narration is “a technique that ‘sticks out’ and therefore attracts to itself an interest in its very form and in its possible significance” (“Second-Person Narrative” 472). The aim of the following section is thus to analyze the possible significance of second-person narration in *Brief Interviews* and, more specifically, to investigate how a pronoun of address might influence the actual reader’s possibilities to experience narrative empathy. By comparing *Brief Interviews*’ two second-person narratives – “Forever Overhead” and the last part of “Octet” – I aim to analyze the way in which second-person narration can be used to call for active reader participation. By such an analysis, I will investigate how this mode of

narration can appeal for the reader to use her theory of mind ability and, consequently, how it can affect the actual reader's experience of narrative empathy.

4.1 Second-Person Narration

However, before moving on to the actual analysis, a brief account of the debated concept of second-person narration is necessary. I will not provide a historical overview of the research history of this subject,⁸ but rather focus on aspects essential to how second-person narration might influence the actual reader's experience of narrative empathy. In her article "Second-Person Fiction: Narrative *You* as Addressee and/or Protagonist", Fludernik defines second-person fiction as "fiction that employs a pronoun of address in reference to a fictional protagonist" (217). In her already mentioned second contribution to the 1994 *Style* issue, "Second-Person Narrative as a Test Case for Narratology: The Limits of Realism", Fludernik furthermore addresses the question of how this specific mode of narration asks for active reader involvement. Here, Fludernik argues that stories told in first- or third-person often allow the reader to enjoy the narrative from a distance, whereas "second-person texts (even if only initially) breach this convention of distance, seemingly involving the real reader within the textual world" (457). Similarly, Brian McHale claims the second-person pronoun to be "*par excellence* the sign of relation", and continues by arguing that "every reader [of a second-person narrative] is potentially *you*, the addressee of the novelistic discourse" (223, emphasis in the original). Finally, Irene Kacandes mentions "the way narrating through a pronoun of address inevitably involves the actual reader" (344n2). These comments indicate that second-person narration induces active reader involvement – rather than distanced enjoyment – more easily than first- and third-person narration. Because of its vocative effect, the use of the second-person pronoun appears to invite the reader to feel personally addressed by the

⁸ For such an overview, see e.g. Fludernik's comprehensive article "Introduction: Second-Person Narrative and Related Issues", published in a special issue of *Style* (28.3, 1994) wholly dedicated to the investigation of second-person narration. This issue, which was edited by Fludernik herself, is a seminal contribution to the field of narrative studies focusing on second-person narration. See also Rolf Reitan's "Theorizing Second-Person Narratives: A Backwater Project?" in *Strange Voices in Narrative Fiction* (2011).

narrator in a second-person narrative, and this invitation might then call for active reader participation.

Despite the vocative effect, the reader of a second-person narrative is of course not likely to completely accept being the one addressed in second-person fiction, or to forget that the “you” addressed and described is always and ultimately a fictional entity. Nonetheless, as Kacandes argues, “flesh and blood readers often cannot help feeling that they themselves are addressed at the same time that they acknowledge the ‘you’ as a character in the fiction” (332). It thus seems possible for the actual reader of a second-person narrative to feel addressed by the second-person pronoun while simultaneously recognizing that the “you” ultimately belongs to a fictional character. In the seventh chapter of his book *Narrative as Rhetoric* (1996), James Phelan discusses this intricate question and claims that readers’ apparent multitasking capacity is due to the fact that they can occupy different audience roles at the same time (137).⁹ By comparing the narratological concept of “the narratee” with rhetorical theory’s “narrative audience”, Phelan investigates how the two concepts might complement each other (*Narrative* 138).¹⁰ Phelan argues that “the ‘you’ address ... invites us to project ourselves ... into the narratee’s subject position”, which makes it possible for the reader to “feel addressed by the narrator but not fully coincident with the narratee” (*Narrative* 151). This line of arguing will prove crucial for *Brief Interviews*, since many of the stories in the collection depend on the reader to step into the narratee’s subject position and imagine herself as the “you” in order to induce narrative empathy.

One important aspect to address when discussing whether or not the actual reader will recognize herself as the possible addressee of the second-person pronoun in a second-person narrative is the fact that there are different kinds of second-person narratives. In his book *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006), Brian Richardson addresses this issue in a comprehensive manner. According to

⁹ An earlier version of this chapter was published as an article in Fludernik’s above mentioned 1994 special issue of *Style*, then with the title “*Self-Help* for Narratee and Narrative Audience: How ‘I’—and ‘You’?—Read ‘How’”.

¹⁰ The term “narratee” was influentially defined by Gerald Prince as “someone whom the narrator addresses” in his “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee” published in 1973 (7). Phelan’s use of “narrative audience” is based on Peter J. Rabinowitz’ discussion and categorization of the term in “Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences” (1977), where Rabinowitz distinguishes four different narrative audiences between which the actual reader can move when reading a narrative (126-34).

Richardson, there are three main types of second-person narration. The first type is what he terms “the standard form”, where “a story is told, usually in the present tense, about a single protagonist who is referred to in the second person” (*Unnatural* 19-20). This type, as Richardson has it, is both the most common and the type “closest to more traditional forms of narration” (*Unnatural* 19-20). However, even though this kind of second-person narration resembles more traditional first- and third-person narratives in that narrator and narratee clearly differ from the actual reader, it still has the potential to disturb and blur such traditionally upheld boundaries. As Richardson argues, even this use of the second-person pronoun “threatens the ontological stability of the fictional world insofar as it seems it could be addressing the reader as well as the central character” (*Unnatural* 20). Thus, it is clear that even less conspicuous kinds of second-person narration possibly can create a sense of personal address for the actual reader.

Richardson’s second type is termed “the hypothetical form”,¹¹ which he describes as generally distinguished by “the consistent use of the imperative, the frequent employment of the future tense, and the unambiguous distinction between the narrator and the narratee” (*Unnatural* 29). This type of second-person narration leads to more disturbance of fictional boundaries than the standard form because, as Richardson writes, “[t]he ‘you’ is one that can embrace almost all of us” (*Unnatural* 30). The third of Richardson’s types is termed “the autotelic” and is distinguished by its “direct address to a ‘you’ that is at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the characters of the fiction” (*Unnatural* 30). Richardson further adds that this type is a “narrativization of a form of address” which occurs only in very short texts (*Unnatural* 30). Due to its capability to merge the fictional narratee with the actual reader, this type of second-person narration could be regarded as the one which breaks down fictional boundaries most conspicuously. In this type, as well as in the hypothetical form, the narrator and narratee are necessarily distinct. All of these types will shed light on the difference between *Brief Interviews*’ two second-person narratives, and the acknowledging of how a pronoun used in a piece of fiction can appear to reach out to the actual reader will be of particular importance.

¹¹ In his 1991 article “The Poetics and Politics of Second Person Narrative”, Richardson calls this type “the subjunctive” (319).

However, as will be argued below, even though the second-person pronoun can appear to address the reader of a second-person narrative, this effect is not something that necessarily occurs in Wallace's collection. The use of second-person narration in these stories appears to be much more complex than to provide automatic reader address. Keen illustrates this complexity rather comprehensively in her question about whether the "you" of second-person narration "enhance[s] the intimacy of the reading experience by drawing the reader and narrator close", or if the second-person pronoun "emphasize[s] dissonance as it becomes clear that 'you' can't include the reader?" (*Empathy* 98). Furthermore, the mere fact that the actual reader feels addressed by the second-person pronoun must indeed not necessarily induce narrative empathy. However, if a reader feels addressed by the second-person pronoun, she will also identify herself with this pronoun, i.e. she will identify herself with the fictional character to whom the second-person pronoun technically belongs. Since character identification is a phenomenon capable of inducing narrative empathy, as discussed in chapter 2, it is at least possible that identification with the second-person pronoun will invite the actual reader to empathize with fictional characters.

If the reader feels addressed by the second-person pronoun, an overlap of reference between the fictional character and the actual reader is created. Again, such an overlap must not necessarily lead to the actual reader experiencing narrative empathy, but, I argue, it will invite the actual reader to make use of her theory of mind ability. What I will investigate in the following pages is therefore when it is possible, and perhaps even likely, that the reader perceives herself as the potential addressee of *Brief Interviews*' second-person narratives, and when this scenario appears unlikely. I will perform this analysis by first comparing the narrative situation of the two narratives. This comparison will be followed by an analysis of how the narratees in the stories are characterized and an investigation of the use of imperatives in *Brief Interviews*' two second-person narratives.

Beginning with "Forever Overhead", Boswell speaks about this story's "reader-involving second-person point of view" (202), and Holland argues that the second-person point of view "extends the intimacy of [the protagonist's] inner experience to the reader who inevitably becomes the owner of that second-person 'you'" ("Mediated" 113). Even

though the vocative aspect of the second-person pronoun and what Fludernik calls “the latent generic meaning of *you*” make it more difficult for the actual reader to distance herself from the character designated by this pronoun, a claim that every reader of “Forever Overhead” *inevitably* becomes the owner of the second-person pronoun neglects to consider that different types of second-person narratives function in different ways (“Second-Person Narrative” 461, emphasis in the original). If every reader would become the owner of “you” in “Forever Overhead”, every reader would accept herself as the addressee of that pronoun. This, as I will now proceed to argue, does not appear to be the case.

The first reason for why such recognition on part of the reader is not inevitable stands evident when comparing the communicative situation of “Forever Overhead” with that of the last part of “Octet” by using Richardson’s terminology. Since the narrator and the narratee in “Forever Overhead” seem to correlate, this narrative appears to fall into the category of the standard form. As described in chapter 3.1, the narrator in this story describes the narratee’s inner thoughts and feelings throughout the narrative. The story can thus be read as an instance of a narrator addressing himself with the second-person pronoun: as a narrator, and protagonist, seemingly speaking to himself. The communicative situation in the last part of “Octet” is of a completely different kind. Here, the narrator and the narratee are necessarily separate as the narrator frequently gives imperatives to the narratee, which would place the story within Richardson’s hypothetical form. Imperatives are in fact used in “Forever Overhead” as well, but as I will argue in chapter 4.3, they are of a different kind than the ones used in “Octet” and therefore have different effects. Furthermore, since, as I will soon go on to exemplify, the second-person pronoun of “Octet” also sometimes appears to address the actual reader, this narrative could be categorized as belonging to the autotelic form, which Richardson argues is the form with “the greatest share of direct address to the actual reader” (*Unnatural* 32-3). After having noted only these brief details, it becomes evident that it is necessary to recognize the differences between the types of second-person narration in Wallace’s collection in order to fully understand the function and possible vocative effect of the second-person pronoun in these stories.

4.2 Characterization of the Second-Person Pronoun

Another crucial aspect influencing the chances for the actual reader to feel addressed by the second-person pronoun in a second-person narrative is the degree of characterization of the narratee. Phelan argues that “the greater the characterization of the you, the more like a standard protagonist the you becomes, and, consequently, the more actual readers can employ their standard strategies for reading narrative” (*Narrative* 137). A precise characterization of the “you” would thus obstruct the actual reader from feeling addressed by the second-person pronoun, as such a characterization would allow the reader to think of “you” as she thinks of a “standard” protagonist in fiction, i.e. not as referring to herself. For the actual reader to feel addressed by the second-person pronoun, she would have to, to a certain degree, be able to identify herself with “you”, a scenario for which the possibility decreases the more specifically the second-person pronoun is characterized. Put simply, if the narratee is elaborately characterized, the possibility for the reader to feel addressed by the second-person pronoun is slight, since precise characterization necessarily elucidates the difference between actual reader and narratee.

In “Forever Overhead”, the narratee is precisely characterized already from the very first sentence. As the story begins with “Happy Birthday. Your thirteenth is important”, it instantly becomes difficult for any actual reader reading the story on a day which is not her thirteenth birthday – a coincidence for which the odds must be considered rather slim – to feel addressed by the narrator (5). The second-person pronoun then becomes even more precisely characterized as the story continues and the narratee’s life situation is further detailed. For one, the description of the physiological changes adjoining the thirteenth birthday reveals the narratee’s male sex already in the story’s second paragraph. It also becomes clear that the narratee’s family consists of (at least) a father, a mother, and a little sister; that “you” are spending your thirteenth birthday at a public swimming pool in Arizona; and that “you” have decided that your thirteenth birthday will be the day to jump from the high board at this public pool. In other words, “you” are in many ways characterized just as a character in a first- or third-person narrative would be characterized, with the exception that the character is called “you”, and not “he” or “I”. This could be considered a further argument for why “Forever Overhead” belongs to the standard form of second-person narratives, since, as Richardson

puts it, this type “oscillates between third and first person perspectives” (*Unnatural* 32). Despite the initial breaching of distance caused by the use of second-person narration, it thus appears rather unlikely that an actual reader of “Forever Overhead” would feel addressed by the second-person pronoun. The many differences (if not in character, so at least in situation, as I think it is safe to say that very few actual readers of this story are simultaneously climbing up a high board as they are reading) are underscored time and again by the precise characterization of “you”. Thus, it is the differences rather than the similarities between actual reader and narratee that are emphasized throughout “Forever Overhead”. As a result, together with the communicative situation discussed above, it does appear unlikely that every reader of this short story inevitably recognizes herself as the addressee of this second-person pronoun.

The narratee in “Octet” is characterized in an altogether different way. At first, however, the characterization of “you” in the last pop quiz of this story does not seem to invite the reader to feel addressed by the second-person pronoun either. As mentioned in chapter 3.4, the first sentence of the quiz goes “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer”; an opening sentence that certainly does not leave much leeway for any real reader who is not a fiction writer to identify with the narratee. The first paragraph then continues to describe the very specific piece of fiction that “you” are working on at the moment. This is accompanied by a detailed description of the trouble “you” have in succeeding with the outlined, also very specific, ambition to make the piece that the narratee is allegedly writing work as “a certain sort of ‘*interrogation*’ of the person reading them” (145, emphasis in the original). As the narrator goes on to describe the writing process of these stories, it is initially difficult for anyone not a fiction writer who has dealt with the described conundrum to feel addressed by the second-person pronoun. It thus appears about as likely that an actual reader would use her “standard strategies” when interpreting the narrative, to use Phelan’s terms, as was the case in “Forever Overhead” (*Narrative* 137). Therefore, it appears rather unlikely that the actual reader of “Octet’s” last quiz will feel addressed by the “you” in the beginning of this story.

However, as the story evolves, the characterization of “you” in “Octet’s” last part gradually changes and becomes more generalized. The usual proceeding in second-

person narration is that the narratee begins as rather uncharacterized, and then gradually becomes more precisely characterized as the story proceeds. Fludernik describes how:

many second-person texts start out with a passage of what initially appears to be a generalized ... 'you', a 'you' with which the reader in the role of '(any)one' can identify, but the text then proceeds to conjure up a very specific 'you' with a specific sex, job, husband or wife, address, interests, and so on, so that the reader has to realize that the 'you' must be an other, a or the protagonist. ("Second-Person Narrative" 452)

Such a gradual change of the characterization of "you" makes the reader reinterpret the story as she gradually understands the second-person pronoun to be less generalized, and then eventually regards the "you" as addressed to the story's protagonist. In the last part of "Octet", however, the procedure works the other way around: the story begins with a passage describing an indeed very specific "you", but the reference of this pronoun gradually widens as the story unfolds. This widening stands evident when the narrator uses analogies to describe the agonies accompanying the narratee's writing process. The first analogy appears when the narrator describes the danger of trying to imagine whether a reader will like the fiction "you" are working on by giving a detailed analogy of going to a party. The basic principle of the analogy is that you go to a party where you know very few people, and then, on your way home, you realize that you have no idea whether you liked any of the guests at the party because you were so occupied by the thought of whether or not they liked you. After outlining this analogy, the narrator states that "[a]nybody who's had that sort of experience knows what a totally lethal kind of attitude this is to bring to a party" (153). Since it is not unlikely that there is a higher number of actual readers able to identify with being self-conscious at a party than with being a fiction writer who has just written a very specific short story, the result of this analogy is that the second-person pronoun becomes more generally applicable.

The second analogy is to be found in a note a couple of pages later. This time, the narrator makes use of an analogy to describe the consequences that might occur if "you" have courage enough to ask the reader the delicate question of "whether she feels it too, this queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness" (157). This analogy presents a detailed description of a scenario where "you" have:

just bought a fancy expensive take-out dinner from a restaurant and brought it home and were just sitting down to try to enjoy it when the phone rings and it's

the chef or restaurateur or whoever you just bought the food from now calling and bothering you in the middle of trying to eat the dinner to ask how the dinner is and whether you're enjoying it and whether or not it 'works' as a dinner. (157n15)

These analogies create a widening of the "you" which leads to there being a greater possibility for the actual reader to perceive herself as the addressee of the narrator, since the second-person pronoun is now more generally applicable than it was in the outset of the story. The common procedure of second-person narration is thus reversed, and instead of gradually characterizing the second-person pronoun more precisely, the "you" of "Octet" gradually becomes more generally applicable. As a result, the reader is invited to reinterpret the story and the address of "you" as she gradually comes to understand that the vocative aspect of the second-person pronoun might call for her own identification with the story's narratee. As will be seen in the following analysis, the interpretation of this particular story, and thus also whether or not the actual reader recognizes herself as the possible addressee of the second-person pronoun, will have important consequences for other stories in the collection as well.

4.3 The Use of Imperatives in the Second-Person Narratives

Another aspect influencing the possibility for the actual reader to feel addressed by the fiction's second-person pronoun is the use of imperatives, which as mentioned is to be found in both of *Brief Interviews*' second-person narratives. As discussed in chapter 4.1, frequent use of imperatives is a distinguishing trait of Richardson's hypothetical form. In "Forever Overhead", the imperatives most often describe the actions of the narratee in the story world. To mention only a few examples, the narrator tells the narratee to "[c]lock your head to the side and hop" (7); "Forget your towel" (8); "Look around. Look bored" (9); and to "[s]tep into the skin and disappear" (16). The imperatives in this story are almost all descriptions of the narratee's physical actions and could practically be compared to stage directions given to an actor. They could also, quite easily, be read as a character's description of the actions he intends to perform. Because of their physical quality and the inevitable difference between the situation of the narratee and the situation of the actual reader, it is highly unlikely (and many times impossible) for the actual reader to do the bidding of the narrator in this story. The actual reader of "Forever Overhead"

cannot climb the high board and “[s]tep into the skin and disappear” as the protagonist of the story does, because the actual reader is not part of the story world. Because of this inevitable discrepancy between actual reader and narratee, the imperatives of this short story can hardly be said to function as invitations to the actual reader to perform the actions called for by the narrator. It is of course possible, and indeed common, for actual readers to empathize with a character both without feeling addressed by the pronoun used to refer to the character in question and without necessarily obeying imperatives given by the narrator. As mentioned above, however, a narrative in which the actual reader feels addressed by the second-person pronoun tends to blur boundaries and allows for a higher degree of character identification than narratives that do not blur these boundaries. Thus, even though it is indeed possible that the actual reader will empathize with the narratee in “Forever Overhead”, the mere use of second-person narration is not likely to increase this possibility in any lasting manner.

The imperatives used in pop quiz 9 of “Octet” are of a completely different nature. Even though the actual reader, of course, is not part of the story world here either, the imperatives used in this story are often created in such a way as to be able to get carried out by the actual reader as well as the fictional narratee. The majority of imperatives in this part of the story are instances of the narrator asking the narratee to imagine scenarios or consider certain aspects of fiction writing. To put it another way: the majority of imperatives in the last part of “Octet” have to do with the narrator asking “you” to make use of your theory of mind ability. To take only the earlier analogies of going to a party and ordering a take-out dinner as examples, the narrator tells “you” to imagine these scenarios in a very detailed manner several times in these passages. The narratee is asked to “consider what [the reader] might think of you just for asking something like this” (157-58); to “[t]ake a moment to imagine the faces of the people at a party where you did this” (158-59); to, more specifically, “[i]magine the faces’ expression fully, in 3D and vibrant color, and then imagine the expression directed at you” (159); and to “keep in mind that it may be for nothing” (159). Contrary to the imperatives used in “Forever Overhead” the imperatives in the last part of “Octet” can thus, theoretically, be carried out by the actual reader. While it is not possible for the actual reader of “Forever Overhead” to “[s]tep into the skin and disappear” up on the high board, it is in fact possible for the actual reader of “Octet” to imagine and consider the

scenarios described in the story. Such reader participation depends on whether or not the actual reader chooses to participate in the thought experiment laid out, on her willingness to imagine herself in the narratee's subject position and accept herself as the possible addressee of the second-person pronoun. If the actual reader accepts herself as the possible addressee of the second-person pronoun and imagines herself in the narratee's subject position, she steps "into a character's shoes" to connect to Keen's discussion of narrative empathy (*Empathy* 18). The use of the second-person pronoun in the last part of "Octet" thus calls for active participation by an actual reader who has the choice to join the game of perspective-taking straightforwardly asked for by the narrator.

In fact, the reader's willingness to step into the shoes of "you" is a prerequisite for "Octet" to work in the way the narrator describes that the story is intended to work. As the narrator mentions time and again, albeit with slightly different phrasings, "Octet" is supposed to "address (or 'interrogate') the reader directly", so that the reader is then able to recognize "this queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness" the narrator so desperately tries to communicate (147n2, 157). In his article "Why *You* Can't Speak: Second-Person Narration, Voice, and a New Model for Understanding Narrative", Matt DelConte writes about the "implied universality of experience that we encounter in how-to narration" (215). As it so happens, universality of experience appears to be exactly what the reader is asked to acknowledge in "Octet" through the recurring emphasis on "this queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness". For "Octet" to be successful as a narrative in the way the narrator allegedly intends, the actual reader has to make an effort to recognize the similarities between herself and the "you" of the story. If doing so, she is also invited to recognize this "universality of experience", this human commonality, as she recognizes underlying similarities between herself and a fictional character. This universality of experience is underscored by the use of this particular type of second-person narration, by the use of "how-to narration", as this specific mode of narration provides the reader with the possibility to acknowledge that she and the narratee of the story might be very similar.

There are, however, other narrative aspects of "Octet" that call for such reader participation as well. Goerlandt argues that the many and long footnotes in the story is one such aspect. These footnotes, Goerlandt claims, create a "hyper-reflexive jungle"

where the meaning depends on “the reader’s willingness to show or refuse sympathy and/or empathy” (167). According to Goerlandt, one of the options the reader has in this case is to “accept the text’s long-winded direction of the narrator-narratee relation as being ‘sincere,’ as truly direct communication between author and reader” (167). This option would lead the reader to accept herself as the possible addressee of the second-person pronoun and imagine herself in the shoes of the narrator/writer, since that is a prerequisite for the type of communication asked for in the text to function. If the reader accepts herself as the potential addressee of the narrator, and thus imagines herself as the writer of the earlier pop quizzes, she is more likely to accept the narrator’s imperative and imagine the scenarios portrayed in the narrative. If the actual reader chooses this option, if she plays along in the game of perspective-taking into which she is invited, the chances that she will recognize the “queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness” of “Octet” increase dramatically.

It is, of course, by all means possible that the actual reader of “Octet” will refuse to step into the narratee’s subject position in “Octet”. To determine whether or not actual readers accept themselves as the possible addressee of “Octet’s” second-person pronoun would require collection of empirical data on individual readers’ reading experiences, which lies outside the scope of this thesis. The crucial part, however, is that it is *possible* for the reader to do so, and that calls for such identification can be found in the text. Smith mentions how a reader looking for “the consolation of ‘character’” in Wallace always will be disappointed, since Wallace’s “stories simply don’t investigate character, they don’t intend to. Instead they’re turned outwards, towards us. It’s *our* character that’s being investigated” (276, emphasis in the original). In this particular case, Smith appears to be the ideal reader of “Octet’s” narrator, accepting that it is the actual reader’s character that is investigated through (among other things) the use of second-person narration. Later in her essay, Smith argues that how you react to “Octet” “will make or break you as a reader of Wallace” (290). The reason for this, Smith claims, is that what Wallace is “really asking” for in “Octet” is:

for you to have faith in something he cannot possibly ever finally determine in language: ‘the agenda of the consciousness behind the text’. His urgency, his

sincerity, his apparent desperation to ‘connect’ with his readers in a genuine way – these are things you either believe in or don’t. (290)¹²

Even though initial beliefs and attitudes regarding fiction might play a significant role in the interpretation of any narrative, I would like to propose that it is in fact possible for the text to at least suggest how the reader of “Octet” is asked to interpret the story. The narrative mode of the story, i.e. the use of second-person narration, is one such language means that can suggest the kind of interpretation asked for.

However, even though there might exist cues in the text for how the reader is suggested, or asked, to interpret “Octet”, the actual choice of how to interpret the narrative always and necessarily has to be made by the actual reader herself. As was mentioned in chapter 1.1, Timmer acknowledges the crucial importance of the reader when she observes that “[w]hether or not [“Octet”] works, whether or not the ‘communicative urgency’ is transferred at all, depends very much on the *reader* here. It is the reader who is called upon” (113, emphasis in the original). Timmer, Smith, and Goerlandt, it seems, have accepted the possibility that they themselves are addressees of the second-person pronoun in the last part of “Octet”, since they all describe how the narrator appears to reach outside the boundaries of fiction to communicate with them, the actual readers. If the actual reader chooses to answer the call made by “Octet”, if she chooses to imagine herself as “you” like the three readers mentioned have appeared to, a relationship is created between narrator and real, flesh-and-blood reader. This relationship might necessarily be a fictional one, but it is nevertheless a relationship created and determined by language. Whether or not such a relationship is created is, again, ultimately dependent on the actual flesh-and-blood reader, as she must be the one actively choosing to step into the shoes of “you”. To experience narrative empathy can thus be regarded as something that has to be actively chosen by the actual reader. It is the actual reader who has to choose in what way to interpret the narrative strategies of the story and, thus, whether she makes use of her capability for empathy and theory of mind to experience narrative empathy.

¹² The theoretically intricate question regarding whether it is even apt to speculate upon what Wallace, the real author (rather than more abstract terms such as “implied author” or perhaps even “narrator”), is asking for will not be dealt with here. It is, however, interesting to note that the question becomes even more intricate since Smith is using a quote from an interview with the author himself, where Wallace explains how he thinks that “the distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text”, to interpret his fictional story (McCaffery 50).

Read this way, the last sentence of “Octet” – “So decide” – can be understood as the ultimate imperative of the story, an imperative of which the reaction will determine the actual reader’s interpretation of not only this particular short story, but the whole collection (160).

4.4 The Use of Imperatives in the Interviews

Another use of the second-person pronoun with crucial consequences for the actual reader’s possibility to experience narrative empathy in *Brief Interviews* is to be found in the stories directing imperatives to an intradiegetic narratee. The most notable examples here are, arguably, present in the collection’s eponymous collection of interviews. The characters in the recurring “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men” consist of a rather diverse cluster of men, but they all have one thing in common: they are – in different ways and degrees – hideous. These men are represented through narratives structured as interviews, with the conspicuous feature that the questions asked are absent. The text itself provides minimal background information as to why the interviews have been conducted, what the nature of the relationship is between interviewer and interviewee, and even who the interviewer actually is.¹³ Due to the omitted questions and the interviewer’s almost complete silence, a vacant space is created in the narrative. The hideous men address this alleged interviewer, the story’s “you”, with questions, requests, and imperatives more than often. Since the answers are never told, the reader has to deduce both the original question asked and the interviewer’s reaction to the men’s requests. The actual reader has to, in a way, fill the vacant space created by the silent interviewer. In order for the narrative to make sense, the actual reader has to step into the role of this fictional interviewer and attempt to view the situation from her point of view, so that she is able to deduce the questions asked and create a (somewhat) coherent narrative out of the fragmentary text. In other words, the actual reader has to experience projective empathy as she imagines herself as the interviewer. Boswell mentions how the structure of the interviews “puts the reader ‘inside’ the story as a character, making her a

¹³ As mentioned in chapter 3.2, Wallace himself has revealed that it (according to him) is the same woman conducting all of the interviews, and that he views this woman as “the book’s protagonist” (Stein 90).

participant in the narrative's construction", and argues that the story constructs a kind of "game" ... in which the reader must play a role" (188). Here I would add that the actual reader must not only play a role in this game, but that she must play an *active* role. The reader's role and the question of co-creation becomes particularly interesting when the interviewed men address imperatives to this silent interviewer and appeal for her to use her theory of mind ability in order to understand their thoughts, beliefs, desires, and arguments. What I will investigate in these final pages of the thesis is therefore if these imperatives can function as addresses to the actual reader, similar to the imperatives of "Octet" discussed in chapter 4.3.

However, before such an analysis is possible, some technical aspects of these interviews have to be addressed. First of all, even though this story makes frequent use of the second-person pronoun when the men address the silent interviewer, it is not, strictly speaking, a second-person narrative. Richardson has defined the category of narrative which "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" seems to belong to in his categorization of the variety of fiction using the second-person pronoun. He writes that "[a]nother kind of narrative that frequently employs the word 'you' but that is not properly speaking a second person narrative is the monologue addressed to a real or imaginary homodiegetic audience" (*Unnatural* 18). The second-person pronoun in this category of narrative is thus addressed to a fictional character who, in this case, is the interviewer. However, since this interviewer is silent in Wallace's narrative, there are certain similarities between the "pure" second-person narratives discussed in chapter 4.3 and "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men". As I will soon go on to exemplify, the interviews' structure with a silent character being addressed in the narrative, allows for the imperatives used by the men to be interpreted as potentially addressed to the actual reader. It allows for the fiction to, in a way, widen the reference of the pronoun across fictional boundaries. Moreover, as was the case with particularly "Octet", the success of these narratives' requests for empathy ultimately depends on whether the actual reader will feel addressed by the men's use of the second-person pronoun and the imperatives used. The boundaries that became blurred in the second-person narratives thus have a tendency to become blurred in "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" as well.

The second aspect in need of address is the intricate question of who, in effect, is doing the narrating in these interviews and, consequently, whom the role of the narratee actually belongs to. One way of reading the narrative is by accepting the idea expressed by Wallace that all interviews are conducted by the same woman. If accepting this view, it would, in the logic of the story world, seem reasonable to categorize this female interviewer as narrator. This construction would then make the interviewees, i.e. the hideous men, narratees. However, since the interviewer, as mentioned, most often is completely silent,¹⁴ and since it accordingly is the men who are doing the actual telling and, one could argue, narrating, things get somewhat complicated. One possible solution to the problematic issue of what terms to use when referring to the characters and their roles in “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men”, and the one that I will apply, is to view the stories the men present as embedded narratives. If applying this view, the men are the narrators in the embedded narratives of a frame story where the female interviewer is the narrator. The level I will focus on, then, is the embedded level where the interviewed men can be regarded as narrators addressing their interviewer, who then can be regarded as the intradiegetic narratee of the men’s narratives.

The first interview of particular interest is the earlier discussed interview #46, where the interviewed man argues for that brutal rape might have positive consequences for the victim “in the long run” (117). As mentioned in chapter 3.2, Holland appears to automatically equal the actual reader with the interviewee’s addressee in her discussion about this interview. Holland writes that the man in this interview “not only verbally accosts us but also elicits our empathy by asking us to imagine suffering the same brutality he implies he has suffered himself” (“Mediated” 119). Her use of the pronoun “us” indicates that Holland feels personally accosted by this character, that she, perhaps too hastily, reads the imperatives used by the man in the interview as automatically directed to the actual reader. However, it might not be that simple. While it is certainly possible that the actual reader will feel addressed, and then most likely verbally accosted, by the man in this interview, such an interpretation is not something that happens automatically

¹⁴ There are a few exceptions to the interviewer’s silence. In Interview #48, the interviewer repeatedly inserts phrases such as “{flexion of upraised fingers to signify tone quotes}”, and later categorizes these finger flexions as “increasingly annoying” (100, 108). However, the majority of the interviews (including the ones that I will analyze) represent the interviewer’s voice only with a “Q.” indicating that a question is being asked.

or necessarily. Rather, such an interpretation is highly dependent on an active and effortful choice made by the actual reader. Furthermore, this is a choice with several consequences, as the imperatives used by the man in interview #46 are of a particularly demanding kind. When speaking about Victor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*, which portrays Frankl's truly horrible experiences in a concentration camp during World War II, the interviewee demands his narratee to "think about it, if there wasn't a Holocaust there wouldn't be a *Man's Search for Meaning*" (116, emphasis in the original). Only a page later, the man presents another exceedingly demanding imperative, as he asks his narratee to "think about getting gang-raped and degraded and beaten down to within an inch of your life" (117-18). These two imperatives are telling examples of when the narratee is asked to imagine extremely horrid situations in *Brief Interviews*. That the reader will take the role of the narratee and do the bidding of the narrator in this case, i.e. imagine these scenarios, could be rendered unlikely because of the horrible nature of the scenarios. It is thus by all means possible that the actual reader will resist stepping into the role of the narratee in order to do the bidding of the narrator and imagine the scenes asked for in this part of the title story.

However, Holland's reading is not completely gratuitous. There are certainly narrative strategies that invite the reader to step into the role of the narratee in this interview. The conversational style created by the interview structure is one, the fact that the reader is required to participate actively in the narrative from the very beginning in order to deduce the questions asked is another. Nevertheless, just as was the case with "Octet", whether or not the reader accepts the invitation ultimately depends on the choice this actual reader makes. If the actual reader chooses to step into the role of the narratee here, which the conversational style and the accompanying need for active reader participation appear to invite, she too is asked to imagine these truly gruesome situations. When the man asks his narratee to imagine being the victim of a gang-rape, what he is actually doing is asking the narratee to make use of her theory of mind ability in order to experience projective empathy as she imagines herself in the situation described. Boswell mentions how the second-person pronoun in interview #46 "suddenly also refers to the reader inside the text, a reader who, as Wallace declares in 'Octet,' the text wants urgently to interrogate and whose powers of empathy it wants to challenge" (194). Who Boswell's "reader inside the text" actually refers to is, to the best of my knowledge, not entirely

clear, and the same reservations that I brought up in connection to Smith's reference to Wallace's alleged intentions above could be brought up here as well. That being said, if presuming that "the reader inside the text" is the actual reader, which the reference to "Octet" would seem to suggest, his description indicates that Boswell as an actual reader did feel addressed by the imperatives directed to the second-person pronoun when reading this narrative. The urge from "Octet" thus seems to resonate through the collection, and if the actual reader does what is asked for by the narrator in "Octet" – if she steps into the role of the second-person pronoun in these narratives – her ability for empathy is greatly challenged.

A second interview in which the narrator asks the narratee to experience both allocentric and projective empathy is the already much discussed interview #20. After the man in the story has described how the raped and very nearly murdered woman was able to soothe the psychotic rapist during the actual rape, he invites his listener to "[i]magine being able to console someone as he weeps over what he's doing to you as you console him" (313). He thus asks the interviewer (and the actual reader, if, as argued, she plays along in this game of perspective-taking) to use her theory of mind ability in order to experience projective empathy as she imagines herself in the position of the rape victim. Just as was the case in interview #46, the scenario the man is asking his narratee to imagine is both extreme and immensely challenging. During the retelling of the rape scenario, the man also asks his narratee to experience allocentric empathy as he asks her to consider "the kind of surreal sensuous clarity she was experiencing in her state of total focus", and then to "imagine what this must have felt like for her, being raped in the gravel by a weeping psychotic whose knife's butt jabs you on every thrust" (309). Here, the man does not simply ask his narratee to imagine what *she* would feel in such a dreadful situation, but actually to imagine what it must have felt like for some other particular individual. As discussed in chapter 3.4, the capacity to experience this type of empathy is a capacity granted very few characters in *Brief Interviews*, due to its high demands on other-directedness. The type of empathy asked for by the man in this interview can thus be regarded as a specifically challenging type of empathy. Therefore, if the actual reader chooses to participate in the game of perspective-taking and imagines herself as a narratee who follows the instructions of the narrator, the actual reader's capability to empathize is put through a very demanding test.

Just as was also the case in interview #46, the man in interview #20 frequently asks his narratee to widen her view of the world and consider arguments she most likely would not want to consider at first. After the man has drawn a parallel between the psychotic rapist's troubled relation to female individuals and his own habit of picking up women for one-night encounters, he tells his narratee that he is "inviting you to consider that it isn't the *motivation* that's the psychotic part" (304, emphasis in the original). What the narrator suggests is that his own and the psychotic rapist's behavior is based on the very same fear of "connection", and that this fear leads them both to victimize women, albeit in different ways (304). Thus, just as this man has come to empathize with the psychotic rapist and to see the human commonality that connects him with the most hideous of men through the woman's narrative, he invites his narratee to recognize this underlying and basic human commonality as well. If the actual reader accepts the role of the addressee, here as elsewhere, she too is invited to acknowledge this human commonality through empathizing with a man she would not initially want to empathize with. As Leake observes in his investigation of difficult empathy, empathy for characters who initially "resist reader empathy" is challenging precisely because it is "pushing identification with and recognition of disturbing qualities that we share with others, qualities that are common to humanity and do not represent the best of us" (175, 177-78). If this narrative succeeds in its evocation of empathy, the actual reader has passed what can be called the ultimate empathy test. If passing, she is also invited to consider an underlying human commonality through acknowledging basic human qualities she might share with a violent and brutal rapist.

To summarize, the use of the second person-pronoun in *Brief Interviews* – particularly when accompanied by the use of imperatives – calls for active reader participation. Such participation, however, has to be preceded by an active choice made by the actual reader to participate in the game of "what if" and perspective-taking that these narratives invite to. The actual reader of these narratives that use the second-person pronoun has to recognize herself as the potential addressee of the "you" in order to step into the narratee's subject position and then, if the narratives are successful in their calls for empathy, recognize the similarities between herself and the fictional character addressed by the second-person pronoun. If such reader participation takes place, if the reader joins the game of perspective-taking and steps into the role of the second-person

pronoun addressed, the collection can also function as a test of the actual reader's capacity for empathy and theory of mind, as a great part of the stories' imperatives are calls for theory of mind usage and perspective-widening. Due to the exceptionally abominable particulars of the situations the narratee is asked to imagine, they can be regarded as considerably difficult tests of the actual reader's capacity for empathy through perspective-taking.

5. Conclusion

Through close attention to how empathy is portrayed in *Brief Interviews*, my analysis has shown that to regard empathy as inherently positive is insufficient as it precludes important aspects of empathy. The most significant of these aspects is that even evidently hideous characters might be great empathizers, a disclosure which illustrates that the capability to empathize can be used for a wide range of purposes, not necessarily either positive or ethically admirable. Rather, a well-developed capacity for empathy and theory of mind can facilitate cruel manipulations and obstruct human relationships. I have furthermore analyzed the possible vocative effect of the second-person pronoun, both in the collection's second-person narratives and in a selection of the stories directing imperatives to an intradiegetic narratee. Through this analysis, I have illustrated the importance of the interpretative choice the actual reader makes for these narratives to be successful in their evocation of empathy.

The choice the actual reader is invited to make – *must* make if the narratives are to be successful in inducing narrative empathy – as well as the possible consequences of this choice might be best described with a parallel to an incident in one of the collection's stories. In interview #20 of "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men", the man retelling the brutal story of the woman he has fallen in love with describes how, while listening to her narrative, he "remembered weeping at movies about animals as a child, even though some of these animals were predators and hardly what you would consider sympathetic characters" (312). This description of predators could just as well have been a description of the majority of the characters in *Brief Interviews*, who are, indeed, hardly what you would consider sympathetic characters. Furthermore, the activity the man remembers

while listening to the captivating narrative, i.e. empathizing with unsympathetic characters, could also function as a description of what the actual reader of *Brief Interviews* is invited to do throughout the collection.

If the stories in Wallace's collection are to be successful in their evocation of empathy, the real flesh-and-blood reader must, as argued, make an effortful choice to make use of her theory of mind ability and empathize with unsympathetic characters despite – or perhaps because of – their hideousness. She has to seriously consider the invitation to empathize with unsympathetic characters and what consequences such empathizing might have. Again, this is not necessarily an inherently positive activity. What such empathizing is, however, is an important aid for the actual reader to recognize human commonality. If the actual reader of *Brief Interviews* chooses to participate in the game of perspective-taking and empathizing encouraged by, among other things, the use of second-person narration and imperatives directed to an intradiegetic narratee, she is also invited to recognize a basic and underlying human commonality shared by herself and these characters she would hardly call sympathetic. To acknowledge an idea of human commonality would be valuable for the actual reader in the “ordinary acts of daily life” Hogan spoke of as possibly benefitting from narrative empathy (*Affective* 246), because it would lessen the doubt expressed in “Octet”: “whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do” (160). If the actual reader considers the invitation to experience narrative empathy for the highly unlikable characters in the stories, she is also invited to consider these characters as not only hideous, but as affined with the actual reader herself. With such a consideration comes an acknowledging of human commonality, as the reader is invited to consider the fact that she might share basic, human, traits with these characters initially regarded as so different. Narrative empathy for unsympathetic characters can thus serve as a means capable of making the reader acknowledge human commonality.

Such an acknowledging is certainly demanding for the actual reader, and it certainly calls for active reader participation. That Wallace's fiction calls for active reader participation is, not surprising when considering his often demanding narrative techniques, a well-established fact in the field of Wallace studies today. What needs to be further investigated, however, is the way in which such reader participation affects the

creation of narrative empathy. As shown throughout my analysis, a one-sided view of empathy where the concept is evaluated in ethical terms and regarded as inherently positive neglects to consider several crucial aspects of empathy, both narrative and “real”. In order to understand a comprehensive picture of how empathy functions, it is necessary to move away from discussions of empathy as an inherently ethical phenomenon and apply a more open-minded, less ethically confined, manner of considering empathy. It is necessary to take into consideration that there are different kinds of empathy and that even empathy with unsympathetic characters can have merits. In applying such a nuanced approach, new questions and hitherto unexplored areas of investigation, both within Wallace studies and empathy research, will arise.

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