Impersonal Selves:
Flat Characters in the Neoliberal Novel

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To Lina,

who left us too soon
whose voice will never abandon me:
ti xe na siensa, ti xe!

(ce-la-fai ce-la-fai ce-la-fai)

With love, gratitude and humour.

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The thesis starts from the observation that a significant number of novels from the 1990s and early 2000s present two salient stylistic features. First, they are sprawling with characters; second, these fictional renditions often read as 'flat', in that they are endowed with little psychological specificity. I contend that the sub-genre I identify as the 'neoliberal novel' originates at the intersection of these two traits, and that its specimens can be said to be 'neoliberal' inasmuch as they respond to the challenges posed by their historical juncture. Through their deployment of characters, these novels delineate the problematic nature of the idea of 'person' in the age of neoliberalism and elaborate varieties of perception and experience that can be said to be 'impersonal'. Often, in the neoliberal novel, flatness of character represents impersonality, and the latter is consistently associated with the specifically biopolitical aspects of neoliberal ideology.

In order to explore these issues, I read four novels from the United States and Latin America: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Salvador Benesdra's *El traductor* (1998) and Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004). I contend that the American hemisphere is particularly productive as a point of observation of the general workings of the 'neoliberal novel' in that the historical facts surrounding the spread of neoliberal policies and practices in the region makes the continent a compendium of its stratified social and anthropological effects. Finally, I conclude that impersonality per se, while offering an escape route from the traps of liberal individualism, does not stand in any definite relationship to either authority or social

change. Rather, it represents the plane of contrast in which the two constantly made and re-made each other.

2500-Word Abstract

Impersonal Selves: Flat Characters in the Neoliberal Novel
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The present thesis aims to investigate the significance of flat characters in the contemporary novel. My contention is that flatness, in the age of neoliberalism, is deployed to dramatize and reflect upon the concomitant crisis of the concept of person. I define this crisis as the widespread anxiety triggered by evidence that the sacredness of the individual human being is, in the historical context studied here, more of an abstraction than ever, as the neoliberal restructuring of the global scenario sacrifices the lives of many both within, and outside, the boundaries of the nation-state. *Impersonal Selves* starts from the observation that the central phase of the neoliberal project (from 1989 to the financial crisis of 2008) coincides with an output of literary fiction from across the globe in which the inclusivity and populous quality of certain texts appears as a salient trait. The demand for long, mammoth novels featuring tens and even, at times, hundreds of characters, adds a key coordinate to the general project of the thesis: the phenomenon to be accounted for is not the presence of flatness of characters *per se*, but rather its simultaneous rise to saliency with and within the forms of novels aiming to depict social totalities in miniature. In this context, flatness of character represents a site and an occasion to signify both processes of dehumanization, on the one hand, and the emancipatory possibility of a specifically *impersonal* approach to the valorisation and recognition of human life, on the other. The aim of the thesis is to describe how and to what extent this sub-genre of the contemporary novel deploys flatness to elaborate upon the impact of the neoliberal counterrevolution on key social and political categories as personhood, recognition and value. In order to investigate the issue and as I explain below, I have selected four representative texts featuring the two defining traits of flatness

and inclusivity. In the Introduction, I proceed to define the genre originating at the intersection between the two as the 'neoliberal novel'. The qualifier here indicates chronological and thematic proximity to the issues brought about by the global spread of neoliberal policies and practices. It does not suggest any intrinsic ideological allegiance between the texts examined and their *zeitgeist*.

I argue that a comparative approach is necessary due to the global nature of the phenomenon, and that the Americas represent a vantage point from which the contradictions of what I call uneven regimes of subjectivity can be observed. With this formula, I refer to the unequal distribution of recognition for the personhood of the particular individual. I argue that 'personhood' acquires specific traits in the age of neoliberalism. 'Personhood' can be defined as the encounter between a ratiocinative and calculative mind, on the one hand, and the particular attributes of innate characteristics and life-experiences evoked by the idea of personality, on the other. In North and Latin America—and, more starkly, at the infamous US/Mexican border—inequalities of all kinds were made more prominent by neoliberal mechanisms of exploitation. The four novels here considered look at the wasted lives of those living and working at the periphery of the global economic system, as well as those marginalized in the urban wastelands of the industrialized world. Given these thematic premises, the four novels I analyse – written by two US authors, a Chilean and an Argentine author – constitute particularly interesting case-studies: Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (published posthumously in Spanish in 2004); David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Salvador Benesdra's *El traductor* (published posthumously in 1998 and not yet translated to English).

Chapter One focuses on the relationship between flatness and impersonality in the neoliberal novel. I delve into both literary and world history in order to account for the specificity of their intersection in the age of neoliberalism. In the first section, I

reconstruct a brief of history of varieties of literary flatness from the liberal through the neoliberal novel, thus including realist, modernist and postmodernist techniques of characterisation. I specify the fundamental features of the particular effect of flatness displayed in this subgenre. I call this 'magnified flatness' and argue that it is generated by the encounter between a substantial amount of information regarding the life of an individual character and the lack of a sense of uniqueness emerging from it. By granting minor characters considerable attention while not foregrounding any depth to their psychological life, authors of neoliberal novels contradict readerly expectations regarding the difference between 'protagonists' and 'figurants'. The second section, entitled 'Impersonality and the Spectre of "The Long '68"', looks at the period of global unrest between the 1960s and the 1970s as the immediate historical and political precedent to the neoliberal revolution, and reconstructs the evolution of a concept of impersonality which was articulated in that period as a response to changes in the capitalist economy. With the interrelated notions of flatness and impersonality thus contextualised, the thesis proceeds to an analysis of the four chosen novels.

All four share qualities that I have ascribed to the neoliberal novel; at the same time, they each offer distinctive angles from which to observe particular issues and put them in relation with one another. Chapter Two is dedicated to the trope of the crowd as it is deployed in *Underworld*, DeLillo's magmatic American epic. The novel is probably the most extended fictional treatment of crowds from a writer who has been fascinated by the subject throughout his entire career. My main contention in the chapter is that *Underworld* makes an ambivalent rendition of the urban mass, as this is portrayed as both a dimension in which characters enter at the risk of sacrificing their individuality and, alternatively, as an occasion for the momentary suspension of the self in favour of an exhilarating sense of community and togetherness. I proceed to identify traces of a discourse on impersonality in both the novel's themes and technique of characterisation.

Through a reading of some of the ekphrastic passages in the novel, I reconstruct a series of implicit poetic statements that I then compare with the general architecture of the work. This first part of the chapter allows me to discuss the social and political implications of DeLillo's work in light of his general critique of the relationship between citizen and national community. As Chapter Two shows, a particular conception of impersonality can be seen to correspond with the ideal of political participation, which is compared in the novel with the actualities of recent American history.

Chapter Three considers the case of *2666* as a way of confronting the dark side of human rights discourse and its implications for the stark global inequalities of its time. I argue that the very form of the novel is conceived as a critique of the kind of humanitarian rhetoric that equates the restoration of a victim's personal identity with the material and moral recognition never granted to her in the first place. Claiming that 'the secret of the world' is hidden in the fictional town of Santa Teresa, one of the characters in *2666* suggests that the long list of femicides surrounding the Special Economic Zones of the Sonoran Desert reveals something about the general character of neoliberal exploitation. 'La parte de los crímenes' ('The Part About the Crimes')—one of the five in which the novel is divided—features a dry and interminable sequence of passages of quasi-forensic prose, in which the attempt of reconstructing the circumstances of a murder seems to parallel the necessity to recuperate the life and vitality of the deceased. Thus, in *2666*, flatness of character alludes to the impossibility of conceiving a life crushed by systemic violence in the same terms that apply to the more fortunate. Through a reading of Simone Weil's 'On Human Personality', I elucidate the implicit ethics of impersonality emerging from *2666* to show that this process of personification is presented as not only impossible but undesirable. The most respectful way to deal with the real-life femicides committed in Ciudad Juárez, the prose of *2666* suggests, is to embrace Weil's idea that what is supremely valuable, in human life, is what is impersonal in it: the real human tragedy is

that *a* woman was deprived of her right to a dignified existence, and not *this* woman. A considerable portion of the Chapter is dedicated to an analysis of Bolaño's prose, which can be thought of as impersonal in its own right.

Chapter Four puts narrative flatness and impersonality in a different relation to neoliberalism by looking at the class dynamics of American society as it undergoes the neoliberal transformation. Wallace's *Infinite Jest* offers a fruitful testing ground for the hypothesis that neoliberalism successfully removed ideas of class and mutual exploitation from collective consciousness only to translate them on the anthropological terrain of the person and of social recognition. The novel aptly describes the atmosphere of its decade by representing society at large as polarised between the two extremes of the fully functional and deserving and those, on the other hand, whose misery is to be attributed to their own personal failures alone: the Enfield Tennis Academy, an elite educational institution, rests on top of a hill in the Bostonian suburbs, with the Ennet Halfway House right at the bottom. Firstly, I situate *Infinite Jest*'s depiction of American society in the context of the sociological debates on the 'death of class' of the 1980s and 1990s, which testified to that long historical process that was the waning of the labour movement in the course of the neoliberal counter-revolution. I show that the concomitant rise of human capital theories applied to the restructuring of the labour-market explains why several characters in *Infinite Jest* perceive a deep sense of unease about their own personal identity, and why they articulate their distress in ways that call to mind the social and psychological wounds of the 'entrepreneur of himself'. A section is dedicated to the novel's countless flat and minor characters, who are reminiscent of neoliberal stereotypes associated with the notion of the urban 'underclass'. After discussing the novel's treatment of personal responsibility, and the relative lack of social and historical contextualisation for the urban decay it registers, I conclude that *Infinite Jest* is, to some

degree, complicit with a specifically neoliberal appreciation of the value of the human being.

Chapter Five tackles the close relationship between the idea of impersonality and that of the end of history, which is so closely associated with the neoliberal turn. It does so by reading Salvador Benesdra's *El traductor* in light of Alexandre Kojève's lessons on the impersonal character of justice, an ideal state of things that would only be reached once the historic alternations between different political systems have achieved a synthesis. This is what Kojève refers to as the 'universal homogeneous state' and which Ricardo Zevi, the protagonist of *El traductor*, reads in the restructuring of the Argentinian economy taking place at the beginning of the 1990s. A lifelong leftist—and a committed Trotskyist—Zevi sees the fundamental coordinates of his personal identity collapse within his professional environment, too. He reacts by withdrawing into the private realm of his apartment and of his romantic relationship, in which he enacts a distorted version of Kojève's thought and of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. In Zevi's interpretation, impersonality is a state of animal-like retreat from the historical and political responsibilities of the citizen and into the selfish and unlimited satisfaction of one's own most basic impulses. Conversely, impersonality turns into a nightmare of self-annihilation for his girlfriend Romina, as she is made the victim of Ricardo's chauvinistic abuse. Benesdra's ultimate achievement lies in narrating the supposed end of ideologies in the form of an existential crisis, thus successfully describing the consequences of such epochal change on the individual consciousness. While *El traductor* has been celebrated by a niche of specialists as one of the masterpieces of Argentinian literature of the twentieth century, it is still a relatively neglected text, and critical treatments of it are scarce. Given the centrality of the theme of personal identity and depersonalization to the overall structure of the novel, Chapter Five functions as both a part of *Impersonal Selves* and a general introduction to a text which has been long awaiting its due recognition. The

Conclusion considers the potential of the neoliberal novel to register different varieties of impersonal experience, in light of the preceding chapters. In particular, it notes that the impersonal is open to a variety of contrasting political valences, as different forces find in it in the natural territory in which authority and social change can be negotiated.

A REPORT ON THE CHANGES MADE BEFORE RESUBMISSION

The examiners' report indicates that the thesis should have dealt more thoroughly with the existing literature on the relationship between neoliberalism and culture, on the one hand, and on alternative notions of the neoliberal novel, on the other. The Introduction has now been changed accordingly; it now features a section entitled 'Crowds, Flatness and Impersonality: A Variety of the Neoliberal Novel', which offers a comparative survey of cultural and literary criticism on neoliberalism from both the US and Latin America (pp. 24-37). I show how similar oppositions—relating in particular to the question of the autonomy of the cultural sphere—structure debates in both areas, and I deploy them in order to articulate my own definition of the neoliberal novel, as well as to mark its distance from those provided by other scholars. The list includes both Sarlo and Ludmer, as suggested by the examiners. (Overall, the thesis now features more precise accounts of my engagement with particular sources: see, in particular, p. 40n43, p. 83n130, p. 92n148 and the notes on pp. 51-2.) As I explain in this section, I intend to provide a coherent definition of a literary object which deserves the qualifier of 'neoliberal', but I do so without implying that the term 'neoliberal novel' should apply exclusively to my subject.

The explanation for my choice of primary texts has also been revised in order to respond to a comment in the report which invited me to consider the possible relationship between impersonality and gender. This has prompted me to reconsider some of the claims I had made in relation to the exclusion of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and conclude that it would have indeed been suitable for a study of flat characters in the neoliberal novel. I therefore justify the exclusion in terms of a balance between texts from each side of the divide between North and Latin America, but also point out why the novel would be an apt choice for future research stemming from this project (pp. 58-60).

In order to fully accept the suggestions, on the examiners' part, that *Impersonal Selves* should have delved into questions of literary style and genealogy more substantially, I have added an extra chapter (which is now Chapter One); it incorporates the section on 'Impersonality and the Spectre of "The Long '68"', previously included in the Introduction, and supports it with a study of the kind of literary flatness that, as I argue below, represents its aesthetic counterpart in the neoliberal novel. This new section (pp. 66-86) is meant to address three of the objectives delineated in the report. First, it provides readers with an account of previous varieties of flatness in literary history, thus allowing me to put into sharper focus the specificity of the kind that emerges in the neoliberal novel, or what I call 'magnified flatness'. This was also the place to contextualise *2666* and *Infinite Jest* within the critiques Bolaño and Wallace made of the generation of literary authors that had preceded them, i.e. the Boom writers, on the one hand, and Thomas Pynchon and the American postmodernists, on the other. Secondly, this section includes the bulk of statements on flatness in the neoliberal novel found in various places of the first version of my thesis. I have now synthesised their content into a broader description of the distinctive way in which these novels handle flatness (pp. 71-3). Passages have been added in each chapter to highlight how the terms deployed in the Introduction apply to each of the four novels. In my revision, I decided to remove the 'Elusive Authors' discussion that was originally the final chapter in the thesis. That chapter adopted a slightly different thematic and methodological perspective from the rest of it, focussing as it did on matters of reception and the sociology of literature. I therefore decided to focus on delivering a more cohesive discussion on impersonality and character throughout the thesis.

Two long footnotes have been added to Chapter Two, on DeLillo's *Underworld*, thus enriching my argument by showing where it converges and departs from the more recent critical work on the novel. This has given me the possibility to update the list of

secondary sources mentioned in the chapter, as suggested in the examiners' report (the notes are on pp. 112 and 116). In my chapter on Bolaño's *2666*, a passage has been added as a response to the work of Latin American studies scholars such as Alice Driver, Héctor Hoyos and Gabriel Giorgi, among others (pp. 161-5). The case of Driver and Donoso Macaya has been productive in the process of deepening my argument about Bolaño's ethics of representation, given how these critics have worked on the implications of aesthetic renditions of the Ciudad Juárez murders beyond the medium of fiction in general. The chapter on Wallace's *Infinite Jest* has been expanded with an entire section, which shows how the brand of flatness identified in the Introduction is deployed in the portrayal of the many minor characters populating it (pp. 194-203). I have also strengthened my argument by engaging with the work of Wallace scholars not mentioned in the previous version of the thesis, such as Lee Konstantinou and Jeffrey Severs.

The chapter on Benesdra's novel has now been modified to clarify how the distinction between protagonists and figurants applies to it, too. I argue that while *El traductor* does not feature dozens of characters as other neoliberal novels do, the same opposition is played out through the juxtaposition of Ricardo and Romina. This has also allowed me to tackle another issue pointed out by the examiners: the hypothesis that there is something distinctively gendered about the idea of impersonality. I conclude that the concept itself does not have any inherent relation to gender per se and that, nevertheless, *El traductor* demonstrates how it can be mobilised in favour of violent and male chauvinistic impulses. An analysis of style and tradition has also been conducted, in which I read Benesdra's work in the context of the tradition of a Russo-Argentine literary influence which connects Dostoevsky to Roberto Arlt (pp. 222, 231-3 and 241). Finally, minor changes have been made to the Conclusion to tackle an issue that had been raised by the new section in the Introduction. The first version of this chapter quoted a possible definition of impersonality from Jon Beasley-Murray's *Post-Hegemony* and deployed it

in order to summarise some of the features shared by the four neoliberal novels discussed. However, the oppositions between critical approaches outlined in the Introduction encouraged me to look at affect theory more critically and reformulate my claims accordingly.

All minor corrections suggested in the report have been amended. Pages have been intentionally left blank, where necessary, in order to have the beginning of each chapter on an odd page. I should also note that the elaboration of the aforementioned points has forced me to apply for an extension to the original word-count of approximately 15,000 words, which has been granted by the Graduate Studies Office of the Faculty of Medieval & Modern Languages.

INTRODUCTION
THE NEOLIBERAL NOVEL AS THE GENRE OF GLOBAL CROWDS

Borders of all kinds haunt the imagination of the globalised world: firstly, as an absence—the sign of a perceived erosion of cultures and identities—and, consequentially, as a presence to be reinforced: this is especially the case with territorial borders, which the decline of the nation-state has put at the very centre of the heated political debates of our time. The intensification of capitalist expansion that goes under the name of neoliberalism has contributed to the erosion of state sovereignty in a variety of ways—not least in its progressive dismantlement of the welfare state in favour of the privatisation and financialisation of the economy. It is not only capitals flowing across borders, but people, too: since the 1990s, in particular, transnational movements of human beings have intensified due to a range of reasons, including armed conflicts, economic crises and, more recently, the tangible consequences of global warming. Such large-scale displacements have called into being many different positions of the subject *vis à vis* the state: the illegal migrant, the refugee, the detainee outside national territory, the worker in economic zones of mixed jurisdiction. These are all different instantiations of what Judith Butler has defined as the condition of 'the dispossessed': excluded from citizenship by the military and the juridical power of the state, individuals are not at all liberated from the influence of power, but are rather deeply immersed in it[1]. And the 'dispossessed', of course, are such even when they are not physically confined to the space of the prison or the camp: they maintain their diminished status even when they live and work among the fully recognised subjects of the state. Thus, a numerous and composite entity takes shape in the metropolises of the globalised world: a swarming of bodies that are unequal first and foremost because their lives and subjectivities are regulated by different institutions,

[1] In Butler and Spivak 2007, 5.

as well as by different degrees of inclusion within the nation-state. The image, after all, is complementary to that of borders: it represents the permanence of certain boundaries (between subjectivities) even when others have been eroded.

The globalised imagination has generated narratives and fictions of all kinds in its attempt to make sense of this state of things. Given its historical allegiance with the nation, it is not surprising that the novel, too, resonates with the plurality of subjectivities called into being by such reconfigurations. The present thesis is a study of one of the contemporary formations of the genre which originates at the intersection of two particularly conspicuous formal traits: on the one hand, the relative lack of a technique of characterisation intent on particularising the portrayals of individual characters and, on the other, the unusual quantities in which these unspecific characters are generated by the narrative-structures hosting them. In other words, the sub-genre which I define as 'the neoliberal novel' features sprawling casts of *flat characters*, to borrow the terms of E. M. Forster's famous distinction between extremes in the characterisation spectrum[2]. This literary object in circulation at the turn of the millennium is not specifically 'neoliberal' by virtue of a supposedly ideological alliance with the *zeitgeist*. Nor, for that matter, should the genre be idealised as a product or a means of resistance to the context. Rather, the historical necessity of pushing literary form to the extremes of populousness and flatness registered in the novels here discussed seems to be one of critical representation. *Critical* because these texts betray an urgency to go beyond the mere thematisation of the social and anthropological effects of neoliberalism. They deploy their own formal architectures to highlight the constitutive insufficiency of older modes of characterisation and story-telling in representing the intermingling of different subjectivities in the globalised world. Ultimately, the neoliberal novel is such because, through the

[2] 'Flat characters were called "humorous" in the seventeenth century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round' (Forster 2012 [1927], 67).

combination of its forms and themes, it creates a narrative language able to represent and discuss inequality—that quintessential trait of the neoliberal condition.

Neoliberal inequality is qualitatively different from the profound disparities of previous ages in that, far from being considered as a mere negative externality of the economic, it is raised to the status of a major organising principle for the life of the polis. Neoliberal inequality thus transcends the realm of the purely economic and becomes an anthropological fact. This fundamental change takes place in the phase described by William Davies as that of 'normative neoliberalism', going from 1989 to 2008. This is when neoliberal ideology was at its widest currency, liberated at last from its historical antagonists: what Giovanni Arrighi has defined as 'the *belle époque* of America's global hegemony', Davies writes, could only begin 'once the horizons of political hope had been delimited to a single political-economic system'[3]. Hence the 'normative' qualifier of the entire phase, in which the 'fairness' of the economic system becomes the primary goal of socio-political institutions, and 'market-based metrics and instruments' become 'the measure of all human worth', thus bringing a revolution about that was not only political and economic, but anthropological[4]. In this context, the neoliberal novel reconfigures and recombines the stylistic solutions of previous seasons of novel-writing in order to account for a new crisis of the liberal subject in an age in which the neoliberal order and globalisation combined have shown that its privileged status cannot be extended to the whole of mankind, as a relentless string of humanitarian catastrophes testifies. *Impersonal Selves* looks at four representative cases of the genre from the phase of 'normative neoliberalism' in order to elucidate the ways in which some of the best fiction of the time responded to the anthropological changes in progress by altering the quantity and quality of its characters. The salience of traits such as numerousness and flatness is evident in works by authors working within distant traditions and from different parts of the globe:

[3] Davies 2016, 127.
[4] Ibid.

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Salvador Benesdra's *El traductor* (1998) and Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004) are all novels which organize their own particular structure around a set of shared preoccupations regarding the status of the individual within the neoliberal order[5]. As we shall see, these preoccupations have much to do with the very category of 'person' and the possibility of transcending it, thus gesturing towards a definition of human worth that is antagonistic to the neoliberal credo and, ultimately, 'impersonal'. The emancipatory possibilities of the impersonal, as they emerge to different degrees in the texts at hand, can only be properly understood in relation to the neoliberal naturalization of inequality and competitiveness, and it is therefore necessary to delve into this chapter of global history before the most specifically literary dimensions of flatness and numerousness can be discussed.

Crowds, Flatness and Impersonality: A Variety of the Neoliberal Novel

If by looking at the publication date of each of the texts treated in *Impersonal Selves* it is clear that they were written in an age characterised by the nearly ubiquitous presence of neoliberalism in the form of economic doctrines, policies and mentality, it is important to consider whether these can be considered four instantiations of 'the neoliberal novel'. Ultimately, this begs the question of whether neoliberalism has impacted the realm of culture and fiction to the point that an entire genre has developed in response to the thematic and stylistic challenges posed by it. The current critical debate on what is, in fact, 'the neoliberal novel' revolves around the issue of the autonomy of the work of art: does literature still hold any oppositional power to the logic of commodification, which neoliberalism exacerbates? Indeed, neoliberalism seems now so pervasive that it is necessary to ask what possibilities for critique and resistance there are, and if literature does indeed hold the potential to convey them. Walter Benn Michaels is a vocal supporter

[5] Hereafter the first three novels will be abbreviated as *IJ*, *U* and *ET* in reference to in-text citations. The fourth remains indicated as *2666*.

of the view that the neoliberal novel does in fact exist and that it should be understood as such because of its ideological allegiance to the tenets of neoliberalism. He thus identifies texts focussed on representing American life as experienced from the point of view of particular ethnic and cultural identities: 'in the political theorist Nancy Fraser's terms', Michaels writes, 'we might say that the novel of identity made questions of "recognition" more prominent than questions of "redistribution"'[6]. Matters of recognition are more palatable to the contemporary American mind because they hide economic matters such as class from view and thus implicitly deny their status as major organising principles of social life. 'This', according to the critic, 'is the world of neoliberalism, the world in which identity and inequality have both flourished, and which the neoliberal novel simultaneously represents and enables'[7].

However, the kind of novels discussed by Michaels, with their focus on ethnicity, represent a relatively small sample of the tendencies traversing contemporary fiction. In a 2013 piece for *Dissent* Magazine, Jeffery J. Williams, too, defines the neoliberal novel in thematic terms, yet different from those mentioned by Michaels: the charge of complicity is dropped in favour of a more neutral approach to the representational content of some of these texts as, according to Williams, the label should be applied to those novels that are intent on representing a time in which American political life functions more as a plutocracy than a democracy. However, Williams does also suggest that it is possible to discern the allegiance of form and ideology in some of the texts he considers, as in the case of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*: 'it is not that Franzen advocates neoliberalism', Williams writes, 'and in fact he exposes some of its dubious values, but, adhering to the conventions of literary realism, he cannot imagine any other possibility'[8]. A leap of imagination is necessary in order to envisage a world beyond the pervasiveness

[6] Michaels 2011, 1026. For an introduction to Fraser's usage of the two terms, see Fraser 2000.
[7] Ibid., 1029.
[8] Williams 2013, n.p.

of neoliberal capitalism and Williams's contention is that the particular form and genre in which we present the stories we tell is part and parcel of that process. Similarly, Jason Goldfarb locates the possibility for resistance to neoliberalism in the form of what he calls the 'affective novel': he distinguishes between critics such as Michaels, on the one hand, highlighting the personal dimension of contemporary fiction, in which matters of identity, as we have seen, are central, and critics such as Sarah Ahmed and Denise Riley, on the other, for which social and collective aspects of recent narratives are central. Goldfarb concludes that neither position is completely tenable, as it is the distinction between the personal/complicit and the social/subversive as two categories of the affective novel which, in his view, should be dismissed: conversely, 'the affective literary novel' should be recognised as a third party to such a dichotomy, as it 'may, in fact, offer a counter to neoliberal logic'[9].

A broader definition is proffered by Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl in their introduction to a *Textual Practice* special issue entitled 'Neoliberalism and the Novel': the two critics connote the 'neoliberal novel' not as a literary object with a fixed and defined set of formal and thematic traits, but rather as a genre which, by its own nature, pays 'critical attention to the economic vectors shaping [itself]'[10]. Nevertheless, significant changes in form and themes are also present, and they 'speak to the epistemic changes under capital in its current incarnation'[11]. Questions of resistance to neoliberalism are to be shifted to individual texts, rather than the genre, as 'how exactly the novel models, integrates or interrupts the social and ideological norms of the neoliberal present remains an open question'[12]. As Johansen and Karl, following David Harvey, see Gramsci's notion of hegemony and the elicitation of consent as central to the conservation of the neoliberal order, they also consider the novel a cultural form

[9] Goldfarb 2021, 9.
[10] Johansen and Karl 2015, 205.
[11] Ibid., 204.
[12] Ibid.

possessing the potential for its specific kind of critique: 'claims of the novel's irrelevance in a neoliberal world are premature', the two authors conclude, as the form itself points to methods of critique not always visible in other genres'[13]. Similarly, Arne De Boever writes that the term 'neoliberal novel' 'refers to any novel that addresses various aspects of neoliberal history, economic policy, politics, or "philosophy"'[14]. In this formulation, then, the label merely indicates that a given set of texts share a loosely defined series of thematic preoccupations, which in turn suggests only that they were all written within the neoliberal timespan: as De Boever concludes, 'there is no unified aesthetic of neoliberalism'[15]. Therefore, there is no such thing as 'the' neoliberal novel, either, 'even if it is clear that aspects of neoliberalism can be found throughout contemporary fiction'[16].

Impersonal Selves constitutes an attempt to go a step further than De Boever's contention and describe the impact that neoliberalism has had on the form of the novel itself. It is not only that 'aspects of neoliberalism' have made their appearance in contemporary texts but, more importantly, the structure of some of these works has been called into being by the socio-economic environment in which they were written. To ask what the influence of neoliberalism is on literature does not necessarily equate to positing that there is, in fact, a 'unified aesthetic of neoliberalism'. Rather, one can identify many different ways in which history and form interact, and this thesis looks at one of them. In doing so, it builds its own object of inquiry, extrapolating from specific cases a description of how a particular subgenre of the novel has been constituted by the intersection of formal characteristics which, in their salience and configuration, represented a response to neoliberal conditions. The aesthetic object at the centre of *Impersonal Selves*, then, is not the only example of what could be defined as 'neoliberal novel', but it certainly is an abstraction which allows us to apprehend the specificity of

[13] Ibid., 211.
[14] De Boever 2019, 161.
[15] Ibid., 165-6.
[16] Ibid., 172.

the cultural consequence of neoliberalism, as it constitutes evidence of the cultural effects of neoliberalism in both its form and themes. The reference to crowds and the widespread resort to flatness, in fact, are the two traits that, even more than the features identified by such critics as Michaels and Williams, suggest that neoliberalism has not only tangentially impinged upon the narrative substance of the four novels treated in this thesis, but rather that it was the main force behind their coming into being. For all these reasons, the central subject of *Impersonal Selves* is henceforth referred to as 'the' neoliberal novel as a shorthand to describe the particular literary subgenre which originates at the intersection of crowdedness and flatness of character, as outlined here. The adjective 'neoliberal' does not suggest any definite political stance with regard to neoliberalism itself, but rather the cultural and historical impetus behind the emergence of the form. Neither does the definitive article indicate that this is the only possible definition of how neoliberalism can impact the novel, but rather that the subgenre at hand is constituted in response to neoliberalism. It is a variety of the neoliberal novel, then, and over the course of this thesis I will employ this shorthand in full awareness that other definitions of what the neoliberal novel is are possible, as the work of many critics whose work I engage with below will show.

Impersonal Selves considers four instantiations of it, each deploying particular configurations of form and content in order to dramatize the extreme forms of inequality of the globalised world. These are texts which look at vast crowds of people—whether hosting many characters themselves or hinting at both national and global fundamental changes impacting the lives of millions, as in the case of *El traductor*—and they do so by unfulfilling readerly expectations about the differences between flat and well-rounded characters which are derived from realist, modernist and postmodernist precedents, as we shall see in Chapter One. Flat characters, in these texts, are conspicuous in more than one sense: they are often numerous, and always irremediably unspecific, as if the full

development of their individual personality was blocked or unachievable. Protagonists are often as flat as the figures in the backdrop of the narratives in which they are featured. Central characters such as *Underworld*'s Nick Shay, *2666*'s Amalfitano, *Infinite Jest*'s Hal Incandenza and *El traductor*'s Ricardo Zevi are juxtaposed to minor characters such as, respectively, the crowd members of a baseball game, the victims of Santa Teresa's femicides, patients in a halfway house and Zevi's girlfriend Romina. Yet the differences in characterisation we would expect between the two terms in each pair are somewhat elusive, as they are all, to different extents, pervaded by an aura of unspecificity and, ultimately, impersonality. The subgenre of the neoliberal novel which *Impersonal Selves* aims at describing is thus defined by the conspicuousness of a kind of flatness of character which extends beyond the dichotomy of the flat and the well-rounded by evoking impersonality as a third way between these two poles.

It is through flatness and the evocation of impersonality that these four neoliberal novels create the possibility to map crucial aspects of the neoliberal condition. A certain critical distance is thus created between the work of fiction and the historical condition from which it springs, thus testifying to the enduring possibility for literature to speak of its own time without being subsumed by the commodifying tendencies of late capitalism. This conception situates *Impersonal Selves* amongst those critical studies which presuppose that neoliberalism functions and propagates through the mobilisation of content which is ideological, and not only by transforming the reality surrounding us to the point that we are forced to navigate it in certain ways regardless of our conscious beliefs. At the heart of the issue is the question of the relationship between neoliberalism and culture, which has divided critics into two opposing factions. In his introduction to a *New Formations* special issue dedicated to 'Neoliberal Culture', cultural and political critic Jeremy Gilbert considers the various 'things' that neoliberalism has been said to be: 'an aggregation of ideas, a discursive formation, an over-arching ideology, a

governmental programme, the manifestation of a set of interests, a hegemonic project, an assemblage of techniques and technologies, and what Deleuze and Guattari call an "abstract machine"'[17]. All of these possibilities, according to Gilbert, contain some degree of truth as to the nature of neoliberalism. But is it possible to attribute to it the high degree of coherence which more properly pertains to a fully-fledged ideology? Gilbert sides with those answering in the affirmative: the similarities between policies implemented by governments in different part of the world attest to a cohesiveness that goes beyond that of discursive formations, and a similar degree of homogeneity is to be found in those cultural phenomena that have historically accompanied the emergence of those same policies. Gilbert therefore argues that neoliberalism is persistently intent on the 'promotion and reproduction of an ideology of competitive individualism'[18].

Nevertheless, the critic continues, it is important to keep in mind that neoliberalism can also function independently of its ideological content: whenever it creates precariousness and scarcity, it forces individuals to act according to its logic regardless of their being cognizant of its key principles. Scholars who have highlighted this capacity of neoliberalism usually build on Foucault's notion of governmentality: in this model, the role of ideological interpellation and subjectification more generally is surpassed by neoliberalism's delineation of a field of conditions and possibilities in which individuals are left free to fluctuate, with no direct pressure to act in any particular way. Neoliberalism concerns itself with the 'conduct of conduct', to borrow Foucault's phrase, and thus bypasses the plane of ideas and representation altogether[19]. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith have applied this intuition regarding the non-ideological aspects of neoliberalism to their study of contemporary fiction. In their introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, the two critics contend that

[17] Gilbert 2013, 8.
[18] Ibid., 14.
[19] For the delineation of this field, see Foucault 2008, 259-60.

neoliberalism 'has advanced historically through four different phases or modes: the economic, the political-ideological, the sociocultural, and the ontological'[20]. They concede that chronological order here merely indicates the moment of emergence of a given mode, while more than one aspect can co-exist at any given time. The term 'ontological' qualifies our present condition, in which the 'extension of market rationality to other noneconomic domains of life shifts from a way of thinking—quantitative, efficient, pragmatic, and profitable—to a way of being'[21].

In the ontological phase, authors of literary fiction have been exploring ways 'for meaning and value to derive not from referential acts of representation but from being's relation to other beings, as well as its relative position in space'[22]. 'Affect', 'body' and 'network' are three key terms in this ontological creation of meaning and value: for example, contemporary writers of colour, Huehls and Greenwald Smith contend, have been gradually transitioning from the representation of racial and ethnic identity and its symbolic value to the exploration of the way of being in the world—in relation to oneself and others—that accompanies it. If this is the path that contemporary writers have increasingly been taking—and if, indeed, the real power of neoliberalism now consists of its capacity to dictate the very structure of our being—it follows that literary criticism, too, should do justice to these new modalities for signification and move away from the related categories of ideology and representation. But if neoliberalism saturates the discursive field, thus pre-empting the possibility of critique, then what kind of cultural politics is still possible? Huehls tackles the subject of resistance in *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age*, but his conclusions hardly offer a viable route for political intervention. In his view, resistance must be 'non-representational [and] ontological' and will necessarily entail the reconfiguration of the conditions of being

[20] Huehls and Greenwald Smith 2017, 3.
[21] Ibid., 9.
[22] Ibid., 10-1.

within the social field, thus, for example, 'reshaping the geographies of inclusion and exclusion'[23]. 'Politics in this scenario', Huehls writes, 'involves accurately describing and then slightly shifting the given configuration of a particular system, not imagining futures yet unthought'[24]. However, it remains unclear how literature can change the disposition of elements within a given system if not precisely through an act of representation[25].

In her own criticism, Greenwald Smith adopts a similarly ambiguous stance towards representation and the critique of ideology. In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, the critic provides an influential account of the 'neoliberal novel' as a genre with a precise set of characteristic traits but no definite stance of complicity with neoliberalism. This genre should be understood in opposition to its liberal antecedent, in which the interior lives of characters were the focus of interest[26]. Instead, matters of allegiance and resistance are shifted to the antagonism between the two varieties of the 'neoliberal novel' which she identifies: on the one hand is a kind of novel founded upon the salience of personal feelings, while, on the other, are texts that generate most of their literary value through the rendition of impersonal affects. The 'representation of recognisable emotional subjects' is central to the former kind, while the latter sub-genre of the neoliberal novel attempts 'the provocation of feelings that are not as easily identifiable as such'[27]. These feelings are not yet 'owned and recognized', and therefore 'potentially destabilising insofar as their presence defies the prevailing notion that feelings only exist insofar as they are the property of the individual'[28].

[23] Huehls 2016, 19.
[24] Ibid., 21.
[25] My contention is that renouncing the axiological assessment of particular configurations of power renders any attempt at altering their equilibrium meaningless, if not self-sabotaging: any action necessarily entails a consideration regarding its desirability and efficacy. Indeed, Huehls approaches the verge of said meaninglessness when he concedes that, 'admittedly, the post-normative result looks disturbingly similar to neoliberalism' (2016, 20).
[26] In the liberal novel, Greenwald Smith argues, the individual was mainly conceived as an independent unity whose essence was to be found in psychological depths and in contraposition to societal pressures. Conversely, in the neoliberal novel, 'there is less emphasis on the dramatic revelation of the inner emotional lives of characters', as 'attachments to others are seen as themselves constitutive of the individual's full realisation' (2015, 40 and 41, respectively).
[27] Ibid., 33.
[28] Ibid., 20.

Through its particular effects, then, literature is capable of both capitulation and resistance to the forces of neoliberalism. It is important to note that, in Greenwald Smith's account, the novel is able to do so on two distinct levels: firstly, through a representation of impersonal feelings as experienced by characters, and, subsequently, through the elicitation of similar affects in readers. The oppositional potential of representation is therefore maintained intact in this model[29].

Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro share an even deeper belief in the oppositional *qua* ideological power of fiction. In their introduction to *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent*, they highlight the necessity to develop a critical methodology capable of bringing to light literature's potential for resistance against neoliberalism. In their estimation, 'the way forward is to think through issues of historical alteration through a greater horizon of the capitalist world-system'[30]. According to this view, considering both centres and peripheries of the world economy at the same time allows us to appreciate the different ways in which neoliberal power operates, thus making it possible to integrate a Foucauldian account of how power works within post-Fordist economies with a Marxist analysis of the exploitation involved in processes of 'neoliberalization' across the globe[31]. Within what is described as 'neoliberal world-culture', the editors contend, we can observe both ongoing processes of expansion of neoliberalism as an ideology *and* what they define as 'the culture of discontent'[32]. Given their firm belief in both the possibility of such forms of resistance and their presence in the realm of culture, Deckard and Shapiro object to 'the framing devices of Huehls and Greenwald Smith's periodisation of neoliberalism' inasmuch as they 'paradoxically discount the role of culture and the long tradition of cultural studies analysis attentive to

[29] See also Greenwald Smith 2014 and 2018 for the critic's stance on the relationship between neoliberalism and ideology.
[30] Deckard and Shapiro 2019, 4.
[31] Ibid., 15.
[32] Ibid.

the complexity of the interlayered waxing and waning of emergent, residual, and dominant cultural forms'[33]. Deckard and Shapiro's appreciation of the uneven development and currency of neoliberalism across the globe is shared by other critics, including Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins[34].

The divide between critics arguing in favour and against the critical and representational value of literature in the age of neoliberalism is present in the Latin American context, too, with the latter position usually associated with the notion of 'post-autonomy', as proposed by Josefina Ludmer in a brief article from 2006. She starts from the premise that 'the cultural and the fictional, in the post-autonomy era, are in sync and in fusion with the economic-political reality' and that, therefore, the possibility for the creation of meaning intended as critical distance from the *status quo* is erased[35]. What takes place in the publishing market of these times, then, is the emergence of 'postautonomous literatures', or fictions whose status as literature is compromised by their political ambivalence towards their own commodification: 'these writings that place themselves inside-outside the literary are charged with a politicity that, like the category of fiction, is not totally defined because it is in a state of de-differentiation or "in fusion"'[36]. It is possible to read a similar disillusionment with literature's capacity to criticise the world in Beatriz Sarlo's reflections on the status of the novel after the presumed 'end of history', even though her usage of the term 'representation' might suggest otherwise at first: 'when we look at literature today', Sarlo writes, 'what is striking is the weight of the present not as an enigma to be solved but as a scenario to be represented'[37]. Here 'representation' is the mere act of *naming* the features of the social

[33] Ibid., 43.
[34] In their introduction to a *Social Text* special issue dedicated to literature and neoliberalism, Elliott and Harkins offer 'genre'—a category that includes 'literary or cultural forms that transect historical periods'—as an entry point into a productive exploration of how the term 'neoliberalism' is used to bring to light and analyse features of the contemporary cultural moment (Elliott and Harkins 2013, 1).
[35] Ludmer 2006, n.p., my translation.
[36] Ibid., my translation.
[37] Sarlo 2007, 473, my translation.

world—an operation similar to the delineation of the field of neoliberal influence described by Foucault—rather than questioning and historicising them: 'if the novel of the 1980s was "interpretative"', Sarlo contends, 'a visible strand of today's novel is "ethnographic"'[38].

Eugenio Di Stefano and Emilio Sauri propose that the concept of 'postautonomous literatures' should be understood as part of a general movement away from critique in Latin American cultural studies. The repudiation of the 'frame', as they define it, between the realm of autonomous art and that of the economy at large is the common denominator of critical practices as disparate as 'testimonio criticism, affect theory, postautonomy and posthegemony'[39]. Through the identification of this shared assumption, Di Stefano and Sauri are able to discuss the work of prominent Latin American theorists with often diverging critical backgrounds and agendas, including John Beverley, Jon Beasley-Murray, Alberto Moreiras and, as he have already seen, Josefina Ludmer. Once the autonomy of the cultural sphere is denied, Di Stefano and Sauri contend, what remains is 'a deep investment in considerations of whatever effect the artwork—like any object—happens to produce, and so what we experience and who we are as subjects of that experience become primary concerns'[40]. Matters of identity take precedence over the cognitive mapping of present structural inequalities, as what counts is not the study of the world 'as it is' but rather the appreciation of one's particular perspective and way of navigating it. Affect theory and a particular attention for the bodily, then, are just as important in this context as they are in the Anglo-American one. These strands of Latin Americanist theory, then, have much in common with Huehls and Greenwald Smith's diagnosis of an 'ontological phase' of neoliberalism, and Di Stefano and Sauri indict such

[38] Ibid.
[39] Di Stefano and Sauri 2014, n.p.
[40] Ibid.

approaches precisely for their blindness and impotence against the cultural and ideological work underpinning the political and economic reality of their time.

'Latin Americanist criticism and theory', they write, 'can be said to participate in what Walter Benn Michaels has identified as the invisibility of the frame within postmodern and poststructuralist accounts of the text and the work of art that is doubled by another: the invisibility of the structure that creates class inequality in neoliberalism'[41]. Elsewhere, Emilio Sauri borrows Dierdra Reber's words in order to characterise Latin American studies' 'turn to affect' as 'a logic that perceives society as "a feeling soma that has dispensed altogether with the need for a thinking head"'[42]. Di Stefano and Sauri's picture contradicts, at least in part, many generalizations concerning the politicisation of Latin Americanist criticism and theory[43]. Nevertheless, examples of both literary texts and criticism that counteract the influence of neoliberalism on ideological terms are present. In *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*, for example, Francine Masiello reads texts from the postdictatorship years in Chile and Argentina as evidence that 'art and literature […] force us to think of interpretative strategies of resistance, interrogating the past and leading to a politics of cognition with which to move toward the future'[44]. In Di Stefano's own work, too, the work of Roberto Bolaño and others is associated with a return to the representational and oppositional value of literature[45]. As this survey of Anglo- and Latin American criticism demonstrates, then, the multifarious status of neoliberalism put into focus by Jeremy Gilbert generates different modes of criticism, according to the particular effects one sets out to counter.

[41] Ibid. The reference is to several articles authored by Michaels between 2010 and 2014, including 'The Politics of a Good Picture: Race, Class and Form in Jeff Wall's *Mimic*' (2010).
[42] Sauri 2018, 264.
[43] Sophia A. McClennen writes, for example, that 'Latin American cultural studies is unthinkable apart from Latin American Left intellectual work' (2011, 129). Héctor Hoyos commends Latin Americanism for 'the vitality of its ideology critique', claiming that 'for Latin Americanists, today's mainstream comparatism is surprisingly apolitical; for those going in the opposite direction, it is surprisingly engaged' (2015, 10).
[44] Masiello 2001, 9.
[45] See Chapter Five in Di Stefano 2018.

The divide between those seeking to fight neoliberalism on ideological terms and those convinced that the representational battle is a mere distraction, in particular, organises theoretical reponses in both cultural contexts. As the central chapters in *Impersonal Selves* demonstrate, and as I shall argue in the Conclusion, it is possible to read the neoliberal novel as a testament to both the ideological and the affective aspects of neoliberalism, functioning in conjunction rather than in opposition to one another[46]. One of the *loci* in which this interrelation is most evident is the representation of different kinds of subjectivities through a modulation of forms of characterisation. In the next section, we shall proceed to see how these have their analogue in the 'uneven regimes of personhood' of the neoliberal age.

'All the Unfiltered Babble of the Peripheral Crowd': Uneven Regimes of Personhood in the Neoliberal Novel

Wallace's *Infinite Jest* offers a scene in which the fundamental elements of the neoliberal novel are both expounded and problematized. The passage describes Don Gately, one of the two main characters, lying in a hospital bed, having been shot. Since he cannot move or speak, he can converse with only one of his several visitors: a ghost who is able to read Gately's mind and make himself heard telepathically. The wraith—as he is always referred to—is the late James Incandenza, the director of a work called *Infinite Jest*. The film, also known as 'the lethal Entertainment', is so compelling that its viewers die from inactivity and self-starvation, almost literally glued to the screen. The fact that the film and the novel are eponymous calls for interesting parallels between the structure and purpose of each, and this line of thought is encouraged by having the wraith discuss its aesthetic ideals with Gately. The parallels between *Infinite Jest*-the-novel and the eponymous film allow the contours of the neoliberal novel to emerge most clearly. While

[46] See infra 257-60.

shooting his last work, the wraith claims, his aim was to depict 'real life's egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment' (*IJ* 835-6).

The wraith's egalitarian ideals are a response to the inequality that he deems to be intrinsic to any film since, as he explains to Gately, every act of storytelling necessarily implies a dynamic distinction between protagonists and minor characters. People in the background, the wraith contends, appear in films and TV series as 'concessions to realism', as they are minor and peripheral in the framing, but they are fully fledged human beings in their own right, just as much as the protagonists are. And in fact, this sort of 'human furniture, *figurants* the wraith says they're called, these surreally mute background presences really revealed that the camera, like any eye, has a perceptual corner, a triage of who's important enough to be seen and heard v. just seen' (*IJ* 835 emphasis in the original). These figurants are 'completely *trapped* and *encaged* […] in [their] mute peripheral status' and liberating them is the task of the new kind of cinematography that Incandenza was striving to achieve. It is easy to see how the director's words could apply to the neoliberal novel, too, in which the numerousness of characters and the fragmentariness of the plot allow for entire episodes and sub-chapters to be dedicated to those that otherwise would be only 'background presences'. The wraith's distinction between 'figurants' and 'protagonists' makes explicit a preoccupation with the representation of personhood that dates back to the origins of the novel. This is because, as a typically bourgeois artefact, the genre responds to the anxieties induced by the presence of masses and urban crowds in nascent liberal democracies[47].

The neoliberal novel continues such tradition by expanding its outlook to the masses of the globalised world and then juxtaposing the uneven regimes of personhood it

[47] A considerable portion of the preceding two paragraphs is taken from my own previous work on *Infinite Jest*. See Bevilacqua 2016, 4-5.

registers in the process. This applies to all of the four novels here examined. *Underworld* and *Infinite Jest*—the two US-representatives in my canon—are more national in character and tend to focus on characters from North America. In fact, while each features geopolitical elements, these are secondary to its plot. Salvador Benesdra's *El traductor* is much more minimalist in its cast of characters, but it nevertheless constantly refers to 'the masses' of twentieth-century history and their political destiny: it is the novel's intensely political and polemical nature that allows it to include multitudes of individuals, however indirectly. Roberto Bolaño's *2666* is organised around the topographical and thematic centre of the Mexican town of Santa Teresa—a fictional rendition of Ciudad Juárez—in which hundreds of femicides have been committed since the beginning of the 1990s around the *maquiladoras*—factories typically lying within Special Economic Zones, the areas of mixed jurisdiction established by NAFTA in the 1990s. Tens of fictional legal reports on the found bodies are included in one of the central sections of the novel, thus making the vast majority of the characters in *2666* a multitude of third-world bodies whose personhood is *de facto* denied by neoliberal processes of exploitation.

Thus, the crowded impression given by these novels is due not only to the numerousness of their respective casts of characters, but to the diversity of forms of subjectivity displayed in them. What distinguishes the neoliberal novel from its liberal antecedent are the principles according to which a subject is deemed to be endowed with the prerequisites of personhood. The four novels all give the impression of hosting small communities of a sort, which one is invited to interpret as many synecdoches of the global polis. This is most explicit in *2666*, which, as in most of Roberto Bolaño's works, we notice a profound fascination with the intermingling of languages, cultures and perspectives that globalisation has made more frequent and quotidian that ever: people from both the centre and the periphery of the world-economic system meet and interact within the boundaries of Santa Teresa, which in itself represents the uncanny—but

realistic—physical proximity of elitist cosmopolitanism and barbarous exploitation. Yet none of these novels really renounces its globalist perspective, and each hints at the interrelatedness of facts and events across the globe as the inescapable context in which its own events take place: *Underworld* abruptly changes scenario so that its American protagonist, Nick Shay, can visit Kazakhstan shortly after the end of the Cold War; *Infinite Jest* focuses on a dystopian version of the United States and its immediate neighbours, but it does so by highlighting the global consequences of American imperialism and consumerism; while the protagonist of Salvador Benesdra's *El traductor*, with his Marxist-Leninist ideological baggage, reads the Argentinian crisis as merely another instantiation of the global class struggle. The geopolitical sweep of these novels naturally invites comparisons between different and sometimes alternative modes of valuing the life of the individual[48].

However, a specific mode starkly emerges from the rest. Precisely because the forms of characterisation emerging from these texts reflect the state of personhood under neoliberal pressures, they necessarily register the currency of specifically neoliberal types of subjectivity, such as the Foucauldian *homo œconomicus*. The distinction between labour and capital is collapsed within the entrepreneurial subject, who is constantly intent on practices of investment and the maximisation of profit, no matter how precarious his circumstances may be. And if personality is posed in the liberal tradition to be the ultimate justification for the legitimacy of private property, the very idea of the entrepreneurial self modifies the mutual relationship between the two terms by making one's own personality the first asset to mobilise in favour of the subject's abstract capacity to hold any property at all[49]. What is meant by personality, in the context of neoliberal

[48] In this respect, I agree with Daniel Hartley, who writes that 'if theories of "neoliberalism" have to retain their critical incisiveness, they will […] have to broaden their conception of its *dramatic personae*; no longer *homo œconomicus* alone, but an even combination of exemplary subjects which, in varying rhythms and ratios, constitutes the objective fact of neoliberal social (de)composition and the diffuse material and geographical basis for the emergence of any future revolutionary subject' (Hartley 2019, 138).

[49] See Arthur 1980 for a philosophical history of the relationship between personality and property.

subjectivity, is a mixture of personhood—or the abstract capacity for rational and calculative thought—and particularity. The entrepreneurial self is not only a subject that is able to act according to his own particular interest, but also to deploy his own particularity—skills, competences, innate characteristics, personal relationships—towards the actualisation and maximisation of its economic potential. As Deidre Lynch argues, the liberal subject produced, as its own literary analogue, a variety of literary character primarily defined in terms of the depth and quality of her interiority[50]. Conversely, the specifically *neoliberal* one must necessarily become more unstable and dynamic, as what matters the most—in order to signify and represent a given and more or less coherent identity-through-time—is the quality of her *behaviour*, rather than psychological coherence. Just like it is demanded of individuals-as-economic-subjects to constantly fluctuate in the market of human capital without a stable venue, so is the character of the neoliberal novel defined in terms of her relative vacuity and inconsistency. Paradoxically, then, the neoliberal personality is already *depersonalised* to a significant extent. This diffused instability of personality is evident in all of the four novels here studied: even those characters that can more rightfully claim for themselves the title of protagonists have an evanescent quality to them. The significant amount of information about their lives does not seem sufficient to suspend disbelief and fall under the illusion that we are being presented with the story of a real human being. Significantly, these protagonists themselves seem to perceive that there is something about their circumstances that makes their personal identity somewhat less stable than they would like it to be: as we shall see in the next chapters, *Underworld*'s Nick Shay has built his life around a career that does not quite feel his own; Amalfitano, in *2666*, progressively retreats into a state of abstract reflexivity bordering on self-effacement; Hal Incandenza,

[50] In *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning*, Lynch aims at tracking 'the emergence […] of the notion that the truth of character should be an inside story of secrets, hidden motivations, and unplumbed depths' (1998, 76).

from *Infinite Jest*, laments that he feels he is little more than his own academic record; while Ricardo Zevi, the protagonist of *El traductor*, goes through an existential crisis that leaves him with only a vague sense of who he is, and which will ultimately result in him deliberately embracing the precariousness of personal and professional identity under neoliberalism.

The contrastive focus of the neoliberal novel on subjectivities does not only take class positions into consideration but also, and perhaps more importantly, geopolitical provenance. Since the neoliberal novel has as its own constitutive centre a comparison of uneven regimes of personhood, it follows that the methodological approach deployed to describe it should be comparative, too. Among the various clusters of literary contexts that could be productively put into dialogue to outline the genre, the Americas offer a particularly interesting example. Critical engagements that pose them as a unitary object of study highlight the magnitude and consistency of transnational contacts and migrations between the North and the South American sub-continents, at once symptomatic and representative of more general aspects of globalisation[51]. The novels here discussed are from different cultural contexts within the Americas, each partaking of the formal traits of the neoliberal novel and adapting them to its own particular exigencies. One of the central methodological premises of this thesis, therefore, is that the literature of the Americas at the turn of the millennium offers a privileged point of observation for the phenomenon of the neoliberal novel, as the four novels explored in this thesis demonstrate. Each of these fictions points to the world at large, but they all do so from the standpoint of an experience of exchange and transnationalism which is specifically pan-American[52].

[51] Ramón Saldívar, co-author of *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies After the Transnational Turn,* writes that 'one powerful function of aesthetic education in the age of globalisation might be […] to teach us how to conceive of transnational rights for individual and collective bodies of subjects, represented most saliently by the participants in the massive labour diasporas from south to north in the last decades of the twentieth century' (2013, 202).

[52] Jeffrey Lawrence has recently argued that the novelistic productions of the North and Latin American spheres have become more proximal and affine than ever, and I take the last chapter in his *Anxieties of*

That a set of texts from different parts of the Americas represents the ideal territory of inquiry for a delineation of the neoliberal novel is confirmed by the fact that three out of four novels converge towards a single point, and that such topographical entity is more of a threshold than a place in its own right—i.e. the Sonoran Desert, crossed by the infamous US/Mexican border. Characters from both *Underworld* and *Infinite Jest* contemplate the desert from its Arizonan side, while the bodies of many of the victims of murder and rape described in *2666* are abandoned or informally buried underneath the dunes of Mexican jurisdiction—specifically, the portion pertaining to the State of Sonora. The desert thus acquires a double symbolic significance. On the one hand, it stands for 'the border'—that is, the exact delimitation between different nation-states, but also between different kinds of subjectivities and levels of economic and humanitarian wellbeing. On the other hand, however, it also represents a void, or a non-place in which the close relationship between state and individual is perceived as if suspended. The desert, on this second level, is a site for both freedom and fear, as some of the characters from the novels seem to realise. Significantly, the trope of the desert also features in the Baudelaire quote at the opening of *2666*, suggesting that the literal flatness of the surroundings of Santa Teresa hides from view the murderous violence pervading the place: 'un oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento' (*2666* 9)[53].

In Bolaño's novel, it is Espinoza—a Spanish Professor of German Literature—who perceives all of the uncanniness emanating from the Sonoran landscape. The night he arrives in Mexico, he has a nightmare in which, he recalls, he looks into the frame of a painting in which 'podía contemplar el desierto estático y luminoso, de un amarillo solar que hacía daño en los ojos, y a las figuras montadas a caballo, cuyos movimientos, los de

Experience as a confirmation of the growing salience of the experience of both the transnational and the more specifically hemispheric registered by the novels here discussed. Lawrence writes, in 2017, that 'over the past decade […] the US and Latin American literary fields have grown significantly closer, merging several of [their] most important tropes: [i]n our own contemporary moment we may be witnessing the birth of something that may truly be called *a* literature—as opposed to the plural literatures—of the Americas' (2017, 209).

[53] 'An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom' (*2666* [English] n.p.).

los jinetes y los de los caballos, eran apenas perceptibles, como si habitaran en un mundo diferente del nuestro, en donde la velocidad era distinta, una velocidad que para Espinoza era lentidud' (*2666*, 153)[54]. So, the desert is a place of indistinctness, as the bright light that illuminates it throughout the day makes it difficult to apprehend what lies in there with clarity: the desert is always there as a presence and, especially, as a limit, but it is nonetheless mysterious and indeterminate. Espinoza casts himself in the role of the observer—and he is a privileged one, as he is visiting Mexico as a scholar from Europe, with little or no notion of the dynamics of violence and exploitation affecting the region: just like the desert itself is difficult to properly observe, so are the figures crossing it 'barely perceptible' and unintelligible, as if they lived 'in a world different from ours'. Of course, the 'world' inhabited by the dispossessed—such as the victims of the Mexican femicides—is not only physically adjacent to the wealthier regions of the world but, *2666* implies, its misery is also one of the necessary conditions for the material wellbeing enjoyed elsewhere.

The encounter between Espinoza and the figures within the painting, however, is not only one of misunderstanding and unintelligibility, and he is quickly acquainted with the dehumanising effects of the desert:

> Y luego estaban las voces. Espinoza las escuchó. Voces apenas audibles, al principio sólo fonemas, cortos gemidos lanzados como meteoritos sobre el desierto y sobre el espacio armado de la habitación del hotel y del sueño. Algunas palabras sueltas sí que fue capaz de reconocerlas. Rapidez, premura, velocidad, ligereza. Las palabras se abrían paso a través del aire enrarecido del cuadro como raíces en medio de carne muerta. Nuestra cultura, decía una voz. Nuestra libertad. La palabra libertad le sonaba a Espinoza como un latigazo en un aula vacía. Cuando despertó estaba sudando.[55] (*2666* 153-4)

[54] '[H]e could see the still, bright desert, such a solar yellow it hurt his eyes, and the figures on horseback, whose movements—the movements of horses and riders—were barely perceptible, as if they were living in a world different from ours, where speed was different, a kind of speed that looked to Espinoza like slowness' (*2666* [English] 114-5).

[55] 'And then there were the voices. Espinoza listened to them. Barely audible voices, at first only syllables, brief moans shooting like meteorites over the desert and the framed space of the hotel room and the dream. He recognized a few stray words. Quickness, urgency, speed, agility. The words tunneled through the

The neoliberal novel very much reads like Espinoza's dream, in which scores of human beings—bereft of both rights and social recognition—demand the readers' attention while at the same time remaining 'barely audible voices', somewhat lost in the swirling structures of the narrative. And, of course, confronting the impossibility of compensating for the injustice that has been perpetrated on them is painful, as the reference to torn flesh suggests. What is most terrifying, however, is the idea of the words 'our freedom'—foundational of the liberal perspective—pronounced by those very people whose capacity to live and act freely has been *de facto* completely annihilated by the economic mechanisms of neoliberal capital.

Conversely, in *Underworld* the Sonoran Desert is a place in which characters look for themselves, as if the emptiness of the landscape allowed their inner depths to emerge and become more distinct. This reflects the general vision of flatness and impersonality articulated in DeLillo's novel: personal identity is certainly not a burden, as in *Infinite Jest*—or an impossibility, as in *2666*—but rather a source of authenticity to be recovered from the chaos and unlinearity of modern American life. Nick Shay, *Underworld*'s main character, is not at all intimidated by the amplitude and repetitiousness he finds in Arizona. While his wife Janet 'seem[s] to resent [the desert] in some obscure personal way' because 'it [is] too big, too empty, [and] it ha[s] the audacity to be real', Nick finds in it an occasion to recuperate the sense of self that he lost in his turbulent adolescence, now almost three decades removed:

> The landscape made him happy. It was a challenge to his lifelong citiness but more than that, a realization of some half-dreamed vision, the otherness of the West, the strange great thing that was all mixed in with nation and spaciousness, with bravery and history and who you are and what you believe and what movies you saw growing up.

rarefied air of the room like virulent roots through dead flesh. Our culture, said a voice. Our freedom. The word freedom sounded to Espinoza like the crack of a whip in an empty classroom. He woke up in a sweat' (*2666* [English] 115).

> After a while he told her to stop looking at the book and look at the scenery but the scenery was empty spaces and lonely roads and this made her very nervous. (*U* 449-50)

Just like the national state expanded West, Nick implies, so does the individual personality find here sufficient room to fully express and deepen itself. The desert, in *Underworld*, is essentially a space to be appropriated by the nation-state and the citizen. The 'empty spaces and lonely roads', therefore, must remain such: no explicit reference is made in the novel to illegal immigration from south of the border. Yet the scenes set in the Bronx during the 1990s inevitably speak to the rapidly mutating composition of American society, with many of the homeless teenagers populating DeLillo's urban underworld being of Latino descent. The dispossessed—in *Underworld* as well as in *Infinite Jest*—are not, in most cases, migrants from a different national context, but rather those isolated and marginalised even within the confines of citizenship.

In these neoliberal novels from the Americas, then, the image of the desert symbolises the radical difference between those whose right to personhood is recognised and those who are denied it. We are used to conceiving of this unacceptable difference as a circumstantial evil—an historical insufficiency to be reduced through prolonged political commitment. Conversely, the provocative claim of Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito is that the boundary between the person and the non-person is intrinsic to the very logic of social and political recognition. In *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*, Esposito notes that the very concept of person already contains an exclusionary boundary between what is properly personal and what is not. At the root of the humanitarian crises of our times, Esposito contends, is this fundamental conceptual boundary, an inherent 'exclusionary disposition' which separates a dimension which is properly personal from its separate and inferior substratum[56]. The guiding hypothesis at the heart of his work is thus both theoretical and historical, as he investigates the

[56] Esposito 2012, 14.

relationship between the horrors of the twentieth century and the 'dispositif of the person'[57]. However, while he devotes considerable space to the history of the concept, Esposito does not identify any meaningful difference between the idea of person that operates in the biopolitical context of the Holocaust and that prevailing at the turn of the millennium[58]. In other words, if we accept Esposito's hypothesis on the violent boundary posed by the notion of person, it still remains to be ascertained how neoliberalism interferes with such a boundary, and perhaps even diverts its trajectory. Foucault's notion of *homo œconomicus*, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, is perhaps the most influential description of the specific form taken by subjectivity under neoliberalism, yet its foundation in theories of human capital makes it more relevant to the context of fully industrialised economies, rather than the Third World scenarios hinted at by Esposito[59]. Just like the global spread of capitalism necessitates zones of uneven development, it seems, so does subjectivity modulate in accordance with the economic structures of each of these zones. The 'entrepreneur of himself' is in fact the protagonist of a saga that takes place within economies in which knowledge and creativity are at the forefront of the creation of surplus value. These advanced economies are presented, in neoliberal discourse, as synonymous with modernity and, as such, representative of a status that countries in the Global South should aspire to[60]. It is possible to imagine a parallel expansion of neoliberal subjectivity—exported to other regions, just like modes of

[57] Ibid., 1-7.
[58] In particular, capitalism makes little or no appearance in the book, and one of the questions prompted by but not answered in *Third Person* is whether neoliberalism has penetrated our collective consciousness to the point of having altered our implicit notions of person and personality. Timothy Campbell, in his own examination of Esposito's book, suggests as much: 'so too we might want to follow out, in ways that I haven't, the deep affinity between the impersonal in Esposito with a thoroughgoing critique of neo-liberalism and its dispositions' (2010, 146).
[59] For a study of Foucault's reworking of the notion of *homo œconomicus*, see Read 2009.
[60] As Fredric Jameson writes in *A Singular Modernity*: 'if free-market positions can be systematically identified with modernity and habitually grasped as representing what is modern, then the free-market people have won a fundamental victory which goes well beyond the older ideological victories' (2002, 9-10).

production and exchange—but this needs to be thought of as overlapping and interfering with other subjectivities.

Once the outlook is extended to the global arena, there is at least another important lesson to be drawn from Esposito's conjectures on personhood, and one that perfectly fits with the comparative approach adopted in this thesis: that is, the intrinsic *relational* nature of the concept of person: what is properly personal can only be considered as such in contrast to something else. The boundary within the individual can be repeated, or projected, at the level of populations, with those at the top of a given social hierarchy standing for the rational qualities of the person, and those at the bottom destined to the nearly animal-like activities normally associated with the body. Rather than pertaining to a particular variance of the idea of person as it mutates across Western history, this double boundary is implicitly posited by Esposito as the central paradigm of the concept, shared by each of its instantiations. When considering the consolidating global hegemony of neoliberal subjectivity and its intermingling with other forms of life, then, it is necessary to consider the outlook that neoliberal ideology itself promotes upon such diversity and stratification. In other words, it is reductive to define neoliberal personhood, or subjectivity, as *one* and more or less unitary. What Esposito's reflections suggest, and invite, is an approach that accounts for the minimal juxtaposition of at least two kinds of subjectivities within the global scope of neoliberalism: one that is properly personal and another that is *less than personal*. This dichotomy can then be refined into a spectrum that includes a number of gradations between two poles, and the result will be a numerous set of possibilities and overlaps between *homo œconomicus* and the modes of subjectivity which it interferes with.

The task is doubly fascinating in that it allows not only for a better grasp of the interplay of heterogeneous and even competing forms of subjectivity in hybrid cultural and economic environments, but also for the kind of understanding of the ways of the

neoliberal *homo œconomicus,* which only a comparative and contrastive reading can provide. It would be equally simplistic to posit the neoliberal subject as monolithic and ubiquitous as to deny the force of its ideological affirmation. On the one hand, the life of those navigating an increasingly competitive job market in the developed world are formed as subjects in a radically different set of ideological presuppositions than those being exploited in the Mexican *maquiladoras* described in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, of course. Yet, at the same time, there is no denying that the mind-set of the former group has been acquiring an even wider currency, to the point that it is now hegemonic. Even those at the margins, in other words, are encouraged to make choices in the fashion of entrepreneurs, with the calculating habits of neoliberal subjectivity taking over their otherwise stratified identities. The form of subjectivity imposed upon the *maquiladora* workers—as well as upon countless other exploited lives in the Global South—can be understood as the emptying out of agency under the threat of death: theirs is a form of enslavement which cannot be said to be literally imposed with the force of violence, but rather of economic necessity[61]. Inequality, then, consists of social and economic mechanisms which implicitly grant different degrees of recognition for one's status as a person. After the neoliberal turn, however, matters of *material* recognition, especially, have been virtually expunged from mainstream debates on social justice in favour of more neutrally humanitarian forms of discourse. This dramatic shift constitutes the most distinctively neoliberal contribution to the 'dispositif of the person', as we shall see.

[61] This is a state of things that literature in the time of neoliberalism has indeed reflected, as is testified by Jane Elliott's critical work. In 'Suffering Agency: Imagining Neoliberal Personhood in North America and Britain', she examines the valence of agency under neoliberal rule and argues that, even in the industrialised world, this is experienced as an affliction rather than a positive capacity. Individuals are constantly encouraged to exert varying degrees of agency in order to pursue their own private interests, to the point that the freedom and efficacy implied by their behaviour paradoxically becomes an injunction: in this context, Elliott writes, 'agency can remain recognisably agency while becoming indistinguishable from profound domination' (2013, 88).

'The Full Development of Human Personality': Neoliberalism, Human Rights and Human Capital

Human rights discourse is the most influential ideological formation of our times. Since World War II, this has become the source of legitimacy for many different kinds of political and economic practices across the globe. The premise of Esposito's argument in *Third Person* is that its currency rests on the value universally attributed to the category of person. Yet, human rights discourse is not a unitary and immutable object: precisely because it is the synthesis of even opposing ideological and intellectual traditions, attention should be paid to the specific role it has played in the age of neoliberalism. As Human Rights scholar Samuel Moyn has noted, 'the transformation from the era of the welfare state to that of neoliberal economics now appears the most important setting for recounting the vicissitudes that "human rights" […] experienced in the later twentieth century'[62]. In his *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*, he goes as far as putting forward the hypothesis that there might be an allegiance—or, at the very least, a relationship of co-optation—between neoliberalism and human rights discourse. Moyn observes that 'human rights enjoyed increasing prominence in that very neoliberal age—breaking out into mass visibility in the 1970s when neoliberalism experienced its first breakthroughs, and ascending to something like a consensus public philosophy in the 1990s, when neoliberalism occupied the same status in worldwide economics'[63]. He concludes that 'the striking correspondence between the two naturally raises the question of their relationship to each other'[64].

The neoliberal novel offers an ideal territory of inquiry to answer the question of the relationship between neoliberalism and contemporary conceptions of 'the person', as it elaborates on these ideas through its own deployment of the category of character.

[62] Moyn 2018, x.
[63] Ibid., 174-5.
[64] Ibid. For accounts that highlight traits of causation and co-dependence between the two, see Klein 2007, 146-7, Marks 2013, 226 and Whyte 2019.

'Person' is always and necessarily a theoretical construct—a political and philosophical concept in continuous evolution and modification and, therefore, a creature of history and culture more than a metaphysical datum. As such, the concept is not at all distinct, or incommensurate, from that of 'character', as they both represent abstractions produced in the attempt to conceptualise the individual[65]. Crucially, character and person—as theoretical and linguistic categories—share an element which features prominently both in the discourse of human rights and in that of neoliberalism: i.e., human personality. The 1948 Declaration of Human Rights celebrates it as a genuinely universal value and sets the condition under which its development must be encouraged and guaranteed[66]. Whether it is considered a collective or an individual trait, 'personality' is posited as coessential to the quasi-sacral aura that the qualification of 'person' bestows upon the individual[67]. The idea that there is, indeed, such a thing as a 'human personality'—both

[65] In *Character and Person*, John Frow writes that 'characters and persons are at once ontologically discontinuous (they have different manners of being) and logically interdependent'. Thus, it follows that 'viewing persons as somewhat similar to fictional characters […] allows us to understand persons not at ontological givens but as constructs, which are in part made out of the same material as fictional characters' (2014, vii). Upon similar premises, an entire subfield of literary studies has been dedicated to the intersection of fiction and human rights over the last two decades. One of the most influential is certainly Joseph S. Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, which, in the author's words, 'elaborates "the image of the person"—the moral creature capable of bearing rights and duties—projected by both law and literature' (2007, 17). That such projection is in no way universal, but rather dependent upon a number of cultural and historical factors, is made explicit by Sophia A. McClennen and Slaughter himself in their introduction to a special issue of *Comparative Literature Studies*: 'if human rights are a problem of representation', they write, 'then they are a problem of comparison', thus further justifying the comparative approach of the present thesis (McClennen and Slaughter 2009, 12). More recently, Lyndsey Stonebridge has highlighted that the representation of character, in particular, is central to the articulation of human rights discourse within and through several kinds of narratives: 'Literary forms, like political forms, come with hierarchies. When a writer or journalist says he is "giving voice" to a refugee by including her story in his prose, what he is probably doing is casting her in a narrative that re-makes her life in a form he, and his readers, recognise as human because they're familiar with that particular kind of being human' (Stonebridge 2020, 13). From this, too, it follows that registering the 'uneven regimes of personhood' represented in the neoliberal novel is a productive way of investigating the fiction produced at the turn of the millennium. For an argument on the power of the novel to make other kinds of subjectivities known and relevant to middle-class readerships since its inception as a genre, see Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (2007).

[66] See Slaughter 2007, Preamble: 'The Legibility of Human Rights', 1-44, for an account the centrality of the concepts of 'person' and 'personality' to the 1948 UDHR. For more on the applicability of Slaughter's work to the neoliberal novel, see infra 141-55. However, any discussion of contemporary human rights discourse which takes the aftermath of World War II as a pivotal moment in their history should be counterbalanced with Samuel Moyn's caveat, in *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*: that human rights, Moyn argues, represent 'an old ideal that finally came into its own as a response to the Holocaust might be the most universally repeated myth about their origins' (6).

[67] In *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights*, German sociologist Hans Joas 'propose[s] that we understand the belief in human rights and universal human dignity as the result of a specific process of sacralisation—a process in which every single human being has increasingly […] been

at the individual and at the collective level—and that the possibility of its free development constitutes at the same time the precondition and the ultimate end of human life does not exclusively pertain to the realm of liberal humanism, but in equal parts to both the liberal and the socialist traditions. Distinct but comparable notions of human personality constitute the foundations of a wealth of different visions of the political ends of modernity, and it is testified by that laborious work of intellectual and ideological synthesis represented by the 1948 Declaration.

However, the human rights crises that have constellated the decades since the start of the neoliberal revolution represent a significant challenge to theories of social justice based on the sacredness of human personality, whether individual or collective. Inevitably, the fact that so many inhabitants of the globe are *de facto* denied access to the material and social preconditions for the flourishing of their personalities triggers anxieties relating to the relationship between individual and crowd that have accompanied the history of liberal democracy since its inception[68]. Crowds, for the liberal imagination, are scary precisely because they are composed of too many particular individuals, each provided with their own recognizable face. But to properly attend to the particularity of countless faces is an impossibility—hence the century's discontent with 'the tyranny of the human face'[69]. And the anxiety would of course be triggered again by the totalitarian experiments of the twentieth century, thus generating philosophies centred upon the status of the human face as synonymous with human dignity. Such is the case of Lévinas's

viewed as sacred, and this understanding has been institutionalized by law' (2013, 5). According to Joas, 'sacrality' does not have an exclusively religious meaning—rather, it can be predicated of secular content which is endowed with the attributes of 'subjective self-evidence and affective intensity' (ibid.). Therefore, the history of human rights and 'the history of the sacralisation of the person' should be understood as one and the same thing (ibid.).

[68] Emily Steinlight's *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* demonstrates the intimate relationship between the nineteenth century novel and biopolitics, and it does so by attending to those texts that, just like the neoliberal novel, were populous in their own right: 'the common complaint that novels were oversaturating their plots and their prose with unnecessary figures, trivial details, and valueless lives', Steinlight writes, 'attests to Malthusian premises[:] the conception of an overpopulated world shaped fiction's reception such that the excessive qualities of literary forms and styles effectively came to be experienced as crowding' (2018, 11).

[69] The phrase is from Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions*, quoted in Steinlight 2018, 1.

thought, which has more recently been revived by Judith Butler's writings on precarious lives[70]. Butler argues that in order to 'know the precariousness of life that is at stake' in a marginalised subject, it would be necessary to 'hear the face as it speaks in something other than language'[71].

'The face' is, of course, both the general and the particular human face: it is, at the same time, both the most human-like of the species' various traits and the site for the recognisability and self-expression of the particular individual. As such, the latter cannot be fully recognised by the polity when she is part of a crowd, as the crowd hosts so many people that its general anonymity takes over the individuality of its members. Philosophies of the face can of course potentially be reconciled with the problem posed by the crowd inasmuch as it is only the common belonging to a single species that is taken as the fundamental source of human dignity. The typical response of human rights-oriented campaigns when confronted with exploitation, abuse and discrimination, however, is much more aligned with Butler's stress on the importance of hearing the face, and not just contemplating it: the focus, in other words, is on self-expression and the particularity of a person's predicament. When large numbers of people are deprived of their lives by means of violence, we aim at compensating the lack of social recognition of their humanity by symbolically giving a name and a face back to them. In *Underworld*, the graffiti-artist Ismael Muñoz and his crew utilise the wall of a dismissed building in the Bronx as a memorial for the victims of street-crime: they 'spray-painted a memorial angel every time a child died in the neighbourhood. […] The child's name and age were printed under each angel, sometimes with cause of death or personal comments by the

[70] For a succinct introduction to the concept of 'face' in Lévinas, see Peperzak 1996, x-xi. As Peperzak summarises, in the philosopher's thought, 'the other's face or speech (or any other typically human aspect that reveals the other) is revealed as a refutation of any totalitarian or absolutist form of economy' (ibid.). For more on the concept's applicability to the neoliberal novel, and to Bolaño's *2666* in particular, see infra 139-40.
[71] Butler 2004, 151.

family' (*U* 239). Similarly, *2666* features the names and surnames of tens of murdered women.

The aesthetic and narrative principles expounded by the ghost of James Incandenza in *Infinite Jest* correspond to the urge of having a face and a name returned to the individual who has been made anonymous. The neoliberal novel, given its intrinsic propensity for numerousness, certainly represents the ideal territory for such ideals of symbolic equality to emerge, as its spaciousness could potentially reverse the fate of countless 'figurants' and have their personalities developed and exposed at their fullest. Potentially, within a structure such as that of the neoliberal novel, every marginalised life could become as rich and articulate as that of a protagonist. It must be noted, however, that such model is underpinned by precise ideological coordinates, as it centres upon the subject of bourgeois individualism and makes his qualities synonymous with human dignity and value. The literary stand-in for the liberal subject is a recognisable unity of personality traits concurring to the impression of being the expression and manifestation of a coherent human life. According to Greenwald Smith, nineteenth-century individualism was founded upon a conception of the subject as a discrete entity, whose capacity to act and think was independent from its societal connections. Conversely, the critic maintains, the specifically neoliberal evolution of the bourgeois individual conceives of himself as a node in a network of relationships which he has to bend to his own interests and purposes[72]. His own personality, that is, does not exist independently of the relationships he entertains with his peers, but is rather constituted by them, in conjunction with specifically individual traits. No aspect of the life of the individual is devoid of investment potential, as tastes, innate characteristics, skills and relationships all concur to a sense of specificity which can increase or decrease one's competitiveness on the job market. Thus, personality—as it is re-invented under the influence of human

[72] See Greenwald Smith 2015, 38-41.

capital theory—becomes both the object and the result of a never-ending process of self-branding. The individual is thus called to constantly elaborate upon his own given qualities, and discern between those deserving to be developed to their fullest potential—as they constitute a competitive edge in his social and economic environment—and those that need to be suppressed, as they are supposedly counterproductive to his own economic flourishing. The paradoxical nature of the neoliberal stance towards personality consists in the fact that it promotes a contradictory view of the subject towards the self: on the one hand, it is the irreplaceable source of individual worth, while on the other even its most essential qualities are made the object of constant change, following the dictates of the market. A certain degree of depersonalisation, therefore, is inherent in the neoliberal cult of personality.

The neoliberal subject is also, as a participant in the exchanges taking place in the market, essentially a consumer. And it is therefore only natural that the constant optimisation of the offer of products and services will yield an almost infinitely personalised variety of products. The hyper-particularising tendency of neoliberalism is therefore reinforced when the subject finds himself at the receiving end of the production-chain. Yet, in order to deliver on its premises, the market must decompose the individual in myriad personality traits, each corresponding to a particular need, and the consequential inclination towards the purchase of a given product or service. Personal identity thus becomes a device through which the market enables itself to influence the behaviour of vast aggregates of individuals. Importantly, the dichotomy that had haunted the liberal imagination for centuries—that of crowd and individual—is thus resolved in its neoliberal evolution, as what the market needs the most is a particularised description of large masses of individuals, considered not as unitary persons, but rather as bundles of consumeristic predispositions. Personal identity, in other words, loses its individual basis: it is no longer a quality predicated upon the individual, but rather one trait that can be

used to describe a given person in conjunction with others. Given such premises, it is only natural that several examples of the neoliberal novel—including the four studies in this thesis—turn away from the representation of personal identity and feature many characters that read as flat and unspecific.

Thesis Structure

When it comes to describing a literary genre in its historical emergence, as *Impersonal Selves* attempts to do, one possibility is that of approaching the issue through distinctively quantitative methods. Different strategies of 'distant reading' could be applied to the formal and quantifiable traits of the neoliberal novel, such as its length and number of characters. The perspective offered by such studies would allow us to visualize not only the growing salience of said traits across extended periods of literary history, but also the relative prominence of lengthy and populous works within the more contemporary and specifically neoliberal literary market. These are all viable and promising research routes. However, the approach adopted in the present thesis aims to explain the significance of such traits in light of their historical and political circumstances. Flatness and the evocation of crowds are here considered not in and of themselves but *in conjunction*, and the phenomenon of their intersection is to be explained in relation to the phase of 'normative neoliberalism'. The task of accounting for both formal and thematic features in response to the anthropological modifications of those decades thus necessarily entails a degree of proximity and attentiveness to context specificity that could only be attained by focussing on a mere handful of novels. Inevitably, such a limited set will sacrifice one kind of representativity to another, and it is important to mention the lacunae of any given approach. The most striking is the gender uniformity in this small canon. *Underworld*, *2666*, *Infinite Jest* and *El traductor* are all representative instantiations of the neoliberal novel but they also share another aspect: they were all written by men, and, with one

important exception, they tend to allocate most of their narrative space to male characters, rather than female or non-binary ones. The fact becomes even more problematic when we consider that Wallace has often been accused of misogynistic views, and that Benesdra centres a considerable portion of his novel on a sadistic re-enactment of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic all to the detriment of the woman in a heterosexual couple[73]. As the work of a male writer addressing a long list of ferocious and unpunished femicides, Bolaño's *2666* is another delicate case.

Thus, the danger inherent in selecting such a limited number of texts is that of replicating the same exclusionary logic in which they might partake, and lose the vantage point of different perspectives brought to the themes at hand. Given the coordinates of the project, it was difficult to find novels written by women with a set of formal traits intersecting flatness and crowdedness, all of which in chronological and thematic proximity to the phase of normative neoliberalism. Of course, the fact that a particular sub-genre of the novel appears to be more often authored by male rather than female writers should not be accepted as proof that there is something distinctively gender-specific about its forms and themes. One only needs to be reminded of the dynamics of historical canon-formation: if, as John Guillory has remarked, 'the traditional European canon has been a white male affair it is in large part because, until fairly recently, few women and minority writers had access to literacy—much less publication', then it is not difficult to imagine that, in more recent times, the internal and external pressures of the world literary market might have discouraged women to undertake creative efforts of a kind traditionally associated with male authors[74]. It is possible that women writers encounter higher barriers to publication when they do pen works of the magnitude of those treated here, and it is also likely that some will have interiorised an implicit dogma

[73] Amy Hungerford has probably been the most vocal among those of Wallace's detractors that take issue specifically with his putatively sexist views. See Hungerford 2016, 141-157.
[74] Guillory's words are paraphrased in Damrosch 2003, 16.

of the present literary work—one that dictates that the long and crowded novel, too, is indeed 'a white male affair'[75].

However, some exceptions to the rule are present, and were considered for treatment in the present thesis. Among these is Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2011. While the novel does lend itself to a reading focussed on numerousness—and while its protagonists live within a chronological framework almost exactly overlapping with the ascent of neoliberalism—the novel is also lacking in any evident formal experimentation revolving around the dichotomy of flatness and roundness of character. If anything, the psychological depths of each and every individual in the text are explored with a more or less homogeneous profusion of details. I reached the same conclusion about Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*, published in 2010. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), conversely, is a novel featuring tens of characters, and its frequent shifts in location, especially across the less-industrialised corners of the world, add to its relevance to the topics at the centre of this thesis. The crossing of the infamous US/Mexican border is explicitly thematised in the novel, thus offering the possibility to investigate how the subjectivity of characters is impacted by it. Furthermore, its focus on racial dynamics would have proved ideal to explore the racially inflected implications latent in both neoliberalism and certain conceptualizations of the category of person. The composite heritage of the author, too, suggests that her voice would have provided me with a chance to expand the outlook of this thesis in useful ways, as Silko was born in the United States and is of both Latino and Native American descent. Most importantly, *Almanac*, too, abounds with characters whose centrality does not always coincide with the depth to which their personalities are explored. Rather, the novel focuses so intensely on the depiction of violence and a disparate set of sexual perversions that the relevance of individual agency is somewhat

[75] See Anderson 2016 for a discussion of how women interiorise expectations regarding the kind of literature that they should write and consume.

mitigated by a sense of the pervasiveness of Euro-American hegemony and its dark side. Systemic forces seem to disrupt the natural development of individual personality in ways which the novel renders through a technique of characterisation which, in many passages, can certainly be described as 'flat'[76].

Thus, while *Almanac* demonstrates that impersonality can indeed be deployed as both a literary theme and a form by different writers regardless of their gender identity, the way in which it was received by academic critics and professional reviewers alike testifies to a certain resistance to the idea that a novel written by a woman should include flat characters and crude affects. Annette Van Dyke, writing about *Almanac* almost twenty-five years after its initial publication, writes that '[a] problem in [its] critical reception […] is that Silko has not written an appropriate novel as a female author'[77]. This, too, might have to do with the fact that characters in *Almanac* almost never display the kind of introspection and emotional complexity that many readers associate with both well-rounded characters and a feminine sensibility, thus suggesting that while flatness and impersonality do not stand in any direct relation with gender when it comes to the practice of contemporary authors, cultural stereotypes do exist that see them as incompatible with women writers. However, two reasons remained not to include Silko's novel in the list of case studies considered in *Impersonal Selves*. The first is the potential overlap with *2666.* In this respect, it must be noted that *Almanac* does not entirely fall into the chronological span identified with the expression 'normative neoliberalism'—i.e. 1989-2008. Although the novel was published in 1991, in fact, its composition started about a decade earlier, and this reflects in the particular themes treated[78]. Border violence, femicides and economic exploitation are issues treated in both *Almanac* and *2666* but, in

[76] The similarities in form between this text and some of the examples of the neoliberal novel I propose in *Impersonal Selves* have not gone unnoticed: Adam Sol, for example, writes that 'like the works of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William Vollmann and David Foster Wallace, *Almanac*'s vision is broad and dark, its cast of characters huge, its narrative line jumbled' (1999, 24).
[77] Van Dyke 2014, 31.
[78] See Clements and Roemer 1997, 285-6 for a chronology of the novel's composition.

the case of the latter novel, these are contextualised within the particular historical phase inaugurated by NAFTA, thus offering an opportunity for an exploration of the distinctively neoliberal intensifications of the region's human rights violations. Secondly, while both novels can be said to be transnational in their scope, it was important that the thesis maintained a strictly comparative approach, thus reading texts from both regions. It was therefore necessary to look at the US/Mexican border from the perspective of an author writing in Spanish. Nevertheless, *Almanac* represents an important case against which the hypotheses formulated in *Impersonal Selves* can be tested. This holds particularly true of the ideas relating to the interconnections between impersonality, neoliberalism and gender explored in Chapter Five[79].

The thesis is organised around two novels from the US and two from Latin America. Chapter One focuses on the relationship between flatness and impersonality in the neoliberal novel. I delve into both literary and world history in order to account for the specificity of their intersection in the age of neoliberalism. In the first section, I reconstruct a brief of history of varieties of literary flatness from the liberal through the neoliberal novel, thus including realist, modernist and postmodernist techniques of characterisation. I specify the fundamental features of the particular effect of flatness displayed in this subgenre. I call this 'magnified flatness' and argue that it is generated by the encounter between a substantial amount of information regarding the life of an individual character and the lack of a sense of uniqueness emerging from it. By granting minor characters with considerable attention while not foregrounding any depth to their psychological life, authors of neoliberal novels contradict readerly expectations regarding the difference between 'protagonists' and 'figurants'. The second section, which is entitled 'Impersonality and the Spectre of "The Long '68"', looks at the period of global unrest between the 1960s and the 1970s as the immediate historical and political

[79] See infra 240-52.

precedent to the neoliberal revolution, and reconstructs the evolution of a concept of impersonality which was articulated in that period as a response to changes in the capitalist economy. With the interrelated notions of flatness and impersonality thus contextualised, the thesis proceeds to an analysis of the four chosen novels.

All four partake in the qualities that I have ascribed to the neoliberal novel; at the same time, they each offer distinctive angles from which to observe particular issues and put them in relation with one another. Chapter Two is dedicated to the trope of the crowd as it is deployed in *Underworld*, DeLillo's magmatic American epic. The novel is probably the most extended fictional treatment of crowds from a writer who has been fascinated by the subject throughout his entire career. My main contention in the chapter is that *Underworld* makes an ambivalent rendition of the urban mass, as this is portrayed as both a dimension in which characters enter at the risk of sacrificing their individuality and, alternatively, as an occasion for the momentary suspension of the self in favour of an exhilarating sense of community and togetherness. I proceed to identify traces of a discourse on impersonality in both the novel's themes and technique of characterisation. Through a reading of some of the ekphrastic passages in the novel, I reconstruct a series of implicit poetic statements that I then compare with the general architecture of the work. This first part of the chapter allows me to discuss the social and political implications of DeLillo's work in light of his general critique of the relationship between citizen and national community. As Chapter Two shows, a particular conception of impersonality can be seen to correspond with the ideal of political participation, which is compared in the novel with the actualities of recent American history.

Chapter Three considers the case of *2666* in order to confront the dark side of human rights discourse and its implications for the stark global inequalities of its time. I argue that the very form of the novel is conceived as a critique of the kind of humanitarian rhetoric that equates the restoration of a victim's personal identity with the material and

moral recognition never granted to her in the first place. Claiming that 'the secret of the world' is hidden in the fictional town of Santa Teresa, one of the characters in *2666* suggests that the long list of femicides surrounding the Special Economic Zones of the Sonoran Desert reveals something about the general character of neoliberal exploitation. 'La parte de los crímenes' ('The Part About the Crimes')—one of the five in which the novel is divided—features a dry and interminable sequence of passages of quasi-forensic prose, in which the attempt of reconstructing the circumstances of a murder seems to parallel the necessity to recuperate the life and vitality of the deceased. Thus, in *2666*, flatness of character alludes to the impossibility of conceiving a life crushed by systemic violence in the same terms that apply to the more fortunate. Through a reading of Simone Weil's 'On Human Personality', I elucidate the implicit ethics of impersonality emerging from *2666* in order to show that this process of personification is presented as not only impossible but undesirable. The most respectful way to deal with the real-life femicides committed in Ciudad Juárez, the prose of *2666* suggests, is to embrace Weil's idea that what is supremely valuable, in human life, is what is impersonal in it: the real human tragedy is that *a* woman was deprived of her right to a dignified existence, and not *this* woman. A considerable portion of the Chapter is dedicated to an analysis of Bolaño's prose, which can be thought of as impersonal in its own right.

Chapter Four puts narrative flatness and impersonality in a different relation to neoliberalism by looking at the class dynamics of American society as it undergoes the neoliberal transformation. Wallace's *Infinite Jest* offers a fruitful testing ground for the hypothesis that neoliberalism successfully removed ideas of class and mutual exploitation from collective consciousness only to translate them on the anthropological terrain of the person and of social recognition. The novel aptly describes the atmosphere of its decade by representing society at large as polarised between the two extremes of the fully functional and deserving and those, on the other hand, whose misery is to be attributed to

their own personal failures alone: the Enfield Tennis Academy, an elite educational institution, rests on top of a hill in the Bostonian suburbs, with the Ennet Halfway House right at the bottom. Firstly, I situate *Infinite Jest*'s depiction of American society in the context of the sociological debates on the 'death of class' of the 1980s and 1990s, which testified to that long historical process that was the waning of the labour movement in the course of the neoliberal counter-revolution. I show that the concomitant rise of human capital theories applied to the restructuring of the labour-market explains why several characters in *Infinite Jest* perceive a deep sense of unease about their own personal identity, and why they articulate their distress in ways that call to mind the social and psychological wounds of the 'entrepreneur of himself'. A section is dedicated to the novel's countless flat and minor characters, who are reminiscent of neoliberal stereotypes associated with the notion of the urban 'underclass'. After discussing the novel's treatment of personal responsibility, and the relative lack of social and historical contextualisation for the urban decay it registers, I conclude that *Infinite Jest* is, to some degree, complicit with a specifically neoliberal appreciation of the value of the human being.

Chapter Five tackles the close relationship between the idea of impersonality and that of the end of history, which is so closely associated with the neoliberal turn. It does so by reading Salvador Benesdra's *El traductor* in light of Alexandre Kojève's lessons on the impersonal character of justice, an ideal state of things that would only be reached once the historic alternations between different political systems have achieved a synthesis. This is what Kojève refers to as the 'universal homogeneous state' and which Ricardo Zevi, the protagonist of *El traductor*, reads in the restructuring of the Argentinian economy taking place at the beginning of the 1990s. A lifelong leftist—and a committed Trotskyist—Zevi sees the fundamental coordinates of his personal identity collapse within his professional environment, too. He reacts by withdrawing into the private realm

of his apartment and of his romantic relationship, in which he enacts a distorted version of Kojève's thought and of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. In Zevi's interpretation, impersonality is a state of animal-like retreat from the historical and political responsibilities of the citizen and into the selfish and unlimited satisfaction of one's own most basic impulses. Conversely, impersonality turns into a nightmare of self-annihilation for his girlfriend Romina, as she is made the victim of Ricardo's male chauvinism. Benesdra's ultimate achievement lies in narrating the supposed end of ideologies in the form of an existential crisis, thus successfully describing the consequences of such epochal change on the individual consciousness. While *El traductor* has been celebrated by a niche of specialists as one of the masterpieces of Argentinian literature of the twentieth century, it is still a relatively neglected text, and critical treatments of it are scarce. Given the centrality of the theme of personal identity and depersonalization to the overall structure of the novel, Chapter Five functions as both a part of *Impersonal Selves* and a general introduction to a text which has been long awaiting its due recognition. The Conclusion considers the potential of the neoliberal novel to register different varieties of impersonal experience, in light of the preceding chapters. In particular, it notes that the impersonal is open to a variety of contrasting political valences, as different forces find in it in the natural territory in which authority and social change can be negotiated.

CHAPTER ONE
FLATNESS AND IMPERSONALITY IN LITERARY AND WORLD HISTORY

Impersonal Selves, as I have argued, is a study of the conspicuousness of flat characters within the neoliberal novel. The flatness pervading them, it has been suggested, is often different from a mere reduction to something less defined and specific than a character endowed with psychological depth. What constitutes the most interesting aspect of the four neoliberal novels analysed in the next chapters, in fact, is the clear impression that the real subject of each of them transcends the form of the individual while, at the same time, resting precisely on the representation of discrete fictional beings. It is not that individual characters are not important, but rather that they are not important because of their specificity. In other words, their flatness corresponds to a certain impersonal quality about them. At times, this impersonality does in fact coincide with a subtraction, as the neoliberal novel deploys it in order to signify the violent subjugation of individual personality through processes of exploitation. More often, however, impersonality in these texts differs from mere depersonalisation and represents a way of conceiving the individual person as valuable for reasons other than those traits we tend to associate with personhood and personality, particularly in their neoliberal varieties. However, both flatness as an aesthetic effect and impersonality as a philosophical concept have a history that far exceeds the more limited timespan of the neoliberal novel and, in order to account for the ways in which they came to be intertwined in this subgenre at the turn of the millennium, it is necessary to think of them historically. In order to do so, the first section of this chapter delves into literary history in order to illuminate what is distinctive about the way in which these novels handle flatness. In the second section, the historical context for the emergence of the neoliberal novel is further explored by reference to the political

and philosophical relevance of the idea of impersonality for the neoliberal revolution and its most immediate historical antecedent—i.e. the 'long '68'.

Magnified Flatness: Flat Characters from the Liberal Through the Neoliberal Novel

In order to appreciate the nexus between flatness and impersonality, it must be noted that, implicit in E.M. Forster's distinction between the 'flat' and the 'well-rounded', is a logic that runs parallel to Esposito's theorization of the relational nature of the concept of 'person': the negative and the positive ends of the spectrum are defined in opposition to one another, and it is only in this contrast that either of them is made visible. Flat characters, as we have anticipated, can at times be interpreted as fictional representations of an individual from which a fundamental aspect is said to have been retained. Yet what exactly constitutes this fundamental aspect can only be determined through an appreciation of what 'character', essentially, is. Narratologist Uri Margolin points to the ontological plurality of the category when he indicates that 'characters can be approached from different theoretical perspectives, each yielding a different conception and theory of character': he distinguishes between 'character as literary figure, that is, an artistic product or artifice constructed by an author for some purpose; character as non-actual but well-specified individual presumed to exist in some hypothetical, fictional domain—in other words, character as individual within a possible world; and character as text-based construct or mental image in the reader's mind'[80]. As Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski and Toril Moi note in their *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, criticism in both theory and practice has for the most part neglected the second and third perspectives in favour of an almost incessant focus on the formal properties of what were seen, in essence, as linguistic constructs. Referring to the influence of poststructuralism upon literary criticism, they denounce that 'these theories succeeded in their wish to avoid concepts

[80] Margolin 2007, 66.

such as the autonomous subject, the human, or reference to reality, but at the cost of leaving us with nothing to say about characters as objects of identification, sources of emotional response, or agents of moral vision and behaviour'[81].

Anderson, Felski and Moi's interest in the ways in which readers of all kinds will, with varying degrees of awareness, fall prey to the mimetic aspects of literary characters is consistent with a wave of critical efforts that have been made over the last twenty years to bridge the gap between formalistic and reader-oriented theorisations of them. One of the most ambitious attempts in this direction is Alex Woloch's *The One vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003). Woloch proposes the notions of 'character space' and 'character system' to ease 'the tension between the authenticity of a character-in-and-of-himself and the reduction of the character into the thematic or symbolic field'[82]. 'Character space' is the amount of narrative focus which is allocated to each individual character, while the 'character system' is the vaster totality in which different character spaces are constituted in relation to one another, in a sort of an economy of attention in which the more is assigned to a particular individual the less will necessarily have to be accorded to another, as the narrative can progress in only a limited number of directions. Thus, character can be thought of as a representation in the reader's mind that will be determined by both formal and mimetic aspects, as the overall structure of the character system will determine the extent to which any given portrayal can be taken as the more or less credible representation of a human being. Woloch defines character as an 'implied individual' and characterisation more generally as 'the literary representation of imagined human beings'[83]. When a sufficient portion of narrative space is granted to these imagined human beings, their 'referential personality' is evoked, and

[81] Anderson et al., 2019, 4.
[82] Woloch 2003, 16. For the notions of 'character space' and 'character system', see the Introduction, pp.12-42. In particular, Woloch defines character space as 'the particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determinate space and position within the narrative as a whole' (14).
[83] Ibid., 15 and 14, respectively.

from said formal constraints a linguistic effect is generated, as this 'personality' must be understood as 'the unique sense and abiding impression that the character leaves us with'[84]. In this, Woloch's view of novelistic characters is in agreement with the view of another eminent literary historian, Ian Watt, when he wrote that one of the distinctive features of the genre was that 'the plot had to be acted out by particular people in particular circumstances, rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types against a background primarily determined by the appropriate literary convention'[85]. Particularisation, in this model, is in direct proportion to presence.

Just like the personhood of an individual or a people, in Esposito's view, is predicated upon the relative presence of certain attributes against a backdrop defined by their absence—as in the dichotomy rationality/animality—so, too, flatness, in *The One vs. The Many*, is defined in opposition to personality intended as an impression of uniqueness regarding a given character's psychological coherence:

> [N]arrative flatness produces a disjunction between 'personality' and 'presence', dissociating the full weight of interior character from its delimited, distorted exterior manifestation. Forced to circumscribe the interior lives of many characters in the elaboration of a singular, central consciousness, the novel has to radically delimit and distort the exterior manifestation of 'roundness and fullness'. [86]

Woloch adds that, in flat characters, 'the free relationship between surface and depth is negated, the actualisation of a human being is denied'[87]. Thus, the distinction between 'figurants' and 'protagonists' maintained by the ghost of James Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, clearly echoes a preoccupation with the uneven distribution of space and attention that lies at the very heart of the novel as a genre, if we accept Woloch's theory. For the critic, this preoccupation in turn echoes the hopes and discontents of emerging liberal democracies in the nineteenth century, thus lending a clear allegorical dimension to the

[84] Ibid., 12.
[85] Watt 2000 [1957], 15.
[86] Woloch 2003, 24.
[87] Ibid., 25.

opposition between flat and round characters, respectively represented as those at the margins and at the centre of a given polis of literary figures. The flattening of characters, then, must therefore be understood as a reduction of something that was in fact present in the human referent but was later blocked or curtailed in its transposition to the formal mechanisms of the novel: Woloch insists that 'to square off "fullness and roundness" is to distort and limit it, to, literally, make a potential round character flat'[88]. 'Personality', therefore, is presented as the ontological core of the individual, as well as the very guarantee of its participation in the political community, and flatness signifies its suffocation, the impossibility to express one's own particularity.

Woloch is clear in maintaining that the theoretical insights proffered in *The One vs. The Many* are not only relevant to nineteenth-century realism and the liberal novel: he writes that his study 'addresses and connects a series of questions that have never been conceptually formulated but that are provoked by, and often essential to, any number of narratives'[89]. Indeed, in his Introduction he dwells on examples from such disparate places and times in world literary history as Homer's *Iliad* and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. But while the application of a 'distributional matrix' does in fact appear as a relatively objective analytical tool to be used on a diverse, and potentially all-inclusive, range of fictional objects, the same cannot be said about the qualitatively different materials contributing to a reader's sense of a character's 'referential personality'. When we confront the question of personality as a referent, we are entering the realm of a series of philosophical questions concerning the nature of an individual's interiority on the one hand and, on the other, of aesthetic expectations concerning the depiction of such nature. While the latter of course vary with time and place, the notion of 'personality' cannot be thought of in ahistorical terms either: one of the main reasons why character is one of the most fraught categories in literary theory is precisely that different aesthetic traditions

[88] Ibid., 22.
[89] Ibid., 13.

will call for different assessments of what counts as 'character', as concepts of the human referent and its relative importance change and the aesthetic norms to represent it change and develop.

Characters in novels, in fact, have the scope and meaning of their personalities shaped by the very conventions of the literary object in which they are immersed. As Nancy Armstrong writes in *How Novels Think*, 'the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same'[90]. In discussing the British novel of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, Armstrong describes how the particular sensitivity and worldview of the Victorian middle classes shaped notions of what a person essentially is: '[the] class- and culture-specific subject' represented by the ideal protagonist of the novel as it evolved and solidified over the course of two centuries, she concludes, 'is what we mean by individual'[91]. Thus, the character-form emanating from the novel is at once the product of changes taking place in English society and an instrument of ideological dissemination: it is not only the specific tastes and inclinations of the European bourgeoisie that are influencing the reading public abroad but, more surreptitiously, the very way of conceiving one's own individuality and place in society. 'Universalising the individual subject', Armstrong claims, is simply 'what novels do', and cannot help but doing, regardless of the genre's remarkable degree of adaptability to the most diverse cultural environments[92]. Yet from this fundamental premise another, less explicit, notion can be derived: the idea, that is, that psychological complexity and a refined sensibility are the true measures of an individual's worth. This hides from view the fact that these elements are not metaphysical absolutes but, rather, the cultural products of particular historical and geographical coordinates.

[90] Armstrong 2005, 3.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid., 10.

This view of characterisation reflects a notion of the value of human personality which is specifically liberal—and therefore liable to being co-opted by neoliberal mechanisms of exploitation. The neoliberal novel, conversely, deploys the same syntax and forms of its liberal antecedent but alters their significance. In the texts treated in this thesis, flatness of character is magnified through the allocation of considerable narrative space, and nevertheless persists as such. Minor and peripheral characters—especially when they are such by virtue of representing the dispossessed—are often granted the same treatment that would normally befit a protagonist, as their biographies and interior states are described in considerable detail. Nevertheless, the sense of vacuity and typicality does not abandon them, thus contradicting a model, such as Woloch's, in which attention and detail will necessarily produce the sense of being presented with a personality[93]. By thus 'expanding' flatness, the neoliberal novel puts into question both the ideal of human personality and the notion of novelistic character formulated by a long tradition of historians of the form, including, as we have seen, Watt, as well as Woloch and Armstrong. The question of whether the structure of the novel can in fact host within itself the form of a purely 'impersonal' character—that is, flatness deployed not as a confirmation by negation of the liberal subject, but rather as an alternative to it—is the question of whether the novel can betray its roots in the ideology of the middle class and point beyond it. Armstrong is peremptory on this point: 'I cannot quite believe', she writes, 'that any novel can reach in and modify the ideological core of the genre and still remain a novel'[94]. Certainly, in order to accommodate the numerousness of characters that allows its discourse on impersonality to emerge, the neoliberal novel has to stretch

[93] Marta Figlerowicz's *Flat Protagonists: A Theory of Novel Character* starts from the same intuition, but takes the nineteenth-century novel as its object of inquiry: the seemingly contradictory label of 'flat protagonists', in Figlerowicz's view, indicates those characters 'whose represented self-expression and ties to others contract and simplify over the course of a novel' (2016, 2). In order to represent them, the novels she examines 'invert [Woloch's] dynamic': they feature 'characters who, given their limited capacities, seem to have been given too much narrative space' (3). In the case of the flat characters considered in *Impersonal Selves*, however, 'self-expression' is often denied from the start, thus suggesting that presence and particularity are not necessarily correlated.

[94] Armstrong 2005, 10.

its structure to the limit: the deconstruction of values and ideals relating to the liberal individual can only take place within a deliberately centrifugal narrative structure.

The neoliberal novels considered in *Impersonal Selves* stage the contrast between a tendency of the prose towards the development of characters' individual personalities and the widespread presence, in them, of portrayals that disregard said tendency. In other words, these novels are structured around the inequalities in the rendition of characters' personalities, as flat characters are a constant and much visible presence in them. This is the case with both populous and sprawling novels such as *Underworld*, *2666* and *Infinite Jest* and the much more minimalist character system of Benesdra's *El traductor*, in which Ricardo Zevi and Romina each represent, in turn, opposite poles between the flat and the particularised. Flatness in these novels is distinct from the one found in previous phases of literary history, as the equation between character space and personality is problematized and, ultimately, rejected. Flatness thus points beyond personality and towards impersonality, offering different expressive possibilities: it can signify both depersonalisation and different forms of emancipatory impersonality. Above all, flatness in these novels encourage the reader to focus more on the overall network of characters than the individual representation of a human being. This is particularly evident in novels with large casts of characters, but it is true even in *El traductor*, in which the progressive dismemberment of Ricardo's personality corresponds to a higher degree of autonomy on Romina's part, thus shifting the narrative focus towards the dialectical opposition between the two and away from the protagonist's interior landscape.

In order to produce the particular effect of 'magnified flatness' which is the focus of *Impersonal Selves*, DeLillo, Bolaño, Wallace and Benesdra build on a repertoire of varieties of flat characterisations which they inherit from previous styles and phases in the history of the novel. To point to the necessity of a literary-historical approach to the problem of characterisation should not be taken as proof that a unified theory of fictional

entities is not possible or, for that matter, desirable. Rather, my contention is that the quantitative notions at the core of Woloch's theory can in fact be retained and applied to texts from different aesthetic and historical contexts, but only on the condition that they are unbound from any specific notion of personality. The interrelated notions of 'character space' and 'character system' are indeed useful in clarifying what is distinctive about the way in which the four neoliberal novels analysed in the present work handle flatness of character. The crowd members evoked in *Underworld*, the countless victims of femicides in *2666*, the recovering addicts in *Infinite Jest* and Romina in *El traductor* are all, in different ways, examples in which the novel's limelight has blessed one or more characters long enough with its persistence for us to feel disappointed at the lack of a distinct sense of personality emerging out of the pages which are dedicated to them. Thus, flatness in these neoliberal novels entertains first and foremost a different relationship to character space than that found in its liberal antecedent. Indeed, the specificity of the neoliberal novel can be defined in contrast not only with the kind of flatness of character found in the realist novel, but also with the different varieties in modernist and postmodernist texts.

As for modernism—here intended as both an historical precedent and a set of aesthetic possibilities—the relationship between flatness and roundness displayed in this style has its clear roots in the realist impulse towards a representation of interior lives, although it represents a profound departure from it. According to Anker Gemzøe, 'in prose fiction modernism may be characterized as some kind of reaction against the conventions of realist narrative' which has usually consisted in a mixture of two main routes[95]. This is a rejection of realism's alleged resort to stereotypes, which are propagated primarily through a narrative voice that operates by telling, rather than showing. In contrast, modernist writers report fragments of dialogue and interior

[95] Gemzøe 2007, 125.

monologues, thus beating realism at its own game by providing a much more 'realistic' rendition of psychological life[96]. This stance towards the conventions of previous modes of characterisation is most typically represented by Anglophone modernist authors. In fact, modernism's immense reach and diversity notwithstanding, few critics would deny the centrality of Conrad, Joyce and Woolf to an account of the transformations of the art of the novel throughout the first half of the twentieth century[97]. From the angle offered by both their critical essays and their practice as writers of fiction, it is possible to generalize the nature of the modernist novelistic character as that of the discrete and unitary centre of a stream of consciousness. The diversity of impressions provoked by the outside world de-centralises the subject by dispersing his or her thoughts, yet little challenge is posed in novels such as *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway* to the notion that a sense of unique and stable identity corresponds to every given individual[98]. 'Roundness' in the portrayal of character is, in modernist texts, a function of the immediacy with which the concrete mental states of an individual mind are rendered in prose, in all of their sensory richness and heterogeneity.

The second possibility which modernist writers have explored in their rejection of literary realism retracts from the representation of uniqueness and deploys narrative materials which display some of the qualities and effects typically associated with flatness. This strand, according to Gemzøe, consists in 'the rejection of realism in favour of narrative': in the modernism practiced by Kafka and other representatives of the Vienna and Prague literary scenes, 'the conventional conception of reality represented by the psychological and social realism of the nineteenth-century novel is problematized by the introduction of eccentricities and alternative worlds'[99]. Here characters are functions

[96] Ibid.
[97] For a discussion of modernism's coherence as a style, see Shiach 2007.
[98] For a summary of the notions of individual consciousness developed by William James and Henri Bergson, as well as of their impact upon modernist writers, see Fernihough 2007.
[99] Gemzøe 2007, 125.

of the text's expressionist and symbolic agenda, and the quest for the impression of uniqueness and credibility is abandoned in favour of other literary effects, with strategies 'favouring not the well-rounded narrative beginnings and endings, but the threshold situation, the sudden change, the complete metamorphosis from one state to another in utter contempt of realist rules'[100]. The abandonment of the psychological focus of the realist novel, on the one hand, and of Anglophone novelists' interest for perception and consciousness, on the other, qualifies the characters populating this latter variety of modernist writing as flat in a different way from some of the typical examples cited by Woloch, such as Dickens's minor characters, which are often described as stereotypical[101]. In contrast to them, the protagonist of Kafka's *The Trial* is neither peripheral nor 'suffocated' from the exigencies of the novel's economy: rather, he is flat inasmuch as he represents an abstract existential condition that does not necessitate of any particularisation in order to be represented. In this sense, he is more similar to the character in a parable, or a fantastic tale: the 'threshold situation[s]' of Kafka's prose do not remind us of a depth that has been denied or left undeveloped in its rendition, but rather encourage us to utterly abandon the expectations for psychological verisimilitude that pertain to other genres.

Postmodernist writing, in turn, reformulates the relation between flatness and roundness in accordance to its vocation for ontological questions. As Brian McHale writes in his seminal work on the subject, 'postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues'[102]. Modernist writers, McHale contends, construct their narratives in such a way as to foreground representational problems linked to the plurality and incompatibility of different points of view: the same vicissitudes acquire new particulars

[100] Ibid.
[101] See in particular Woloch 2003, 24-26 and 32-37.
[102] McHale 1987, xii.

and connotations as they are recounted by different characters, each bringing to the table not only the partiality of his or her own role in them, but also the cognitive or psychological specificities by which he or she has interpreted them. But once these representational issues are exacerbated to the point that they seem to denounce an irreconcilable flux of heterogeneous forms of knowledge, McHale continues, epistemological questions tip into ontological ones: the more mature works of writers such as Faulkner and Beckett are properly understood as first and foremost preoccupied with the coexistence of different and alternative layers of reality. As for the quality of characters in these texts, the most distinctively postmodernist approach to them consists in flattening them out in order to highlight their artificiality and dependence upon the overall linguistic workings of the novel. The nexus between flatness and meta-textuality is highlighted by Raymond J. Wilson, who lists, among the four properties defining the postmodernist novel, both 'a turning away from penetration into the psychological depth of character as the primary goal of fiction' and 'a propensity for metafiction, in which writing draws attention to the techniques and processes of its own creation'[103]. In postmodernist fiction, then, flatness of character primarily functions as a means to break the mimetic effects of the prose and point to the distinct ontological levels to which characters, narrators, authors and readers pertain.

Although these categories of characterisation are built on Anglophone primary texts, it is possible to trace genealogies of literary techniques that connect the varieties of flatness we have identified to the specific traditions that influenced the work of Benesdra and, especially, Bolaño. Postmodernism 'is by no means merely a Western phenomenon; it also appears in different forms elsewhere', as Wang Ning has claimed[104]. Similarly, the legacy of modernism—here intended in its Anglo-American sense—is evident in the so-

[103] Wilson 1992, 50.
[104] Ning 2013, 264.

called Latin American Boom[105]. This is an expression usually deployed to indicate the enormous critical and commercial success of the works of mainly four Latin American writers—Mexico's Carlos Fuentes, Argentina's Julio Cortázar, Colombia's Gabriel García Márquez and Peru's Mario Vargas Llosa—over a span of years that approximately coincides with the 1960s. Gerald Martin writes that 'the 1960s Boom saw both the climax and consummation of Latin American modernism (in the Anglo-American sense of the word) and catalysed the inauguration of Latin American postmodern narrative (in which the Boom writers would also participate)'[106]. Martin also cites a well-established critical consensus that Cortázar's *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch*] was 'something like "Latin America's *Ulysses*"', and indeed the influence of Anglo-American modernist writers on the Boom was repeatedly acknowledged by the four authors themselves[107].

At the same time, however, the aesthetic of complexity which the Boom writers had inherited from their Anglo-American models soon became an orthodoxy and therefore invited acts of literary rebellion. Furthermore, a perceivable break with the tradition of modernism was clearly present even in the most canonical works from the Latin American 1960s, with the pinnacle of the Boom's international acclaim coinciding with the publication of García Márquez's *Cien años of soledad* [*One Hundred Years of Solitude*] in 1967, certainly the most distinctively postmodern among the Boom novels. The literary production that followed this period of immense visibility was inevitably characterised by the attempt to avoid the set of expectations and constraints that the Boom itself had determined. The commercial success and viability of certain stylistic features now associated with the whole of Latin American literature in the minds of millions of

[105] Any comparative discussion of these aesthetic formations between the Anglo-American and the Latin American context is complicated by the fact that, as John Beverley and José Oviedo write in their Introduction to *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, 'the words *modernismo* and *postmodernismo* designate in Latin American Spanish early-twentieth-century literary movements that have no direct correspondence to what are generally understood as *modernism* and *postmodernism* in English' (Beverley et al. 1995, 2).
[106] Martin 2013, 479.
[107] Ibid., 480. For Faulkner's influence, in particular, see King 2005, 64.

readers across the globe meant that they now had to be avoided at all cost if one did not want to play into limiting cultural stereotypes. New paths had to be taken. What, in the following decades, would be described as 'Post-Boom' literature was a much more heterogeneous set of formal solutions and thematic preoccupations: Stephen M. Hart notes that, from the 1980s, 'it became difficult to talk of a single canon'[108]. Women's writing, queer literature, the genre of *testimonio*, as well as Latino and Brazuca canons started to emerge in the context of a general simplification of narrative structures and pronounced attention for those forms of mass culture that were gradually becoming omnipresent in the Latin American context[109].

Within this vast array of aesthetic forms, it is possible to trace particular genealogies of flatness—relationships of influence and adaptation—in order to put the four novels treated in *Impersonal Selves* into a wider literary and historical context. Fiction from the last decade of the millennium, in fact, seems to be pervaded with a preoccupation with a kind of flatness that goes beyond the representation of characters and extends to every corner of human experience and perception: in both the US and Latin America, one of literary fiction's main focuses is globalization as a *fait accompli*, inasmuch as television and multinational-driven consumerism have already changed the very substance of everyday life, bringing an unprecedented level of sameness to the experiences of people living in very distant corners of the globe. As Lucas Thompson writes, 'from his various statements, it is clear that Wallace perceived global capitalism as an unprecedentedly homogenizing force, flattening out local particularities and bringing about a blandly undifferentiated form of human experience'[110]. Similarly, DeLillo's foray into the 'other side' of the Cold War, in *Underworld*, registers the ubiquity of Western popular culture across the globe. In parallel, over the course of the

[108] Hart 2007, 250. For useful surveys on the Post-Boom canons and the critical debate on them, see Hart 2007, 250-88; Swanson 1995; Swanson 2005; Williams 2003, 163-205.
[109] See Swanson 1995, 161.
[110] Thompson 2016, 18.

1990s, the Latin American literary scene saw the rise of two movements that claimed both their independence from the aesthetic of the Boom and the necessity to represent the ongoing Americanization of life and culture—namely, the Mexican 'Crack' and the Chilean 'McOndo'[111]. Bolaño and Benesdra belong to the same generation as the Crack and McOndo writers, and the 'flattening out of local particularities', as we shall see in the next chapters, is very much at the centre of their respective literary projects.

In treating this phenomenon through both the form and content of their fictions, Wallace, Bolaño and Benesdra draw, just like other members of their generation, from the repertoire of techniques relating to narrative flatness which they postmodernist forebears, especially, left behind. As for DeLillo, he is of course one of the postmodern masters of the 1980s himself, but by the 1990s he has extended the set of thematic interests that shaped works like *White Noise* significantly, and the very structure and length of *Underworld* testify to an evolution in the way in which he handles individual characters and the intertwining of their fates within the overall arc of the novel. Furthermore, both Wallace and Bolaño had such an eclectic set of literary influences that they in fact were able to put, each to a different extent, the North and the Latin American canons in conversation. In delineating the writer's Latin American influences, Thompson writes that 'Wallace perceived the Latin American literary tradition as being capable of expressing "the stuff of spirit and human feeling" within a postmodern aesthetic'[112]. As for Bolaño, he famously claimed that 'in the Americas, all modern fiction springs from two sources: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby-Dick*', thus making explicit his tendency to read literature from both the North and the South continent as relating to a unified form of experience that was quintessentially 'American'[113]. Wallace and Bolaño also share an admiration for the work of Jorge Luis Borges, and the former, in particular,

[111] See O'Bryen 2011for a critique of the McOndo aesthetic.
[112] Thompson 2016, 52.
[113] Valdes 2008, n.p.

seems to have inherited from the Argentinian writer an interest in stories that do not depend upon an excavation of the interiority of individual characters: as Wallace writes in 'Borges on the Couch', an essay that first appeared in *The New York Times*, '[Borges's stories] are designed primarily as metaphysical arguments; they are dense, self-enclosed, with their own deviant logics[: a]bove all, they are meant to be impersonal, to transcend individual consciousness'[114]. Indeed, the same tendency towards deploying characters as instantiations of generalizable metaphysical conditions is present, to some extent, in *Infinite Jest*, but complete and most clearly visible in Wallace's short stories, especially the ones included in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, with the protagonists of the 'Pop Quiz 6' section in 'Octet', for example, rarefied to the point of being referred to merely as 'X' and 'Y'[115].

Bolaño and Wallace, in particular, spoke of their respective bodies of work in relation to the preceding generation of writers, thus contributing to the critical assessment of the distance in forms and themes separating two different phases of world literary history. This literary distance can be gauged from the standpoint of the treatment of characters, too, and in fact it does help us to account for the distinctive variety of character flatness displayed in *2666* and *Infinite Jest*. In both cases, the standards set by the literary forebears of the 1960s were seen as a precious inheritance that needed to be repudiated, at least to some extent, in order to liberate oneself from the shackles of the past and proceed to create something in line with the problems and expressive solutions demanded by the times. In the case of the Chilean writer, the Boom represented the most obvious candidate for a form of 'grateful parricide'. At times, Bolaño's critique is implicit in his very usage of certain literary techniques and concepts that are usually associated with the Boom writers, as in the case of his reworking of Mario Vargas Llosa's 'total novel' in

[114] Wallace 2013, 288.
[115] Wallace 2000, 134.

2666[116]. Bolaño was certainly not the first to protest against the aesthetic and political implications of novels purporting to be 'total' representations of their world. In fact, as Raymond L. Williams notes in accounting for the evolution of Latin American fiction in the 1970s and 1980s, writers such as Diamela Eltit, Tununa Mercado and Alicia Borinsky constructed their stories in ways which cast a negative light on such ambitions: 'their novels tend to leave the reader lacking sufficient information to construct a complete story', Williams writes, 'and thus they question the authority of the Boom novelist to create the total novel'[117]. One of the ways in which these writers conducted this critique was that of including marginalized characters in their works, so as to highlight the dangers of the centralisation of the narrative and of its social scope.

Bolaño, too, as we shall see in Chapter Three, would later use the form in which his characters were brought on the page as a tool to transform his literary inheritance and adapt it to new ends. The flatness displayed in *2666*—and in the 'crímenes' section in particular—derives in part from the analogous treatment of characters in the work of the one among the Boom writers for whom Bolaño had nothing but praise—namely, Julio Cortázar. Here, again, the genealogical line connecting flat characters in a novel like *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch*] to *2666* can be identified by highlighting vectors of influence and continuity including Latin American postmodernist writers. Borinsky is a good case in point, as she theorizes about the form of character and Cortázar's relevance to its usage in Latin American fiction. In her *Theoretical Fables*, she describes the Argentine writer's approach to character by referring to the theories of Morelli, Cortázar's fictional alter ego in *Rayuela*: 'Morelli', Borinsky writes, 'wants to dismantle the notion that causality is an adequate tool for explaining behaviour; he tries to undermine the unity of characters with

[116] Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat thus describes Bolaño's reworking of this particular form: 'it is often said that *2666* is Bolaño's stab at the total novel, a form that was at its height during the Latin American Boom of the 1960s and that was practiced and theorized by Mario Vargas Llosa, among others. […] As for *2666*, there's no question that the novel intends to trace an image of evil on a global scale, but totality here comes in parts' (Gutiérrez Mouat 2016, 174). For a very good 'catalogue of properties' of the 'total novel' as it travelled from the Anglophone to the Spanish American literary scene, see Fiddian 1989, 33.
[117] Williams 2003, 211.

strong selves'[118]. Williams notes that the same can be said of Borinsky's characters[119]. Indeed, the fact that one of the four literary critics featured in the first section of *2666* goes by the name of Morini—an Italian surname so similar to that of Cortázar's alter ego—is no coincidence. Morini is the one, among the four protagonists of the first part, to intentionally take on the role of observer, leaving his colleagues to travel all the way to Santa Teresa while he remains at home in Italy. And, indeed, Pelletier and Espinoza, in particular, find it difficult to explain their own behaviour in terms of precise nexuses of cause and effect[120]. Thus, the process of literary deconstruction of 'the unity of characters with strong selves', which in *2666* is juxtaposed to other kinds of flatness of character—most importantly, to the variety associated with the victims of femicides—finds its origin in Bolaño's conscious reworking of Cortázar's formal experiments and in his adaptation of them to the historical and political contexts symbolised by the fictional town of Santa Teresa.

Something similar can be said of Wallace's critique of his postmodernist forefathers, which was never separated from a deep admiration for the work of Thomas Pynchon. As Adam Kelly and other critics have pointed out, Wallace's theorizations of the value of fiction in the American culture of the 1990s—usually referred to as the 'essay-interview nexus', in reference to the two pieces in which they were articulated—are central to the definition of what came increasingly to be known as 'post-postmodernism'[121]. According to Robert McLaughlin, post-postmodernism 'is a movement in US fiction that took shape in the late 1980s as a response to both a perceived exhaustion of American postmodernism and the growing dominance of television in American popular culture'[122]. The category of literary character is central to this

[118] Borinsky 1994, 56.
[119] Williams 2003, 212.
[120] See infra 256-7.
[121] The expression 'essay-interview nexus' is to be found in Kelly 2010, 53. This comprises Wallace's own 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction' and Larry McCaffery's 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', both published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993.
[122] McLaughlin 2012, 212.

movement, as McLaughlin acknowledges in summarising discontents with the work of Pynchon and other postmodernists: 'why can't these authors put aside their postmodern games, their annoying stylistic tricks', many readers of American literary fiction were asking themselves in the 1990s, 'and give us characters we can care about and a plot in which we can lose ourselves?'[123]. As Brian McHale notes, 'no matter how [postmodernism] is characterised, however, the fiction of Thomas Pynchon appears to be universally regarded as central to its canon'[124]. Thus, it is only natural that writers such as Wallace would look at his way of treating character in order to draw on his techniques and adapt them to the needs expressed by post-postmodernism as a movement.

The individuals of Pynchon's fiction—especially in novels from the early part of his career, such as *V.* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)—are consistently represented as flat inasmuch as their particularity is made irrelevant by the influences of power and language surrounding them[125]. The fact that they do not possess a stable centre of identity is also explicitly thematised in the rendition of characters such as Lady V. and, in the latter novel, Tyrone Slothrop, as the following often-quoted passage makes clear:

> There is also the story about Tyrone Slothrop, who was sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly—perhaps, heavily paranoid voices have whispered, his time's assembly—and there ought to be a punch line to it, but there isn't. The plan went wrong. He is being broken down instead, and scattered. His cards have been laid down […] laid out and read, but they are cards of a tanker and feeb: they point only to a long and scuffling future, to mediocrity (not only in his life but also, heh, heh, in his chroniclers too […]—to no clear happiness or redeeming cataclysm. [126]

The reference to Slothrop's chroniclers confirms that the postmodern variety of character flatness—the quality that makes individuals such as Tyrone himself 'broken down' and

[123] Ibid.
[124] McHale 2012, 97.
[125] Deborah Madsen writes that 'Pynchon's characters are thematised as artefacts of larger discursive systems that enact patterns of control, power and ownership. That is, characters do not possess the innate selves assumed by liberal humanism: rather, they are spoken by powerful cultural agents like governments, popular culture or, more often, corporations' (Madsen 2012, 151).
[126] Pynchon 1973, 738.

'scattered'—is brought to the fore through the metafictional effect generated by these narratives. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, too, characters are made flat by the constant reminder that they are, in fact, linguistic constructions in which life has been inflated by an author.

But in post-postmodernist fiction, what counts above all is the connection that the text enables between the reader and the projected figure of the author, which implies that characters can be made flat but, at the same time, also the credible vectors of empathy and the mimetically credible representation of basic emotions. Post-postmodernists like Wallace, in sum, aim at filling the flat vessels they have inherited from previous forms of fiction with a renewed interest for feeling. In this sense, these writers can be said to have capitalised on one of narratologist Suzanne Keen's hypotheses about narrative empathy: 'empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterisation'[127]. Post-postmodernist flat characters, resembling real-life human beings in their generic capacity for basic forms of feeling and suffering, are therefore in line with these criteria even though they may be represented as 'broken down' and 'scattered'. Writers and readers alike felt that 'the breakdown of the autonomous, integrated individual' which poststructuralism had theorised and postmodernism represented through its own variety of flat characters had left values such as sincerity, empathy and solidarity on the outside of what was considerate legitimate literary fiction, a problem that contemporary writers should now address[128].The formal lessons of the postmodernists were to be retained, but the emotions and personal stories of characters were to be credible and well-articulated, so that fiction could return to its previous role as a catalyst for a sense of warmth and human connection, even in the face of the solipsism promoted by American culture at the turn of the millennium.

[127] Keen 2007, 169.
[128] McLaughlin 2013, 285.

The post-postmodernist focus on feeling which is clearly present in *Infinite Jest* is absent from the other novels considered in *Impersonal Selves*, thus suggesting that, even within the genre of the neoliberal novel, flatness of character can be deployed as an aesthetic means towards more than one end. As we have seen, however, different kinds of flatness in the neoliberal novel are all connected by the same formal model: that of 'magnified flatness', which contradicts the assumption that the development of a character's personality stands in direct relationship with character space. Once we consider this variety of flatness in conjunction with the thematic preoccupations that are typical of the neoliberal novel, it is possible to understand this particular model of flatness as a formal solution used by writers of the 1990s to tackle the set of historical and political problems posed by the rise of neoliberalism—both within the economies of single industrialised countries and across the boundaries of the nation-state. Ultimately, it is the tension generated by geographical and political borders to constitute the representational problems which the writers considered in *Impersonal Selves* attempt to solve through their extensive deployment of 'magnified flatness'. We have already seen how flatness can be used in order to evoke the depersonalising tendencies of neoliberal capital or, alternatively, as a way of gesturing towards modes of subjectivity that reject the binary opposition between the personal and the depersonalised in favour of a properly impersonal approach to individual and collective life. The chapters dedicated to each of the four novels of *Impersonal Selves* feature a representative set of these alternatives: in *Underworld*, impersonality names both the quality of the discarded piece of consumeristic waste and the state of togetherness to which Sister Edgar aspires; in *2666*, it stands for both economic exploitation and the irreducible sacredness of the victims' bodies; in *Infinite Jest*, it is the psychological cost of extreme competitiveness and the state of grace one can achieve through physical labour; while *El traductor* conflates the two possibilities in a contradictory whole, as Ricardo Zevi depersonalises himself in a failed attempt at

psychological and emotional survival and his girlfriend Romina nearly annihilates herself in order to get closer to him. We shall now proceed to consider how these varieties of impersonality are intertwined with the history of the neoliberal revolution and its historical antagonist—namely, the 'long '68'.

Impersonality and the Spectre of 'The Long '68'

In the decades of the neoliberal turn, the 'dispositif of the person' itself is subject to change, given the anthropological transformations in progress. It becomes a slightly different cage, as its contours are now inflected with the economistic logic of the times. To appreciate this transformation, it is necessary to understand the neoliberal turn as a counter-revolution set up to counter a precise set of desires and political demands. In other words, it is necessary to look back to 'the long '68' as the fundamental antagonist that neoliberal ideology mobilises against. The expression 'long '68' is, in particular, a reference to Richard Vinen's work on the socio-political events of the 1960s and 1970s. In the introduction, Vinen writes that he has distinguished 'between "1968", by which [he] mean[s] a single eventful year, and "'68" or "the long '68", by which [he] mean[s] the variety of movements that became associated with, and sometimes reached their climax in, 1968 but cannot be understood with exclusive reference to that year'[129]. The relationship between 'the long '68' and the moment of neoliberalism has been the subject of heated debate over the years, as different and competing narratives have been put forward regarding their points of convergence and antagonism[130]. The connotations

[129] Vinen 2018, 14. I prefer the expression 'long '68' in the present context precisely because it synthesises a variety of social, political and ideological positions within a unitary continuum while giving at the same time the impression of their unravelling over an arc of time that allows for evolution, multiplicity and contradiction, and which does not completely overlap with the 1960s. By making it clear that the following decade well partakes of some of the same features, the expression also has the advantage of highlighting the chronological proximity with the neoliberal turn and, to some extent, of implying the reactionary character of the latter.

[130] In an article published for the fiftieth anniversary of May '68, Christian Laval retraces the main positions in this debate. The sociologist sets out to answer the question of 'whether, as has often been said […] May '68 paved the way for the neoliberal turn our societies were to undergo in the following decade, and if the historical signification of the event can, in some way, be turned onto a path […] that May '68 could have

acquired by the concept of person under the aegis of 'the long '68' cannot be understood without reference to the wave of decolonization started in 1945. Over the next couple of decades, the formerly colonised world became active on the stage of international relations as never before, and visible under a new light: as a multitude of persons—and not merely peoples—who could now aspire to the same levels of wealth and political representations as their peers in the industrialised regions of the planet. All of a sudden, the privileged status of the Western 'person' was extended to a seemingly infinite number of individuals. Sartre's famous Preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* registered the profound difference with the old colonial ways: 'Not so very long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million *men* and one thousand five hundred million *natives*. The former had the Word; the others merely had use of it'[131].

As Jameson notes in his commentary on Sartre's Preface, 'the 60s was […] the period in which all these "natives" became human beings, and this internally as well as externally' and we could add that they more specifically became 'persons'—the proper subjects of the humanitarian crises that would take place over the course of the following decades. When Jameson refers to the internal and external dimensions of this epochal process of recognition, or personification, he is pointing to the fact that those marginalised within the societies of the industrialised North, too, started to become increasingly more visible in public discourse, along with the populations of the former colonies. It is only through the painful and unsettling encounter with the kind of life that has not (yet) been

announced, engendered or accelerated' (Laval 2018, 9). In answering this question, Laval builds on the previous work of Kristin Ross, who writes that one influential but fundamentally misleading interpretation of 1968 'asserts that today's capitalist society, far from representing the derailment or failure of the May movement's aspirations, instead represents the accomplishment of its deepest desires' (Ross 2002, 6). Laval shows that 'the idea of a "neoliberal May '68"' has been the product of revisionist approaches put forward by Régis Debray and other French intellectuals since the end of the 1970s. This narrative is still influential on the twenty-first-century French political scene. 'Indeed, not only has there been a *deactivation* of the critical charge of the revolt', Laval concludes, 'an *ignorance* […] of its sociological composition and a *depoliticisation* under the auspices of a culturalist interpretation—there has been a *fundamental reversal* of its political significance' (10-1). This narrative should be understood as a '*strategic response* to the widespread protests of '68' (11). See also Parkinson 2018 for a similar delineation of the 'neoliberal May '68'.

[131] Quoted in Jameson 1984, 181.

recognised as 'personal' that the artificial character of personhood is revealed as such: the problem is therefore double, as it involves both the observer and the observed. At the turn of the millennium, then, there is something more radical that the novel must register and incorporate within its formal logics than the political demands of a consolidating liberal democracy: the failure of the political project it had laid out for the West, first, and then the world at large. Contemporary critics of liberalism will often assert that liberalism 'has failed because it has succeeded', by which they mean that its promises of individual freedom transformed its subjects into 'increasingly separate, autonomous, non-relational selves replete with rights and defined by [their] liberty, but insecure, powerless, afraid, and alone'[132]. Such critiques only seem to confirm the paradoxical nature of the concept of person identified by Esposito: the more this philosophical and juridical fiction is given substance within those political assets that recognise it as a sacred and inviolable entity, the more its lack of adherence to reality is exposed, thus indefinitely expanding the magnitude of its failure to include all individuals.

The relevance of ideals of person and personality to 'the long '68' emerges on a different level, too: the field of social relations within industrialised countries, as they are mediated by capitalism. One of the demands of the decade that the neoliberal counter-revolution succeeded in co-opting is that concerning profound change within workplaces that were considered deeply hierarchical and repressive. As French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello suggest, the demand for more creative jobs was made in particular by students, who centred their critique of capitalism around the watchword of 'alienation', while factory workers still spoke the language of 'capitalist exploitation' and consequently focused on the quantitative, rather than qualitative, aspects of labour[133]. Having elected Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* as one of the key-texts of the revolts of 1968, French students were ready to read even in the white-collar jobs awaiting

[132] Deneen 2018, 16.
[133] Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 169-70.

them an analogue to the oppressive strictures of the modern family. In order for society to flourish, this line of argument went, individuals had to be liberated from the quasi-Taylorist routines forced upon them by the economy, so that individual personalities could be freely expressed and developed: 'their positive counterpoint', Boltanski and Chiapello remark, 'was demands for autonomy and self-management, and the promise of an unbounded liberation of human creativity'[134]. Such demands, however, ended up being in perfect accord with the neoliberal fragmentation of the workplace, as it would be apparent only a handful of years later. The capitalist firm—which was gradually evolving into the neoliberal workplace *par excellence*—was in fact more than ready to render work more individualised. If it is the ethos of the firm that, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, becomes the 'new spirit' of social relations under neoliberalism, then it can only be thought of in relation of its own other, which it has subsumed—i.e. the set of collective desires and ideas that 'the long '68' represented. This acquired different connotations depending on the different economic and political contexts in which demonstrations were held and ideological battles fought, but the overall impetus behind it was one towards social justice and a fairer world. 'The long '68' stands for a moment in which radical changes to society were still regarded as not only possible but imminent, and questions about the efficiency and tenability of the capitalist system were on the minds of perhaps more people than ever before. David Harvey confirms and completes this picture when he defines neoliberalism as a 'counterrevolutionary project' of the world capitalist class 'as they felt intensely threatened both politically and economically towards the end of the 1960s into the 1970s'[135]. Revolutionary movements in the Third World were as preoccupying as the Communist tides in highly industrialised countries like France and Italy, and the power-balance between capital and labour was rapidly evolving in favour

[134] Ibid., 170.
[135] Quoted in Skærlund Risager 2016, n.p.

of the latter. It is no surprise, therefore, that the 'spectre of communism' would be still hunting the neoliberal imagination for decades to come.

According to the French philosopher Alain Badiou, 'the long '68' represents the most recent revival of what he calls 'the Communist Hypothesis', and it is precisely for this reason that, deep into the neoliberal age, its myth is still 'haunting the regime'[136]. This 'hypothesis' is not a definite political and economic project, but rather a 'very general set of intellectual representations': 'it is what Kant called an Idea, with a regulatory function, rather than a programme'[137]. And this Idea brought with it, inevitably, its own anthropology—an unarticulated but widespread desire for the dissolution of the private and narcissistic individual into a collectivity defined by the new aspirations and ideals of equality. If the stress on creativity and individual emancipation had much to share with and contribute to the 'new spirit of capitalism', then 'the long '68' also represented a moment in which the personal and the political melted, and collective desires were being expressed and articulated as alternatives to the individualistic schemas of consumerist society. The student revolts of May 1968 in Paris—the most influential in defining the founding myth of the following decade—testify to a desire to see the personality of the individual merge with a vaster collectivity, in which his particularity can gradually become less and less important without being alienated in the process. That the spirit of that particular historical conjuncture was also characterised by a necessity to go beyond the person and towards what is more properly impersonal—and yet not de-personalised—is registered in the words Edgar Morin employs when he refers to the Paris protests as a 'faceless revolution'[138]. The French epistemologist was not alone in noticing that what was demanded was a redefinition of the relationship between individual and society at large. Maurice Blanchot wrote of his first-hand experience of the revolts claiming that

[136] Badiou 2008, 34.
[137] Ibid., 35.
[138] Morin 2018, 49, my translation.

'whatever the detractors of May might say, it was a splendid moment, when anyone could speak to anyone else, anonymously, impersonally, welcomed with no other justification than that of being another person'[139]. Blanchot also noted that his friend and colleague Michel Foucault seemed to incarnate the spirit of that precise moment perhaps better than everyone else, as if it corresponded to something which he had already been holding on to for a number of years: 'Foucault', Blanchot wrote, 'is a man always on the move, alone, secretive, and who, because of that, distrusts the marvels of interiority, refuses the traps of subjectivity'[140]. Being impersonally, for Foucault, and (one might assume) for many of participants in the revolts of May, represented an emancipation from the constraints of the outer world, and not a mortification of one's own individual necessities and inclinations[141].

'The marvels of interiority' are one of the monuments that the neoliberal restoration later attempted to save from the possible revolutionary movements represented by 'the long '68' and transform into part and parcel of its own updated version of the 'dispositif of the person', in which classic liberal individualism merges with ideas and values associated with human capital theory and the tenets of the creative economy. If these are the elements of the 'traps of subjectivity' of the neoliberal age, it remains to be determined what possibilities are offered by all of those different conceptions and practices that fall under the rubric of 'impersonality'. As Sharon Cameron writes, this is no easy task, since 'we don't know what the *im* of impersonality means'[142]. This is because, according to her, 'personality and impersonality do not stand in binary relation', and it is therefore impossible to define the latter as the mere negation of the former[143]. This, of course, does

[139] Foucault and Blanchot 1987, 63.
[140] Ibid., 68.
[141] Gary Gutting writes that 'Foucault's interest in [the impersonal structures of language itself] corresponds to his declaration that he 'writes in order to have no face' […], to lose any fixed identity in the succession of masks he assumes in his books' (Gutting 2005, 6). Gutting juxtaposes the phrase to another, from Foucault's last interview: 'the main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning' (originally transcribed in Gutman et al. 1988, 9).
[142] Cameron 2007, ix.
[143] Ibid.

not imply that the concept is vague and unspecific, but rather that it gestures towards alternatives to the realm of the personal that are multiple and qualitatively different from one another, and which must be thought of historically. Cameron argues that impersonality 'means different things for different authors', and proceeds to elucidate how a certain variant of the concept animates the formal and thematic workings of the texts in her small canon[144]. A similar stress on the non-binary relationship between impersonality and its alleged opposites recurs in Esposito's *Third Person*: the Italian philosopher agrees with Cameron when he claims that, 'of course the impersonal lies outside the horizon of the person, but not in a place that is unrelated to it: the impersonal is situated, rather, at the confines of the personal'[145]. Such positioning is not at all neutral with regard to the nature of the personal as, according to Esposito, the impersonal is constituted as a form of resistance to the 'reifying outcome' of the category of person[146].

Similarly, describing varieties of specifically modernist impersonal experience, Fredric Jameson writes that 'the task [of the critic] would insist in showing everything that is energising and active about a depersonalising tendency that has too often been discussed in terms of loss and incapacitation; in demonstrating how such a renunciation of subjectivity, far from amounting to some resignation to an impossibly 'alienating' condition, stands on the contrary as an original and productive response to it'[147]. The same would apply to later theorisations of impersonality—a term which, especially after the Frankfurt School, has often been associated with the dehumanising effects of capitalism: Jameson suggests that this latter variety be called 'depersonalization'[148]. Rochelle Rives

[144] Ibid.
[145] Esposito 2012, 14.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Jameson 2002, 132-3.
[148] Ibid., 133. On this point, I disagree with Jameson and agree with Daniel Hartley, who understands depersonalization 'as part of a broader phenomenon of "impersonality" inherent in the capitalist world-system as such' (2019, 132). While impersonality holds an emancipatory potential, Hartley argues, capitalism also generates its own variety of it, in which alienation and the cult of personality are joined as two phases of the same process: 'the impersonality of historical capitalism is best conveyed as an uneven, often violent, combination of socio-cultural processes of depersonalization and (re-)personalization' (132). Where I differ from Hartley is in delineating the history of the emancipatory variety of impersonality. He

implicitly concurs with this positive evaluation of impersonal experience in her survey of modernist literary texts, but she also notes that it is often entangled with elements that are easily exploitable by political projects with strong authoritarian connotations: 'as opposed to contrasting definitions that stress its neutrality, objectivity, and detachment', Rives writes, 'impersonality […] is a theory of engagement, enabling forms of connection that both radically challenge authority and simultaneously sustain it'[149]. Historical varieties of impersonal experience, then—in both philosophy and the arts—seem to suggest that the idea of transcending the realm of the person and that of the bourgeois individual is, just like Badiou's 'communist hypothesis', a regulatory idea, or the indication of a route out of the predicament of a particular conjuncture. As Rives's analysis suggests, the impersonal does not correspond to any fixed position with regard to hierarchy and social change, but rather constitutes the plane on which opposing forces can conflict and establish new balances. It is for this reason that, taking up Cameron's suggestion that the prefix in 'impersonality' does not have a fixed meaning, but one that varies depending on author and context, *Impersonal Selves* looks at the specific regional and historical significance that the concept acquires in four texts from the Americas in the age of neoliberalism.

Furthermore, the symbolic value of 'the long '68' constitutes a further justification for the hemispheric and comparative approach of the present thesis. In fact, the Americas entertain a special relationship with that period, as the memory of the events associated with it on the two continents is more inextricably intermingled with a sense of violence

traces the origin of the concept in '[Alain] Badiou's […] understanding of truths as indifferent to differences [and] Jacques Rancière's […] notion of subjectivation as disidentification—both variations on communist universality' (135-6). In contrast, the articulations of redemptive impersonality which I read in the chapters ahead are derived from a list of thinkers including Simone Weil, Maurice Blanchot, Alexandre Kojève, as well as the aforementioned Roberto Esposito. That we follow different paths of the historical and philosophical evolution of impersonality, of course, does not mean that our two narratives are incompatible: Hartley's comment on communist universality, in particular, dovetails with my account of 'the long '68' and 'the Communist Hypothesis' as crucial to an understanding of the relevance of impersonality in the age of neoliberalism.

[149] Rives 2012, 2-3.

and defeat than perhaps anywhere else. As for the United States, it was there, arguably, that many of the characteristic traits of the social and political unrest of the decade gradually took shape. Most importantly, the civil rights movement and the opposition against the Vietnam War represented an influential precedent for some of the new movements that would later spread to other corners of the world, the episodes of violence by which they could be accompanied notwithstanding. As Richard Vinen writes, 'the political divisions of the 1960s in the United States were, at least in the early part of the decade, a dispute about the meaning of America itself'[150]. A similar juxtaposition of opportunity and violence recurs in the memorialization of the Tlatelolco massacre, which is perhaps the most iconic event of the year 1968 as seen from Latin America. In the weeks leading up to the Summer Olympics, the student-popular movement constituted around the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) organised a series of protests and demonstrations against the government. On 2 October 1968, students had gathered in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Tlatelolco neighborhood, chanting 'no queremos olimpiadas, queremos revolución'[151]. As the government ordered the gathering to be broken up, the thousands of soldiers surrounding the square shot and killed students and other civilians in the hundreds. Thus, as Samuel Steinberg notes, '2 October 1968 marks both a tragic act of state-sponsored terror and a moment of unrealised possibility for the birth of a new world'[152]. One of the defining features of this 'new world' was the notion that democratic participation was not possible without a strong sense of proximity and togetherness among the citizenry, but the politics that might have emerged out of the historical conjuncture represented by 'the long '68' were buried under the brute force of state repression.

[150] Vinen 2018, 78.
[151] 'We don't want Olympics, we want revolution'.
[152] Steinberg 2016, 7.

There is one further element that makes the region a particularly fruitful point of observation for the transformations registered by the neoliberal novel as a genre: the neoliberal counter-revolution, in the Americas, shows its specifically *international* dimension, as it was in large part made possible by the influence of the United States upon the internal conflicts of Latin America. As Odd Arne Westad remarks, 'after the Cuban revolution, no other event positioned Latin America more in terms of the Cold War than the 1973 coup in Chile'[153]. While the CIA was not directly involved in the organization of the events of the Chilean 9/11, it is evident that the presence of highly conservative and repressive social forces was welcomed and supported by the United States in their fight against the socialist tendencies emerging on the continent. The violent crimes against Chilean citizens in the years of the Pinochet regime were perpetrated at the same time that the economic policies of a group of US-trained Chilean economists known as the Chicago Boys were restructuring the national economy according to the prescriptions of Milton Friedman and other neoliberal theorists. Thus, if the repressive and anti-democratic tendencies displayed in Chile and elsewhere were in fact endemic to several Latin American contexts, the invasive influence of their northern neighbour was undeniable, and it was key in giving the neoliberal project its necessary global spread. As Westad concludes, 'the 1970s became a watershed for these political tendencies in Latin America'[154]. At the end of the decade, two thirds of the region's major states were under the rule of right-wing and anti-democratic regimes. In the US and in Latin America more than anywhere else, then, the period represented 'a spontaneous combustion of rebellious spirits' and yet one which ended, in varying degrees, in repression and restoration, thus making of the 'long '68' in its entirety the symbol of an unrealised possibility[155]. The contrast between the establishment of the neoliberal rule and the phase of possibilities

[153] Westad 2017, 413.
[154] Ibid., 415.
[155] Kurlansky 2005, xi.

that just preceded it is thus particularly visible in the literature from the Americas, especially when we read across the continental divide.

If neoliberalism is to be understood as a political project, as suggested by Harvey, then one of its crucial strategic targets certainly is the planned disaggregation of the social in all of its forms. This aversion for co-operation and solidarity outside the realm of the market is instrumental in diminishing the power of labour against that of capital, of course, and the ideological tenets set up to promote such imbalance of power intersect with the logic of the 'dispositif of the person' in a range of different ways. Political theorist Jodi Dean sees the neoliberal project as one that has made us 'individuated, concerned first with our own particular preoccupations', thus devolving 'collective strength […] into the problem of individuals aggregating by choices and interests that may or may not converge'[156]. Thus, when we consider the valences of impersonality in the age of neoliberalism, we should first and foremost take this process of 'collective de-subjectivation' into account[157]. In different ways, the novels analysed in the next chapters reveal a widespread nostalgia for the sense of togetherness associated by many with the myth of 'the long '68'. This does not necessarily mean that the neoliberal novel displays any intrinsic political affinity to the ideals of that decade, but rather that it registers the social and political disaster of a fragmented polis, whether global or national in character. By virtue of the scores of individual portraits featured in them—even more than a hundred, in the cases of *2666* and *Infinite Jest*—these four instantiations of the neoliberal novel from the Americas represent the fragmented communities of their time, and they do so through their deployment of flatness of character, too. To what extent, and under what conditions, collective desires and demands can be experienced and articulated within these vast assemblages of people is a question that each of them answers in its own peculiar way.

[156] Dean 2016, 4.
[157] Ibid., 5.

CHAPTER TWO

'THEN YOU LOSE HIM IN THE CROWD': IMPERSONALITY AND THE PROBLEM OF COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY IN DON DELILLO'S *UNDERWORLD*

Underworld opens with 'a painting crowded with medieval figures that are dying or dead—a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin' (*U* 41), or Peter Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, which gives DeLillo's imposing 60-page Prologue its title. Brilliantly condensing several of the recurring themes in the novel within the same image, DeLillo frames this ekphrastic passage through the point of view of his fictional rendition of J. Edgar Hoover, here attending the famous 1951 baseball final that links, in different ways, the lives of many of *Underworld*'s characters. The atomic bomb, baseball, waste, death and questions of community and nationhood all emerge in Hoover's reading of Bruegel: here he is as part of the crowd gathered at the Polo Grounds, plucking the page of a ripped magazine off his shoulder, a fragment of the waste—scraps of paper, chewing-gum wraps, cigarette butts, used tickets—that the audience naturally produce and disseminate across the stadium. Moments earlier, as Director of the FBI, he has been given the news that the Soviets have entered the atomic race by conducting their first bomb test in Kazakhstan. In the *Time Magazine* reproduction of Bruegel's painting is a multitude of men and women scattered across a vast and desolate landscape, with most of them being slaughtered by an army of skeletons. The parallel drawn by Hoover between the American crowd around him and that in the picture is clear, with the Soviets cast in the part of Death triumphant. Looking at his compatriots, he ponders: 'all these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction' (*U* 28). Consumerism and atomic violence, both, stand at the heart of the American way of life, DeLillo notes with Hoover.

And the ekphrastic passage not only functions as an overture of sorts introducing *Underworld*'s main themes, but also as a *mise en abyme* in which the formal workings of the novel, too, are presented in their kernel. The painting, in fact, is said to be '*crowded*' with figures, just as DeLillo's 827-page novel is crowded with characters. Both works ultimately aim at representing a crowd *at a glance*, in its togetherness. And both are concerned with the role of the individual within the multitude. In *The Triumph of Death*, while the personality of those in the distance is unfathomable—their faces, clothes and movements too far off to be discerned—the sheer magnitude of the painting invites us to examine the features and actions of those in the foreground. Similarly, *Underworld* follows Nick Shay—its main contender for the role of protagonist—and a few other central characters over the course of more than forty years of American history, while relegating many others to a minor role and a brief appearance. With the particularity that Nick, too, is preoccupied with his own waning sense of self: he longs for the days in which he was 'a sturdy Roman wall', as well as 'a country of one' (*U* 275). Just as preoccupied are the many readers, reviewers and scholars of *Underworld* who see 'DeLillo's typically flattish *impersonal* style of narration', as Lawrence Buell puts it, deployed here to the detriment of his characterisations[158]. What is most clearly *impersonal*, in *Underworld*, is not DeLillo's style, but rather, and most importantly, the way in which he uses it to portray characters that sound and behave in similar ways: their personalities are flattened out in favour of the sense of interconnectedness that the novel insists on invoking through its Pynchonesque mantra that 'everything is connected' (e.g. *U* 289)[159].

This chapter looks at the way in which *Underworld* contributes to the discourse of impersonality in the age of neoliberalism through the at-once formal and thematic motif of the crowd. DeLillo is a writer who has been fascinated by crowds for most of his career,

[158] Buell 2014, 454, emphasis mine.
[159] On the commonalities between Pynchon's and DeLillo's poetics, see Parrish 2002.

and representations of it were particularly prominent in *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991). *Underworld* can be considered both the culmination and the summa of this fascination for two main reasons. First, as we have seen, it makes of the crowd its own organising principle, as well as one of its central images. Secondly, its historical range, going all the way from the 1950s to the 1990s, allows DeLillo to conduct a comparative study of the different crowds of recent American history. Ultimately, *Underworld* shows the crowd to be a distinctly *political form*: an entity whose fundamental character and force is constituted through its shape, and the process of taking that shape. DeLillo's 1997 novel features literal crowds in stadiums, marches and riots, as well as the metaphorical ones represented by waste landfills and the Internet. Each, in DeLillo's highly historicised account, is representative of particular struggles and power relations: they synthetize in an image the way in which the relationship between society and the individual has changed through the Cold War and into the age of neoliberalism, with echoes of the marches and protests of the 1960s. These changing patterns are inherently political. Thus, reading *Underworld*'s crowds as forms entails accepting Caroline Levine's case 'for expanding our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of socio-political experience'[160]. The individual, too, can be thought as a form, and *Underworld* explores the ways in which the crowd holds the potential to either sublimate it into collective experience or, conversely, reducing it to a sub-human nullity. DeLillo's implicit theorization of impersonality lies in the tensions his characters perceive between these two poles, and is reflected in the various degrees of flatness of his characterisations.

This chapter aims at putting such theorization into sharper focus by first looking at *Underworld*'s handling of character. The first section considers James Wood's notion of 'hysterical realism' as a neoliberally inflected celebration of personality disguised as a non-ideological defence of more traditional forms of literary realism. Wood considers

[160] Levine 2015, 2.

Underworld to be both an influential and paradigmatic example of the malaises he identifies in Anglo-American fiction of the 1990s. In so doing, the critic speaks both to the centrality of flat characterisation to DeLillo's novel and to the salience of this stylistic trait on the scene of contemporary American letters. This first section also includes a discussion of DeLillo's own implicit poetical statements through a reading of artists and their works as they appear in *Underworld*. The second part of this chapter looks at how the theme of the crowd is linked to that of national community in the novel, and it considers the ways in which DeLillo's poetics of impersonality can be seen as a co-essential aspect of *Underworld*'s ambitions as a social novel. The third section explores images and theories of the crowd from both the history of American literature and recent political theory, and the ways in which *Underworld* echoes them. Nick's personal trajectory will be described as exemplary of the crisis of the individual-as-form that rests at the centre of crowd imagery. In the fourth section, the figure of the Internet in *Underworld* is analysed and interpreted as yet another metaphor of the crowd, through which the limits and deceits of the neoliberal discourse on collective agency are highlighted. Through a reading of the character of Sister Edgar, in particular, and of her meanderings into cyberspace, the last part of the chapter draws some conclusions on the ambiguous valences of the impersonal in *Underworld*.

'An Awkwardness About Character': *Underworld* and Hysterical Realism

Underworld is considered by many to be Don DeLillo's magnum opus. It is, without a doubt, the writer's longest and most intricate piece of work, a novel spanning more than four decades of American history and looking at many different characters, crossing each other's path over the course of their respective lives. As in the other novels in this thesis, here, too, the point of view that this novel encourages its readers to acquire with regard to characters is, at least in part, collectively oriented—that is, often diverting readerly

attention away from the fragmented renditions of personal biographies and to individuals' respective positions in a network of relations. Differing from novels such as *2666* and *Infinite Jest* in that it does not feature too vast a cast of characters—here in the tens, not the hundreds—*Underworld* furthers and complicates the neoliberal novel's engagement with questions of personhood and the modes of impersonal experience that might lie beyond it by focusing on the 'interconnectedness' of individuals. While the novel's refrain of 'everything is connected' has been discussed in most critical treatments so far, it has rarely been put into direct relation with the question of the characterisation technique which it displays. This is surprising, considering that the question of the quality and intensity of characters, in *Underworld*, is one that split reviewers into polarised sides. On the one hand, Michiko Kakutani and other prominent critics saluted DeLillo's new novel as his most successful in terms of heartfelt and vivid characterisation[161]. This is an assessment that returned in later academic treatments of the novel, with John Duvall writing in his *Reader's Guide* to the novel that here 'DeLillo may have succeeded in wedding his cultural critique to characters with fully developed inner lives that recall an older novelistic sense of the human heart'[162]. Michael Wood and Tony Tanner, on the other hand, differed in that they could not find any credible depiction of 'fully developed inner lives', but rather just fictitious human beings that, for all the personal details and circumstances which they had been granted by DeLillo's recognizable narrative voice, still read as abstract individuals engaging in abstract thinking, often far more eloquent and precise in reasoning over their own lives and experiences then novelistic verisimilitude would require them to be[163]. Putting the issue of characterisation in relation to that of voice, Tanner concludes 'in *Underworld*, the many voices start to seem just part of one, tonally invariant American voice'[164].

[161] See Kakutani 1997.
[162] Duvall 2002, 27.
[163] See Wood 1998 and Tanner 1998.
[164] Tanner 1998, 68.

However, the significance of *Underworld*'s ambivalent style of characterisation is to be missed if it is not seen as a discourse on the status of the individual and its personal qualities in the age of neoliberalism, and as intimately linked to DeLillo's vision of the increased interconnectedness that characterizes postmodernity. The novel, in fact, mirrors and discusses the topic of neoliberal subjectivity—both individual and collective—at the level of form, too, and it is to be read as an experiment with the possibilities and the significance of character. Ultimately, *Underworld* aims to *represent* the experience itself of interconnectedness, and not just pose it as a fact in the lives of so many separate individuals. Specifically, the novel's chronological scope allows its author to draw comparisons between the social and political possibilities incarnated by different kinds of crowds in the Cold War years and in the phase of American history that opens in the 1990s. By maintaining a bifocal vision of both eras, DeLillo is able to show how neoliberal political discourses influence the way in which people think about and experience collective responsibility, thus making use of the category of personhood and its privileged status in US culture in order to discourage collective collaboration. This is particularly evident in the novel's treatment of waste and the environmental problem that it poses, together with other human-made threats to the biosphere such as the radiations from Cold War-era nuclear tests. The celebration of the individual is thus instrumental, in neoliberal discourse, to the devaluation of any articulation of collective will. While mid-century American propaganda would present a picture of world-politics in which clear agents were at play—and in which nation states were definite, recognizable actors—neoliberal doctrine encourages its subjects to think of the world as motioned and shaped by the relentless forces of private interest and capital, thus pre-empting any attempt at organised collective agency. While on the thematic level *Underworld* reflects this crisis in political ideology, on the level of form and characterisation in particular it attempts to think of individuals as less than discrete personalities, and to conceptualize ways of

thinking of our own place in the world that could go beyond the destructive logic of neoliberal capitalism and its exclusive celebration of individuality. When considered in this context, then, *Underworld*'s formal features can be considered part and parcel of a metaphysical problem—that of the relation of the individual to the collective—that is primarily *political*, and rooted in a specific historical moment—the hegemonic phase of neoliberal ideology.

What is at stake, politically, in a fuller appreciation of *Underworld*'s undertaking can be gauged by a reading of a polemic that appeared in *The New Republic* in 2000, by John Wood. The influential critic's indictment of it and a handful of other novels published in the 1990s seems to be targeting DeLillo's work in particular, as the one that more than any other in his personal list of recent novelistic aberrations summarises all that is wrong with the state of contemporary fiction. The subtitle of Wood's essay is 'On the Formation of a New Genre: Hysterical Realism', and its argument can be summarised as follows: the particular (sub-)genre of the novel that 'is hardening' is 'big' and 'ambitious'—a series of mammoth books that range in length between 600 and 1000-plus pages—and yet it is also 'Human, All Too Inhuman', which is, appropriately, Wood's title. What preoccupies the critic is that in the midst of all the chaos and characters that these novels feature, the human, introspective and psychological verisimilitude that gave novelistic realism its raison d'être is inadvertently caricatured. Too many characters, that is, and not enough narrative space to make each (or at least, most of them) credible and well-rounded. Instead, Wood contends, what we are left with is precisely a sense of the interconnectedness not only of objects and events—their relations as they unfold over time and space—but also of different people, whom, in these novels, often do not read as much more than dots connected in a larger network. The way in which Wood phrases his belief in the mutual exclusion of characterological credibility and panoramic view is significant, and worth quoting at length:

> Alas, since the characters in these novels are not really alive, not fully human, their connectedness can only be insisted on. Indeed, the reader begins to think that it is being insisted on precisely because they do not really exist. Life is never experienced with such a fervid intensity of connectedness. After all, hell is other people, actually: real humans disaggregate more often than they congregate. So these novels find themselves in the paradoxical position of enforcing connections that are finally conceptual rather than human. The form of these novels tells us that we are all connected […] but it is a formal lesson rather than an actual enactment. [165]

What makes *Underworld* such an interesting work of fiction is that, among other things, it both confirms and critiques some of the assumptions underpinning Wood's judgment. On the one hand, there is some truth to the idea that the connections that the novel constantly refers to are merely 'conceptual'. People in *Underworld* are indeed shown to obsess over various kinds of political conspiracy theories, as well as the ways in which consumerism and advertisement constantly influence and shape American life. Small and insignificant details are often taken as reminders of the overarching presence of one or another form of power, and the ways in which it dictates the conditions of existence itself. These attempts at mapping reality, and making sense of it, are sometimes shown to be futile and paranoid, while at other times they point to historical changes and situations that the reader will recognize from late-twentieth century history. In this sense, Wood is right in claiming that the connections being made are 'more conceptual than human'. And yet, on the other hand, this form of reckoning is also shown in its existential dimension: after all, the interest and anxiety for the interconnectedness of things and events is depicted as an *experience*, and one that is central to most of these characters' lives. It is also very much a collective one, in that it is shared by different people in different places, and across the novel's forty-year chronological span.

The very quality of the rendition of different lives in *Underworld*, then, challenges Wood's notion that 'life is never experienced with such a fervid intensity of

[165] Wood 2000, n.p.

connectedness'. And while expressions such as 'alive', 'fully human' and 'enactment' are reminiscent of the lexicon deployed by critics such as Ian Watt to describe and theorise the workings of novelistic realism, the assertion that 'real humans disaggregate more often than they congregate' seems to align liberal humanistic evaluations of character and person with a more specifically neoliberal form of individualism. Interestingly, *Underworld*, with its historical outlook on four decades of the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, seems to account for the ways in which American society has transitioned from the kind of collective and multitudinous enthusiasm (as well as fear) that characterised the Good Old Days of the Prologue set in Nick Shay's childhood, to the much more isolated and individualistic way in which, through the Internet, his son makes sense of the world from his room in the 1990s. DeLillo's treatment of these scenes is far from being uncritically celebratory and nostalgic of the American sense of unity and solidarity that characterised the outset of the Cold War, and is careful in showing how that, too, was based on collective fear and paranoia. However, such themes as crowds, the individual and collective experience of history, commodity and nuclear waste and the Internet, all allow DeLillo to explore the dialectic between an exacerbated form of individualism and different and alternative forms of communitarianism. Through these images and metaphors, the writer is able to make sense of the very moment from which he writes, too—namely, the 1990s.

Wood's arguments on 'hysterical realism' can be read as expansions and elaborations on his 1999 essay 'Against Paranoia: The Case of Don DeLillo', which centres on *Underworld*. Here Wood finds the intersection of the two malaises he has identified: broad social commentary, theoretically inflected, as well as a proliferation of characters that makes most of them underdeveloped and humanely uninteresting. It is at the junction between these two dimensions of DeLillo's novel that Wood's use of the word 'interconnectedness' splits and doubles. By its criticism of *Underworld*'s refrain

that 'everything is connected' he means to indicate both the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of the facts that compose contemporary world history and the intertwining of personal lives on which the novel insists. In this light, what Wood sees simply as a shortcoming of characterisation is in fact the effect of a novelistic architecture that is founded upon the idea that there is a close proximity between the causes of the crises that it identifies and a certain way to regard the role of human agents in them. *Underworld* suggests that phenomena such as the threat of a nuclear war, environmental disaster and the rise of the Internet can only be appreciated when considered from the standpoint of the collective experience they prompted. As a novel, it does not only aim at linking one historical fact to another, but rather at connecting those facts with the many individuals that experienced them in their unfolding, and account for a kind of experience that is *impersonal* in the sense of not being anchored in the specific circumstances or inclinations of one specific individual—individually perceived, that is, and yet collectively construed and shared.

Conversely, while Wood's line of argument is developed out of the aesthetic premises of the tradition of novelistic realism, it acquires a different and distinct set of implications at the turn of the millennium. 'Hysterical realism' as a critical label, that is, seems to share some of the ideological tenets of neoliberalism, in its insistence that any form of collectivity is illusory and a mere aggregation of individual components each with their own set of self-serving goals. For one thing, Wood's celebration of the personality of characters as the ultimate *locus* of their novelistic value is the aesthetic counterpart of the political ideology of human capital, in which individuals compete in the market and gain relative advantage over each other by means of their distinctive qualities. In this light, individual difference—or, in novelistic terms, 'personality'—is what each subject needs in order to compete and (therefore) survive. Wood echoes Woloch's theory of realism—together with the implications that I have discussed in the

Introduction to this thesis—when he laments that, while full of vitality, 'hysterical realist' novels lack clear centres of focus in the form of individual characters: there should be a clearer hierarchy and relative imbalance between the too many fictional beings featuring in these lengthy books[166]. A passage from Wood's critique of *Underworld* highlights the proximity between the political and aesthetic implications of a discourse on characterisation that revolves around equality: 'after a while DeLillo's attitude towards these people, some of whom are supposed to be crazed, comes to seem irrelevant; their bulk amounts to a pedagogical statement', Wood argues, concluding that 'though they are all different, their differences are burned away by the scandal of their sameness'[167]. While 'sameness' and 'equality' are of course no natural synonyms, one can see why Wood would take the former to be the effect of the latter: it is precisely by virtue of their relative importance in the architecture of a novel that the author can elaborate on any given character's personality and grant them the gift of particular feelings and idiosyncrasies. Thus, while there is certainly some ideological complicity with neoliberalism in 'hysterical realism' as a critical construct, the same applies, potentially, to the object that it identifies—i.e., in particular, novels with vast and sprawling sets of characters.

Underworld investigates the issue through its depiction of author-figures. Don DeLillo's novels often feature one or more characters that happen to be artists of one kind or another, sometimes specifically a fiction writer, as it is the case with *Mao II*'s protagonist Bill Gray. This habit, especially in combination with DeLillo's well-known penchant for ekphrastic passages, provides him with a range of different ways and occasions to reflect on his own craft, and readers are clearly invited to consider possible parallels—and contrasts—between the work of the character at hand and the workings of the narrative of which it is part. *Underworld* makes no exception to this rule, with the most prominent example in it being Klara Sax. When she is first introduced to readers,

[166] See supra 67-8.
[167] Wood 1999, 52.

Klara is in her mid-fifties, working on a monumental project in the midst of the Texas desert: together with a team of young volunteers, she is painting in all sorts of colourful combinations a vast body of old B-52s, today a symbol of the Cold War years. We first get a glimpse of her work-in-progress through the point of view of the closest thing *Underworld* has to an individual protagonist, Nick Shay. Flying on a balloon across the area which is hosting tens of Klara's B-52s, he reaches an insight as to what the authorial intention behind such a project probably is: 'She wanted us to see a single mass, not a collection of objects. She wanted our interest to be evenly spaced. She insisted that our eyes go slowly over the piece. She invited us to see the land dimension, horizonwide, in which the work was set' (*U* 83-4). At first sight, this seems to be a poetic statement on what the ultimate aesthetic aim of a novel such as *Underworld* is: to be gazed at a glance just like 'a single mass' which is significant in its totality. This reading is reinforced by Klara's subsequent meditations over the streets of New York City as observed from her rooftop terrace—a location that allows her to get a glimpse of urban life in its bustling vitality and diversity.

However, *Underworld*'s fascination for the 'single mass', or crowd, of characters, is somewhat mitigated by Klara's remarks on her own project, with the admission that it is also guided by a genuine preoccupation with the specificity of the individual elements that make up the whole:

> What I really want to get at is the ordinary thing, the ordinary life behind the thing. Because that's the heart and soul of what we're doing here. […] See, we're painting, hand-painting in some cases, putting our puny hands to great weapon systems, to systems that came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible, millions of components stamped out, repeated endlessly, and we're trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life, and maybe there's an element of survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct—to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are. The way the nose artists did, the guys who painted pinups on the fuselage. […] Long Tall Sally […] we will definitely have to salvage her name. […] But this is an individual life. […] I want to keep our intentions small and human despite the enormous work we've done and the huge work we have ahead of us […]. (*U* 77-8)

In Klara's work—and, to some extent, in *Underworld* itself, as a work of fiction—the compositional principle seems to be that of 'unrepeat[ing]', or recovering the sense of an individual personality that 'a single mass' of seemingly identical object tends, by its own nature, to relegate to the background.

In turn, the baseball that collector Marvin Lundy reckons to be the original one used for the 'Shot Heard 'Round the World' in 1951 is used as a common thread that connects several of the characters in the novel, thus working as a metaphor for its organising rationale. And the way in which Marvin looks at the ball also represents a certain way of conceiving and representing character—here, too, the aim seems to be that of 'unrepeating', and finding out the personal circumstances of all of the baseball's owners, in order to finally link it back to the historical occurrence of the match. Committed to his quest to find the original owner of the ball, Marvin thus describes both his own experience of getting to know the people that took part in the object's memorable history and what their own sense of belonging to a vaster narrative means to them:

> The ball brought no luck, good or bad. It was an object passing through. But it inspired people to tell him things, to entrust family secrets and unbreathable personal tales, emit heartful sobs onto his shoulder. Because they knew he was their what, their medium of release. Their stories would be exalted, absorbed by something larger, the long arching journey of the baseball itself and his own cockeyed march through the decades. (*U* 318)

The conceptual proximity of Klara's and Marvin's respective projects to DeLillo's seems also evident in his essay 'The Power of History', about his initial interest in the subject matter of the novel, published in a magazine the same month in which *Underworld* came out in 1997. Here DeLillo clearly states that 'against the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self. Here it is sly, mazed, mercurial, scared half-crazy. It is also free and undivided, the only thing that can match the enormous dimensions of social reality'[168]. DeLillo is in fact an author still very much concerned

[168] DeLillo 1997, n.p.

with the fate of the individual within a host of de-personalising tendencies in the age of neoliberal capital. However, as the next sections in this chapter suggest, Klara's and Marvin's remarks can actually be read as poetic statements in contrast with the actual workings of *Underworld*. In fact, the novel shows both a distinctive attention for the positive valences of the crowd and a sense of uneasiness at the asphyxiating individualism incarnated by its protagonist.

'Language and Climate and Popular Songs and Breakfast Foods': *Underworld* and the National Community

As we have seen, the Prologue of the novel describes the (national) crowd experiencing the game both at the Polo Grounds and through the radio and other media. This is an assemblage of people that is defined by their being, collectively, an audience to a media event. The crowd is impersonal in a twofold sense: it is, first and foremost, made up of pseudo-discrete entities that surrender their personal characteristics in the very act of taking part to a collective event; and it is also impersonal in the sense that a crowd—in and of itself—is not (yet) a subject whose force and volition can be apprehended or channelled. Affects, longings and movement run through it, without it ever being able to settle or being attributed precise boundaries. DeLillo complicates this line of thinking by describing media as constantly feeding an image of the crowd back to the public, thus influencing the way individuals in the crowd itself conceive of the experience of taking part in it.

The first page of the novel features the often-quoted line: 'Longing on a large scale is what makes history' (*U* 11). Juxtaposed to this collective and diffused 'longing', is Cotter, a kid 'with a local yearning', and yet one who is

> part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge above the river, and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with

> them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations, the unseen something that haunts the day—men in fedoras and sailors on shore leave, the stray tumble of their thoughts, going to a game. (*U* 11)

In a novel that is almost literally *crowded* with characters, this is the first glance of what *Underworld* will investigate, in its many representations of collective experience. For while crowds have been a favourite subject of DeLillo's at least since *White Noise* (1985)—and, most significantly, *Mao II* (1991)—the 827-page novel that opens with a description of Cotter Martin joining an assembling crowd in a stadium is unique in the writer's canon in that it complements this thematic interest with a discourse on characters, collectivity and impersonality that is carried through its form and structure. What can the novel—not this novel in particular, that is, but the very genre itself—contribute to our understanding of collective experience? Is the crowd at the end of the millennium any different than 'the city's endless crowd' favoured by nineteenth-century writers such as Baudelaire and Whitman? Or that vituperated and feared by modernist poets from Ezra Pound to Wallace Stevens? *Underworld* adds a further complication to this line of thinking in that it historicizes its own plot, thus offering the possibility to compare the experience of the crowd—the experience of being part of a crowd that is, as well as that of seeing a crowd and testifying to its movement and inherent possibilities—between the Cold War and the phase that follows it. And in creating this parallelism between its own thematic preoccupations and its formal structure, it invites readers to consider the task and duty of fiction itself, and the role, in turn, that narrative structures and patterns play in our own thinking about the relationship of individual and collectivity in politics and society.

In what sense, exactly, are the thousands gathering at the stadium 'anonymous'? Is it because none of them is as important and famous as a 'certain picturesque foursome' of American celebrities attending the show—J. Edgar Hoover, Frank Sinatra, Toots Shor and Jackie Gleason? Or perhaps none of them, as an individual member of this assembling

crowd, has the same role in the game as the two protagonists of this memorable match—Bobby Thomson and Dodgers pitcher Ralph Branca? A third possibility is that these people are anonymous not only because they are 'common people', but rather because it is in the process itself of converging into a crowd that they are anonymised. Each of them carries their own 'reveries and desperations', and random thoughts, sometimes unconnected to events, that are later described as 'the dusty hum of who you are' (*U* 21). What happens to the residue of *personal* experiences—that is to say, individual as well as private and psychological—when the individual joins the crowd? Does the crowd acquire any of the volition and possibility for agency that the novel, as a genre, is used to associate with the individual consciousness? This crowd is 'not a migration or a revolution', and neither 'some vast movement of the soul', and therefore, if we are to consider that it is its 'longing' that makes history at all, it must be that it is significant, as a subject, in a different way than a mere extension or enlargement of the individual personality would be. In significant part, *Underworld* constitutes an experiment in thinking and imagining precisely this: what would it mean to have a novel with no clear protagonist other than the sum of many, often 'anonymous' characters[169]? If this is not

[169] That *Underworld* chooses the crowd as its main subject should not be taken to imply that it does not maintain the same difference between 'figurants' and 'protagonists' which, I have argued, is a defining feature of the neoliberal novel. This is true both on the formal and the thematic level. As for the latter, the novel does indeed register the presence of many marginalised groups, and it also ventures into an exploration of the neoliberal urban landscape and its profound inequalities. As Thomas Heise notes in *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture*, '[the] novel's title, without a definite or indefinite title, uncovers the underworld in almost every conceivable manifestation: the underclass ghettoes of Harlem and the Bronx; the secret world of subway tunnels where the queer graffiti artist Moonman 157 skulks; the criminal underworld of late 1940s Italian New York; mutant humans who in Sergei Eisenstein's fictitious sci-film *Unterwelt* live in crevices in the earth; and the forgotten history of the down-winders of Nevada and Utah who were unknowing test subjects in a vast government experiment with radioactive fallout' (2011, 220). As for the aesthetic rendition of these marginalised categories, David L. Pike, too, connects the novel's handling of characterisation and flatness with Klara's artistic practice: 'as in the aerial view of Klara's piece', he writes, 'the urban panorama suggested that no single narrative on the ground could encompass the scope of the modern city; at the same time, its high vantage point schematized the inhabitants, reducing them to types, occupations, classes, and neighbourhoods rather than individuals' (2011, 87-8). However, I disagree with Pike's evaluation of different kinds of characterisation in the novel. In his view, 'recognizing this duality, DeLillo is careful to modulate the view from above with which he privileges certain of his characters' (88). In this chapter, I contend that even the novel's 'protagonists' are portrayed with the kind of 'magnified flatness' I associate with the neoliberal novel.

the first time that DeLillo considers the crowd, it is the one case in his career in which he makes it the very protagonist of a novel. Is the novel's duty to zoom in on the crowd and scatter through this kind of residual waste in search for 'the dusty hum' of who some of these individuals are, recovering the everyday of individuals that are 'anonymous' just because they are not visible from afar? The Prologue seems to suggest the opposite with its slow, nearly cinematic movement from the one to the many: here, already, it is made clear that this is a novel that will attempt to renegotiate the notion of character that grew out of the bourgeois novel and, at the same time, try and find itself a new, collective kind of protagonist—an assembly that is both impersonal and a kind of subject.

It must be clarified, then, whether *Underworld* can be considered a national epic, as some critics have defined it, and in what sense. In light of the preceding discussion on the themes of crowds and impersonality, it is easy to see that the novel does not aspire to represent any kind of 'polyphony', but, to the contrary, aims at synthesising the diversity of the American crowd into a flattened-out narrative voice. Questions of personal 'voice' and its place in the public sphere of the 1990s allow DeLillo to consider national myths and assess their state in a turbulent decade for American society. At least two trends of American politics and society were going to become more visible than ever over the last decade of the century. On the one hand, the Culture Wars that divided the nation, as well as the increasingly loud and widespread talk of national 'decline', with regard in particular to 'the continuing spread of hyper-commercialization, consumerism, and materialism', that had been steadily growing since the Reagan years, and was now more visible and influential than ever[170]. And, on the other hand, the rapidly-changing ethnic composition of the country, with an immigration influx more sustained than in any other decade of the century, and from regions of the world (namely, Latin America and the Asian South-East) that had so far exerted a far less intense migratory pressure on the

[170] Patterson 2005, 277.

United States. James T. Patterson summarises the moment as one in which 'whatever the causes, the clamour of cultural conflict over social trends, coexisting with laments about national decline, seemed especially *cacophonous* in the early 1990s', when there was 'a popular sense […] that the nation was coming apart'[171]. It wasn't only that America was becoming even more 'multicultural' than it had ever been—with all of the tensions that predictably, will accompany such a change in social, cultural and ethnic composition—but the very public debate on the notion of 'multiculturalism' was the subject of hot and less civic debate. The many voices in the American landscape gave a 'cacophonous' result when considered as a whole, and therefore any work of fiction with an ambition to represent the nation as a whole would necessarily have to deal with this disarray, before even attempting to synthetize it (or not) in any kind of epic vision.

That *Underworld* does, in fact, have the ambition to make sense of the phase in which America finds itself—as well as, perhaps, to unify different strands of American experience into a coherent whole—is suggested in its now-famous opening line: 'He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful' (*U* 11). Significantly, this is being predicated by the narrative voice of an African-American teenager, Cotter Martin, who, we will learn later in the novel, lives in a very different neighbourhood from that of most of the white middle-class people filling the stalls at the Polo Grounds. Just like his race and class suggest, this teenager from Harlem cannot afford the entry ticket and would not be able to take part in the national ritual of this baseball final but for his decision to jump the turnstile and run from the police as fast as he can. And, in a novel as fixated as *Underworld* is that 'everything is connected', the reader is encouraged countless times to notice parallels and similarities between the lives of individuals who have relatively little in common, if not for the fact of being American. In fact, the opening line is the first hint of the novel to the recurring theme of sameness—

[171] Ibid., 260, emphasis mine.

a common belonging that here is first and foremost national and linguistic. The narrative voice is careful in depicting him as a figure that would not normally stand out of a crowd: 'he is just a running boy, a half-seen figure from the streets, but the way running reveals some clue to being, the way a runner bares himself to consciousness, this is how the dark-skinned kid seems to open to the world, how the bloodrush of a dozen strides brings him into eloquence' (*U* 13). He becomes *eloquent* because he acquires a *voice*, DeLillo suggests, a voice that is simultaneously his own—that of a 'dark-skinned kid' who is usually just 'half-seen' on the street as well as in national discourse—and American, as those 'dozen strides' grant him access to the great American pastime of a baseball match. The movement is in three phases, the narrative voice tells us: in the matter of just a few seconds Cotter Martin goes from the street, to revealing 'some clue to being'—a moment of manifested individuality—to that vast, collective subject contemplated by DeLillo at least since *White Noise*: 'Then you lose him in the crowd' (*U* 14).

Underworld is significant, in DeLillo's oeuvre, for its unusual focus on the theme of ethnicity, and it appears to have a comparative and historical outlook on the issue: the Bronx, in particular, is a case in point, in that it is chosen as a backdrop for scenes set both in the 1950s and the 1990s. In so doing, DeLillo is able to testify to the differences and similarities of being a first- or second-generation immigrant in the United States at different times in the recent history of the country. And while in the case of a similarly historically-minded American writer of DeLillo's generation such as Philip Roth, the 'experience of ethnicity' and its political and existential dimension has proved to be a significant wealth of biographical material from which an oeuvre can be sustained, DeLillo is famous for being reticent about his own private life and the way in which it would possibly inform his work. Indeed, he has been enumerated among 'the most impersonal writers' of his time, a group 'whose literature appears immune to biographical

interpretation'[172]. And yet Nick Shay is a second-generation Italian from the Bronx, growing up and getting older through the same decades as DeLillo, and with a professional trajectory that led him out of the cultural and linguistic peculiarities of his background and into a dimension of life and relationship that is plainly (that is, non-ethnically) American. Nick's trajectory can be said to parallel DeLillo's literary efforts as an attempt to *overcome* ethnicity as an existential and intellectual horizon, and consider the part of one's life and experience that lays beyond it[173]. This is confirmed by Duvall, among others: 'it is precisely DeLillo's recovery of his ethnic roots that marks *Underworld* as his most personal work to date'[174]. But *Underworld* is not only limited to the ethnic roots that Nick Shay and Don DeLillo have in common: it looks at Cotter Martin and his father, too, as well as the many Latino characters that populate the impoverished and decayed Bronx of the 1990s. Thus, it would seem, this 'most impersonal' of writers opens up the possibility for exploring his own biography and making this work his 'most personal to date'. And yet it is difficult to look at Nick Shay

[172] Veggian 2015, 1.

[173] In recent years, a number of critics have drawn attention to the nuances of the novel's handling of ethnic identity. Josephine Gattuso Hendin, for example, writes that '*Underworld* […] is Don DeLillo's tribute to the power of ethnicity as a pathway into postwar experience' (2011, 99). Usually, this power is understood as deceptive, as hopes for recognition relating to one's ethnic identity are mostly seen as betrayed by the course of recent American history. Samuele Pardini is representative of this trend when he claims that *Underworld* 'reinvent[s] the Italian American gangster in order to decompose the historical unfolding of the interplay of whiteness, modernity, and its ideological corollary, the success story of assimilation' (2016, 255). Interestingly, as part of a broader argument about the novel's framed narratives, Graley Herren contends that we should interpret Nick as the implied author of the sections on the Martins, thus creating a sense of shared experience between members of different minorities, i.e. the Italian and the African American, respectively: 'Nick takes the anxieties once held at bay by the mob-hit story and transfers them to the mythic vehicle of "The Martiniad"' (2019, 70). This aspect of the novel is particularly important for its contextualization in the neoliberal era because, as we have seen in the Introduction, Walter Benn Michaels's theorization of the 'neoliberal novel' depends upon an alliance between personalistic and ethnic themes at the expense of class and inequality. It is worth asking whether *Underworld* participates in this trend. Tim Engels's recent interpretation of it would seem to indirectly corroborate this hypothesis. In fact, in *White Male Nostalgia in Contemporary North American Literature*, the critic connects the novel's treatment of ethnicity with its focus on solipsism when he notes that 'DeLillo dissects in *Underworld* the individualism fetish most fully embodied by mainstreamed white American masculinity', which accounts for both Nick's nostalgia for his 'ethnic' past in the Bronx and his subsequent acceptance of his status as a white male towards the end of his professional trajectory (2018, 149). I contend that this is only an 'indirect' confirmation because I take 'mainstreamed white American masculinity' to include a connotation of class in Nick's case: once he abandons his Italian surname and makes a career, he acquires the status of a *middle class* white male. However, as I have noted in this chapter, *Underworld* does also thematise inequality and, therefore, cannot be grouped with the texts indicted by Michaels. See supra 112.

[174] Duvall 2002, 36.

for any sense of what DeLillo's experience of having deep ethnic roots in America must have felt like—even for those readers among us that would be so inclined—because Nick's own story is somewhat less than 'personal'. Just like many other characters in *Underworld*, he is struggling to connect the dots of his own story, and at times deliberately refusing to do so.

It is at this juncture that *Underworld* reveals its more interesting tension: it is sometimes thought as an example of the Great American Novel, as well as a national epic, and representative of DeLillo's ear for different idioms and 'voices', and it does in fact feature American characters across the socio-economic spectrum and a forty-year span[175]. Yet at the same time the structure and linguistic texture of the novel testifies to an interest in the synthesis of such polyphonic variety—in the peculiarly 'American' dimension that emerges once all of these different voices converge in a single national entity. Indeed, the novel opens with a remark on an American voice *before*, and not after, it goes into any detail as to the character that speaks it and his circumstances. This ambivalence between the ambition to represent on the page the diversity and plurality of a country and the desire to make a national—and specifically American—epic out of it has a long literary genealogy. Franco Moretti, in his seminal *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*, mentions both Melville and Whitman as examples of a compromised representation of 'polyphony in America'. The minimum common denominator behind the American epicist's project, Moretti contends, is 'to take polyphony, in other words, and reduce it to a single language: ultimately, to eliminate it altogether'[176]. And the political agenda that informs such project is far from anti-democratic in its intention, since the 'whole process', Moretti continues, is presented 'as a way of understanding one

[175] In *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Buell agrees that *Underworld* displays the ambition to speak of the state of the nation, but he also notes that, in *Underworld*, 'national history is made inseparable from world history' (Buell 2014, 3).
[176] Moretti 1996, 63.

another better'[177]. Morley, among others, deems DeLillo to be 'committed to the epicist's vocation of defining the people through their 'language' or sharing their 'voice'. 'In fact', she argues, 'it is his insistence upon the voice of the people that will unravel the untold histories that are often smothered by the overarching language'[178]. And yet DeLillo's own remarks, as well as the stylised language in which the novel is written, suggest otherwise: 'the tonal prose creates its own landscape, psychology and patterns of behaviour. It is stronger than the weight-bearing reality of actual people and events'[179]. This resonates with the way in which the crowd in the novel's Prologue is depicted, a diverse and numerous assemblage of people with a distinctive and recognizable overall aural dimension to it: that of the crowd is 'an ambient noise like random dugout buzz' accompanying every action in the game, 'a pattern, a texture, an extension of the game' (*U* 26).

'A Planing Away of Particulars': Nick Shay, Crowds and the 'Individual Form'

The conceptual proximity between a loss of personality and the imagery of the crowd has accompanied the social sciences and the modern literary imagination since the nineteenth century, 'the century of the crowd'[180]. This is particularly true in the case of American culture—'a culture of crowds', as Mary Esteve defines it[181]. 'Long before crowd psychology emerged as a scientific discourse', she claims, 'conventional tropes registered [a] sense of a crowd's loss of personality'. Esteve then proceeds to describe a fundamental internal differentiation in the crowd, which is 'constituted through the aggregation of persons, whereby the aggregation itself occasions the evacuation of these persons'

[177] Ibid.
[178] Morley 2009, 130.
[179] DeLillo 1997, n.p.
[180] Nietzsche 1966, 197. As for the prominence of the crowd in the century's literary imagination, Walter Benjamin sums it up in his reading of Baudelaire: 'The crowd—no subject was more entitled to the attention of nineteenth century writers' (in Benjamin 1986, 166).
[181] Esteve 2003, 1.

personalities'[182]. The crowd haunts the liberal imagination: on the one hand, as a potentially political congregation, it speaks to democracy's insistence on a politic body that is at once diverse and unitary, and yet, on the other hand, the vision itself of a vast populace united by nothing else than their presence within urban scenery is a constant reminder that the crowd could turn itself into 'a mob', the very nemesis of democratic thinking[183]. But, even more menacingly, the crowd threatens the existence and expression of a 'personality' on the part of the individual.

One of the most interesting questions that *Underworld* poses has to do with what, exactly, can be said to be a collective experience, and where is its political potential to be found. Jodi Dean's *Crowds and Party* is a thorough exploration of what the experience of the crowd has been taken to signify by thinkers and political commentators since the nineteenth century, and what it could mean specifically in the age of what she calls 'communicative capitalism', an age that includes the time in which *Underworld* was written. Following the genealogy of theories of the crowd Dean has traced, we see that, in the works of several theorists over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'the crowd does not have a politics[, i]t is the opportunity for politics'[184]. In other words, the 'crowd' cannot be assumed to completely represent or be represented by the 'people'. Conversely, it is a manifestation of a collective desire that is yet to be articulated, and that both 'people' and 'party' can retrospectively claim as their own in a second phase, but never in the moment itself of the actualization of the gathering of a crowd. In Dean's genealogy, the crowd is always, and necessarily, a 'crowd *event*'—yet an event that is not political yet, but only expresses a potential to acquire a political dimension at a later time, in retrospect.

[182] Ibid., 6.
[183] For more on the recurring presence of the crowd in American literature, see McGraw 2000 (on the twentieth century) and Mills 1986 (mostly on the nineteenth century, but with chapters on twentieth-century figures such as Ellison and Mailer). For an iconographic study of the masses in twentieth century art, see Jonsson 2008. For more on the role of the crowd/mob dichotomy in political philosophy, see Jonsson 2013 and McClelland 1989. On the implications of the crowd for mass psychology, see Moscovici 1985.
[184] Dean 2016, 8.

In treatments of the crowd Dean reads in Taine, Marx, Lenin and Badiou, 'charge, atmosphere, pressure, expectation, excitement' are the elements of the crowd experience for its participants: 'the affective sensibility of the collective becomes desirable in itself, the shared sense of the power of numbers'[185]. And the wave of positive affect is due to a shared perception of what Dean calls 'the individual form'—or, in other words, the suffering and limitations to experience that thinking of ourselves as discrete individual entities necessarily entails: 'this sense lets us construe the crowd as the positivity of negation, a positive expression of the negation of individuality, separateness, boundaries, and limit'[186]. Dean poses the dichotomy between the 'individual' and the 'commodity' to lie, dialectically, at the heart of capitalism's process of subjectification. She takes slave-trade to be a paradigmatic example of this logic: while, in order to be priced, slaves had to be converted into comparable quantity of an abstract value, 'to be sold they had to be distinctive enough, individuated enough, to stand out from the crowd. The individuality of the marketed slave was produced for purchase'[187]. It is from this premise that she proceeds to see in the 'the form of the individual' a 'form of capture' that extends far beyond the realm of human trafficking and into the everyday psychic and emotional life of the person[188].

The moment of transcendence and negation of individuality is so important because Dean takes the 'form of the individual' to be just one of the possibilities in which subject can think of themselves—and consequently, can conceive of the relationships they entertain with their peers—and one that has its roots in the needs and workings of a production mode, capitalism, that is neither embedded in 'human nature' nor coextensive with it: 'I argue that the problem of the subject is a problem of this persistent individual form, a form that encloses collective political subjectivity into the singular figure of the

[185] Ibid., 119.
[186] Ibid., 120.
[187] Ibid., 75-6.
[188] Ibid., 76.

individual'[189]. Dean argues that over the last few decades of the twentieth century, neoliberal capitalism has exerted an influence on this 'form of the individual' that is contradictory in nature. The more the individual is glorified and encouraged to develop his own uniqueness and particularity, the more he is made to perceive a pressure that deadens him—a pressure that cuts him off from his peers and sets the standard so high that it is impossible for him not to fall under the impression of being underperforming. Dean advances the hypothesis, following Marx, that individuals are made to feel different from one another precisely because they are unequal—in a twist of perspective that subverts the neoliberal narrative of character and personality as the very sources of personal worth that will then translate into material well-being.

The critical apparatus developed by Dean is useful when applied to *Underworld*, although the novel is much less committed than she is to the deconstruction of 'the form of the individual' that she envisions in her articulation of a possible future path for socialist politics. For one thing, crowds in DeLillo's preceding works are described as ominous and oppressive precisely because of the surrender of individuality they encourage. The following description of a mass 'Moonie' wedding, from *Mao II*, captures the spirit by which that novel looks at the various assemblages of people it describes—ranging from the one attending Khomeini's funeral to that of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster:

> They all feel the same, young people from fifty countries, immunised against the language of self. They're forgetting who they are under their clothes, leaving behind all the small banes and body woes, the daylong list of sore gums and sweaty nape and need to pee, ancient rumbles in the gut, momentary chills and tics, the fungoid dampness between the toes, the deep spasm near the shoulder blade that's charged with mortal reckoning. All gone now. They stand and chant, fortified by the blood of numbers. [190]

[189] Ibid., 73.
[190] DeLillo 1991, 24.

This is a crowd that is emptied out of meaning, and is, in a certain sense, the very negation of meaning: its foundational act is precisely the erasure (or forgetting) of 'the language of self', which in *Mao II* is conducive to historical deviances. There is a sense of loss in this 'immunis[ation]', a stubborn resistance—this seems to be the implication—to a dimension of experience, that of the individual, that is both foundational and necessary for the making of any broader, civilised entity. There is something ominous in their 'stand[ing] and chant[ing]', and the force which they derive by 'the blood of numbers' is described as the direct consequence of their obliviousness to 'the language of self'. Significantly, DeLillo chooses 'body woes', rather than personal, intimate psychological activity to account for what is forgotten and left behind in the experience of joining a crowd. By contrast, *Underworld* seems to adopt a more curious perspective towards the crowd, with its frequent visions of masses of individuals often seen as a means into understanding how complex historical process were constituted by an assemblage of individual lives and their specificities, too.

Underworld's more nuanced outlook on crowds is due to its attention to different phases of capitalism. The consumeristic culture underpinning Cold War-era American patriotism is contrasted with the changes brought in society and culture by the advent of the Internet and communicative capitalism more broadly. While it predates the era in which social media and big-data business would become part and parcel of everyday life, *Underworld* is remarkable in its imaginative anticipation of the kinds of pressures exerted by new informational technologies on individuals and their perception of community and interconnectedness. Several characters in the novel are shown to perceive a form of anxiety with regard to their own status as particular individuals which they directly link to forms of technology and commerce that were not available in the 1950s America of the Prologue. Crucially, the anxiety induced in them by the production, availability and

circulation of personal and commercial information is connected to the idea of being part of a crowd, yet a very different crowd from the one gathered at the Polo Grounds in 1951:

> Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that's electronic and sex that's cyberspaced […]. Some things fade and wane, states disintegrate, assembly lines shorten their runs and interact with lines in other countries. A method of production that will custom-cater to cultural and personal needs, not to cold war ideologies of massive uniformity. And the system pretends to go along, to become more supple and resourceful, less dependent on rigid categories. But even as desire tends to specialize, going silky and intimate, the force of converging markets produces an instantaneous capital that shoots across horizons at the speed of light, making for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream. (*U* 785-6)

These are the first lines of 'Das Kapital', *Underworld*'s final section, clearly conceived as both counterpoint and historical contrast to the Prologue, as it takes place after the end of the Cold War. The Epilogue is significantly set outside the United States: this is Nick's interior monologue, in a brief meditative break during a business trip to Kazakhstan with one of his colleagues at Waste Containment, Brian Glassic. They are described having a drink 'at a pub called the Football Hooligan', feeling a 'sense of displacement and redefinition' which comes from being within a place that is an imitation of Western popular culture on the territory of what used to be America's number one antagonist on the planet. 'States disintegrate' is not just a commentary on the coming to pieces of the USSR, but also a remark on the shared perception that nation states have seen their relative importance reduced by global markets. Nick's words reveal a sense of uneasiness about the increased fluidity of capital, goods and information that he expresses along the familiar lines of the particular and the general.

It is no coincidence that this is perceived by *Underworld*'s most nostalgic supporter of the idea of being 'a country of one', and who sees himself as 'a sturdy Roman wall' (*U* 275). On the one hand—Nick is starting to realize—a capitalistic consumeristic

culture that goes global will be more capable than ever to 'custom-cater' to needs that are inherently 'personal', and this is because its expansion in space and intensity will grant it even more power to hyper-specialize. Yet on the other, this movement unmasks the paradoxical nature of 'subjectification' itself, as the peculiar constitution of an-individual-as-consumer. That is, the particularity of the individual is not a pre-condition for the performance of his duties as a consumer but, conversely, it is what he conceives of as his personality and his independence which is constituted in the act itself of consuming. Thus the 'planing away of particulars' Nick is referring to does not only flatten out the physical or informational commodities that this new form of capital can spread, but it does *de facto* change the individual's most intimate aspects of life—not just the way he consumes, that is, but also the way he 'eat[s,] sleep[s] and dream[s]'. The sub-conscious, too, is an effect of capital. Whether Nick attributes this new state of things to an inherent feature of capitalism or rather to its most recent incarnation is not clear—but his nostalgia for the sense of self that he had in the Bronx of his youth seems to suggest the latter. Through the character of Nick, DeLillo is able to describe the crisis of the individual who experiences the demise of its own fiction: it was not only states that 'disintegrate[d]' in the passage from a Fordist to a global economy, but the 'form of the individual', too, has 'fade[d] and wane[d]'. It is in this light that Nick's obsession with the baseball and the personal narratives that it carries with it is more significant: in his musings over waste, whether nuclear or commercial, we find an individual who is going through a crisis of subjectification by trying to renegotiate his relationship with the crowd at large—that is, not one or another definite form of collectivity, but rather the vast, shapeless multitude of possible subjects that new global narratives, as well as his own business endeavours, are forcing him to consider[191].

[191] Nick is thus representative of a broader tendency in DeLillo's work, which is best summarised by Dewey: 'whatever poignancy DeLillo's characters manage comes when they demand the privilege of a self to explore, fearing in clearer moments that it simply is not there' (Dewey 2006, 6). Similar conclusions are shared by most other DeLillo scholars. Cowart concurs with Dewey that DeLillo is dedicated to the

In the 'planing away of particulars', too, is one of *Underworld*'s crowds: the novel is not only interested in those assemblages of individuals that can be seen at a glance, but also those scattered around the globe and still constituted as one entity by ubiquitous and transnational flows of capital and information. Not only does this crowd not assuage its members' desire for collectivity, it also undermines their sense of being particular individuals, with their own specific desires and idiosyncrasies. Paradoxically, in *Underworld*, it is this first-hand experience of the crisis of the 'individual form', too, that unites the disparate elements of its composite cast of characters. Yet there is a crucial difference between the network of feelings and desires created by transnational capital and the shared perception of a threat to the cult of the individual. For the experience of being a customer attended to by global productive and financial powers is a public one, in which each individual is provided with a service that claims to be ultra-specific and personalised and yet is also aware that everyone else is benefitting from a similar treatment to the extent that their finances allow. Conversely, a feeling of confusion and self-doubt derives from the realization that a form of collective and consumeristic desire shapes individuality rather than being constituted as the sum of its parts. This precludes the kind of intimacy that would be necessary for these characters to recognize themselves in others.

Intimacy is a feeling—as well as a disposition toward others—that characters in *Underworld* are often shown to strive for, without ever succeeding in attaining it. Secrecy

chronicle of how, in contemporary America, 'the individual's sense of identity or self suffers progressive attenuation', mainly due to the invasive character of television and other media (Cowart 2003, 12). While I do accept these critics' premises, my reading of Nick's pondering in *Underworld* differs from theirs in that it aims at highlighting the potentially emancipatory aspects of the 'crisis of the individual' identified by DeLillo. Peter Boxall comes the closest to my interpretation of character in *Underworld* when he writes: 'it happens again and again in DeLillo's oeuvre that the ecstatic process by which one is removed from oneself, by which one lapses from the faith of self-identity, is the process that opens onto death' (Boxall 2006, 193). In this 'death' Boxall traces a contradictory coexistence of both 'capitulation to the dominant power' and the possibility of 'an undreamt and unnameable utopian ideal' (195). My contribution to this debate consists in further exploring the implications to this kind of 'death', and, through the concept of impersonality, linking it to DeLillo's political preoccupations in *Underworld*.

and betrayal seem to be the norm in Nick's history of personal relationships, particularly romantic ones: he is aware that his wife had an affair with Brian a few years back, but he does not appear to be too bothered by the idea. He, too, has deceived and hurt other people, and some of these events have marked his entire adult life: he is often shown to reminisce about the accidental manslaughter he committed as a teenager, as well as about the love affair he entertained with Klara. His resistance to open up with anybody else seems to be connected with the void that his own father left in his life when he disappeared from home in Nick's childhood. Significantly, he often links the sense of self that he had been able to muster in his adolescence to the absence of his dead father, as if his own personal identity had a kind of fundamental loneliness at the heart of it, a lack that ended up defining the whole. Nick sums this up by saying, in what is an interior monologue interspersed with fragments of recalled conversations with his wife, 'I've always been a country of one' (*U* 275). That his own sense of individuality is here defined in relation to a word, 'country', which identifies a kind of collectivity—a national community, in fact—as well as a territory, is revealing.

What Nick is alluding to is not only a sense of an individual who can survive and thrive without others, but even more importantly, an individual who is defined *in contraposition to* others, his own success determined by his relative position against peers. He uses an Italian word to explain his disposition to his wife, the word being 'lontananza'—'distance or remoteness', as he translates it himself—and he seems to be fascinated by the violent implications of the term, the act of aggression at the heart of the *removal* of one's own presence from an interpersonal exchange: he compares his own disposition to 'the perfected distance of the gangster, the syndicate mobster—the made man', when most of his life he has entertained the suspicion that his own father had been killed precisely by a member of the local organised crime scene (*U* 275). The absence of Nick's father recurs between the lines of his next comment: 'Once you're made a man,

you don't need the constant living influence of sources outside yourself. You're all there. You're made. You're handmade. You're a sturdy Roman wall' (*U* 275). Those 'sources outside yourself' to influence (and perhaps guide) one's own developing self echo the role of a father, in particular, and it is easy to spot a deep loneliness behind Nick's sense of being whole. Here, 'the form of the individual' is described in its constituent phase of being *separate from* others—a foundation, in other words, that is precisely 'outside of [one]self' and clearly not emerging from any immanent personal specificity. Nick's ruminations on his own sense of isolation from others occur at the same time that he is wandering around the streets of Los Angeles, fantasising that he might get a glimpse of his own dead father, should he have survived and moved away, and not been killed by the Italian Mob, as he suspects. That is, independence from others is clearly affirmed precisely when their loss is most acutely perceived.

If such a strong and stable concept of one's individuality could be nurtured and maintained throughout Nick's young adulthood—and a phase of American history in which consumerism and patriotism not only supported but demanded it—the phase of capitalism that coincides with the end of the Cold War makes it unsustainable, as Nick's nostalgic undertones suggest: 'I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself' (*U* 810). This aspect of Nick's nostalgia for his own past—the sense that his own identity was 'a distant mystery', if indeed a stable and unitary one—reveals another anxiety that is specific to the globalised world in which he finds himself in his early sixties. Post-World War II American consumerism demanded a certain *exterior* performance of subjectivity, which was to be expressed primarily through the acquisition and exhibition of commodities. In the decade that opens with the

crumbling of the Soviet Union, instead, it is a certain kind of interiority that is fetishised—as if the new frontier of consumerism was in fact the continuous unveiling and re-shaping of one's own personality and deepest thoughts.

'A Disembodied Fact in Liquid Form': Cyberspace as Global Crowd

Yet another crowd depicted in *Underworld* is that created through the World Wide Web, in which individuals are promised instant contact with countless of their peers scattered around the globe, thus creating a virtual crowd unbounded by place or individual event, constantly active and mutating. Nick observes the experiential change brought about by the Internet by looking at his son, who 'spends tremendous amounts of time with his computer': 'Jeff is a lurker. He visits sites but does not post. He gathers the waves and rays. He adds components and functions and sits before a spreading mass of compatible hardware. The real miracle is the web, the net, where everybody is everywhere at once, and he is there among them, unseen' (*U* 806 and 808). Nick's ambivalent language testifies to the anxiety that many felt in the 1990s when the Internet was first introduced in the everyday lives of a vast number of non-military users. For, on the one hand, the Web offers the thrilling possibility of transcending space and time, and connect to people from all over the globe, exchanging information at the fastest possible rate. The Internet, in this sense, represents the ultimate capitalistic fantasy, the 'miracle' Nick is referring to: both time and space collapse into a Jamesonian immanent present—Nick's own experience of globalization, but made accessible from one's own study or living room, with no need to travel all the way to Kazakhstan. But Nick also senses the existential threats that this new technology carries with it: while giving the superficial impression of *connecting* people, the Internet also holds the power to make them lonelier than they have ever been. This, he feels, is the case with Jeff, who is now already in his twenties and displays signs of excessive insecurity and introversion. It is easy to recognize Nick's own

insecurities in his anxious remarks about Jeff being a 'lurker', and yet DeLillo is making use of the generational gap between father and son to comment on how the recurring problems of loneliness, intimacy and community have been transformed by the social and technological conditions of the end of the century.

With its putatively horizontal and reticular shape, the Web offers itself as an apt metaphor for the way in which people can congregate and collaborate, succeeding precisely by virtue of their interconnectedness. Having enormously reduced the relative importance and prestige of the printed press, as well as having created new and seemingly infinite venues for people to voice their most radical political opinions, the Internet did seem in fact to many people to be on a mission to re-design American society. Following Clinton's 1996 Telecommunications Act and the dot-com boom, self-appointed technology-gurus were celebrating the Internet as the tool that would finally allow the American people to fulfil the promises of their Constitution: 'life in cyberspace', *Wired* magazine announced in 1993, just four years prior to the publication of *Underworld*, 'seems to be shaping us exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity and community'[192]. Indeed, new forms of community did seem to be soon-to-come, the entire network of Internet-users a virtual, vast and global crowd in which all kinds of information could be shared and disseminated. As we have seen, *Underworld* makes of the phrase 'everything is connected' its leitmotif, and DeLillo explores the literal and metaphorical implications of the World Wide Web most explicitly in the final pages of this network-like novel, interwoven as it is with interconnected characters, facts and coincidences. Its surrealist and enigmatic coda co-joins religious transcendence with the Internet, merging them into a single image.

[192] Quoted in Lepore 2018, 732.

DeLillo further elaborates on his ideas on impersonality and collectivity through the character of Sister Edgar, a Catholic nun described as bearing a weird physical resemblance to Hoover, the other Edgar in the novel. In the last pages of the novel, she experiences self-transcendence on two distinct and profoundly different occasions. The first is a literal crowd event, with semi-religious overtones: Edgar joins the people gathered to admire what is thought to be an apparition from beyond the grave of Esmeralda, a teenager brutally murdered in the Bronx just a few days earlier. In sharing the moment with the bystanders, the nun experiences an intense sensation of 'sadness and loss and glory […] that makes her feel inseparable from the shakers and mourners' (*U* 823). For an instant, the narrative voice tells us, 'she is nameless[,] lost to the details of personal history, a disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd' (*U* 823). In the immediate aftermath of this event, Edgar takes her exploration of the limits of the individual form to the realm of the Internet. Right after her death, in a brief sub-section titled '*Keystroke 2*', she seems to literally attain the state of 'a disembodied fact in liquid form', as her consciousness, we learn, has been in some way transported into the World Wide Web, and she is now one piece of information liberally circulating in it.

> In her veil and habit she was basically a face, or a face and scrubbed hands. Here in cyberspace she has shed all that steam-ironed fabric. She is not naked exactly but she is open—exposed to every connection you can make on the world wide web.
>
> There is no space or time out here, or in here, or wherever she is. There are only connections. Everything is connected. All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password—world without end, amen.
>
> But she is in cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems. This is why she's so uneasy. There is a presence here, a thing implied, something vast and bright. […] [I]t's a glow, a lustrous rushing force that seems to flow from a billion distant red nodes. (*U* 824-5)

DeLillo's nuanced reflection on the potentialities and dangers of the Internet is revealed in the succession of these three short paragraphs, each highlighting an aspect of the

cultural and political significance of what, for all purposes, seems to be a new dimension of experience. Sister Edgar's first impression upon entering the Web is reminiscent of the sense of liberation and affective community with others that she had known with the street crowd admiring Esmeralda's putative icon[193]. Interestingly, though, this freedom is not so much described as the consequence of leaving behind one's own 'personal history' and sense of identity, but as the mere abandonment of signs of religious and cultural affiliation: veil and habit were reducing her to 'a face and scrubbed hands' in real life, but here in this kind of virtual after-life she seems to be freer to be put in relation with a diverse range of facts and individuals—a possibility, it is implied, that was not there for her when she was clearly definable by creed and institutional affiliation. The fact of being 'exposed to every connection you can make' in a vast and anonymous on-line crowd is one aspect of the experience offered by the Internet that resounded particularly with the American public of the 1990s. Not only did online fora and mailing-lists perfectly feed into a collective imaginary already replete with secrecy and plots, but it also created venues for people to hide behind nicknames and online alter egos that could, at will, disguise their class, race and religious affiliation.

Here, too, is a form of impersonality, conceived as the removal not of one's own 'personal history', but rather as the disguise or removal of one's own 'face', or recognizable traits, in order not to be seen. The possibility of the Internet that Sister Edgar seems to experience is one in which her mobility is enhanced—her capacity to see and

[193] However, the figure of Sister Edgar is too morally ambiguous for her ascension into cyberspace to read as a positive and straightforward endorsement of the communitarian and utopian possibilities offered by the Web. Duvall, among other DeLillo scholars, concurs: 'in terms of individual identity, the implications of DeLillo's cyberspace […] seem less than fully liberating, certainly not a celebration of an empowered computer user' (Duvall 2002, 68). Cowart fundamentally agrees with Duvall but registers a degree of openness and ambiguity when he writes that *Underworld* constantly returns to 'the idea of a more genuinely metaphysical—even religious—connectedness that remains indeterminate and often debased as superstition or paranoid delusion' (Cowart 2002, 192). I differ from them in that I interpret Sister Edgar's loss of 'individual identity' as conducive to a form of connectedness that is presented in the novel as a political good. As for the delusional aspects of her inclusion in cyberspace, I attribute them to DeLillo's critical stance towards the cyber-libertarian discourse of the 1990s.

learn, as well as being put in connection with strangers—but her sense of herself is perfectly maintained. So much so that even the nodes of the Web in which she finds herself are described as being in connection with one another, but only through the metaphor of the hyperlink: parts of the same network of relations, in other words, and yet discrete and independent entities. In the place of the emotional outburst of the crowd scene—in which different and at times contradictory affects run through Sister Edgar's body all at once as she joins in—here the means of establishing connections are nothing more than 'keystroke, a mouse-click, a password'. And, in fact, it is perfectly possible, as the case of Nick's son Jeff demonstrates, to be there in cyberspace as a 'lurker', seeing—spying, even—without being seen: the dark side of the potential for communion and communication offered by the Web, *Underworld* suggests, is a virtual crowd in which everybody can maintain their own privacy and secrecy while out in a public space. Most importantly, this virtual crowd is experienced by Sister Edgar as an object of study and interest, not as the subject of any affective state with ethical or political implications: the Web is a space to navigate, enjoying the availability of its interconnected contents. Crucially, for a novel as focussed on paranoia as *Underworld* is, it is only by fully becoming 'a disembodied fact in liquid form' that Sister Edgar can access 'all human knowledge gathered and linked'. That is, a user needs to become the potential object of observation of another user in order to join the network. In *Underworld*'s darkest portrayal of communicative capitalism, the common citizen, too, receives the same paranoid attention as major historical figures and events—as the Kennedy assassination and its protagonists in DeLillo's 1988 *Libra*, for example—and she needs to cede her own data ('the details of personal history', that is) in order to be able to investigate her fellow citizens.

The most ominous implication is brought to the fore in the third paragraph of Sister Edgar's foray into cyberspace. For she, too, realizes that this place is not as benign

as a Catholic nun would expect heaven to be, and she feels the force of an entity which is other than herself or any of the other nodes making up the network. The 'thing implied', 'vast and blind', is the logic of capital only recently being exported to the realm of information technology, carrying with itself its contradictory concept of the individual. In the context of the Internet, *Underworld* is quick to register, the ultimate force to benefit from the commercialization of users' personal information, clearly, is that of 'the grip of systems', i.e. the several—but few—companies providing the platform for the acquisition and sharing of such content. Here individuals—through the medium of their data—are de-personified in that they are made as just another type of commodity. Yet on the other hand, this kind of commodification reveals a contradiction which is present elsewhere in the history of capital: the information being sold and bought is only of interest insofar as it is *particularised*, at least to some extent, thus paradoxically realigning itself to the category of the personal. Even while 'big data' is only valuable once it reaches statistical relevance, it is often oriented toward the *personal* tastes and inclinations of the individual, thus first appropriating and then commercialising those aspects of users' existences that we thought were their most private. Just short of a decade early for the rise of social networks as such—but well into the era of collective paranoia regarding the acquisition and storage of personal data—*Underworld* envisages the reduction of the individual to the commodified status of a piece of data through the image of Sister Edgar's fluctuating in cyberspace.

The kind of potentially egalitarian and pluralistic crowd represented by cyberspace looks and feels, from Sister Edgar's perspective, like a field of force which leaves little autonomy to individual users, even when taken as a collectivity. For while she is exploring the wealth of interconnected facts and events made available in cyberspace, she encounters 'the H-bomb home page', thus closing up on the novel's circle of interest with the collective experience of history and the nuclear arms race of the Cold

War. All sorts of technical and contextual detail is disclosed to her, but it is the sheer murderous potential of the technology at hand that inspires a quasi-religious awe in her:

> Whole populations potentially skelly-boned in the massive flash—dem bones, dem bones, sing the washtub women. And Sister begins to sense the byshadows that stretch from the awe of a central event. How the intersecting systems help pull us apart, leaving us vague, drained, docile, soft in our inner discourse, willing to be shaped, to be overwhelmed—easy retreats, half beliefs. (*U* 826)

In the Prologue the coincidence of the most memorable baseball match of an era with the testing of an H-bomb had served the purpose of illustrating the internal and external forces binding the American nation together—a consumeristic lifestyle coupled with mortal fear of the enemy. Here, however, in a scene set in the 1990s, Sister Edgar's pondering over the atomic threat as 'a central event' from which the 'intersecting systems' of a by-now globalised planet extend seems anachronistic. DeLillo, in a novel that walks the line, stumbling at times, between being a paranoid fiction and a fiction about paranoia, here confirms his fascination with the idea that the multiplicity of history can be reduced to the story of a handful of actors, objects and events, just like a series of episodes 'that stretch from the awe of a central event'. Whether *Underworld*, in its structure and themes, endorses such point of view or merely aims at registering it, it is clear that its political implications have much in common with the repetitive disparagement of collective action promoted by neoliberal ideology. The progressive deregulation of capitalism—together with its global spread and intensification—is often portrayed by its supporters as a natural and beneficial development in social and economic history. Therefore, even though they have no interest, of course, in describing it as a system that 'help[s] pull us apart', neoliberal ideologues do present the hegemony of capital as the central event from which everything else must proceed in human affairs. Any form of discourse—be it a work of fiction such as *Underworld* or a political perspective—that aims at being critical of neoliberal capital would therefore necessarily expose this narrative as arbitrary, and highlight instead the plurality of forces and actors that constantly help to shape our reality.

The Internet, as we have seen, would function precisely as an image for such a multiplicity of subjects—its metaphorical horizontality a good metaphor not only for the pluralism of a diverse nation, but also for the interrelatedness of systems and movements that characterize the body politic. Enthusiasts of the political potential of information technology, especially in the years in which *Underworld* was being written, were quick to remind the American public of the Internet's roots in the countercultural movements of the 'long '68'. Far from representing another Big Brother-like tool for mass surveillance, the Web was presented precisely as the opportunity for an attenuation of the danger of governmental intrusion into citizens' privacy. Central to this narrative was a vision of the Web as free, unregulated and egalitarian. However, it is now well-known how such rhetoric of equality and shared knowledge was deployed to advance a project of economic deregulation that ended up constituting an enormous advantage for those American companies that pioneered the sector between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s[194]. Out of metaphor, and into real political life, the Internet evolved into a quintessentially neoliberal dream: developed and sustained by a wealth of technology and infrastructure that was state-funded in large measure, it was increasingly being controlled by just a handful of big companies, which of course held enormous power over the ways in which information was being collected and stored. What is more, the Internet—as well as Silicon Valley and the other symbols of the technological revolution that was taking place in America and all over the globe—was characterised by an entrepreneurial culture that celebrated the individual genius over the collective intellectual labour of the many. Under this light, Sister Edgar's preoccupation with 'a central event' that left people 'vague, drained, docile, soft in [their] inner discourse' seems to have more to do with the Web from which she speaks than the terrors of the past which she is directly looking at.

[194] For the proximities between cyber-libertarian and neoliberal discourse, as well as an account of how the convergence between the two influenced the institutionalization of the Internet in the 1990s, see Chenou 2014.

It is a preoccupation for the privatising tendencies of neoliberal capitalism, and certainly not a rejection of impersonality per se. Thus, while abandonment to the life of the crowd is depicted in often-ambiguous terms in *Underworld*, Sister Edgar's case shows that such an experience holds some liberating potential for the individual.

CHAPTER THREE

'BARELY AUDIBLE VOICES': IMPERSONAL JUSTICE AND THE CRISIS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE IN ROBERTO BOLAÑO'S *2666*

Roberto Bolaño's *2666* entertains a complex and ambivalent relationship with cultural difference. On the one hand, its author certainly is a champion of contamination and the crossing of geographical, political, linguistic and literary borders. Travelling features prominently in both *2666* and *The Savage Detectives*, with many characters going from one country to another—sometimes for short periods of time, sometimes for life. Bolaño's own story was characterised by the displacement and perspective that sojourning in different national contexts inevitably brought with it. On the other hand, however, the writer seems to be equally attuned to the experience of the international as a sphere of its own: his subject is often not the irreducible and untranslatable particularity of a given place, but rather the coexistence of different systems of thought and life within a broader, global, sameness. The famous quote from *2666* allows for this interpretation, too: 'nadie presta atención a estos asesinatos, pero en ellos se esconde el secreto del mundo' (*2666* 439)[195]. Within the geopolitical specificity of peripheral Santa Teresa—Bolaño's fictional rendition of the world-infamous Ciudad Juárez—lies a truth that explains the workings of a world that increasingly works as a *system*. A system: an entity, that is, with a certain degree of homogeneity and sameness. If you can find 'the secret of the world' hidden in the violent deaths of the NAFTA-era Mexico-US border it is because, the passage suggests, they are the product of a systemic violence that is impossible to understand if not as the necessary by-product of the global workings of capitalism. Thus, Bolaño's

[195] 'No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them' (*2666* [English] 348).

novel can be considered a narrative about genuine displacement and, at the same time, a testimony to the illusory nature of travelling within the globalised world[196].

In *2666*, it is 'La parte de los críticos' that features the most pungent indictment of the blindness of first-world observers to the specificity of the global economy's periphery. Norton, Pelletier and Espinoza—'the Critics' of the title—have travelled from their respective countries in Europe to the Mexican town of Santa Teresa in search of the mysterious writer Archimboldi, the author to whom they have dedicated their professional lives. Their short stay in Mexico is unsatisfactory both as a research trip and as a stimulating encounter with a different part of the world, as they are shown to spend most of their time either in a hotel or purchasing cheap tourist merchandise. Yet references to the killings start to penetrate even such a protected environment, and readers perceive that something disturbing is going on in Santa Teresa. The subconscious of each of the three critics, too, registers the uncanniness, and they are visited by images and apparitions that temporarily pollute the realism of the novel with fragments of the spectral and the symbolic appearing just beneath the surface of the prose. Liz Norton's nightmare is the most evocative among *2666*'s engagements with the dialectics of the culturally specific and the globalised sameness, the particular and the general, and the personal and the impersonal. Norton dreams that she is standing in her hotel room in front of a mirror, staring at what seems to be her own reflected face. Taking a closer look, she realizes that the woman she sees is a distinct individual, although nearly identical to her. At this point, the critic is convinced that she is experiencing an apparition, in the form of a young and silent woman standing in the middle of her room:

[196] In this I differ, in part, from David Kurnick, when he praises Bolaño's capacity to recreate local parlances and jargons, his 'inhabitation of voice' (2012, n.p.). My impression is rather that Bolaño focuses instead on how all of these particularities can often blend into a flattened-out, global perspective that both locals and travellers will inhabit over the course of their transnational exchanges. Thus, I agree with Adam Kirsch when he includes *2666* into his small canon of representative examples of what he labels 'the Global Novel', a genre that is 'faithful to the way the global is actually lived—not through the abolition of space, but as a theme by which place is mediated' (Kirsch 2017, 12).

> Los ojos de ella eran iguales a los suyos. Los pómulos, los labios, la frente, la nariz. Norton se puso a llorar o creyó que lloraba de pena o de miedo. Es igual a mí, se dijo, pero ella está muerta. […] La mujer volvió a sonreírle. Esta vez la sonrisa precedida por una mueca sino por un gesto de profundo abatimiento. Y luego la mujer volvió a sonreírle y su rostro se hizo ansioso y luego inexpresivo y luego nervioso y luego resignado y luego pasó por todas las expresiones de la locura y siempre volvía a sonreírle, mientras Norton, recuperada la sangre fría, había sacado una libretita y tomaba notas muy rápidas de todo lo que sucedía, como si en ello estuviera cifrado su destino o su cuota de felicidad en la tierra, y así estuvo hasta despertar. [197] (*2666* 155)

Norton's encounter is unique in the novel, in that she is the only character that is able to directly gaze into the face of one of the victims.

As it has been convincingly argued, Bolaño manifests an ambivalent attitude towards the significance of the human body, and the face in particular: on the one hand his fiction 'displays a nostalgic desire for the face as [the] site at which the embodied subject becomes visible and might be understood or "read"', while, on the other, the writer 'demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining the body within any order, and particularly within that of representation'[198]. The same ambivalence is registered in the encounter between the British and the Mexican woman. Importantly, the gaze can be returned, because Norton is looking at a face that is capable of moving and expressing feelings—a circumstance never to reappear in the novel. For a moment, there seems to be, on Norton's part, the recognition of a common humanity: an almost humanitarian pity for the precariousness of a life in a different part of the world. Yet, suddenly, 'the face of the Other' breaks down and its function as mediator between the personal feelings of a subject and another is shown in its frailty and dubiousness, as the expressions of this ghostly

[197] 'The woman's eyes were just like her eyes. The cheekbones, the lips, the forehead, the nose. Norton started to cry in sorrow or fear, or thought she was crying. She's just like me, she said to herself, but she's dead. […] The woman smiled at her again and her face became anxious, then blank, then nervous, then resigned, and then all the expression of madness passed over it and after each she always smiled. Meanwhile, Norton, regaining her composure, had taken out a small notebook and was rapidly taking notes about everything as it happened, as if her fate or her share of happiness on earth depended on it, and this went on until she woke up' (*2666* [English] 116).

[198] Merchant 2015, 5 and 1, respectively. Merchant's article is the most thorough application of Lévinas's concept of the 'face' to Bolaño's treatment of femicides. See in particular, pp. 5-13.

apparition mechanically proceed from one extreme to the other, interrupted only by an ambivalent smile[199]. Norton is left to interpret, or decipher, the dream just like other visitors to Santa Teresa try and interpret the town: as if 'the secret of the world' was 'hidden' in it. Whatever she succeeds in reading in this apparition, Norton leaves Mexico for Europe the next day, as if running for her life.

The aim of this chapter will be to show that *2666* rejects the kind of personalistic recognition of humanity implied by Norton's gesture and points, instead, to a concept of (international) justice which is impersonal. In his literary representation of the Ciudad Juárez femicides, Bolaño deploys the conceptual toolkit of the novel in order to show how globalization and neoliberalism have profoundly changed the terms in which ideals of social justice can be articulated. As I will show, *2666*'s form and tone point towards a conception of 'the good' that shares important features with the work of a thinker that, just like Bolaño, made of the evils of twentieth-century history a major concern of her intellectual work—namely, Simone Weil. Reading in particular her essay 'On Human Personality', I will argue that the concept of justice that emerges from *2666* is *impersonal* and, as such, developed in opposition to human rights discourse. In order to show how Weil's political considerations are to a significant extent reflected in the very form of *2666*, I will read Bolaño's style in light of Maurice Blanchot's thoughts on the 'neuter', a concept which is strictly related to that of impersonality[200]. Before these themes can be tackled, however, a brief introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of human rights discourse is necessary, as well as a reflection on its crisis in the years of neoliberal ascendancy.

[199] Butler's words on 'the face' in Lévinas aptly summarise the significance of Norton's dream: 'for Levinas [sic], then, the human is not *represented by* the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give' (Butler 2004, 141). Bolaño's depiction of 'the face of the Other', foregrounds precisely this impossibility.

[200] See Esposito 2012, 125-33.

Literary Justice I: Incorporation

The encounter between Norton and her ghostly twin is paradigmatic of an anxiety that runs throughout *2666*, which has to do with the crisis of legitimacy of human rights discourse. This crisis is generated by the gap between the legal and philosophical underpinnings of humanitarian interventions and, on the other hand, the evidence of human rights abuse that is so pervasive in a world in which neoliberal doctrine and policies are hegemonic[201]. *2666* puts this crisis into focus through its double attention to violence and transnational exchange. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida summarizes the sad predicament of an era in which humanitarian interventions are on the rise, but with dubious results: 'instead of celebrating the "end of ideologies" and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth'[202]. Derrida's words already seem to imply that the supposedly apolitical character of human rights discourse is not only suspicious, but potentially indicative of an alliance with the interests of capital. As we have seen in the Introduction, in recent years several scholars have pointed to the fact that the rise to prominence of neoliberal doctrine and human rights discourse were nearly concomitant[203]. In particular, human rights discourse is, indeed, post-political in the sense that it claims to be genuinely universal and non-ideological, and this is certainly a feature it shares with the technocratic aspects of neoliberal doctrine. But the question that is posed by the form of *2666* concerns a deeper dimension of the impact of neoliberalism on the humanitarian crisis that it registers. My interpretation of Bolaño's novel corroborates Esposito's hypothesis that the notion itself of 'person', on which Human Rights are

[201] As legal and literary scholar Joseph R. Slaughter has noted, 'the discursive victory of human rights means that ours is at once the Age of Human Rights and the Age of Human Rights Abuse' (2007, 2).
[202] Derrida 1994, 106.
[203] See supra 50-6.

founded, already contains, *in nuce*, the pernicious divisions that manifest themselves in the humanitarian crises of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries[204]. What the novel also does is substantiate the claim that neoliberal capital has indeed something to gain from conceptions of justice that focus on the inalienable rights of the person, rather than on any redistributive agenda. Indeed, *2666* can be thought of as a monument to the 'disposable third world woman', a figure that testifies to the deep entanglement between misogynistic violence and the exigencies of neoliberal capital[205]. The novel dispassionately looks at how the human personality that human rights rhetoric so vehemently posits as inalienable can *de facto* be suppressed and sacrificed to processes of capital accumulation. In so doing, it implicitly criticizes the notions of person and personality that underpin not only human rights discourse, but also certain forms of novelistic personalization.

This formal and aesthetic critique is conducted primarily in 'La parte de los crímenes'. The 113 sections in it detailing the finding of as many dead women are famously and almost literally transposed from *Huesos en el desierto*, the non-fictional book on the Ciudad Juárez humanitarian crisis that Sergio González Rodríguez, a Mexican journalist, was completing while also exchanging notes, opinions and information with Bolaño. In a sense, then, these sections represent an attempt at incorporating non-fictional documents within a work of literature, with little or no reworking. In fact, the re-elaboration of Bolaño's novelistic writing is minimal: he adds sparse details that never seem to converge towards rendition of a fully-fledged character, even when the information provided would seem to approximate it. Virtually all critical treatments of the novel have tackled the issue of its flat narrative voice and the forensic,

[204] For my discussion of Esposito's hypothesis, see the Introduction to the present thesis. For the original formulation, see Esposito 2012, 4-7.
[205] The notion of 'the third world disposable woman' is the subject of Melissa W. Wright's *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (2006), which I further discuss below. The word 'monument', in relation to *2666*, echoes John Kraniauskas's reading of the novel as 'A Monument to the Unknown Worker' (2016).

quasi-scientific tone of these 113 sections[206]. What needs to be accounted for, then, are two things at once. First, exactly what readerly expectation is betrayed in the lack and resistance that many have perceived as a quality of the overall tone of the novel—a quality that is particularly intense in the descriptions of the dead bodies. If the fate of these 'disposable bodies' is painful for us to consider—just as it was for Norton—and if our sense of injustice is elicited by the descriptions of the many signs of horrendous violence on their corpses, then what form of novelistic justice do we feel is being withheld from them? So much of Bolaño's fiction engages with the question of what relevance still pertains to the literary in our time, that it is necessary to ask what is being done to these bodies once their existence is registered in a work of fiction without any discernible trace of compassion or humanization. If these individuals were made 'disposable', less than human, non-persons, is it possible, and desirable, to reestablish their humanity with a process of literary personalization?

As we have seen, it is 'human personality'—the very claim to universality at the heart of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights—that is called into question by *2666*. Here lies my main disagreement with the biopolitical readings of the novel that see it as a mere denunciation of the exclusion from rights of those that are only granted the status of 'bare life'[207]. On the contrary, Bolaño's treatment of the victims of neoliberal violence points to an ethics of impersonality, in which the process of literary incorporation that would grant them a personality is deliberately resisted. What Bolaño

[206] Glen S. Close provides a useful overview when he writes that 'it has been called anaesthetised, affectless, cold, frigid, detached, disenchanted, distant, impassive, impersonal, indifferent, insensitive, mechanical, neutral, noncommittal and rigorously formal' (2018, 142-3). He attributes each of these judgments to the relative critic in note 3, 198.

[207] Many critical treatments of *2666* have noted that it can be read through the lens of Agamben's *Homo Sacer*: that is, as a tale of subjects that are reduced to the state of *bare life*, in that their existence bears no political relevance and they can be exterminated without any consequences. While I am convinced that Agamben's terms are certainly applicable to *2666*'s renditions of the Mexican femicides, I see the novel mainly as an interrogation of what lies at the other end of the equation—what really is a 'person'—and not only a denunciation of what happens to the individual body when it is bereft of rights and political relevance. Representative treatments of Bolaño's work in relation to Agamben include Elmore 2008, Farred 2010, Loy 2018, Merchant 2015 and Stockwell 2019.

does share with Agamben and the biopolitical strand of theory is a scepticism of both Enlightenment and modernity, as forces inherently containing the violent and totalitarian aspects that shaped the history of the twentieth century. Crucially, as López-Vicuña has noted, Bolaño holds an 'anti-humanist view of literature', as he sees fiction-writing, too, as a form of culture implicated in the violent project of modernity[208].

In order to grasp the implications of Bolaño's treatment of the 'victims' in *2666*, it is important to understand what is at stake in the process of 'personalization' that the novel's forensic passages apparently refuse to undertake. For the streak of femicides that the novel takes as its central subject is first and foremost, in the language of international law, a violation of human rights. It was not only that the rights of these individuals were negated but that it was those rights that are said to be *human* which went unacknowledged. The fictional evocation of the 'personality' of these subjects, then—however cursory and unspecific—could potentially stand for an aesthetic gesture of compensation, thus helping to make visible what was forever erased by an act of brutal violence. The very concept of 'ascription' presupposes a certain level of abstraction and simulation, which is shared by both literary and legal discourses. In both, a 'personality' is something that is predicated upon a subject, even when it is thought that it directly emanates from them. That is, the concept always entails the presence of both a subject that is to be acknowledged as a person and a society that bestows that status upon it. The conceptual proximity between novelistic and legal constructions of 'person' in the particular context of human rights legislation is the subject of Joseph R. Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. According to Slaughter, '"personality" is a technical term that means the quality of being equal before the law', which equates, tautologically, 'the quality of being a person'[209]. In his study, 'personality' is thus a distinct concept than that found in common parlance and psychological technical

[208] López-Vicuña 2009, 156.
[209] Slaughter 2007, 17.

language: 'it is not the name of individual, irreducible difference but of sameness, the collection of common modalities of the human being's extension into the civil and social order'[210].

It is precisely because of this premise on sameness that 'personality' is both an individual and a collective quality: the individual person is such by virtue of participation of qualities that define mankind as a whole. The 'person' that is conjured up at the intersection of such 'common modalities' is 'an over-determined and inconsistent figure', as its roots lie in the extremely intense mediating process that was the drafting of the 1948 UDHR. The syncretism that necessarily went into the foundation of a new universal, in the proto-Cold War environment of the time, meant that the new pillar of human dignity—the person—was to be the product of sometimes irreconcilable intellectual and political traditions[211]. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the main objective of the Declaration was the 'free and full development of the human personality'[212]. In other words, the 'human personality' that is ascribable to the individual is both the premise and the outcome of a process that entails the mutual engagement of individual and community at large. Mutuality is demanded on both the axis between the individual and her peers, and between the individual and the society in which, and through which, she fully develops her personality. In *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel makes it clear that the fundamental demand of right is: 'Be a person and respect others as persons'[213]. Admission to a community in which the status of person is recognised by and to each individual is dependent on a process that Slaughter terms 'incorporation': 'contemporary human rights incorporation is a figurative process of naturalization (both in the civic and epistemological sense) that enfranchises the individual as a "world citizen" within an

[210] Ibid.
[211] Ibid., 19.
[212] Quoted in Slaughter, 2007, 17.
[213] Quoted ibid., 2007, 45.

international system of rights and duties'[214]. It is through this process of incorporation that the person is conjured up, as Slaughter's alternative term for it indicates: incorporation equates 'legal personification'[215]. The value of Slaughter's contribution lies in the premise that novelistic writing—particularly the *Bildungsroman*—and the legal discourse of human rights are 'mutually enabling fictions', as they both share the development of personality as both their premise and their ultimate goal: 'each projects an image of the human personality that ratifies the other's idealistic visions of the proper relations between the individual and society and the normative career of free and full human personality development'[216].

2666 offers a different take on the linguistic and imaginative process of incorporation that underpins the respective spheres of both the legal and the literary. In a series of brief passages in 'La parte de Fate', the world-famous criminologist Professor Albert Kessler is discussing his career achievements with a younger colleague, who takes the false step of concluding that 'nos hemos acostumbrado a la muerte' (*2666* 337)[217]. The older man, who has been recently summoned by the Mexican authorities to investigate the serial femicides, quickly corrects him: 'siempre ha sido así' (*2666* 337)[218]. The argument that follows is centred upon the mediating role of language in society's apprehension of violent death: 'en el siglo XIX', Kessler maintains, 'la sociedad acostumbraba a colar la muerte por el filtro de las palabras' (*2666* 337)[219]. The kind of journalism that brought serial murderers such as Jack the Ripper to the attention of national audiences, he continues, deployed a language whose ultimate end was that of reducing the public's fear and anxieties. Yet a fundamental difference was perceived between the deaths that occurred within the urban landscapes of the industrialised world,

[214] Ibid., 21.
[215] Ibid., 23.
[216] Ibid., 4.
[217] 'We've gotten used to death' (*2666* [English] 265).
[218] 'It's always been that way' (*2666* [English] 265).
[219] 'In the nineteenth century, [...] society tended to filter death through the fabric of words' (*2666* [English] 266).

on the one hand, and the aggregate extermination of those outside of it, on the other: 'los muertos de la Comuna no pertenecían a la sociedad, la gente de color muerta en el barco no pertenecía a la sociedad, mientras que la mujer muerta en una capital de provincia francesa y el asesino a caballo de Virginia sí pertenecían' (*2666* 339)[220]. The fundamental difference determined by one's position with regard to society was that 'lo que a ellos [those within it] les sucediera era escribible, era legible' (*2666* 339)[221]. Kessler concludes that he is unsure whether the kind of journalistic and literary conventions he has just described served the purpose of hiding something from view or, conversely, unveiling hidden truths. In these terms, 'La parte de los crímenes' should be not only unwritable, but unreadable. Kessler himself readily acknowledges that Santa Teresa represents the complete failure of the mutually constitutive relationship between the individual and the nation-state: 'esa sociedad está fuera de la sociedad, todos, absolutamente todos son como los antiguos cristianos en el circo' (*2666* 339)[222]. One of the fundamental questions raised by both the form and content of *2666*, then, is whether its own linguistic rendition of the Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez deaths hides something from view or, conversely, begins to say something about them that had previously gone unnoticed. Even more importantly, Kessler's words suggest that there might be an inherent danger in deploying the same linguistic conventions that made journalistic prose understandable to the nineteenth-century public.

Gabriel Giorgi writes that in 'La parte de los crímenes' 'there is no literary justice to restore a proper name and a personal identity in those cases where violence has destroyed the person and where the legal order is incapable of restoring identity'[223]. Read

[220] 'The ones killed in the Commune weren't part of society, the dark-skinned people who died on the ship weren't part of society, whereas the woman killed in a French provincial capital and the murderer on horseback in Virginia were' (*2666* [English] 267).
[221] 'What happened to [those within it] could be written, you might say, it was legible' (*2666* [English] 267).
[222] 'Everyone living in that city is outside of society, and everyone, I mean everyone, is like the ancient Christians in the Roman circus' (*2666* [English] 267).
[223] Giorgi 2013, 279. The translation in the one found in Close 2018, 141.

in conjunction with Kessler's considerations, Giorgi's words are revealing of a set of expectations remarkably similar to those manifested in the double standards of journalistic writing. For 'literary justice', here, is conceived as the attribution of a 'personal identity' that will be posthumously predicated upon a subject that was denied it in the first place. What makes Kessler's historical considerations all the more intriguing is the comparison that it invites in terms of the composition of the public spheres of the nineteenth and the twenty-first century, respectively. The reading public, clearly, are not extraneous to the process of personification (or 'incorporation', to borrow Slaughter's term), which sees individual and society as mutually constitutive entities, because a second possibility of incorporation is being rehearsed in the very apprehension of the news of the outsiders' death. The community imagined by this national public is being reshaped by the act of reading, and new parameters of justice and incorporation can be set *post mortem*. As Kessler seems to suggest, there is a kind of perverse therapeutic value to a kind of writing that will confront the existence of 'bare life' while at the same time providing a consoling reminder that one is protected *qua* citizen of a nation-state. Presumably, this is what he means when he equates the mediating function of language with respect to death and the reaction of a child confronting imminent violence. The suggestion, however, is increasingly less reassuring to the citizen of any nation-state at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the convergence of a globalised world with a saturated mass-mediatic landscape ensures that the failure of human rights discourse is in full display. On which terms, then, should *2666*'s victims be incorporated, *post mortem*, within the community of world-citizenship? Bolaño's anti-humanism, as it is displayed in *2666* and other of his major works suggests that a new concept of literary justice needs to be elaborated, and of a different kind that the restoration of personal identity suggested by Giorgi.

The quality of the tone of *2666*'s prose parallels Bolaño's technique of characterisation, in that the overall effect is that something essential has been deliberately retracted from it. The move is particularly counterintuitive when applied with the assiduity that characterizes the 'Victims' section. A novel centred upon an existing humanitarian crisis, one would assume, will elicit readers' affects and mobilize their capacity for empathy. Instead, the seemingly endless streak of graphic descriptions of violated and mutilated bodies progressively gets them even bored by the violence, thus weakening whatever call to empathy they might have heard at first. What kind of readerly attitude do these passages demand? Are we being encouraged to adopt the same detached moral stance as the supposedly-omniscient narrator? These questions are particularly uncomfortable when asked from the point of view of the audience of a work of literary fiction—an audience that is educated and affluent enough, that is to say, to be reading about the hardships of the *maquiladoras*, rather than having to endure them. We are now cast in the same role as Norton when she is looking into her nightmare's mirror, except we are now contemplating the mirror itself, wondering at its distortions and the cruelty of its impassive gaze. It is not only that we would like to see fully-fledged human beings on the other side, but also that we expect a sense of moral participation to be already present in the act of representation.

If the narrative voice does not emotionally participate in the atrociousness of what it describes, then it is unclear what kind of subject-position it stands for[224]. It often reads like the mere emanation of the chaotic complex of local police and corrupt judiciary system that is ridiculed in the novel: an infinite series of details accumulated as parts of a whole that never gets into clear sight. In passages that read like a parody of a detective novel, the police are often shown to completely abandon the hope (or the intention) to

[224] It has been suggested that it could correspond to no subject-position at all, a point of view on which I further elaborate below: 'The narration is tuned down in order to elude the signs of a narrator's "subjectivity", and there is an impression that the events tell themselves' (Herlinghaus 2013, 209).

find order and significance in this 'desierto de aburrimiento'[225]. Detective Epifanio Galindo is shown to obsess over the circumstances of a murder having taken place in November for days on end, 'hasta que decidió que por más que lo pensara no iba a hallar una solución satisfactoria, y entonces dejó de pensar en ello' (*2666* 532)[226]. While it is easy to laugh—bitterly—at the moral and professional inadequacy of the Santa Teresa police, one is also left to wonder whether the subject-position represented by the narrative voice is not, to some extent, accusing the reader of being the disinterested spectator of a horror story based on well-documented facts. According to this line of reasoning, the narrative voice does in fact inhabit something of a subject-position. It is, in other words, *personal*, at least in the minor sense of being projected from a particular point of view, and according to a logic of will and intentionality.

But another possibility is that the writing is *impersonal*, in that it emanates from a machine-like entity that generates long streaks of semi-unrelated facts. This latter possibility is contemplated in 'La parte de los críticos', when Pelletier reads the work of a fellow academic, who is part of an opposite faction of Archimboldians. His article 'consistía en una minuciosa y a menudo frustrante indagación' on the life of the mysterious German writer—two qualifications that certainly apply to the prose in *2666* (*2666* 79)[227]. Pelletier seems unnerved by the simple way in which the academic describes Archimboldi, as 'un anciano alemán'[228]:

> Las palabras anciano y alemán utilizadas indistintamente como varitas mágicas para develar un secreto y al mismo tiempo como ejemplo de literatura crítica ultraconcreta, una literatura no especulativa, sin ideas, sin afirmaciones ni negaciones, sin dudas, sin pretensiones de guía, ni a favor ni en contra, solo un ojo que busca los elementos tangibles y no los juzga sino que los expone fríamente,

[225] From the Baudelaire quote which opens the novel: 'An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom' (*2666* n.p.).
[226] 'Until he decided that no matter how much he thought about it he wasn't going to come up with a good answer, and then he didn't think about it anymore' (*2666* [English] 425).
[227] 'Consisted of a painstaking and often frustrating investigation' (*2666* [English] 55).
[228] 'An old man, a German'(*2666* [English] 55).

> arqueología del facsímil y por lo mismo arqueología de la fotocopiadora.[229] (*2666* 79)

The eye affectlessly recording facts as they come into view, with no filtering criterion, is the compositional principle of *2666*; this is suggested by the well-known origin of the novel's title. This is a reference made in Bolaño's *Amulet* about a 'cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery under the eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else'[230]. However, it is exactly the proximity between the form of the novel and the style deployed by the Archimboldian that casts a dubious light on the project of *2666*. For while a certain degree of objectivity is certainly a quality to be hoped for in a condemnation of what is truly a terrible humanitarian crisis, it is morally unacceptable that such writing be 'neither pro nor con'. What lies at the heart of the human rights project, in fact, is precisely the intention to found a universal agreement upon what is deemed to be 'just'. Even in its minimalist formulation, human rights discourse stands in stark opposition to cruelty and human suffering. Thus, the impersonality of *2666*'s narrative voice reads like an impartiality that should be condemned, in that it participates in the absolute violence it purports to represent, rather than attempting to counter it in any significant way through its aesthetic project.

Is *2666* merely replicating the injustice that has already been perpetrated on the victims or aesthetically redeeming it in any meaningful way? Reading 'La parte de los crímenes' through the concept of 'personality development' that Slaughter extrapolates from both the UDHR and the theory of the *Bildungsroman*, it would be easy to conclude that the personality of the *maquiladora* workers and the other women murdered in and

[229] 'The words *old man* and *German* he waved like magic wands to uncover a secret, and at the same time they supplied the stamp of ultraconcrete critical literature, a nonspeculative literature free of ideas, assertions, denials, doubts, free of any intent to serve as guide, neither pro nor con, just an eye seeking out the tangible elements, not judging them but simply displaying them coldly, archaeology of the fac-simile, and, by the same token, of the photocopier' (*2666* [English] 55, italics in the original).
[230] Bolaño 2009, 86.

around Santa Teresa was never allowed to develop, and on two distinct levels. On the civic and political one, the ultimate guarantor of their inclusion within a national community—the Mexican state—has foregone its legal responsibilities by initiating a public investigation that is as farcical as it is inconclusive. As it has often been noted, *2666* functions as a post-detective novel of sorts, in which the simulacra of the subjects that would normally be implicated in an investigation are still nominally present, but only mimicking their role[231]. The detectives, the police, the judiciary system, the press: none of them seems to be actually doing what is expected of them, and Bolaño is eloquent about the many malfeasances that specifically pertain to the corrupted Mexican state, even while he hints at the wider crisis of the nation-state. On a second level, however, it is fundamental to note that the victims were the object of a form of violence with clear gender connotations. The murders of Ciudad Juárez/Santa Teresa are *femicides*, and therefore targeted at individuals *qua* members of a particular group. There is a second level of dehumanization in every form of genocide, Slaughter claims: 'by the logic and letter of [the Genocide Convention], to die as a victim of genocide is, precisely, not to die as an individual but as an instance of a racialised, ethnicised, nationalised, or sectionalised group. The human rights person may be an atom, but it is not the atomised individual of libertarian Enlightenment philosophy; rather, the individual person is an atomic unit of social relations—the embodiment of group personality and vulnerability'[232].

Human rights discourse presents itself as the only juridical and philosophical language that is capable of bridging the gap between 'citizen' and 'human being' in the age of globalization, but it does so at the price of a conception of justice with implications that are dubious. Let us consider, by way of example, the difference between Nancy

[231] Close thus summarizes this position, quoting both Eguía Armentos's and Herlinghaus's treatments of *2666*, respectively: 'Whereas traditional detective fiction exists, by Franco Moretti's account, "expressly to dispel the doubt that guilt might be impersonal, and therefore collective and social" […], it is clear that "La parte de los crímenes" is designed precisely to deny expurgation […] and that […] "*guilt* has become ubiquitous and omnipresent" […]' (Close 2018, 141).
[232] Slaughter 2007, 161.

Fraser's considerations of the kind of justice demanded in a globalising world and the delineation of the kind of justice brought about by human rights by Michael Ignatieff, one of their leading apologists. In order to overcome the impasse in which it finds itself after the decline of the modern territorial state, Fraser writes, 'the theory of justice must become three-dimensional, incorporating the political dimension of representation, alongside the economic dimension of distribution and the cultural dimension of recognition'[233]. This understanding of justice, by Nancy's own admission, is a 'thick' one. Thus, it stands in stark opposition to the kind of justice that Ignatieff associates with human rights in his 2001 Tanner Lectures series, 'Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry'. Ignatieff upholds a 'self-consciously minimalist' theory of the universalism implied by human rights. These, he insists, 'can command universal assent only as a decidedly "thin" theory of what is right, a definition of the minimum conditions for any kind of life at all'[234]. Thus—as Wendy Brown acknowledges in her critical dissection of Ignatieff's claims—one of 'the implications of human rights assuming centre stage as an international justice project, or as *the* progressive international justice project' is already manifest in its minimalism, focusing on 'pain and suffering rather than political discourse of comprehensive justice'[235].

Human rights discourse, then, *does* present itself as a discourse about justice, and yet holds a view of it that is founded upon the rights 'that are strictly necessary to the enjoyment of any life whatever', as Ignatieff points out[236]. The *maquiladora* workers evoked in *2666*—as well as the other female 'victims' of the mysterious allegiance of violent forces converging in Santa Teresa—do seem to conduct a life that is close to 'any life whatever'. They are representative of what Melissa W. Wright has called 'the myth of the disposable third world woman', an ideological construct that refers to 'someone

[233] Fraser 2013, 192-3.
[234] Quoted in Brown 2004, 454.
[235] Ibid., 453.
[236] Quoted ibid., 457.

who eventually evolves into a living state of worthlessness'[237]. One strand of Wright's approach to this myth is the Marxian axiom that '*all things of value under capital originate with those energies we call human labour*'[238]. Thus, most of the murdered women in *2666* are in fact necessary to the flowing of neoliberal capital through the Special Economic Zones in which maquiladoras operate, and must therefore be granted the right to *a* life, at least for the time in which value can be extracted out of them. And the maximization of profit makes it imperative that, while their right to life is *de facto* guaranteed, theirs will be just 'any life whatsoever'—the bare minimum for survival and work. That human rights entertain an ambiguous alliance not only to neoliberal capitalism but also to neo-imperial projects is also highlighted by Jacques Rancière. His words highlight a dangerous proximity between the minimalism defended by Ignatieff and an absolutisation of justice that is consonant with acts of hypocritical intervention: 'the absolute victim', the French philosopher notes, 'is the victim of an absolute evil. Therefore, the rights that come back to the sender—who is now the avenger—are akin to a power of infinite justice against the Axis of Evil'[239]. With Bolaño's sustained fascination for both the ontology of Evil and the reduction of life to its bare, pre-political status, the question of whether the ethics of representation reflected in *2666* amount to a purported antipolitics aligned with that of human rights arises. Rancière suggests an historical element to bring to the table when he notes that 'the issue of rethinking Wrong increasingly took the floor after the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the disappointing outcomes of what was supposed to be the last step to universal democracy'[240] (307). With 'La parte de Archimboldi' inviting a comparison between the evils of the Holocaust and those of the maquiladoras in the age of neoliberalism, it is important to determine whether Bolaño falls into the trap of de-politicising the question of violence by privileging

[237] Wright 2006, 2.
[238] Ibid., 12, italics in the original.
[239] Rancière 2004, 309.
[240] Ibid., 307.

ontology over history. A closer look at his usage of language and affect will help us answer this question.

Literary Justice II: 'Speaking in the Neutral'

While the political ramifications of Blanchot's thought have been comparatively neglected in the critical appraisal of his work, his better-known texts on language, literature and metaphysics have clear implications for the role of writing and speech in public life. In his engagement with Lévinas's attempt of overcoming the horizon of the personal encounter between two subjects, Blanchot theorizes the 'neuter'[241], a kind of otherness that, in Esposito's account, 'is not a person, but is not crushed onto the objective plane of the impersonal either'[242]. This particular kind of otherness should be conceived not as an object of which (the absence of) particular qualities can be predicated but, rather, as a *modality* of thought and speech: 'rather than talking *of* the neutral, we should talk *in* the neutral'[243]. According to Blanchot, this mode of representation is much more attainable in writing than in speech; historically, the neuter has penetrated the field of literature more than any other in the Western tradition. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot delineates a history of fiction in which the presence of the neuter gradually expands from being the mere condition of coherence of a given narrative, as in classic epics, to the outbreak of everyday experience that we associate with the emergence of the novel as a genre. But the triumphal rise to prominence of the neuter culminates with Kafka: with him, 'the absence of a narrative voice, like an irreducible extraneity,

[241] The terms 'neuter' and 'neutral' are used interchangeably in both Susan Hanson's translation of Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation* and Zakiya Hanafi's translation of Roberto Esposito's *Third Person*. In a glossary chapter in *Understanding Blanchot, Understanding Modernism* entitled 'The Neuter/The Neutral', John McKeane confirms that Blanchot's 'le neuter', 'growing out of initial usages in adjectival form and as "neutrality"' is 'translatable both as "the neuter" and "the neutral"' (McKeane 2018, 303).
[242] Esposito 2012, 128.
[243] Ibid., 129.

penetrated into the subjectivity of characters, but also into the very structure of the work'[244]. Kafka's prose, in Blanchot's view, is characterised by two traits:

> (1) the speech of the narrative always lets us feel that what is being recounted is not being recounted by anyone: it speaks in the neutral; (2) in the neutral space of the narrative, the bearers of speech, the subjects of the action - those who once stood in the place of characters - fall into a relation of self-nonidentification. Something happens to them that they can only recapture by relinquishing their power to say 'I'. And what happens has always already happened: they can only indirectly account for it as a sort of self-forgetting, the forgetting that introduces them into the present without memory that is the present of narrating speech. [245]

Blanchot's first point certainly resonates with *2666* as the product of an 'archaeology […] of the photocopier': just like with the mechanical writing advocated for by the Archimboldian critic, the anonymous white noise generated by countless, unrelated events makes it impossible to discern any recognizable voice[246].

The second characteristic, too, fits with the overall atmosphere of *2666*, in which the role of action is confined to the improbable, the ridiculous and the illusory. It is not only the police who feel like their acts are of no consequence. Many other characters, too, are described as being puzzled by their own actions as emanations of impersonal, external forces. To some extent this seems to apply particularly to those individuals that are more reflective and educated, thus adding to *2666*'s extended critique of intellectuals. A representative case is that of Amalfitano, a philosophy professor in Santa Teresa—a place that, perhaps more than any other possibly could, makes him feel the perceived irrelevance of his role. His presence in the novel focuses, in great part, on his passive contemplation of a Duchampian ready-made object of sorts—another hint at a work that is produced at the impersonal intersection of chance and intentionality. His motives are

[244] Esposito 2012, 131.
[245] Blanchot 1993, 384-5.
[246] Among the several critics that more or less directly acknowledge an impersonal quality to the narrative voice in *2666*, Kraniauskas is perhaps the most explicit in linking this trait with the mechanical functioning of a machine when he writes that 'Bolaño's wild free-indirect speech mines the history of narrative for its procedures, radically transforming the transcendental (narrating) third person into something both more and less than a 'person', a mad 'robot' perhaps' (2016, 45, n. 2).

unclear even to himself, and he seems to wonder at his very presence in the narrative when he admits: 'no sé qué he venido a hacer a Santa Teresa—', the first words in the 'Part' dedicated to him (*2666* 211)[247]. His own appearance seems to fade into the background, as the four European critics note upon first meeting him: 'la primera impresión que los críticos tuvieron de Amalfitano fue más bien mala, perfectamente acorde con la mediocridad del lugar' (*2666* 152)[248]. Amalfitano, in their opinion, 'sólo podía ser visto como un náufrago, un tipo descuidadamente vestido, un profesor inexistente de una universidad inexistente, el soldado raso de una batalla perdida de antemano contra la barbarie' (*2666* 152)[249]. In the idea that the battle against barbarity has already been lost emerge both Bolaño's anti-humanism and his convergence with the Kafkaesque style as described by Blanchot. For there is at least one clear explanation of why 'what happens has always already happened': namely, that the result had always been already implicit in the process. And this can translate into a pessimistic view on modernity that sees the evils of the twentieth century that so haunt Bolaño's imagination as the natural effects of Enlightenment ideals of progress and reason. Under this light, Amalfitano's apparent passivity and insignificance, considering his status as an intellectual, is all the more unsettling.

A similar lack of subjectivity applies to Norton, Pelletier, Espinoza and Morini, but with at least one important difference. 'La parte de los críticos' is significant, in the overall structure of *2666*, because it represents a counter-narrative of sorts to the lack of personal intentionality that lets Blanchot's neuter pervade the remainder of the novel, at least initially. Indeed, the novel does start as a Bildungsroman, with the personalities of the four critics being described in their evolution through the years, as each organizes

[247] 'I don't know what I'm doing in Santa Teresa' (*2666* [English] 163).
[248] 'The first impression [they] had of Amalfitano was mostly negative, perfectly in keeping with the mediocrity of the place' (*2666* [English] 114).
[249] 'Could only be considered a castaway, a carelessly dressed man, a nonexistent professor at a nonexistent university, the unknown soldier in a doomed battle against barbarism' (*2666* [English] 114).

their life around the study of Archimboldi's novels. If Amalfitano, as an intellectual living in the violent periphery of the world's economic system, represents a sense of self-identity and capacity for agency that is crumbling, the equally cultured European critics seem to flourish both socially and academically at the composite centre of the Republic of Letters[250]. Bolaño describes them in terms that speak unequivocally to their solid subjectivity: 'Besides Archimboldi, there was one thing Morini, Pelletier and Espinoza had in common', the narrative voice remarks, 'los tres poseían una voluntad de hierro' (*2666* 21)[251]. The dead bodies of the 'Victims' section—reduced by both violence and representation to mere flesh devoid of subjectivity—stand in opposite relation to the strong personality-in-the-making represented by Pelletier in particular. Even more importantly, he is much aware of his strong willpower: he is shown picturing himself intent on mastering German language and literature, toiling away on his dictionaries 'como si todo él fuera voluntad hecha carne, huesos y músculos, nada de grasa, fanático y decidido a llegar a buen puerto' (*2666* 17)[252]. This sense of self-identity and direction is vital to him—it influences him 'como una droga' that allows him to make his own way into the Academy: 'su voluntad' is indeed the cornerstone on which he decides to found his life and career (*2666* 17)[253].

It is not surprising, then, that the machine-like quality of the academic writing defended by his Archimboldian colleague years later appears to Pelletier as the exact opposite of what the work of the critic entails: what is needed, in his opinion, are 'ensayos de interpretación'—a kind of writing which, his words suggest, originates in the very

[250] McCann agrees that the different locations in the novel correspond to different modes of subjectivity: 'in the journey from the Europe of a disembodied, literary subjectivity to the city of bare life, we get a sense of how the geography of global capitalism also makes implicit assumptions about the locability of the human, assumptions that are evident in the normalization and geographical particularization of violence' (McCann 2010 137).
[251] 'All three had iron wills' (*2666* [English] 8).
[252] 'As if he were pure will made flesh, bone, and muscle without an ounce of fat, fanatical and bent on success' (*2666* [English] 5).
[253] 'Like a drug' and 'pure will', respectively (*2666* [English] 5).

subjectivity and point of view of the author (*2666* 82)[254]. The narrative voice, however, often reminds readers of the potentially violent effects of too strong and rigid a sense of self. In the case of Pelletier, the latter ultimately resembles a quasi-colonial outlook on the place of the individual in society, as if personal identity were somewhat reinvigorated by subjugating others to one's own rules and dictates. By extension, the journey undertaken by the four critics in search of Archimboldi acquires the dark undertones of a violent conquest when read in light of the opposite styles of writing repeatedly evoked in *2666*. An *à la clef* commentary on the critical attitude represented by Pelletier is implicit in Morini's present to Norton: an art-book by four photographers, each 'interpreting'—by means of their camera—Brunelleschi's masterpieces. In Morini's comments on the book, something about the Critics' journey to Santa Teresa is revealed: '–Son interpretaciones –dijo Morini–. El mejor es el francés –dijo–. El que menos me gusta es el americano. Demasiado aparatoso. Con demasiadas ganas de descubrir a Brunelleschi. De *ser* Brunelleschi' (*2666* 131, italics in the original)[255]. Similarly, the voracity displayed by Pelletier and Espinoza in repeatedly absorbing and interpreting all of Archimboldi's works—over the course of their Santa Teresa sojourn—attests a desire to *own* the subject of their studies. This is reflected in their intrusive quest for a man that carefully maintained his own anonymity for his entire career[256].

A sense of uneasiness with too strong a sense of self-identity is also present in *2666*, and most clearly represented by the figure of Morini. In one scene, he dreams of having 'una experiencia en cierto sentido nueva', in which 'su propia imagen, lo que

[254] 'Interpretive essays' (*2666* [English] 57).
[255] '"They're interpretations," said Morini. "The French photographer is the best," he said. "The one I like least is the American. Too showy. He's too eager to discover Brunelleschi. To *be* Brunelleschi"' (*2666* [English] 96, italics in the original).
[256] To some extent, not even the omniscient narrator of *2666* succeeds where the four Critics have failed: we are left with a sense of elusiveness even when Archimboldi is given the closest thing to a *Bildungsroman* that *2666* can provide. Hermann Herlinghaus sees 'La parte de Archimboldi' as 'serv[ing] as a fissured screen, through which the exhaustion of (literary) critical discourse meets the epistemic vitality of the "negative subject"—the contemporary not-self turned into "amphibian"', and he sees the German author as 'an intellectual whose habits as "not-self" are, from a certain angle, tremendously timely, bearing an unusual ethical fascination' (2013, 208).

Morini pericibía de Morini, se iba diluyendo de forma gradual e incontenible, como un río que deja de ser río o como un árbol que se quema en el horizonte sin saber que se está quemando' (*2666* 145)[257]. A similar passage highlights the desirability that such progressive dismemberment of one's own self-identity acquires in Morini's eyes: 'mientras comían los postres tuvo deseos, otra vez, de llorar o, aún mejor, de desmayarse, de dejarse desvanecer, caer de su silla suavemente, con los ojos fijos en el rostro de Norton, y no volver nunca más en sí' (*2666* 75)[258]. Crucially, Morini is the only one among the Critics not to join the Archimboldian quest to Santa Teresa. His conduct anticipates the apparent disregard for the details of self-identity that later in the novel will make Archimboldi such a ghost-like figure—difficult to comprehend regardless of the amount of biographical detail that his 'Part' provides the reader with. But the dismemberment of personal identity is a recurring element in the novel. Often, in *2666*, brief passages describing a character's emotions or intimate thoughts acquire a surreal atmosphere in which bodies—and faces, more often—collapse into a form that ceases to be recognizable as that of a particular individual, as we have seen in the case of Norton's dream. In yet another instance, Rosa Amalfitano looks at Charly Cruz's face only to discover that 'su mirada quedaba desnuda o vacía' and 'las facciones, las arrugas, las venidas capilares, los poros, todo se vaciaba, quedaba sin defensas' (*2666* 422)[259]. 'La parte de los crímenes', with its cascade of faces whose features have been metaphorically emptied, explains why the sensation felt by Rosa is depicted as both disorienting and liberating in the novel.

[257] 'A new experience', in which 'his own image, what Morini saw as Morini, gradually and helplessly dissolved, like a river that stops being a river or a tree that burns on the horizon, not knowing that it's burning' (*2666* [English] 107).
[258] 'As they ate dessert he felt like weeping, or better yet, fainting, sliding gently out of his chair with his eyes fixed on Norton's face, and never waking up' (*2666* [English] 52).
[259] '[H]is gaze was necessarily left naked or empty' (*2666* [English] 334). '[A]ll of [his] features emptied, his wrinkles, his veins, his pores, everything left defenseless' (335).

'Her Face […] Was Unrecognizable': 'La parte de los crímenes'

2666 abounds with graphic descriptions of martyred women which seem at first to overindulge in their corporeality at the expense of a sense of their personal identity and, even, dignity. At times, the prose can come across as disrespectful, as if the insistence on exposed bodies replicated, to some extent, the violence exerted on them. What is more, the forensic passages featured in the novel, too, report a certain incidence of cases in which the intent of the murderer seemed precisely that of de-personalising the victim, and this often happens with the removal of their facial features, as when a victim is found with her head buried in a hole, 'como si el asesino […] creyera que al cubrir de tierra la cabeza el resto se haría invisible a cualquier mirada' (*2666* 514)[260]. In articulating the puzzlement and mixed feelings that accompanied her reading of the novel, Alice Driver asks: 'at what point does Bolaño move beyond counting the dead, beyond the messages of the flesh?'[261] This question seems to organise a considerable amount of the extant critical debate on *2666*. The field is divided between those claiming that the novel does in fact restore a sense of personal identity to the victims it describes—that it moves from 'flesh' to the metaphysics of personality, in other words—and those denying that its prose works towards that goal. A further line of demarcation separates contrasting axiological assessments of said two alternatives: some see the refusal to develop a sense of character out of the reports as a failure, or at least the denunciation of an unjust state of things, while others praise its refusal to upturn the logic of the uncritical celebration of the personal over the impersonal. The contrast between different accounts of the 'crímenes' section on this point seems to be particularly stark within the field of Latin American studies. This is probably due to the closer proximity of the commentators at issue to the

[260] 'As if the killer […had] thought that by covering the head with earth the rest of the body would be invisible' (*2666* [English] 409).
[261] Driver 2015, 59.

real-life atrocities depicted in the novel—a proximity that is not only cultural, but often predicated upon the personal and professional background of a particular writer.

Driver, for example, has worked extensively on the US-Mexico border. Her non-fiction book *More or Less Dead: Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* was written while living in Mexico City and it features several interviews with relatives of the victims, as well as journalists, photographers, and filmmakers who have had first-hand experience with both the findings of the corpses and the autopsies conducted on them. The Mexican writer Mario Bellatin is a representative example of those claiming that Bolaño does (literary) justice to the real-life victims by restoring to their portrayal a sense of personal identity: in a personal interview with Driver, he celebrates the reports for their attention to names: 'I feel like this is the only tribute that the victims have received, the dead women of Juárez, especially in the section of *2666* where he gives a body and a name to these anonymous dead. Anonymity is something frightening, something that goes beyond death. The dead are always statistics and numbers'[262]. Ángeles Donoso Macaya, a researcher and activist from Chile based in New York City, concurs with Bellatin and argues that the effect of Bolaño's prose is generated by its movement from the descriptive repetition of the murder to its aesthetic overcoming: 'the narrator repeats once and again the crime perpetrated against the victims while at the same time he names them and describes in detailed fashion their appearance[: b]y repeating the story he manages to restore the lost identity of the disappeared body that is later found'[263]. Clearly, Driver herself belongs to the group that is disappointed at Bolaño's withholding of personal warmth from the representation of the victims, which she describes as 'discomforting'[264]. She contrasts Bolaño's work with its non-fiction counterpart, González Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto*, and concludes that 'an

[262] Quoted ibid., 68.
[263] Donoso Macaya 2009, 132. The translation is the one found in Driver 2015, 91-2.
[264] Ibid., 91.

emphasis on the fetishized body of a woman who has suffered extreme violence, if that representation does not include her life story, can convert the victim into a ghost: a woman should be seen as more than the sum of the violence written on her body'[265]. In relation to Charles Bowden's *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*, a book-length visual essay realised in collaboration with Mexican photographer Julián Cardona, Driver suggests that one of the dangers of detailed representations of the victims' tormented bodies is that of indulging in a form of macabre and misogynistic voyeurism: '[Bowden's] use of the term *whore*', she notes, 'is representative of the treatment of women in the book as a whole—sexualised or dead female bodies are of central interest, while the nuances of life for individual victims are not'[266].

Driver's concerns are well-founded, as indeed it is necessary to ask if Bolaño's reworking of González Rodríguez's cases is liable to analogous criticism. One does find, after all, an insistence on the sexual nature of some of these crimes that can at times seem to repeat the same violent, possessive and misogynistic gesture of the perpetrator, and the same applies to certain descriptions of gratuitous physical violence, beyond torture and reckless sadism. However, as we have seen, the sense of liberation associated by some characters with the dismemberment of personal identity suggests that the urge to move beyond 'the messages of the flesh' perceived by Driver might indeed be in contrast to the novel's own aesthetic agenda. The attention to the physicality of the found bodies which is displayed in 'La parte de los crímenes' goes beyond the spectacularization of the female body and is part and parcel of the novel's productive tension towards impersonality, although it arguably needs to enact this spectacularization in order to point to the inefficacy and undesirability of the kind of restorative aesthetics advocated for by Bellatin, Donoso Macaya and Driver. One of the paradoxes that *2666* highlights in so doing is the potential incompatibility between the care for the individual and that for the

[265] Ibid., 73.
[266] Ibid., 81.

victim *qua* member of a given category. The desire to give a name, a face and a story to each individual victim, as understandable as it is, gives way to dismay as soon as one realises that it is a task made impossible by both the irretrievability of what is lost and by the sheer quantity of individual crimes perpetrated.

Interpretations more attuned to the positive content of Bolaño's insistence on corporeality are to be found among the literary studies working from within the field of Latin American studies. Héctor Hoyos and Gabriel Giorgi represent two cases in point. The former proposes that we read the murdered bodies in *2666* as instantiations of the 'abject', defined as 'that which is cast off', a concept which, as he reminds us, is held by Lacanian psychoanalysis as 'a basis for subjectivity, which defines itself in opposition to what it rejects'[267]. In this reading, the focus on the carnality of the body displayed in *2666* is conducive to a non-humanist reconsideration of justice and the value of human life: 'in the very slow build-up to the crimes', Hoyos writes, '[Bolaño] teaches a sensibility toward human "flesh" by way of "meat"'[268]. Giorgi, too, sees the dehumanised substance of the dead body as definitive—the consequence of an act that cannot be undone but can be made to signify through its own material effects, 'as if the bodies were traversed by an inherent, almost defining anonymity, which constitutes them and which cannot in any way be sutured by nomination and identification'[269]. The contrast between critical points of view is particularly stark when we juxtapose them: to Driver's anguished question—'Do not these bodies, even without names, have human rights? Does death convert them into public property?'[270]—Giorgi's treatment of the novel can only offer the desolate and disillusioned observation that 'what is exhibited in Bolaño's corpses are portraits of insignificant lives, which only come to the light of representation because of the violence

[267] Hoyos 2017, 69.
[268] Ibid., 75.
[269] Giorgi 2013, 279. My translation.
[270] Driver 2015, 87.

that leads them to death'[271]. The potency of Bolaño's prose does not stem from the attempt to restore what was lost but rather from the evocation of what, in these often-anonymous bodies, compels us to reformulate our ideals of justice.

As we have seen, according to the notion of literary justice implied by the theory of incorporation, *2666*'s narrative voice redoubles the injustice that has been perpetrated against the 'Victims'—it kills them a second time, by not making them alive again in language. The impersonality that characterizes both the narrative voice and the subjects that it portrays, in this logic, brings death with it, casting a dark shadow on everything it touches. Conversely, Blanchot's thoughts on the relationship between language, impersonality and death postulate the three as coessential. If *2666* does anything different than what every work of literature necessarily does, it is making this intimate relationship as explicit as possible, and doing so while taking the literal death of hundreds of women as its own central theme. In 'Literature and the Right to Death', Blanchot writes that it is 'a strange impersonal light' that asserts itself in literary writing[272]. According to him, this is true for two reasons. First, writing always de-personalizes the writer, in that the pure act of creation from which it springs transforms her into something that she was not before: in writing, Blanchot notes, 'I separate myself from myself, I am no longer with my presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence'[273]. Similarly, language manifests its own separateness from the things it names in the very act of naming them. Language highlights its own materiality, thus constantly reminding us of the central absence of which it speaks: the absence of the subject supposedly being evoked by words that are ontologically different from him.

[271] Giorgi 2013, 279. My translation.
[272] Blanchot 1995, 322.
[273] Ibid., 324.

The inherent detachment of language from life explains why it is intimately connected to death, and why a certain kind of violence is always a necessary component of its workings:

> A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, 'This woman', I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being - the very fact that it does not exist. [274]

Indeed, 'La parte de los crímenes' is, in its most characteristic passages, precisely a continuous litany of the phrase 'This woman' being repeated over and over again. Flesh and blood are its recurring elements, as if an insistence on the materiality of the victims' bodies could somehow parallel the reduction to the status of non-person that death and violence combined brought to them. While Bolaño does not use the victims' real names, he is remarkably precise in his fictional reworking of the descriptions he found in the non-fictional *Huesos en el desierto*[275]. At times, *2666*'s reports on the finding of a body are poignantly precise, and they certainly do attempt to restore a sense of individuality and personhood to the subject described. A typical first line will include the victim's name, age, and familiar relationships: 'la siguiente muerta se llamaba Penélope Méndez Becerra[,] tenía once años' (*2666* 503)[276]. And yet, the very presence of her name in the 'Victims' section intensifies the implicit relationship to death that language entertains: if the narrative voice says 'this woman', in *2666*, it is because of 'the very fact that [she] does not exist' anymore. In accordance with Blanchot's contention on the nature of language, the words 'Penélope Méndez Becerra' are 'no longer a name, but rather one moment in the universal anonymity, a bald statement, the stupor of a confrontation in the depths of obscurity'[277]. In this sense, then, these detailed portrayals, too, constitute an

[274] Ibid., 322.
[275] For a complete and thorough schematization of the parallels between the victims described in each book, Andrews 2014, 205-29.
[276] 'The next victim was Penélope Méndez Becerra[,] she was eleven years old' (*2666* [English] 402).
[277] Blanchot 1995, 328.

example of the 'magnified flatness' typical of the neoliberal novel: regardless of the amount of information concerning the 'victim' we are given, no distinctive sense of personality emerges.

This 'universal anonymity', in Bolaño, is not a dimension of oppression and annihilation. Perhaps surprisingly, buried beneath the horror of some of the 'victims' passages, we find some of the more vital and tender manifestations of love and caring the novel is able to express. Penélope's family is one of the very few, in *2666*, to actively look for her when she disappears, and also to hold the police accountable for their lack of initiative (*2666* 505). Her mother loves her children and cares after them with intensity and determination. She strains every single day to provide for a family to which not even the right to physical security is ever effectively guaranteed. Her life is every bit as precarious as that of her daughter. It would be easy to read in her physical exhaustion the very cause of her reduction to anonymity—reduced, as she is, to a life almost totally sucked up by the exigencies of capital. Bolaño's prose, instead, locates the fullest expression of life in Penélope's mother's fatigue, rather than its repression. The narrative voice affirms that she did not care about losing her sleep and feel the pain that continued physical effort brought with it: 'al contrario, el esfuerzo físico la llenaba de energía, el agotamiento se convertía en vivacidad y gracia, los días eran largos, lentísimos, y el mundo (percibido como un naufragio interminable) le mostraba su cara más vivaz y la hacía tomar conciencia de que la suya, naturalmente, también lo era' (*2666* 504-5)[278]. Here, too, Bolaño's penchant for the 'face' recurs, except this time it is not framed within an encounter between two subjects, but rather as a pure manifestation of one's own vitality as it is expressed through labour. This is not the variety of physical exhaustion that alienates an individual from herself, but rather a kind of productive tension in which

[278] 'In fact, the physical effort filled her with energy, her exhaustion was transformed into vivacity and grace, the days were long, slow, and the world (perceived as an endless shipwreck) showed her its brightest face and made her aware, as a matter of course, of the brightness of her own' (*2666* [English] 403).

one's own productive energies find their fullest expression. It is not so much that the particular individual finds its full realization in the context of the relationships that it has established. Rather, life itself pervades an interconnected set of relationships—a 'general anonymity' that corresponds to the plane of the impersonal, and of which 'persons' are nodes, or 'moment[s]'. Here is life expressing itself beyond the realm of the person, with the particular individual cast as the mere occasion for this impersonal life to appear.

Penélope's family is indeed thrown into the 'depths of obscurity' of the femicides, their 'human personality' disregarded and effaced at its very root. When the narrative voice evokes them—when it says 'this woman', in Blanchot's terms—it is not attempting to recuperate them from 'universal anonymity', but rather to show their ultimate value as pertaining to a dimension that is already anonymous, already impersonal. By foregrounding the language's intrinsic deadening effects, *2666* shifts the realm of personhood to a position of irrelevance. The aesthetic rendition of the Ciudad Juárez murders does not directly resist a process of literary incorporation, but rather surpasses it. If the complete name of the victim is mentioned—together with the personal details that supposedly make up the life of an individual—it is only to stress the inherent insufficiency of the logic of rights to defend the sacredness of life. It runs opposite to the logic of humanitarian campaigns, in which the names of the victims are often declared in an attempt to denounce the violation of the individuality that a name is thought to represent. In that context, a name equates the particular instantiation of 'human personality' within an individual. In *2666*, conversely, the name pertains to the logic and the semantic field of rights, which is intimately linked to the nation-state. By mimicking the legalistic language of the forensic report, and showing its inherent insufficiency, Bolaño's prose points beyond it.

Bolaño, in *2666*, dissolves the category of character to the point that individuals are still firmly in place in his prose—still very much recognizable in themselves and as

rational agents—and yet made somewhat irrelevant[279]. His interest in impersonality—originating, as it does, in a confrontation with the related questions of Evil and suffering—is similar to Simone Weil's argument in her essay 'On Human Personality'. The central target of Weil's essay is the philosophico-political doctrine of Personalism represented by Jacques Maritain, one of the key intellectual figures in the process that led to the drafting of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. According to Personalism, the source of the rights of the individual is a metaphysical centre that constitutes his or her personality. Deriving as it does from a Christian understanding of the individual soul, this concept of personality indicates a set of peculiar characteristics that define the empirical individual. In Weil's account, this metaphysical foundation of the value of human dignity is to be rejected, particularly as it does not provide an adequate understanding of human suffering. In fact, if this metaphysical core is thought of as unalienable, then the injustice suffered by those that had their lives destroyed and their souls crushed by the evils of the world is not only impossible to account for, but to some extent hidden from view. Our own experience of evil as a *de facto* potentially annihilating force, Weil contends, should prompt us to reject 'personality' as the root of human dignity and look for it elsewhere. The fundamental question in her essay is one that Bolaño's novel, too, invites its readers to consider: if it is not discoverable in individual personality (in the psychological sense) and personhood (the defining feature of a rational individual), where is the sacred in the human being to be found? Weil asks: what is it that would stay my hand if I were allowed to put out a man's eyes, and felt like doing so? She contends that it would be pointless to predicate the source of an individual's inviolability upon their particular intellectual and psychological traits. This is because empirical individuals can be mean, vicious and vain, with nothing about their particular personality that seems to

[279] Sharae Deckard writes that 'the forensic language of homicide has invaded the subjectivities and speech of every character, while affect has been emptied out', so much so that, in *2666*, 'characterisation is minimal and psychological insight rare' (2012, 364).

deserve an *a priori* protection from evil[280]. And yet the need to affirm the sacredness of *any* human being stands. Therefore, a different grounding for it must be found. Weil's conclusion is that it is that which is impersonal in the human being that is sacred: it is the universal aversion for the endurance of evil that ultimately constitutes the inviolable core of a human being[281].

Weil's ethics are fundamentally distinct from the language of rights defended by liberalism, in that, just like Bolaño's prose, they point beyond the personal dimension of the individual. 'Penélope Méndez Becerra'—the three words supposedly conjuring up the individual on the written page—refer to a particular person, whose rights have been violated. By naming 'this woman', Bolaño repeats the same gesture of incorporation that underpins the ideology of human rights, and by exposing us to the brutality that the name was not able to prevent, he undoes it, showing its limitations[282]. When Penélope is found dead a few days after having gone missing, the forensic abstractions of the narrative voice—even more than the state of things they describe—have an eerie undertone to them, as Blanchot's reflections on the deadliness of language resonate with the coldness of Bolaño's prose. The narrative voice does not project a subject that is in any significant measure affected by the horror of what has been done to 'this woman'. Its logic is that of a legal document: facts are to be ascertained from an external point of view, as dispassionately as possible. The form in which facts are reported is essential to the proceedings of legal justice, in that the objectivity of their reconstruction is one of the premises on which the rights of all parts involved are predicated. But it is precisely

[280] For a more in-depth analysis of Weil's argument, see Hamilton 2005: 'paradoxical and unhelpful as it sounds, there is a sense in which Weil claims that there is *nothing* about this man that makes blinding him evil. That is, there is nothing about the fact that this man is *this* man that makes it evil' (189).
[281] See Weil 2005, 69-98.
[282] Names, in *2666*, are subject to the same scepticism as the face and the human body, both regarded as illusory sites of personal identity: 'Todos los nombres son comunes y corrientes, todos son vulgares. Llamarse Kelly o llamarse Luis María en el fondo es lo mismo. Todos los nombres se desvanecen. Eso tendrían que enseñárselo a los niños desde la primaria. Pero nos da miedo hacerlo' (*2666* 755). 'All names are ordinary, they're all vulgar. Whether your name is Kelly or Luz Maria, it makes no difference in the end. All names disappear. Children should be taught that in elementary school. But we're afraid to teach them' (*2666* [English] 605).

through this objectivity that Bolaño is able to make us perceive that 'the word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being'. And the name of the victim—which stands for the recognition of her (human) rights as a person—is coessential to the process of abstraction that 'annihilates' the individual. The language of human rights, in *2666*, is also the language of the state and of police reports bearing no consequence whatsoever on the vindication of supposedly inalienable rights. It certainly is a language in which the sacredness of the individual is predicated upon their personality, as rights are said *to pertain* to them. Bolaño's implicit philosophy of the impersonal converges with Weil's on another crucial aspect: they both seem to represent a *way of looking* at a subject, more than an authentic metaphysics of it. For when Weil affirms that it is the impersonal in the human being that is sacred, the language she uses suggests she is engaging in metaphysical reflection, but she fails to provide even a sketchy outline of what this could be. Thus, as it has been suggested, one is left with the option to see in her delineation of the concept of the impersonal the attitude of an observer—'the impersonal' as that which is valued and deemed to be sacred by an impartial observer. This is an observer with no *personal* relation whatsoever to the parts involved, whether victim or perpetrator.

Impersonal Justice and the Rights of Man

Literature has two sides to it, Blanchot contends. On the one hand, it is concerned with the things of the world, in its constant effort to represent them though language. It is 'meaningful prose'[283]. On the other, though, it 'sympathises with darkness, with aimless passion, with lawless violence'[284]. Bolaño's literature certainly partakes of the latter tendency. Its narrative voice does in fact suggest a 'force' that, as Blanchot suggests, 'makes language into matter without contour, content without form, a force that is capricious and impersonal and says nothing, reveals nothing, simply announces—through

[283] Blanchot 1995, 332.
[284] Ibid., 330.

its refusal to say anything—that it comes from night and will return to night'[285]. However, Blanchot also contends that no individual text can possibly collocate itself in one or the other category: a work will be more inclined towards one side but as a particular instantiation of the general category of literature, it will always exemplify both tendencies. Thus, it is important to ask what the political relevance of Bolaño's rendition of the Ciudad Juárez victims can possibly be, when the metaphysical proximity of language, death and impersonality is so visible in the author's prose. What kind of public use of language can possibly correspond to a philosophy of the impersonal—a philosophy, that is, which is founded upon the overcoming of both subject and agency? What is to be made of a language that implicitly denies the premises for responsibility? Bolaño's reduction to flesh-and-blood is not a form of denunciation: rather, it is an attempt at a gesture towards justice but against the kind of legal and literary incorporation that underpins the philosophy of human rights.

Weil's lamentation that the language of rights is incapable of expressing the truths of justice resonates with Marx's critique of rights. For the 'sameness' that is attributed to each and every individual, in his reading, is the very ideological veil that is necessary to justify the right to property and the inequality that follows from it[286]. The notions of formal equality and negative liberty are the fundamental underpinnings of the notion of rights, as they are of the whole of liberal ideology. But judged against an ideal of justice that includes distributive equality, they fall short of providing the preconditions for the full development of each individual's personality. Distributive equality is necessary so that everyone can effectively participate in the political life of their community, but necessarily compromised in a production system founded upon exploitation. Marx

[285] Ibid.

[286] In 'On the Jewish Question', an essay written in the autumn of 1843, Marx writes: '[L]iberty as a right of man is not founded upon the relations between man and man, but rather upon the separation of man from man. […] None of the supposed rights of man, therefore, go beyond the egoistic man, man as he is, as a member of civil society; that is, an individual separated from the community, withdrawn into himself, wholly preoccupied with his private interest and acting in accordance with his private caprice' (Tucker, ed., 1978, 42-3).

concludes that only those on the side of Capital are effectively in the position to exert their political rights to the fullest. In the *maquiladora* context—with levels of alienation and exploitation that approximate the industrial scenario that characterised Europe, too, in Marx's time—it is easy enough to perceive the gap between the assumption of equality represented by human rights and, on the other hand, a status quo which invalidates not only their efficacy, but their philosophical premises. The fact that human rights are *de facto* premised on a concept of *negative* liberty also reveals their inherent aversion to politics, regardless of how they are presented by their supporters. In her analysis of Ignatieff's apology for human rights, Wendy Brown notes that negative liberty is to be understood as the prerogative of being left alone, unimpeded by society, to do as one wishes: a kind of liberty which encourages the individual to conceive of one's own development as something that not only does not occur in the realm of politics, but can only take place *in spite of* the latter's influence[287].

In *2666*, attempts at politicising the Santa Teresa murders are rare, but present. Crucially, they are often undertaken by women. Along with professionals such as journalists, deputies and lawyers, *2666* registers the presence of feminist associations taking up the task of publicly denouncing the murders by addressing public opinion through their media campaigns. Azucena Esquivel Plata is a Mexican journalist, as well as a deputy for the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). She gets in contact with Sergio González Rodríguez, the eponymous fictional alter ego of the real-life author of *Huesos en el desierto*. Esquivel Plata intends to share important news about the crimes with the reporter, as well as gathering as much information as possible about Kelly Rivera Parker, a friend of hers that has recently disappeared. In recounting the story of how she

[287] 'In [Ignatieff's] framing', she writes, 'Human rights discourse thus not only aspires to be beyond politics (notwithstanding his own insistence that it is a politics), but carries implicitly antipolitical aspirations for its subjects' (Brown 2004, 456).

became involved in the murders, she provides a useful commentary on the dialectics between personal and impersonal justice staged in *2666*:

> A medida que conocía otros casos, sin embargo, a medida que oía otras voces, mi rabia fue adquiriendo una estatura, digamos, de masa, mi rabia se hizo colectiva o expresión de algo colectivo, mi rabia, cuando se dejaba contemplar, se veía a sí misma como el brazo vengador de miles de víctimas. Sinceramente, creo que me estaba volviendo loca. Esas voces que escuchaba (voces, nunca rostros ni bultos) provenían del desierto. En el desierto yo vagaba con un cuchillo en la mano. En la hoja del cuchillo se reflejaba mi rostro. Tenía el pelo blanco y los pómulos como chupados y cubiertos de pequeñas cicatrices. Cada cicatriz era una pequeña historia que me esforzaba vanamente por recordar.[288] (*2666* 782-3)

The reference to many 'little stor[ies]' certainly fits with the usual style of humanitarian rhetoric, as what is highlighted is the individuality of each of the lives that have been lost and all of the personalities that were never allowed to fully develop. The same could apply to the 'voices' that often appear in *2666*, but those are never really heard independently of one another, as they always come as if in unison.

In his own nightmare in the Santa Teresa hotel, as we have seen in the Introduction, Espinoza dreams of 'voces apenas audibles' that become increasingly clear, to the point that he can distinguish the words 'nuestra cultura, […] nuestra libertad' (*2666* 154)[289]. It does not really matter that these voices appeal to a concept of freedom that may well resemble the negative variety associated with liberal rights: their only claim to this freedom is reduced to a collective and often indistinguishable sound in the desert. Some voices are audible in their own right but, Espinoza's image suggests, the room is empty and no one is there to listen. As loud and terrible as their claim for justice is, it is to no avail. Esquivel Plata's parable, however, suggests that a different path can be taken from

[288] 'As I learned about other cases, however, as I heard other voices, my rage began to assume what you might call mass stature, my rage became collective or the expression of something collective, my rage, when it allowed itself to show, saw itself as the instrument of vengeance of thousands of victims. Honestly, I think I was losing my mind. Those voices I heard (voices, never faces or shapes) came from the desert. In the desert, I roamed with a knife in my hand. My face was reflected in the blade. I had white hair and sunken cheeks covered with tiny scars. Each scar was a little story that I tried and failed to recall' (*2666* [English] 626).

[289] 'Our culture[,] our freedom' (*2666* [English] 115).

merely surrendering to the infinite sadness of just listening to the voices' lament. And this other path is constituted by the politicization of the diffused violence that characterizes the *maquiladora* districts. Initially, she is mainly interested in looking for her friend, but gradually her work brings her to a point where she cannot resist the evidence that the murders represent a collective tragedy more closely resembling a genocide than a series of individual cases. What is distinct about Esquivel Plata's sense of a rage that becomes both numerous and collective is that it becomes a modality of *seeing* the murders that focuses on the violence unleashed, rather than on the individual victims. In other words, what is condemned is not the violation of the rights of one or more individuals, but rather the very fact that violence was deployed against any number of individuals. This represents a shift in perspective which, in Weil's conceptual vocabulary, goes from a personal to an impersonal perspective on the crime. What becomes the focus of a gaze that looks impersonally, such as that of Esquivel Plata's, is that what is considered unjust is the very existence of a force that could potentially cause harm to a human being—not the empirical manifestation of that force, and even less so the fact that it hit the personality of a particular individual. Violence is thus considered unjust in itself, and not relatively to a sphere of individual rights that it supposedly violated.

This impersonal perspective allows for a political stance towards violence that is distinct from the depoliticised variety customarily associated with human rights. In fact, it is the only one in the novel to allow for a systemic critique of the status quo, one that moves beyond the impasse of a series of crimes that seem to have no culprit in particular. The 'secret of the world' that supposedly lies buried in Santa Teresa must be confronted as a phenomenon whose causes are to a considerable extent unfathomable. The closest thing that the novel gets to a culprit is Klaus Haas, Archimboldi's disturbed nephew, but it rapidly becomes clear that, while it is possible that he took part in the murders of a few women, he cannot be held responsible for a wave of crimes that has been going on for

nearly a decade. Just as individual characters feel inconsequential, in *2666*, so violence, too, seems to originate in place that does not correspond to a unitary, autonomous subject—neither collective nor individual. For while systemic causes can often be linked to particular actors, the Sonoran femicides stand at the intersection of a number of pernicious forces: the *maquiladoras* and neoliberal capital, the misogyny among certain strata of the Mexican population[290], the ineptitude of the police, the corruption of the Mexican bureaucracy, the crisis of the nation-state, the violent inclinations of individual rapists and serial killers. None of these, by itself, can satisfactorily explain the appearance of so many dead bodies in the Sonora desert, in numbers so high and concentrated over a mere handful of years[291].

That the mysterious character of this violence constitutes a *prima facie* obstacle to its politicization is thematised again by González Rodríguez, pondering if there is any possibility for collective and individual realization in the world as he sees it now. 'Ganas de vivir', in his musings, is 'ganas de hacerle la lucha, como decía su padre, ¿pero hacerle la lucha a qué, a lo inevitable? ¿Luchar *contra* quién? ¿Y para conseguir qué? ¿Más tiempo, una certeza, el vislumbre de algo esencial?' (*2666* 703-4)[292]. 'El vislumbre de algo esencial' is exactly what *2666* promises its readers without ever really delivering on the promise, but Rodríguez concludes that it might be the case that the 'mystery of the world' is not effectively occulted, but simply non-existent: 'como si hubiera algo esencial en este pinche país, pensó, como si lo hubiera en este pinche planeta mamador de su

[290] 'Casi todos los mexicanos tienen miedo de las mujeres' (*2666* 478). '[A]lmost all Mexican men are afraid of women' (*2666* [English] 382).

[291] David Kurnick links the absence of a determinate root cause for the femicides to a genre from which *2666* borrows a significant component of its tone—that of the hard-boiled novel: '[I]f we can understand hard-boiled fiction's torque on classic detection as a depersonalization—substituting a systemic criminality (the collusion of state and industry) for an individual mastermind (i.e. "Moriarty"), Bolaño takes the process a step further by vaporising the detective himself. In *2666*, romantic individualism is entirely residual: the novel refuses the orienting perspectivalism of character. The heroic detective simply disappears in this novel; more precisely, his witnessing, investigative, emotive, and *collating* functions all migrate to the level of the book's form' (Kurnick 2015, 116-7). He also notes: '*2666* demands that we take an interpretive distance from the category of the individual' (2015, 118).

[292] 'The will to live, the will to fight, as his father used to say, but fight what? The inevitable? Fight against whom? And what for? More time, certain knowledge, the glimpse of something essential?' (*2666* [English] 563).

propia verga' (*2666* 704)[293]. If we accept Kraniauskas's reading of *2666* as tracing the parable of the popular, collective subject through history, in what direction is this subject moving in the era of neoliberal capital? One possible answer, of course, is that the question is easier to answer from the transnational perspective that *2666* urges readers to adopt. For, in the age of the ascendancy of neoliberal doctrine, it is difficult to believe that the post-industrial Global North can generate any powerful revolutionary subject against capitalism. But the 'Monument to the Unknown Worker' that Kraniauskas sees in *2666* is a powerful testimony to the level of subjugation that capitalism continues to produce well after the so-called End of History, thus identifying a multitude with the clear historical interest in fighting against the *status quo*. The *maquiladora* workers, just like the other members of the exploited masses of the Global South, are not a cohesive political subject, but they are, in fact, a multitude with political and economic demands that go well beyond the minimalistic interests that human rights discourse would attribute them[294].

Jacques Rancière's interrogation 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?' comes handy in clarifying the nature of their demands. According to Rancière, Agamben and Arendt see rights as belonging exclusively to citizens because they conceive the political as a sphere rather than a process. The ultimate value of human rights, Rancière contends, does not consist of their applicability, but rather in the legitimization they can provide to claimants of any given right. In other words, they are a tool for dissensus and the precondition for a process of inclusion, rather than the effect of a previous incorporation:

[293] 'As if there were anything essential in this shitty country, he thought, anything essential on this whole self-sucking motherfucker of a planet' (*2666* [English] 563).

[294] Farred draws a similar conclusion when he writes that 'globalised oppression of women (especially in the global South, of course) must be opposed not on the grounds that it denies women's intelligibility (or, "agency", to invoke a now much-critiqued term) or humanity but that it largely ignores it. The language of human rights or economic justice has, no pun intended, little currency for the women of maquiladora, or women like them in other parts of the global South' (2010 703-4).

> The Rights of Man are the rights of the demos, conceived as the generic name of the political subject who enact—in specific scenes of dissensus—the paradoxical qualification of this supplement. This process disappears when you assign those rights to one and the same subject. There is no man of the Rights of Man, but there is no need for such a man. The strength of those rights lies in the back-and-forth movement between the first inscription of the right and the dissensual stage on which it is put to test. [295]

By subverting the literary conventions that would incorporate *2666*'s victims into an ideal community of right-bearing subjects, Bolaño highlights the conceptual space for dissensus and refuses to close it. Incorporation, that is, can function as a process of denial of the violence that it seeks to prevent. As highlighted by Douzinas, the critique of rights articulated by Marx allows us to read in our present situation an instantiation of a process that was already at play since the 1793 French Declaration: the de-politicization of conflict which is inherent in the extension of rights. By shifting the realm of contention from the properly political to the legal, the ideology of rights acquires a legitimising rather than a revolutionary potential. Rights 'attempt to legalize social struggle: they individualize political claims turning them into technical disputes and removing the possibility of radical change, in other words, rights de-politicize politics'[296]. It must be noted that the scepticism towards the emancipatory potential of the project of modernity that can indeed be attributed to Bolaño does not equate disillusionment with the radical ideals of liberation from oppression and exploitation. If anything, *2666* stands as concrete evidence that, among the detours of world-history, a need for progress and justice survives its repeated betrayal. The very form of the novel—the impersonal qualities of both its narrative voice and characters—restlessly insists on the hiatus between the present state of injustice and a desirable definition of justice which is yet to be articulated, and cannot be adequately realised by the promise of human rights.

[295] Rancière 2004, 305.
[296] Douzinas 2010, 94.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIGURANTLESS CROWDS: (IM)PERSONALITY AND THE NEOLIBERAL MYTH OF THE CLASSLESS SOCIETY IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST*

Infinite Jest is a novel with countless characters and embedded narratives, and with an overall plot that is loose and simple enough to accommodate them all. A group of terrorists seeking to get hold of a copy of a film that kills by entertaining, a teenager in an elite boarding academy trying to make sense of his father's suicide and a 29-year-old recovering alcoholic redeeming himself by risking his life to save his fellow patients at the Ennet halfway house: these are the main elements of a novel which often leaves mysteries unresolved and crucial information hidden beneath layers of notes and sub-notes. And yet, the opening scene in *Infinite Jest* does provide the reader with a sense of one of its central thematic concerns. We find Hal Incandenza—the seventeen-year-old athletic and academic star of the Enfield Tennis Academy—being interviewed for admission at the University of Arizona. Readers never get to know what causes Hal's crisis, but he is suddenly hit by what look likes an attack of aphasia that leaves him unable to complete the interview. In one rare instance of first-person narration in the novel, Hal rehearses in his own head the words that he would like to be able to direct to his interviewers:

> 'I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex.
>
> 'I *read*' [...]. 'I study and read. I bet I've read everything you've read. Don't think I haven't. I consume libraries. I wear out spines and ROM-drives. I do things like get in a taxi and say, "The library, and step on it". My instincts concerning syntax and mechanics are better than your own, I can tell, with due respect.
>
> 'But it transcends the mechanics. I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about anything. I believe Dennis Gabor may very well have been the Antichrist.

> I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption. I could interface with you guys right under the table', I say. 'I'm not just a creātus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function'. (*IJ* 11–12)

In reaction to his temporary reduction to a state in which he is not capable of acting independently nor expressing himself, it is only understandable that Hal will try and claim for himself the attributes of a *person*: his 'intricate history' and complexity are a sign of his personality, while his 'opinions' indicate the capacity for rational deliberation that pertains to the autonomous subject. What is more peculiar in Hal's words—and, as I will show, indicative of a problematic of *Infinite Jest* that has not been fully acknowledged in its critical treatments yet—are the particular terms in which this personhood is described and asserted. For Hal is very attached not only to his intellectual abilities, but also to the level of education he has attained. And his ability to read and interpret the world is not predicated in absolute terms, as a tool to navigate the complexity of life, nor as a means to participating in public life. Rather, the ultimate value of his talents is *relative to* the talents of others, and it is measured in competition against them. 'I bet I've read everything that you've read', he says, well-aware that his precocity is out of the norm, and that the institution to which he has applied would benefit from his admission as much as he would. What is even more telling, in Hal's remarks, is the anxiety that is triggered in him by the condition at the opposite end of the spectrum from where he stands: the fate of those who are merely 'conditioned' and 'bred for a function'. Hal's crisis opens a novel that revolves around two parallel universes, each placed at either hand of the Enfield Hill: the Academy of the hyper-educated and competitive elite students on top of it and, at the bottom, the house of those who were highly 'conditioned' by their social background. As we shall see in this chapter, the hill functions as a synecdoche for the polarising effects of neoliberalism on American society.

Infinite Jest entertains a complex relationship with regard to the themes of class and labour. On the one hand, its focus on efficiency—or lack thereof—is evident in its treatment of both the Enfield Academy and Ennet House. Pupils of the elite institution are constantly under pressure to optimize their physical and mental capacities. Conversely, in the scenes set at Ennet House, the deleterious effects of various kinds of addiction are repeatedly presented as impediments to one's self-conduct—a malaise of both will and rationality, preventing individuals from acting in their own best interest. The effective micro-management of one's own time, energy and professional skills is of course central to capitalist economy in general and exacerbated in the neoliberal age. Hal and his peers are training for a future life in which their social position will be determined, to a significant extent, by the level of prestige and relative scarcity of their future professional credentials. In a sense, then, they are cultivating competitiveness as such: their ultimate goal is a high place in a social hierarchy that is ultimately defined by one's relative position in the workforce[297]. This form of competitiveness—extreme, intended to bring talent beyond itself through constant effort—is typical of neoliberal ideology in its almost overt disrespect for the limitations and needs of individuals. Hal, too, thinks of himself as a sort of human enterprise surrounded by competitors in all spheres of life. This anti-essentialist notion of the self—the self as a product, rather than the source, of economic investment—together with a focus on the rationalization of resources and maximization of profit, leads to the kind of existential exhaustion felt by so many of the athletes at ETA. In this context, Hal's insistence on not being 'a machine' is clearly an attempt to create a way of thinking about himself whereby his value as an individual is intrinsic, rather than dependent on continuous performance. Conversely, the characters

[297] Wendy Brown devotes Chapter VI of her *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* to tracing the historical transition from a conception of higher learning as the necessary precondition for a healthy democracy to the current cultural climate, in which the highest purpose of a degree is that of guaranteeing the professionalization necessary to be successful on the job market. See Brown 2015, 175-200.

gravitating around Ennet House are essentially members of an 'underclass'—being, as they are, marginalised and excluded from any form of paid work, at least temporarily. On the other hand, however, labour is present only as a void, as it is almost completely hidden from view: in a novel populated predominantly by students and welfare-recipients, many are shown to do several kinds of labour, but very few actually do salaried work. Some of these activities are presented in the novel as deeply connected to the personal identity of the individual undertaking them—this is particularly the case with the intellectual endeavours of the more educated ones—while others are depicted as requiring a kind of impersonal detachment in order to be carried out. The dyad of personal and impersonal does not neatly overlap with that of skilled and unskilled labour, but interferes with creating a complex and multifaceted portrayal of the different possibilities offered by impersonal experience.

In this chapter, I contend that the anxiety perceived by Hal is to be understood in class terms, and in particular as symptomatic of the sense of disorientation perceived by the American middle class at least since the Reagan presidency. This is an anxiety that *Infinite Jest* registers on the level of both form and content, even though the themes through which it is articulated are often the result of a process of concealment, or refraction. Issues as disparate as drug addiction, excellence in sports and creativity are all manifestations of what, following Jameson, I see as the 'political unconscious' of a work of fiction that speaks of class even though it is perfectly consistent with a political climate—that of the 1990s in the US—that chooses to be completely oblivious to it[298]. I define 'class' as the perceived identity of an individual with regard to their position in the economy of both prestige and material wealth, a position that is defined in relational terms.[299] This chapter connects *Infinite Jest*'s treatment of class to the argument of my

[298] See Jameson 2002b.

[299] For a schematization of alternative conceptions of class deployed in sociological research, see Wright 2015, viii. My own definition can be described in terms borrowed from Wright's outline as relational (rather than gradational) and reliant on the market as the primary organising force of class-divisions, as opposed

thesis as a whole by showing how ideas of relative productivity and aptness to succeed on the job market are linked to concepts of personhood and impersonality. I shall begin with an historical overview of the decline in relevance of the notion of 'class' in American social discourse after the 1970s, and the concomitant rise of what I have defined in the Introduction as 'neoliberal personhood', which many characters in the novel are shown to embody. A second section will consider the novel's countless minor characters, and show how the 'magnified flatness' typical of the neoliberal novel is here deployed to depict a segment of the population which coincides with the pseudo-sociological notion of the 'underclass'. The third and final section will focus on Ennet House and the practices of bodily impersonality adopted by some of its patients and it will show how depersonalising and objectifying these can be.

Through the analyses of these aspects of *Infinite Jest*, I will show that Wallace's novel can be read as complicit with certain tenets of neoliberal doctrine—an ideological proximity that can only be brought to the fore by looking at its treatment of class. In particular, through a reading of the dialectic between the personal and the impersonal in the novel—pivoting on the mediating concept of class—I intend to answer the following question: does the political unconscious of *Infinite Jest* ultimately justify neoliberal inequalities by depicting the poor as undeserving?[300] I will suggest that Wallace's novel is consistent with its political and economic *zeitgeist* in at least three aspects. Firstly, it reduces class differences to nothing more than a cultural phenomenon to be caricatured, rather than understood in economic and relational terms. Secondly, it celebrates intimist, personal solutions to problems that it identifies as collective and structural. Thirdly, it articulates an ideal of freedom that equates to little more than voluntary submission to the

to production.

[300] Thus, the present chapter attempts to find aspects of the unconscious messages Jameson identifies in George Gissing's *Nether World*: both the 'ideologemes' he sees at play in the text 'drive home the same ultimate message for the lower classes: stay in your place!' (2002b, 176).

self-exploiting mechanisms of human capital.[301] Ultimately, my reading of the novel suggests that while the novel does take an imaginative leap into the realm of impersonality the results are compromised by a certain reactionary hint[302]. Under this light, the novel's celebration of Don Gately as its ultimate hero of self-acceptance, empathy and altruism appears suspicious, as all of these qualities are shown to be the direct product of a capacity for a kind of self-discipline that holds much in common with the ways of the neoliberal *homo œconomicus*.

'An Endless War Against the Self': Human Capital and the Death of Class

The age of economic and political history which saw the apex of the implementation of neoliberal policies in the United States—from the presidential election of Reagan in 1979 to the financial crisis of 2008—is one in which the concept of class seemed to disappear from collective consciousness. The 'demise of class' in the American public discourse of the 1980s and 1990s is no coincidence, but rather the result of the mutual alignment between the neoliberal counterrevolution and the American myth of a classless society[303]. Neoliberal ideology justifies the erosion of the welfare state by maintaining that, while access to the resources necessary to flourish is denied to many, all are guaranteed an equal opportunity to achieve success and social recognition. A 'classless society' is an

[301] This apparent contradiction is somewhat resolved and put into context by Mark Fisher's apt formula: 'Neoliberalism's victory, of course, depended upon a cooption of the concept of freedom. Neoliberal freedom, evidently, is not a freedom from work, but freedom *through* work' (2018, n.p., italics in the original).

[302] The reactionary elements present in Wallace's works have recently been the subject of a small number of academic articles, including McGurl 2014, Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts 2017, Dorson 2014, Williams 2015 and Hayes-Brady 2015. However, Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts are fairly representative of this group in their project of elucidating 'the reactionary *racial and gender* dynamics that are constitutive of *Infinite Jest*'s New Sincerity' (13, my italics), thus focusing on elements of ideology and subject-formation that have more to do with classic identity politics than class antagonisms. I see my reading of the novel as complementary to theirs.

[303] Nancy Isenberg thus summarizes this aspect of American exceptionalism: 'Nowhere else, we are meant to understand, was personal freedom so treasured as it was in the American experience. The very act of migration claims to equalize the people involved, moulding them into a homogeneous, effectively classless society. Stories of unity tamp down our discontents and mask even our most palpable divisions. And when these divisions are class based, as they almost always are, a pronounced form of amnesia sets in. Americans do not like to talk about class. It is not supposed to be important in our history. It is not who we are' (2016, 30).

American founding myth that neoliberal ideology makes its own and reinforces through its discursive focus on meritocracy. And it was not only the *concept* of class that was disappearing from view, but also the working class as a strong economic and social force. This political subject had seemed more powerful and cohesive than ever with the strikes of the late 1960s and early 1970s: a decade of struggles had certainly changed not only the way in which the working class looked at itself, but the place it occupied in the American public sphere, now more than ever interested in it[304]. What followed was a social and economic restoration: as historian Jefferson Cowie notes in *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and The Last Days of the Working Class*, it is 'within the gloomy seventies we can find the roots of our own time'[305]. By the mid-1970s, the American working class had been subdued both in its numbers and its political relevance.

The neoliberal transformation had fragmented and dispersed the American working class into a variety of low-paid jobs that bore no clear resemblance to the Fordist workplace and the forms of collective organization that it used to make possible. Even more fatal to millions of workers was the distributive inequality that was rising in most developed economies. Income levels skyrocketed for the very few members of the new, up-and-coming managerial class, and decreased dramatically for the vast majority of the population[306]. And with the emergence of unprecedented urban decay and poverty, also came the political rhetoric of law-and-order that brought into being the War on Crime and the War on Drugs. *Infinite Jest* resonates with the political climate of its decade and the rhetoric of the War on Crime by depicting an ultimately dehumanised crowd of

[304] Marxian sociologist Göran Therborn situates these changes in a global frame, in which the decline of the working class is also, in part, influenced by 'the long '68': 'the end of the working-class century had an economic basis in the accelerating deindustrialization and financialisation of the capitalist core; more obliquely, a sociological factor was the social dissolution stemming from the 1968 cultural movement' (2020, 66).
[305] Cowie 2012, 11.
[306] See Piketty and Saez 2003 for an account of income inequality in the United States over the course of the Twentieth Century. Elsewhere, Piketty is clear in linking the unprecedented levels of material inequality to the rise of a new managerial class: 'this spectacular increase in inequality largely reflects an unprecedented explosion of very elevated incomes from labour, a veritable separation of the top managers of large firms from the rest of the population' (2014, 24).

impoverished and marginalised Americans. As we shall see, the Ennet House is fundamentally a shelter for an 'underclass'—a collection of people with destitution and the threat of imminent criminalization as the only binding element beside drug-consumption. From the standpoint of their participation in a national community that is increasingly conceived of in economic terms, they are the exact opposite of their neighbours at the other end of the Enfield Hill: incapable of self-management, let alone the management of others.

The demise of 'class' is also due to another tenet of neoliberalism: the notion of human capital. This was firstly theorised by economists Gary Becker and Theodore Shultz, and it was to have immense resonance in the knowledge-driven world of the neoliberal economy. Shultz started from the observation that the state of the world economy after World War II contradicted a series of predictions made by key theorists of capitalism such as Malthus, Ricardo and Marx. Contrary to their expectations, returns on investment had not decreased with the tumultuous expansion of capital in the postwar years, nor had wages compressed to accommodate the declining rate of profit. Unprecedented levels of growth and wages could be explained by recurring to the notion of a capital that was not only deposited in physical resources, but also in the competences and skills of the workforce: this 'new' capital was human inasmuch as it pertained to the unalienable qualities of the individual selling his time—i.e. the labourer.[307] As Foucault explains in his famous *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures, human capital 'is the set of all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage, so that, seen from the side of the worker, labour is not a commodity reduced by abstraction to labour power and the time [during] which it is used'[308]. By re-conceptualising skills as capital, the very difference between capitalist and worker was erased.

[307] See Paltrinieri 2017, 463-5, for an overview of the impact of Becker's and Shultz's theories on the managerial practices of the neoliberal firm.
[308] Foucault 2008, 224.

This renewed notion of capital calls for a kind of subjectivity that specifically pertains to the rationality of neoliberalism: *homo œconomicus*. This new subject, Foucault maintains, is at heart an 'entrepreneur of himself', and therefore always and inextricably occupying both positions of interest, that of the owner of his own capital and of a worker seeking to rent or sell his labour at the highest possible price. That this distinction collapses is crucial on two distinct levels. On the one hand, it makes it easier for neoliberal discourse to mitigate class antagonisms by creating a form of false consciousness: of course, distributional inequality between distinct segments of the population increases under regimes of neoliberal deregulation, yet the victims of this process are led to believe that they do not occupy a structurally different role than the economic elite. On a second level, however, the synthesis of capitalist and worker within the same persona does correspond to an actual mutation in the way the economy is structured. From this angle, the figure of the 'entrepreneur of himself' is not an ideologically-inflected piece of propaganda, but rather an apt description of a new state of things: the rationality of neoliberalism elevates competition to the regulating principle of both market and society, thus engendering a process of *financialisation* of the work-force. Success on the job-market, that is, is made dependent on a scheme of supply and demand of skills and competences that is distinct from that of the industrial age. Neat distinctions between classes seem to disappear in favour of a competition in the job market supposedly among peers.[309]

The 'individual considered as an enterprise'—whose 'conditions of life are the income of a capital'—finds that, in order to survive, he needs to constantly invest in the

[309] Wendy Brown confirms that it is through the theory of human capital, in particular, that neoliberal doctrine is able to mystify capitalist class relations: 'the transformation of labour into human capital and of workers into entrepreneurs competing with other entrepreneurs obviously obscures the visibility and iterability of class to an even greater degree than classical liberalism does' (2015, 65). Paltrinieri concurs: 'the objective of the neoliberal economic analysis that defines each individual as the owner of their human capital is to dissolve the very concept of class, making generalised competition the only economically *justifiable* reality in which social actors move' (2017, 464).

expansion of all of those skills and characteristics that make him employable.[310] The 'physical and psychological factors' Foucault refers to become the means and end of constant reinvestment, since human capital—just like any form of capital—cannot stand still in its perpetual movement towards expansion. Education therefore acquires an even more central role in the workings of social and economic reproduction, and expands its sphere of influence well beyond the mere consolidation of inherited status: what the *homo œconomicus* really needs to do is engage in perpetual (self-)training in all those areas of life that might impact his chances to compete with others on the job-market. Such expansion of the economical over the other spheres of the individual's life has one key implication with regard to the concept of personality. In fact, classic *homo œconomicus* could afford the privilege of acting in accordance with his calculating and ratiocinative mind only when immersed in his work, and could therefore conceive of his own 'personality' as a private inner sphere that could be explored and expressed with no direct consequences on his economic activities. By contrast, the neoliberal subject is brought to scan through every single passion, inclination and talent on the lookout for traits that might impede or enhance his chances at economic success. Under this logic, 'personality' becomes the sum of those 'physical and psychological factors' that will need to be subjected to the logic of investment. Far from considering a site for authenticity, the neoliberal subject needs to constantly reshape his personality according to the fluctuations of the market. It is the duty of the ratiocinative mind to assess how best to undergo such necessary changes. The dignity deriving from one's status as a person—craved for so anxiously by many of the characters in *Infinite Jest*—depends upon the exploitation of personality at the service of a process that will ultimately increment the individual's social and economic worth. This recursive process of profitability sees the alliance and mutual exploitation of personality and rational, competitive agency, and it is in the dialectics

[310] Foucault 2008, 233.

between these two elements that the constitutive traits of neoliberal personhood emerge in *Infinite Jest*.

Wallace's novel dramatizes the differences between two sections of society that are at the antipodes only when seen from a strictly neoliberal point of view: it is not the incredibly wealthy against the poorest, but rather those most able to rationally manage themselves and their own personal societal ascension against those that have supposedly renounced any role as active egotistical subjects and spend their existences at the mercy of external forces. The novel's focus on its protagonists' drive to acquire value through self-training and self-management—as well as the anxiety of those that do not seem able to do so—testifies to another crucial aspect of neoliberal personhood: its inherent relative quality, which is founded upon a never-ending process of social recognition and devaluation. In fact, since the ultimate arbiter of value and performance is the market, it is only through the double confrontation between competing peers and between supply and demand that the exchange value of one's own personal skills and qualities can be measured. Crucially, such value is not *assessed* in competition, but rather *produced* at the very moment in which the relative scarcity of certain kinds of human value manifest. This is why the political unconscious of *Infinite Jest* is driven towards the comparison between the two communities of Enfield and Ennet: it is only in the juxtaposition between proper *homines economici* and the underclass of those always already excluded from competition that its discourse on neoliberal social recognition and its implications can be conducted. As Andrew Sayer puts it in *The Moral Significance of Class*, 'to develop a sense of self we need others[:] even though we may objectify ourselves through labour by producing objects, objects are not capable of reflecting back to us our conception of ourselves as subjects, having some degree of freedom and responsibility'[311]. But this conception, Sayer continues, will only be reflected back to us if we grant the same consideration to

[311] Sayer 2005, 56.

our interlocutor: 'only other persons, also subjects having some degree of freedom and responsibility, can do this'[312]. The 'real life's egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds' envisaged by the ghost of James Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, then, represents an abstraction that neoliberalism seems to promote (inasmuch as it conflates diverging class positions within the figure of the 'entrepreneur of himself') while, at the same time, sabotaging it by structuring society around the relative capacity to make oneself visible and victorious in competition (*IJ* 835) [313].

In the neoliberal age, the race to efficiency and self-development leads to the celebration of education as the primary means for climbing the social ladder. Foucault acknowledges the renewed centrality to society of educational institutions when he considers what it means 'to form [H]uman [C]apital, and so to form these kinds of abilities-machines which will produce income, which will be remunerated by income': it is through 'educational investments', he concludes, that future economic prosperity is secured[314]. It is no surprise, then, that *Infinite Jest* is also set on the premises of an elite educational institution, the Enfield Tennis Academy. Hal Incandenza is only one among the student- and athlete-prodigies attending this ultra-competitive preparatory school: each of these students has been led to believe that they have enormous innate potential, but that it will only bear fruit if cultivated under the strictest of physical and academic routines. The race to fame and success promoted by the Academy is depicted as corrupting and almost necessarily frustrated in the novel, as the all-consuming anxieties

[312] Ibid.
[313] For a discussion of Incandenza's professed egalitarian aesthetics, see supra 37-8. Rachel Greenwald Smith makes a useful but divergent claim when she adapts Alex Woloch's arguments on the nineteenth-century novel's character system to identify a fundamental difference between the liberal and the neoliberal novel. She writes that, in the latter, 'the multiplicity of protagonists looks like the triumph of the democratic impulse behind realism over inequality, just as the attribution of entrepreneurial subjectivity to workers and managers alike under neoliberalism appears to abolish the class system' (2015, 143, n.26). The overall effect of said aesthetics is that of 'reinforc[ing] the belief that inequality no longer exists', she concludes. While Greenwald Smith's comments would almost perfectly describe the principles of Incandenza's aesthetics, I differ from her in that I see this effect as just one among the discursive possibilities of the object I call the neoliberal novel. As I argue in this Introduction, the neoliberal novel owes its defining traits precisely to the historical circumstances that have been reinforcing material disparities across the globe.
[314] Foucault 2008, 229.

of its pupils attest. 'The Show', as they refer to the world of professional tennis, represents the ultimate validation of their personal worth, the practical proof that they were both uniquely talented and hard-working enough to deserve the acknowledgement of the masses. The ambivalence towards personality and impersonal exploitation returns in the scenes set at the Academy: if personal qualities are the very basis on which future growth is built, it is only through the subjugation of personal instincts to extenuating bodily routines that the investment returns can be maximised.

LaMont Chu is fully representative of his peers at the Academy when he meets the *genius loci* of the locker room, Lyle, and 'haltingly confesses to an increasingly crippling obsession with tennis fame' that, he feels, '[i]s eating him alive' (*IJ* 388). 'Tennis fame', inevitably, comes with 'hype' and the commodification of a player's personal identity, then refracted and proposed again and again across glossy magazine covers and TV footage. It is this kind of personal glorification that LaMont envies and desires so ardently. Interestingly, he perceives an incongruence between his own anxiety and the general ethos of the Academy, 'an academy that regards hype and the seduction of hype as the great Mephistophelian pitfall and hazard of talent', as he sees it (*IJ* 388). The ideology of the Academy is founded upon a process of progressive abandonment of the self, a view that is summarised in Head Coach and Athletic Director Gerhardt Schtitt's motto 'self-transcendence through pain' (*IJ* 660). Prorector DeLint is adamant in maintaining that the erasure of any narcissistic celebration of an athlete's personality is the necessary precondition for success on the playing field. The 'pain' in the motto directly derives from a mortification of the ego: it is triggered by the realization that one is not the top player he thought he was in his own local tournament after all, and that further results will only be made possible by a radical dose of humility. DeLint knows that for the audiences 'it's about entertainment and personality, it's about the statue', about *seeing* the immense talent of these future players being used in competition, and for precisely this reason he

believes that in order to use the 'time and total focus' necessary to develop athletic excellence, ETA pupils need 'to get to be the ones who look and see and forget getting looked at, for now' (*IJ* 661). What is more, the desires expressed by LaMont—the celebration of one's own personality as a kind of 'statue' to be adored and envied by others—do not only distract the aspiring champions from the task of developing their talent, but constitute in fact the fundamental obstacle to it. 'The true opponent', Schtitt maintains, 'is the player himself', and the literal opponent on the field is no more than the '*excuse* or *occasion* for meeting the self' (*IJ* 84). But in what is *de facto* the creed of the ETA, this deep, mysterious self that must be apprehended through the constant and intense deployment of one's mental and physical abilities is not a source of wisdom through self-knowledge or the necessary base for authenticity and sincerity. Rather, it is conceived as an obstacle to be overcome, a subject-within-the-subject that must be conquered: 'the animating limits are within, to be killed and subdued' (*IJ* 84). Life is 'an endless war against the self you cannot live without' (*IJ* 84): a maxim that reveals that the kind of junior athletics practiced at the Enfield Academy are just an occasion to master an attitude towards the self that will be useful to pupils well beyond the playing field: a kind of Foucauldian 'technology of the self', then.

The neoliberal twist to this distrust of personality is revealed by Schtitt's cult of performance and competition, an attitude made explicit in his assertion that 'tennis's beauty's infinite roots are self-competitive' (*IJ* 84). Here is a distrust of the innermost self that is more reminiscent of the pre-Reformation Christian attitude towards the individual soul than of a fundamentally benign source of spontaneity and authenticity, as in Romanticism. At Enfield, both self and mind seem to be distrusted inasmuch as they often get in the way of a certain physical efficiency, the sole guarantee of a player's capacity to outperform his adversary. However, the social outlook implicit in such views emerges as soon as rankings and statistics are introduced, with pupils constantly being reminded of

where they stand in relation to the performance of others. For while the competition promoted by the athletic preparation at the Academy is primarily against *the self*, it is clear that its ultimate success is only measurable in terms of the relative value of the performance it makes possible. The hypocrisy of the Academy's ideology is pointed out by Steeply, during his in-incognito interview with DeLint: the focus on one's own inner limits is justified and validated only in prevision of the future gains it will produce in tournaments. If anything, the kind of 'self-transcendence through pain' incentivised at Enfield is a form of self-discipline that increases the distance between the individual and his peers by making his own worth in inverse proportion to the ability of others. 'Self-transcendence', at Enfield, is a provisional abandonment of personality that is only made because it is functional to its ultimate value-extrapolation. It works very much according to the logic of an *investment*: a certain amount of profit is momentarily put aside, only to return as future income.

Thus, the ethos of the Academy is perfectly compatible with the logic of human capital and LaMont Chu's anxiety is not at all in contradiction with the general ethos 'inculcated' by Schtitt, DeLint and the other Academy authorities, as they themselves admit. Rather, any intrinsic value of the individual's personality is negated by the logic of capital-investment and enhancement. The individual is no end in itself, but rather a means to the exploitation of its own personal qualities. Under new light, it is easy to see in the social production of recognition yet another form of the exploitation of the impersonal logic of capital upon the various actors that concur to its production and dissemination. Furthermore, it becomes clear why the various mechanisms of production and distribution of a specifically human kind of capital is a mechanism of exploitation that pertains specifically to those strata of society that are associated with the middle-class and cognitive labour. While those destined by a combination of factors to menial jobs in which qualities such as originality and competitiveness are made almost irrelevant

by the low grade of skill necessary to perform their duties, those segments of the population that rely upon their education and competences in order to find employment will necessarily be more subject to the logics of the exploitation of personality. Inevitably, the worth of one's own personality-as-capital can only be realised in the implicit recognition that peers will bestow upon it. Of course, as La Mont Chu's anxiety testifies, the mental health of the neoliberal subject is radically compromised by dread and fatigue. Similarly, the feeling of anhedonia periodically experienced by Hal during his days at ETA can be seen as the dark side to the levels of intense activity to which his body and soul are subjected by the logic of human capital. Once crowds are supposedly made figurantless, the intensities of class warfare are introjected by individuals, and the 'endless war against the self' begins.

'The Unchecked Panhandler': *Infinite Jest*'s Figurants

Nearly half of the social world represented in *Infinite Jest* is made up of people pushed to margins of American society by a variety of factors, the list usually including drug addiction and a family background characterised by material scarcity and emotional neglect. As we have seen, these characters are identifiable as members of an 'underclass', a term that had gradually been gaining currency in the decade preceding the publication of Wallace's novel. German sociologist Hans-Peter Michels writes that 'the underclass discourse has been one of the most influential ideological transformations of the last few decades, and has succeeded in upending the previously established definitions of "classes"'[315]. Michels identifies a cluster of conservative think tanks in the United States as the main sources and propagators of this discourse, and highlights that the latter serves the same ideological purpose wherever it is accepted: that of 'ideologically preparing for and/or accompanying the dismantling of social safety nets'[316]. The kernel of the

[315] Michels 2013, 45-6.
[316] Ibid., 46.

underclass discourse is identifiable in American political scientist Charles Murray's influential argument that 'the poor, marginalised or excluded people are themselves the agents of poverty', since 'the causes lie in their deficient personality structures and shameful behaviour'[317]. Social and economic factors impacting the lives of the impoverished multitudes of the urban landscapes are thus deliberately ignored in favour of a purely behaviourist approach, in which one's own relative position in the social ladder is the direct consequence of one's innate psychological traits. 'Instead of focusing on social conditions', Michel writes, 'this discourse focuses on negative characteristics and corrupt morals, in order to build the construct of a "behavioural underclass"'[318].

This notion was to become central to the neoliberal restructuring of society, starting from policies that aimed at transforming the urban environment. In the pages of *The Atlantic* in 1982, George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson formulated what would then become a foundational precept of urban safety policies in ensuing decades. They linked prevailing notions of the underclass to a theory of order and decency in urban neighbourhoods:

> The citizen who fears the ill-smelling drunk, the rowdy teenager, or the importuning beggar is not merely expressing his distaste for unseemly behaviour; he is also giving voice to a bit of folk wisdom that happens to be a correct generalisation—namely, that serious street crime flourishes in areas in which disorderly behaviour goes unchecked. The unchecked panhandler is, in effect, the first broken window. Muggers and robbers, whether opportunistic or professional, believe they reduce their chances of being caught or even identified if they operate on streets where potential victims are already intimidated by prevailing conditions. [319]

In outlining their Broken Windows policy theory, Kelly and Wilson are presenting a series of traits of the American urban landscape as the indisputable causes of a series of undesirable circumstances, ranging in magnitude from minor forms of urban decay, such as literal broken windows, and petty crimes, all the way up to serious aggressions and

[317] Ibid., 55.
[318] Ibid., 51. The formula 'behavioural underclass' is borrowed from the work of sociologist Herbert Gans.
[319] Kelling and Wilson 1982, n.p.

other similar infringements of the law. Their main assumption is thus that 'disorderly behaviour' is not only often to be found in areas with significant crime rates, but also that it directly causes said rates to rise. In this scenario, the most visible impediment to a safe and serene urban life is not the literal offender, but rather an individual defined by her lack of property: 'not violent people, nor, necessarily, criminals', Kelling and Wilson warn their reader, 'but disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people: panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, the mentally disturbed'[320]. Urban decay is thus unequivocally associated with a specific cast of recognizable urban characters, who are thus demonised for the fact of having been left to their own devices by politicians intent on cutting welfare programs. In order to serve the neoliberal agenda, cultural stereotypes were being rehashed from the depths of American history, ranging from the figure of the African American male as a rapist to the category of 'white trash', the list now expanded to include new figures such as the 'welfare queen' and the racialized crack addict[321].

Infinite Jest abounds in 'panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers [and] the mentally disturbed' and, most importantly, it unfolds much of its narrative force through the representation of them in a squalid urban landscape. The narrative voice in *Jest* usually brings these people to life with humour and warmth, but it does so in ways in which an echo of Broken Windows policies is clearly distinguishable. Here, too, the issue of whether the form of *Infinite Jest* merely registers the conspicuous presence of neoliberal discourses or partakes, to an extent, in it, is crucial. This is because through his construction of a narrative voice, Wallace stages not merely a representation of the urban 'underclass' so central to the public discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, but rather a depiction of these people as seen from the perspective of the middle classes. In

[320] Ibid., n.p.
[321] For a cultural history of the category of 'white trash', see Nancy Isenberg's 2016 *White Trash: The 400-year Untold Story of Class in America*.

other words, a certain prejudice against the myriad minor characters populating the streets of *Jest*'s Boston is clearly detectable in the narrative voice's way of making fun of them. This is often done through the deliberate deployment of stereotypes and clichés which make certain pages in *Jest* almost painful to read. The exposition of personal and social tragedy is often accompanied by a playfully ironic tone which implicitly questions the validity and credibility of what has just been narrated, as if directing a smirk at the supposedly well-educated readers of literary fiction from across the page, thus inviting them not to take these people's self-narratives too seriously. The perspective in which these personal stories are implicitly put by the narrative voice's tone bears some similarities to that of media campaigns against the poor and the disadvantaged, who are cast in the role of public enemies. Thus, Wallace's treatment of 'the unchecked panhandler'—a term that comprises the different members of the 'underclass' he depicts—mobilises some of the same tropes and formulas deployed by those conservative think tanks that were remodelling American public policy in the 1980s and 1990s, and it does so at the level of form, too. For the flatness of these characters lies precisely in their varying degree of adherence to the types spread through neoliberal social discourse.

Bruce Green, Randy Lenz, Poor Tony Krause, Mat Pemulis are just some of the many characters shown in the context of the most deprived areas of suburban Boston. Similarly, Kate Gompert, Geoffrey Day, Tiny Ewell, Ken Erdedy, Ruth van Cleve and Joelle van Dyne are representative examples of all of those characters that are implicitly presented as belonging to the same human and social landscape often associated with urban decay. The poorer areas in Boston are thus presented in *Jest* as something close to a war environment, and clear allusions to the War on Crime of the 1980s and 1990s are made, with a hint to the 'Zero Tolerance' policies that Rudy Giuliani (in New York) and other Republican mayors were implementing across the United States at the time of the novel's writing: at one point, Randy Lenz, one of Ennet House's most violent and psychotic

inmates, 'observes to Green how myriadly ironic are the devices by which the Famous Crooner's promise to Clean Up Our Urban Cities has come to be kept' (*IJ* 556). The war which is being fought is, just like any other manifestation of neoliberal reason, one conducted by the capitalist class against the weaker segments of the population. The otherwise minor characters occupying this urban landscape are turned into the protagonists of countless brief sketches, and rendered flat in at least two respects. On the one hand, they are presented as nothing more than the representative example of a certain taxonomy of the socially unacceptable. On a distinct level, however, they are described as devoid of character and agency, as if the ultimate effect of their drug-consumption habit and destitution was the progressive removal of all of those traits that make up a personality. This is the case of '[Poor Tony] Krause's spectral mien', described as 'looking less alive than undead, identifiable as old Poor Tony only by the boa and red leather coat and the certain way he held his hand to his throat's hollow as he walked' (*IJ* 684; 683). Similarly, Bruce Green's normality is described as 'his normal psychorepressed cerebral state where he has about one fully developed thought every sixty seconds, and then just one at a time' (*IJ* 582). These individuals have been made somewhat less than human by their drug of preference, the narrative voice often seems to imply.

Various scripts are included in *Jest* as background stories for its 'panhandlers', thus contributing to a sense that they are not completely real, or at least that there is something counterfeit about their lives. At times, the overall effect created by the narrative voice is one which encourages us to discredit them and take their caricatural self-narratives as proof that they are only trying to justify themselves for their nearly criminal lack of character and personality. Mildred Bonk, for example, is a young mother living in a trailer who is capable of little more than '[getting] high in the afternoon and [watching] serial-cartridges' until her husband comes home, at which point they are eager to get high

together again, thus offering little hope to the readers empathically invested in their daughter's future (*IJ* 39). Randy Lenz and Bruce Green's nightly walks are paradigmatic of the narrative voice's ironic detachment from the at-times staggering depths of suffering and destitution experienced by these individuals. Lenz is an Ennet House resident affected by various addictions and a profound psychosis, which leads him to vent his discontents by torturing and killing stray animals. He does so on his way back from AA meetings; he has been recently joined by Green. Their wanderings are one of the many occasions deployed in the novel to give readers glimpses of the dumpster-constellated life of inner Boston at night. Now that his urge to violence has to be at least deferred because of Green's presence, Lenz finds that having a companion encourages him to think about the past and put his ruminations into words. What follows Lenz's decision to share 'some painful Family-Of-Origin Issues' is a brief sketch in which the narrative is focalised through the character's point of view, while the voice from which this focalisation originates adds some comments and ironic distance of its own (*IJ* 575).

The story that follows derives most of its dramatic force from the subtle intertwinement of tragedy and farce, promoting in the reader a set of ambiguous feelings, as if laughing in the face of the protagonist's sorrow was at times simply too difficult to avoid. Lenz relates a story about an 'unspeakably obese' mother who denies him any form of affection, and who abandons him after a series of events comical and grotesque in equal measure. During a long-distance bus ride, Mrs. Lenz, her son informs us in his characteristic linguistic awkwardness, 'ha[s] to go potty' at what will turn out to be a very wrong time, as the driver will temporarily lose full control of the vehicle, causing it to swerve back and forth. The narrative voice's somewhat acidic humour is condensed in the passage detailing the consequences of the swerves as seen from the interior of the on-board restroom:

> Mrs. Lenz, right in the process of going potty, was hurled from the toilet by the first swerve and proceeded to do some high-velocity and human-waste-flinging

> pinballing back and forth against the potty's plastic walls; and when the bus finally regained total control and resumed course Mrs. Lenz had, freakishly enough, ended up her human pinballing with her bare and unspeakably huge backside wedged tight in the open window of the potty, so forcefully ensconced into the recesstacle that she was unable to extricate, and the bus continued on its northward sojourn the rest of the way up [Commonwealth Route] 24 with Mrs. Lenz's bare backside protruding from the ensconcing window, promoting car horns and derisive oratory from other vehicles […]. (*IJ* 576)

The narrative voice is saving none of Lenz's blushes: the passage unforgivingly mixes a certain mastery over syntax and comic timing with what we are to take as Lenz's own solecism ('recesstacle'), which is neither amended nor removed from view, but made part and parcel of the overall sense of uneasiness to be dissipated through laughter. That a certain nastiness and snobbery are being directed at Lenz is also revealed by small but sharp jokes inserted as if between the lines of his reported speech, as when the settlement received by Mrs. Lenz from the bus company as compensation for the moral and material damage she has suffered is qualified as 'morbidly obese' (*IJ* 576). That an extra-diegetic persona is offering us Lenz's free indirect speech in mediated form is clear from the gap between the character's own powers of expression and the convoluted but brilliant structure of the sentences in which his thoughts are reported. References to words and ideas exceeding the character's level of education occasionally surface in the prose, as when we are told that '[Lenz and Green's] route down here is a *Mondrian of alleys* narrowed to near-defiles from all the dumpsters' (*IJ* 577, emphasis mine).

In the scene in which Don Gately, lying in his hospital bed, is visited by the ghost of James Incandenza, Wallace is staging the ambiguous relationship between the novel's narrative voice and many of its characters. As the two can only communicate because the ghost has supposedly entered Gately's mind, the passage blends their point of view, with results that are both entertaining and unsettling. In fact, Gately feels that he is being possessed by a 'ghastly intrusive force', as he realises that many of the words which have started to appear in his interior monologue are unknown to him: 'then […], into Gately's

personal mind, in Gately's own brain-voice but with roaring and unwilled force, comes the term PIROUETTE, in caps, which term Gately knows for a fact he doesn't have any idea what it means and no reason to be thinking it with roaring force, so the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape' (*IJ* 832)[322]. Elsewhere in the novel, the narrative voice seems to violate the dignity of some of the minor characters with a kind of ironic detachment which is reminiscent of said 'ghastly intrusive force'. What is striking is that the narrative voice's patronising tone functions on at least two distinct levels. On the one hand, when it reports in the form of free indirect speech Lenz's statement that, on the day of the incident, his mother was 'visit[ing] her son in a Commonwealth Youth Corrections facility Lenz was doing research for a possible screenplay in', it is clear we are being encouraged to smile at Lenz's clumsy attempt to deceive and boast (*IJ* 575). Yet what is perhaps most disturbing about the treatment of this 'origin-story' is the impression that if we are not to take Lenz seriously as a narrator, then perhaps we should not fall into the trap of considering him a credible representation of a human being. In other words, one is left to wonder whether the narrative voice is merely enriching Lenz's story by adding a note of comedy and sarcasm here and there or, conversely, if it is composing a demeaning caricature. The mimetic effect, or the credibility of a literary character as a representation of a potentially real human being is thus seriously imperilled, as flatness of character is highlighted. This would be particularly difficult to accept from a moral standpoint on the part of the reader, as other remarks suggest that Lenz and other characters should in fact be taken seriously, and their intense human suffering properly considered. The incipit to Green's 'origin-story' is in this respect representative of this other side to the narrative voice's tone: 'the searing facts of the case of Bruce Green's natural parents' deaths when he was a toddler are so deeply

[322] That this passage, too, has some metatextual implications confirms my claims, in the Introduction, that the so-called 'wraith scene' is to be interpreted as an *à la clef* commentary on the entire novel. See supra 37-9.

repressed inside Green that whole strata and substrata of silence and mute dumb animal suffering will have to be strip-mined up and dealt with a Day at a Time in sobriety' for him to consciously recollect them (*IJ* 578).

Yet the conclusion to Lenz's story about the wounds his mother's lack of empathy left in him is comically grotesque well beyond the preceding passages, and prompts a certain incredulity:

> When the check arrived, in an extra-long-size envelope to accommodate all the zeroes, Mrs. L. lost all will to Data Process [her profession] or cook or clean, or nurture, or finally even move, simply reclining in a custom-designed 1.5-meter-wide recliner watching InterLace Gothic Romances and consuming mammoth volumes of high lipid pastry brought on gold trays by a pastry chef she'd had put at her individual 24-hour disposal and outfitted with a cellular beeper, until four months after the huge settlement she ruptured and died, her mouth so crammed with peach cobbler the paramedics were hapless to administer C.P.R., which Lenz says he knows by the way — C.P.R. (*IJ* 576-7)

In passages such as this, it is not only the tone that is exaggerated and comical, but the very substance of the fictional material at hand. It is as if the characters were gradually absorbed by the irony of the voice telling their stories, to the point that the tragic substance of which their lives are made becomes grotesquely comical. The juxtaposition of the two modes makes them flat, but this does not happen without readers registering the transition, and having their emotions mobilised in the process. This effect is only reinforced by the impression that it is not entirely clear what to make of the events narrated. If, on the one hand, *Jest*'s many 'panhandlers' do in fact succeed in eliciting our empathy, on the other we are left to wonder whether our emotional response is somewhat misplaced and even, perhaps, a reaction of which we should be critical[323]. The specific variety of flatness of these characters is generated as the combined effect of heart-breaking narratives and the

[323] As I have anticipated in the Introduction, Suzanne Keen's hypothesis on the nature of empathy towards stereotypical figures is confirmed by the example of *Jest*'s 'unchecked panhandlers': in discussing Forster's distinction between flat and well-rounded characters, the narratologist concludes that 'the typical critical preference for psychological depth expressed by roundness, in those characters "capable of surprising in a convincing way" [Forster 2012], does not preclude empathetic response to flat characters, minor characters, or (as we have seen in the earlier discussion) stereotyped villains and antagonists' (Keen 2007, 95).

pseudo-sociological stereotypes which have been part and parcel of the neoliberal warfare on the poor throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This is a form of 'magnified flatness' in that it is in no way mitigated by the amount of biographical information that is thrown at us by the narrative voice, as the more details are included in the picture, the more it reads as false and derivative. It would appear logical that a novel as focussed on the margins of urban life as *Jest* be dedicated to one variety or another of social realism, in which the import itself of the dramatic material at hand would call for a prose both accurate and respectful of the subject at hand. Conversely, in Lenz's story and elsewhere in the novel, we find the repeated usage of trite stereotypes, but deployed to create a particularly distressing literary effect, in which readers are implicitly encouraged to take stock of the flatness inherent in hegemonic social discourse[324]. In the next section, we shall see how even the squalor in which many of these minor characters have lived throughout most of their lives is, in the novel, reconceptualised as a primarily individual and psychological disadvantage, rather than a properly collective and political issue.

'You Have to Surrender Your Will': The Ennet House

Regardless of all its insistence on the dynamics of class, *Infinite Jest* registers an interesting absence in its plot: labour. Pupils at the Enfield Academy are generally training for jobs they will have only in a distant future, while patients at Ennet House are excluded from the workforce for the time being. Nevertheless, the different kinds of

[324] Lee Konstantinou's work on *Infinite Jest* is based on a reading of the irony of the narrative voice which does not entirely converge with mine. In *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*, the critic asserts that Wallace 'uses the style of *Infinite Jest* to lead his readers through his process of thinking, highlighting the complicated interpenetration of the mass media, the avant-garde, and the market, possibly as a precursor to asking readers to become believers modelled on the members of AA' (2016, 185). Indeed, many members of AA, as we have seen, belong to the same group of 'panhandlers' described by Kelling and Wilson, thus complicating Konstantinou's assertion that, as consumers of literary fiction, we are in fact being encouraged to admire them. In a nutshell, my disagreement with Konstantinou consists in our different perspective on what kind of social subject members of AA, in fact, represent: in my reading, as I have shown, these are for the most part representatives of the marginalised, whereas in *Cool Characters* the main trait identifying them is their addiction, thus making them clinical patients with no clear class characteristics. My point is that, as class is a blind spot in his reading of the novel, Konstantinou misses the caustic paternalism and, at times, scorn which I argue is clearly detectable in the narrative voice's ironic stance.

physical and mental activities they undertake are described in terms that are deeply connected to the particular ethics of work promoted by the idea of human capital. As we have seen, the very idea is called for and justified by an economic growth that is driven not by cheaper labour but rather by an increment in the quality of the labour that is being undertaken—because it is *specialised*, and every hour worked realizes the value of all the knowledge that is being deployed in it. As a corollary to this, it is primarily intellectual and specialised work that will bear the most fruit through the logic of investment in education: the hourly wage should be considered as the renting of one's own skills, rather than restitution for a certain amount of one's own time. But, in the life of the bearer of human capital, psychological dispositions such as motivation for one's own work and perseverance will also significantly increase his employability. Thus, an entirely different ethics of work emerges in the neoliberal economy: work should be seen as a form of emancipation in and of itself—an emancipation primarily from the economic constraints to a satisfying life—rather than a demanding but necessary sale of one's own time. According to this logic, it is in work that one's own potential and capabilities find full expression. The neoliberal take on work subsumes discourses on the misery of the working day and promotes the idea that one should not work at all, but rather put one's own passions and interests—what had been previously confined to the time *not* dedicated to one's working life—to profit. It is within this broader historical framework that the idea of 'creativity' begins, to some extent, to substitute that of 'work' in the culture's engagement with the role of employment in one's life.

Of course, this new ethics of work brought with it a series of implications on recognition and the social value that is to be attributed to different kinds of labour. The new 'creative economy', in particular, surreptitiously reinforced industrial-era notions of classes while simultaneously removing them from mainstream political discourse. As Miya Tokumitsu writes, in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

> Work becomes divided into two opposing classes: that which is lovable (creative, intellectual, socially prestigious) and that which is not (repetitive, unintellectual, undistinguished). Those in the lovable work camp are vastly more privileged in terms of wealth, social status, education, society's racial biases, and political clout, while comprising a small minority of the workforce. For those forced into unlovable work, it's a different story. [L]abour that is done out of motives or needs other than love (which is, in fact, most labour) is not only demeaned but erased. [U]nlovable but socially necessary work is banished from the spectrum of consciousness altogether. [325]

Infinite Jest, as we have noted, dramatizes the opposition between 'creative, intellectual [and] socially prestigious' work and the 'repetitive, unintellectual [and] undistinguished' occupations of those at the bottom of the social ladder, but the novel does so by idealising to a significant extent the latter. Don Gately, in particular, is often shown doing 'unlovable but socially necessary work' and the novel celebrates him as a positive example precisely because of his spirit of *self-abnegation*—which in *Jest* is often equated with the willing undertaking of physical, repetitive and unintellectual work.

The undertaking of unpaid and menial jobs is an essential component of the recovery program at Ennet House. Often, characters working their way through the first months of sobriety will perceive these jobs more as a form of punishment than a means towards a healthier life. Don Gately is highly conscientious in submitting himself to the physical routine necessary to keep his job as a janitor at the Shelter For Homeless Males five early mornings a week, sometimes right after all-night duty at Ennet House. In describing Gately's duties, the narrative voice seems to delight in the scabrous details of the surroundings, with all of its usual sardonic humour and lexical virtuosity deployed to give the reader a sense of the visual and olfactory disgust entailed in his morning routine. The scene is dominated by details relating to the semantic field of the body, with Gately having to detect and clean a grotesque list of excrement and bodily fluids from the walls and floors of the facility. Bodily activity is also the focus of Gately's attention, which attempts

[325] Tokumitsu 2015, n.p.

to zoom out from conscious engagement with his present activity and retract in a zone that has very little to do with rational calculation: when he gets to the Shelter at a minute to five, he 'just shuts his head off as if his head has a kind of control switch' and 'screens input with a fucking vengeance the whole time' (*IJ* 435). It is not only that his work does not require much mental effort, but rather that it makes it necessary to retract to a state in which an almost perfect dualism of body and mind is maintained, and can therefore allow a mechanic activity on the part of the former that completely exonerates the latter to register the experience. The ability to complete humble and boring tasks by momentarily isolating oneself from one's own impulses and desires is part and parcel of the idealization of the working class that has been identified by many critics[326]. Taken only at face value, the positive values that the novel associates with Gately amount to a eulogy of the working class and the sense of solidarity and self-sacrifice that constitute an important component of its identity.

This idealization, in turn, is very much consistent with the critique of intellectualism that is so pervasive in the novel. At different times throughout the text, analytical skills and eloquence are shown in their degenerated forms as '*Analysis-Paralysis*' and excessive verbosity. In both cases, they are presented as self-defence mechanisms of the ratiocinative mind against panic and anxiety. One of the better-known examples is that of Tiny Ewell, a well-educated former professional entering Ennet House in order to recover from alcoholism. Ewell is often shown deploying his verbal reasoning skills in order to question the validity of 'the exact definition of *alcoholic*', thus implicitly revealing a deep sense of terror at the possibility of qualifying as one (*IJ* 205). Ewell's counterproductive fastidiousness is only paralleled, the narrative voice remarks, by his 'white-collar amazement' at how many of the guests at Ennet House have tattoos—a trait that he

[326] Elizabeth Freudenthal is the most vocal on this topic: she complains of the 'clichéd contradictions of working-class identity defining Gately' and making him very much stereotypical. Such contradictions, in her opinion, are some of 'the unfortunate low points of this otherwise breathtaking novel' (2010, 191 and 211, respectively).

associates not only with people below the level of education and social prestige enjoyed by the middle class, but also with a certain predisposition to addiction and the disastrous abidance to impulses. Elsewhere, the narrative voice makes a long list of the 'many exotic new facts' that can be apprehended by spending time 'around a Substance-recovery halfway facility like Enfield MA's state-funded Ennet House' (*IJ* 200). When read in conjunction with Ewell's 'white-collar amazement' at the guests of the facility, it is easy to read in them the desire to equate lower social backgrounds and educational attainment with *tout court* stupidity: should one ever be so unfortunate as to find oneself in a halfway house, the narrative voice tells us, they will discover 'that it is statistically easier for low-IQ people to kick an addiction than it is for high-IQ people'—a statement that hypocritically hinges upon the category of intelligence only to allude to the ingenuity that supposedly follows from a lack of formal education (*IJ* 203). The list also includes the notions that 'logical validity is not a guarantee of truth' and that 'it is possible to learn valuable things from a stupid person'—two slogans that are implicitly offered as prescriptive antidotes to the sophisticated scepticism displayed by Tiny Ewell, as well as by Enfield Academy prodigy Michael Pemulis, when he concludes that '*addict*', after all, is 'just a word' (*IJ* 1066). The novel insists so much on the debilitating effects of complex and convoluted thinking at the mercy of addiction that it often ends up celebrating simple-mindedness and ignorance per se. 'A[lcoholics] A[nonymous] real Prime Directive', engraved on a wall of the Ennet House attic, is indicative in this sense: 'Do not ask WHY [/] If you dont want to DIE [/] Do like your TOLD [/] If you want to get OLD'—a short series of solecisms proffered as salvific and comically solemn in equal parts (*IJ* 374-5, *sic*).

Critical thinking, in *Infinite Jest*, is consistently presented as unreliable when it comes to the problems inherent in one's own personality, thus delegitimising the ratiocinative individual in favour of the institution offering to guide and protect him. Thus, the

narrative voice's considerations on the 'real Prime Directive', too, point to the problematic aspect of surrendering one's own personal will to the dictums of one or another credo: 'though it can't be conventionally enforced, this, Boston AA's real root axiom, is almost classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist' (*IJ* 374). The AA 12-Step Program represents the other powerful combination of creed and method followed by the characters of *Infinite Jest*. An analogous distrust of one's own individual personality accompanies assumptions that would otherwise be radically different from the dogmas of the Enfield Academy. The only possible salvation from the perils of addiction is that offered by the community of recovered and recovering addicts. The scenes in the novel which depict regular meetings of many Boston local addiction-recovery groups are focused on the psychological difficulties of the recent adept in accepting their precepts as a matter of faith. For the precepts of this new community sound like trite banalities to most newcomers, so much so that the efficacy of the entire method is undermined by its apparent simplicity. The two central passages of this method of salvation—'Com[ing] In' and 'Hang[ing] In', in AA's jargon—both require a surrender of a part of one's own ego to 'Blind Faith' in a group of other individuals. The move that is necessary in order to proceed in the recovery-program is to completely abandon faith in one's own rational judgment: one of the community's slogans, after all, is 'My Best Thinking Got Me Here' (*IJ* 1026). What is more, the particularity of the individual is completely assimilated to the addiction afflicting her, and demonised as 'The Spider'.

Thus, the only viable way forward in the therapeutic process that is offered to new members is the complete surrender of will—a move which makes any form of rule-enforcement unnecessary:

> The bitch of the thing is you have to want to. If you don't want to do as you're told—I mean as it's suggested to you—it means that your own personal will is still in control, and Eugenio Martinez over at Ennet House never tires of pointing out that your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in, still. The will you call your own ceased to be yours as of who knows how many Substance-drenched years

> ago. It's now shot through with the spidered fibrosis of your Disease. His own experience's term for the Disease is: The Spider. You have to Starve The Spider: you have to surrender your will. This is why most people will Come In and Hang In only after their own entangled will has just about killed them. You have to want to surrender your will to people who know how to Starve the Spider. You have to want to take the suggestions, want to abide by the traditions of anonymity, humility, surrender to the Group conscience. (*IJ* 357)

Here the authoritarian aspects of the AA method are more visible than ever: what is really demanded of the individual is the complete surrender of personal agency in favour of the impersonal protection provided by the institution: individual personhood must be abandoned—or muted—because it is the very nourishment of the malaise affecting the individual. A radical ambiguity recurs whenever the 'Spider'-metaphor is deployed in the novel. For the 'personal will' that feeds the Spider has now ceased to be your own, AA maintains, thus implying that the 'Spider', really, is something external to it but nevertheless impacting it to the point that any possibility for agency is impracticable. Yet, at the same time, AA is categorical in rejecting the kind of 'origin-stories' in which recovering addicts will recount their biographies in such a manner as to suggest that the emotional imbalances that caused a life of addiction and distress can in fact be causally located in their past. This is a logic, according to the AA credo, that serves the only purpose of allowing the patient to shift the burden of personal responsibility to others—their parents, usually—thus preventing the kind of therapeutic self-narrative that would allow them to recognize themselves as autonomous individuals. It is here that the ambivalence of the AA Recovery Program returns: personal will is both something to be recovered from the ashes of one's own past experience *and* the root of the problem—what caused the addiction in the first place. *Infinite Jest*'s insistence on individual autonomy is thus often declined as relative autonomy from one's own personal history—the kind of early-life experiences that forge a whole life's trajectory. As the narrative

voice notes, 'it's not like Boston AA recoils from the idea of responsibility, though[:] cause: no; responsibility: yes' (*IJ* 376).

In this, too, the novel reveals an anxiety that is often attributable to the middle class: a rejection of a strong sense of 'identity' in favour of a stress on the ability to conduct oneself independently of limiting circumstances. Should one recovering addict ever indulge for a second on rehashing the past, she will be reminded that 'the sub current of explanation, an appeal to exterior *Cause* […] can slide, in the addictive mind, so insidiously in *Excuse* that any causal attribution is in Boston AA feared, shunned, punished by emphatic distress' (*IJ* 374). Many commentators have noted that the phrase 'middle class' often calls to mind images of lives characterised by no class connotations at all, in a rhetorical and imaginative twist in which it is only the ultra-wealthy and the super-poor who have their existences shaped, to different degrees, by the quantity of material and social resources at their disposal. This point was recently made by anthropologist Hadas Weiss:

> In contrast to 'middle', which is amplified in the way we talk about the middle class, 'class' is toned down. In fact, class is muted to such an extent that, as some theorists have noted, saying 'middle class' is almost like saying 'no class at all'. They point out how middle classness summons neither a deeply held sense of identity (just compare it to things like race, religion, nationality, gender or sexual orientation), nor empathic allegiance to members of the same group, if a group is even acknowledged'. [327]

Weiss insists that it is extremely important, for people identifying as members of the middle class, to think of themselves as individuals 'fully equipped with a personal history', rather than part of a group or category[328]. In the case of the recovering addicts in the novel, their 'personal history' is precisely what defines them as victims of processes that were largely greater than their own capacity for self-determination. And, just as they

[327] Weiss 2019, 22. The theorists Weiss is referring to include Michael Savage, Slavoj Žižek, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello.
[328] Ibid., 23.

are denied the right to narrating their 'personal history' by the strictures of the Boston AA method, so they are excluded from the kind of work normally associated with the middle classes. As we have seen, *Infinite Jest* expresses elements of its political unconscious through the opposition between personal and impersonal work, a dichotomy which has a lot to do with the DWYL credo Tokumitsu reads at the core of neoliberal ideology. For, if the kind of work in which one is left free to fully express oneself—to fully express one's *personality*, that is—is of the creative and intellectual variety, then it naturally follows that any kind of predominantly physical activity is debased to the status of inferior. The opposition between the purely abstract core of the person, on the one hand, and its material substratum, on the other, is thus transposed into the realm of work. Interestingly, *Infinite Jest* could seem, at first, to dramatize precisely a positive and emancipatory rediscovery of physical and routine work.

Each of the two institutions in the novel is endowed with its peculiar set of rules, practices and subdivision of roles: these are highly regulated environments, in which the necessity to benefit the individual translates into a regime of discipline and training. Indeed, both institutions can be described as sites for the (re)production of subjectivity—a place where old habits are broken, and an individual is trained to become a person that she would not have been able to be otherwise: a functional and independent citizen/worker, in the case of former drug-addicts, and a professional capable of making one's own way in the competitive worlds of sports and academia, in the case of the young and privileged students at ETA. The willing submission of the subject to the institution that will shape her is not at all depicted in solely negative terms in *Infinite Jest*: while elements of critique and scepticism are present, as we have seen, the novel insists so much on the lack of healthy interpersonal connections in contemporary American life that it

ends up celebrating institutions *qua* communities[329]. Indeed, people within each of these two institutions do find solace in a life that is lived 'in common', and in which strict routines, imposed from above, regulate life and attention in such a way that many of the temptations to which an individual could succumb are safely kept out of the horizon. These routines, notably, are physical, as the care for one's own body occupies a central position in both environments. Thus, subjects are made, or re-made, through institutional practices that closely resemble rites and ceremonies, in which both ETA and Ennet House abound: athletes will be subjected to demanding and painstakingly repetitive drills, while recovering addicts will have to fight their cravings through physical labour, as well as medicines and various forms of collective psychotherapy. Just like in classic accounts of the prison and the mental house by Foucault and others, the expectation here is that the psychic life of the individual will be conditioned from the outside in, or, in other words, their personal identity reshaped by the physical constrictions imposed by and through the environment.

Wallace's optimistic depiction of certain physical routines—celebrated in the novel as effective ways of managing one's own worst impulses and therefore successfully directing one's own conduct—is revealed in all of its problematic implications by a reading of it that takes into consideration Louis Althusser's intertwined notions of ideology and class in his famous essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'. Althusser's second thesis concerns the material existence of ideology, and is thus formulated: 'an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material'[330]. That is, for Althusser, 'the ideology of ideology […] recognizes, despite its imaginary distortion, that the 'ideas' of a human subject exist in his actions, or

[329] Thus, I concur with Mark McGurl when he writes that Wallace is here 'practicing an existentialism of institutions—which is to say, a commitment to the necessity of institutions in making and maintaining a "meaning of life"' (2014, 34).
[330] Althusser 2001, 166.

ought to exist in his actions'[331]. *Infinite Jest* explores this aspect of the ideological function of institutions, too, by concentrating much of its narrative attention onto the different kinds of practices that members are required to regularly perform, and by favouring, among them, those that require a particular relationship of the body to the mind: one in which one's own intelligence and personality are put aside for the duration of the activity, and the physicality of the body is at the forefront. In particular, Gately's relationship with his own physicality has been central to many critical treatments of *Infinite Jest*, and it has often been portrayed as the most hopeful and positive model in the novel—a powerful *pars construens* that indicates the possibility for a healthier way of being in the world[332]. His difficulty in accepting and practicing the methods and ideas on which the recovering method of Alcoholics Anonymous is based are redolent of Althusser's analysis, and of the Pascalian motto that he paraphrases: 'kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe'[333]. One of the practices required by AA requires precisely this kind of ritual—in a version of the act of praying which is emptied out of its explicitly religious content but maintains its mystical overtones: Gately is invited to kneel down every morning and every evening and ask 'God As He Understood Him' to help him overcome 'his agonising desire' for alcohol and narcotics (*IJ* 466).

That the AA method does not impose any definite doctrine upon this semi-religious practice is indicative of the status that belief holds in the eyes of its practitioners: all that pertains to the realm of the mind and personal psychological inclinations is rejected in favour of a semi-exclusive reliance on the body and the possibilities for change that the latter is able to offer. It is the act itself of 'going through the motions', here, that will guarantee the overcoming of bad inner voices and the development of a regenerated

[331] Ibid., 168.
[332] Katherine Hayles is well-representative of the critics sharing a positive assessment of Gately's trajectory in the novel: '[his] struggle', she writes, 'reveals what it means to attempt on a daily basis to shed the illusion of autonomous selfhood and accept citizenship in a world in which actions have consequences that rebound to the self because everything is connected with everything' (1999, 693).
[333] Althusser 2001, 168.

biomedical equilibrium. In other words, it is the impersonality of the physical act of praying without any kind of psychological, personal belief in the content of such prayer that Gately must accept in order to recover:

> He didn't have any God- or J.C.-background, and the knee-stuff seemed like the limpest kind of dickless pap, and he felt like a true hypocrite just going through the knee-motions that he went through faithfully every A.M. and P.M., without fail, motivated by a desire to get loaded so horrible that he often found himself humbly praying for his head to just finally explode already and get it over with. Pat had said it didn't matter at this point what he thought or believed or even said. All that mattered was what he *did*. If he did the right things, and kept doing them for long enough, what Gately thought and believed would magically change. (*IJ* 466)

Gately's passing reference to his head, and the desire for it to explode, is in line with the novel's repeated insistence on the anxieties of 'Analysis Paralysis' and, more generally, the traps of a mind prey to its own recursive tendencies and generating an incessant string of negative thoughts that will make life unbearable. As Pat Montesian, the manager at Ennet House, reminds Gately by unintentionally evoking the words of both Althusser and Pascal, a change in thoughts and inclinations will follow from the careful execution of a physical ritual. The method is effective only inasmuch as one totally submits to it, in what is really an act of obedience to the authority of the institution of AA. Personal responsibility for one's own actions is totally declined in favour of obedience to the group of which one is a part[334].

In *Infinite Jest*, Gately's trajectory from a life of crime and addiction to altruistic rescuer of others suggests that the method works, and that deliberate self-subjection to a physical ritual imposed from the outside bears its results when it comes to fighting an addiction: Gately 'hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he's talking to Anything/-

[334] 'It didn't matter one fuckola whether Gately like *believed* a cake would result, or whether he *understood* the like fucking baking-chemistry of *how* a cake would result: if he just followed the motherfucking directions, and had sense enough to get help from slightly more experienced bakers to keep from fucking the directions up if he got confused somehow, but basically the point was if he just followed the childish directions, a cake would result' (*IJ* 467).

body or not, and he somehow gets through that day clean' (*IJ* 443). The lack of substantial content to this religious ritual of sorts constitutes a key element of its impersonal quality. For the subject in question is not entering in a supposedly direct relationship with a supernatural being, as would normally be implied in the practice of prayer. Rather, the radical metaphysical openness of the AA method allows for every recovering person to fill out for themselves the particular content of their quasi-religious ritual, including the nature of the entity to which they are directing their request for help. Gately is particularly frightened by the implications of this intentional conceptual void, and experiences the ritual as a window onto an existential emptiness that is almost painful to bear: 'when he kneels at other times and prays or meditates or tries to achieve a Big-Picture spiritual understanding of a God as he can understand Him, he feels Nothing—not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sorts of unconsidered atheism he Came In with' (*IJ* 443). Rather than constituting proof of any personal failure of imagination or belief on the part of Gately, the 'Nothingness' that he perceives is a necessary and constitutive element of the practice of sustained attention as it is described here and elsewhere in *Infinite Jest*.

Infinite Jest then narrates bodily activity as an essential tool in subject-formation and, therefore, as part and parcel of the ideology accompanying the neoliberal restructuring of society. Elizabeth Freudenthal has coined the term 'anti-interiority' in relation to *Infinite Jest*, and she defines it as 'a mode of identity founded in the material world of both objects and biological bodies and divested from an essentialist notion of inner emotional, psychological, and spiritual life'[335]. In her view, the repetitive bodily rituals performed by Gately are an example of a satisfactory emancipation from the reifying strictures of the conscious mind. However, Freudenthal does not take the institutional landscape of the

[335] Freudenthal 2010, 192.

novel into proper account, and thus fails to see that Gately's practice of anti-interiority is far from being an act of self-liberation. Rather, it represents a desperate attempt at being recognised by others as a properly autonomous self: the deeply felt longing for connection and community that is so pervasive in the novel ends up amounting to a mistrust of one's own personal identity and a consequent homogenization of interiority within the boundaries of the institution[336]. *Jest* elevates practices of self-subjugation to the status of emancipatory routes to self-fulfilment and social recognition. In this, it is perfectly in line with neoliberal ideology: it encourages victims of systemic marginalization to forget about injustice and individually strive for a kind of success that ultimately equates to the capacity to regulate one's self-conduct according to the rules of the market and other institutions. The variety of impersonality celebrated in the novel is thus primarily an act of depersonalisation, in which personal necessities as well as social and collective desires are put to the side in order to make oneself more efficient and competitive.

We have noted how the flatness of character displayed in the portrayals of tens of 'unchecked panhandlers' seems to run counter to an interpretation of the novel as supportive of certain aspects of the neoliberal creed, as any act that highlights a certain discursive structure opens up the possibility for its denaturalisation. *Infinite Jest*, in this sense, serves as a valuable commentary on the rhetoric of neoliberal urban policies. However, one also needs to pay due attention to what the novel *is not* foregrounding, as the novel's 'political unconscious' manifests most distinctly in its omissions. In fact, at the heart of the underclass discourse is the notion that social conditions should be ignored when accounting for the vicissitudes in the life of an individual, as the determining factors are corrupt morals and behaviour. It is therefore important to note that *Jest* does not linger over the potential social explanations which could be given to account for the decay displayed in the streets of Boston. The stereotypical quality of its minor characters does

[336] As McGurl notes in reference to Gately, 'in a profound reversal of the usual rhetoric of liberation, what we have here is a profound desire to be a tool' (2014, 38).

bring to the fore the arbitrariness and artificiality of neoliberal social discourse, but it does not offer any alternative to it. Social issues are not investigated, and neither are the chapters of recent American history that would have encouraged readers to consider drug consumption, poverty and welfare cuts as interrelated phenomena. Rather, the 'unchecked panhandlers', in *Jest*, seem to be merely excused for their sins and inadequacies, with a great deal of paternalism on the part of the narrative voice. The fact that they are shown as victims of their circumstances, rather than merely as irresponsible and underserving citizens, does not compensate for the fact that the novel, in its entirety, does not question values of merit and self-reliance that are implicit in the notion of human capital but, if anything, reinforces them[337].

[337] Jeffrey Severs writes that 'across his career [Wallace] uses the spine as a locus for exploring humans' often frustrated attempts to lay claim to ontology and say "I EXIST", constantly addressing how humans stand up and balance, how they rise up from flatness to inhabit (it is implied) a third dimension, whether the force keeping them down is a gunshot wound or the effects of endless desk work' (2017, 9). He thus registers the same flatness of characters I describe here, but interprets it in a rather different way: as I argue in this section, it is dangerous to interpret 'flatness' as the formal analogous to quasi-psychological notions such as 'lack of character' and 'ineptitude', as doing so plays into the hands of neoliberal social discourse. Severs' language thus supports the narrative voice's demeaning of 'the unchecked panhandler', as the latter is implicitly presented as incapable of joining the ranks of 'humans' who were strong enough to 'stand up and balance' against impossible social odds.

CHAPTER FIVE

'A GREY NIGHT OF UNIVERSALLY BROWN CATS': SALVADOR BENESDRA'S *EL TRADUCTOR* AND IMPERSONALITY AT THE END OF HISTORY

Ricardo Zevi—the protagonist of Salvador Benesdra's *El traductor* (published posthumously in 1998)—is an Argentinian polyglot in his thirties living in Buenos Aires at the beginning of the 1990s. Like the title of the novel suggests, he deploys his linguistic skills to make a living as a translator at Turba, a major left-wing publishing house in the Spanish-speaking world. Ricardo's affiliation is in no contrast with his own political views, at least broadly speaking: well-versed in the history and theory of socialism and communism, he identifies as a Trotskyist. However, unlike so many of his colleagues, Ricardo is sceptical of Turba's administration: the publishing house is undergoing fundamental changes in its relationship to its own employees, as the transformations brought about by the fall of the USSR and the implementation of neoliberal policies transform the Argentinian economy. While his co-workers continue to believe that they are still somewhat protected from the emerging market fundamentalism, Ricardo is perceptive to the small signs of a return of class politics within the dynamics of the firm and looks down upon the blindness of others: '¿No era Turba el único reducto de la generosidad socializante que quedaba en el país?', he asks sarcastically, thus summing up both their hopes and fears (*ET* 45)[338]. Together with the USSR, Ricardo realizes, his whole social and political outlook collapses, as he and the other workers at Turba are involved in a crisis of left-wing politics and thought that puts them on the losing side of history. Old identities need to be reconsidered and adapted to the epochal victory of neoliberal capitalism.

[338] 'Wasn't Turba the only remnant of socialising generosity left in the country?'

And now that dreams of solidarity and collective well-being seem to vanish, the rampant individualism of the times is confirmed as the only viable route to navigating the world. Ricardo is well aware that the identity crisis that has hit half of the political spectrum is deeply felt on a personal level, both by himself and others. If in the first few chapters of the novel he is terrified at the prospect of having to renegotiate who and how he is, he ends up embracing the crisis quite promptly, and even welcomes it. The so-called 'end of history' represents, for him, also the end to a *personal* history that he had been wanting to abandon for a long time. After briefly considering suicide, he concludes:

> No, lo que quería era acabar con mi vida. Es decir, conmigo, con la vida que había llevado hasta entonces, con mi persona, con mi identidad. Con las cosas en las que había creído, con los gustos que había tenido. Para que cuando todo acabara de derrumbarse volviera a aparecer esa última compañía infaltable que solo se avergonzaba de mis propias vergüenzas, que solo despreciaba mi propio desprecio de mí mismo, que solo me culpaba por mis sentimientos de culpabilidad, que solo aplaudía como cumbre de todos mis aciertos esa hazaña puramente casual de no haberme pegado un tiro. Quería empezar de veras de cero, aun con toda la arbitrariedad que había en poner en esa cifra el marcador cuando ya había recorrido 37 hitos del camino y me faltaban tan pocos para el final. [339] (*ET* 246)

In the midst of epochal changes—and with the increasing currency of Human Capital theories and practices—Ricardo feels the urge to restyle his own identity so that he can survive (and, perhaps, thrive) under the new circumstances. In order to do so, he intends to abandon all of the mental schemata and prejudices that he associates with his left-wing inclinations: just like a Nietzschean *übermensch*, he shall abandon all inclinations towards morals and celebrate his own strength.

[339] 'No, what I wanted was to give up on my life. That is, to give up on myself, on the life that I had led until then, on my own persona, my identity. To give up on the things I had believed, the tastes I had. So that when everything eventually stops foundering, this last unfailing companion would reappear who only felt shame for my own feelings of shame, who only despised my own contempt for myself, who only accused me of my own feelings of guilt, who only celebrated as the pinnacle of all of my achievements this purely random feat of not having shot myself. I wanted to start from zero for real, even with all of the arbitrariness of putting that figure on the scoreboard when I'd already covered 37 milestones on the way and had so few left to go'.

As we shall see in this chapter, Ricardo's project is not only one of self-renewal. Rather, his abandonment of those traits and inclinations that had made him himself until the age of thirty-seven constitutes an act of de-personalization. Ultimately, he aims to live and act in agreement with a logic of *impersonality*, in which a more genuine and animal-like force is recuperated from the limiting constraints of one's own persona. It is time, he feels, to take hold of his own destiny and place in the world, rather than delegate his quest for self-affirmation to collective abstractions and historical processes. Such an abrupt change in personal conduct is only an instantiation of a state of things that is far more general. The (presumed) end of ideologies, Ricardo reflects, is not to be mourned, but rather celebrated: 'lo que los otros lamentaban como un fin de la historia yo creía poder vivirlo como un fin de la violencia y un comienzo de la verdadera historia' (*ET* 222)[340]. In this new course, the powers of the individual can be liberated from the tyranny of collective projects—'como si la muerte de las utopías globales abriera el camino a la utopía grupal, local, pequeña, individual' (*ET* 222)[341]. Ultimately, *El traductor* is a novel that attempts to register one of the most important moments in the history of the twentieth century from the perspective of the existential crisis it causes to a single individual[342].

In this respect, the themes explored in the novel are inseparable from its form, as Benesdra chooses to let Zevi's own point of view emerge through a first-person narration that can often be asphyxiating. Nora Avaro, among the few critics to have worked on *El traductor* to date, writes that it is narrated 'in an alluvional first person', resulting in a reader experience in which 'there are almost no streets, no interiors, no objects, no sizes, no colours, no portraits, but only conflicting interpretative forces'[343]. In the portrayal of

[340] 'What others lamented as the end of history, I believed I could live as the end of violence and the beginning of true history'.
[341] 'As if the death of global utopias opened the way to group, local, small utopias'.
[342] As Nora Avaro puts it in *Entre gatos universalmente pardos*—the 2018 documentary on Benesdra and his magnum opus—the subject of the novel could be summarised as 'the fall of the Soviet Union and me', and it is by intersecting the personal and the properly historical that *El traductor* generates its powerful effect (in Finvarb and Borenstein 2018, 15:50, my translation). Silvia G. Kurlat Ares agrees that 'as he sinks into his own personal hell, Zevi looks at History's other free falls' (1999, 134, my translation).
[343] Avaro 2006, n.p., my translation.

a protagonist that is so self-centred as to appear to absorb within himself the entire substance of the narrative which encloses him, Benesdra builds on a tradition of Dostoevskian anti-heroes which is well-represented in the Argentinian literature of the twentieth century, and in particular in the work of Roberto Arlt[344]. In fact, Ricardo Zevi can be read as an updated version for neoliberal times of Dostoevsky's underground man and Arlt's Augusto Remo Erdosain, from *Los siete locos* (1929). The list of similarities between these characters include both their abject behaviour and the sense that they are somewhat threatened by the deep historical changes that are traversing their urban and national environment. These are men crushed by the course of events who feel a strong urge to subject others to the same humiliations to which they have been subjected, and, in so doing, they usually obtain little but their own self-destruction. Not only does each of them represent an instantiation of a 'figurant' aspiring to be a 'protagonist' but all three will vent their respective frustrations by acts of cruelty perpetrated against a woman in their lives. As we shall see in this chapter, the plot of *El traductor* incorporates these elements in order to reinforce its own vision of the existential threats posed by neoliberalism through an implicit comparison with previous generations of novelistic anti-heroes.

The novel explores Zevi's wanderings in and outside the realm of personhood and its opposite by juxtaposing three main narrative strands. The first chronicles the growing discontentment at Turba, where employers gradually realise that their working environment is changing and that the economic safety of a good number of them is under threat. Here, the protagonist plays a Cassandra-like role and is one of the most vehement

[344] Again, it is Avaro, more than any other critic of his work, that has insisted in reading Benesdra's work as a descendant to the line of realism in Argentinian literature of which Arlt is one of the forefathers: '*El traductor* takes up and enhances the only realist tradition that really matters in Argentine literature—that of Roberto Arlt, of course—and as no one, no other writer in this country, not even the self-considered fervent Arltians, had ever done before' (Avaro et al. 2012, n.p., my translation). Similarly, Miguel Vitagliano notices that a considerable critical consensus has already been established regarding Ricardo Zevi's antecedents: *El traductor*, he writes 'has been linked to the particular realism of Roberto Arlt […] and to the tormented tribulations of Dostoevsky's characters' (Vitagliano 2018, 22).

proponents of a series of strikes and negotiations with the Gaitanes—the father and son who own and run Turba. *El traductor* is particularly effective in its depiction of assemblies, in which the disorientation and disunity of workers sharing the same material interests is palpable. The second narrative strand pertains to the private realm of Zevi's home. Early in the novel he encounters Romina, a young 'adventista' with little formal education and a deeply provincial background. The ultra-knowledgeable Zevi is fascinated by her for a mixture of contradictory reasons, and begins a relationship with her that will occasion the most crude and disturbing scenes in the novel. Frustrated at Romina's supposed frigidity, Zevi will force his partner to prostitute herself so that, he believes, the physical encounter with strangers will unblock her deeply repressed libido. Appalled at the victory of the ruling class in the wider realm of politics and economics, Zevi seems to find solace in his fiancée's sexual submission within the walls of their apartment[345]. The third strand follows his reading of Brockner—a fictitious right-wing German thinker—through his own translation of the philosopher's main work. The novel features long passages from Brockner's book, and his reactionary interpretation of the victory of Western liberalism seeps into Zevi's own musings and influences him greatly over the course of the novel. Ultimately, these three strands share their focus on the dismemberment of personal identity and its consequences. In order to understand how they relate to one another, it is first necessary to discuss the implicit theory on the end of history that emerges from Benesdra's novel, as well as its deep connections to the idea of impersonality.

The 'One-Dimensional Order': Zevi, Kojève and Fukuyama at the End of History

Zevi seems to be fully aware that the presumed end of history now in sight is not devoid of contradictions. If he is intent on interpreting the changes taking place in his own limited

[345] Rosso and Dal Maso define the novel as a 'a harsh and extreme denunciation of an epochal climate and of what a social regime can do to people's subjectivity in times of defeat' (2014, n.p., my translation).

environment (Argentina, the publishing industry, Turba in particular), his reading and translating of Brockner encourages him to take a deeper historical perspective and consider the triumph of liberal democracy on the world-stage. Brockner himself is merely a creation of the novel: the fictional prophet of the definitive victory of neoliberalism and democracy, his work has never been translated into any foreign language, with Zevi being the first translator ever to be assigned the task[346]. Brockner's thought allows Zevi to reconcile two seemingly contradictory elements in the political landscape that is taking shape under the impetus of neoliberalism: the increasing currency and spread of liberal democracy, on the one hand, promoting formal equality in rights amongst citizens of a given country; and, on the other, the intensification of class warfare represented by the neoliberal attacks on labour—a force of tremendous economic inequality. It might well be that human history—intended as the continuous evolution of social and political relations—is drawing to an end and attaining its ultimate form, Zevi concedes, but if that is the case, then this form is far from ideal. The world as it can be perceived from the offices at Turba is one in which the powerful are gaining strength and subduing the vast majority of workers and people on earth. Zevi's perception of 'la ubicua malla de dominación que estaba abrazando el mundo' begs what is perhaps the most pressing question he asks himself in the novel: '¿podía acaso regir la igualdad jurídica en un mundo en el que nadie creía de veras en ninguna igualdad intrínseca de los humanos?' (*ET* 282)[347]. What is being problematised here is nothing less than the ethical character and political tenability of liberal democracy as a force for the good of mankind.

Through his invention of entire passages of Brockner's fictional text—as refracted in Zevi's fictional translation—Benesdra conducts an enquiry into the implications of a supposedly post-ideological world which echoes Fukuyama's famous 1989 article ('The

[346] Interestingly, later in the novel he will discover that his Spanish version was never intended for publication, but rather commissioned so that one of Turba's editors could read it for his own private interest.
[347] 'The ubiquitous web of domination that was embracing the world'. 'Could legal equality rule in a world where no one really believed in any intrinsic human equality?'.

End of History?'), as well as anticipating elements of the 1992 book that will originate from it. This is mainly because both authors recognize in the historical juncture following the fall of the Berlin Wall a possible instantiation of the coming of that 'universal homogenous state' which animated—in different forms and to different extents—the writings of Hegel, Nietzsche and those twentieth-century thinkers who re-worked their initial formulations of it. Among these, the most prominent is certainly Alexandre Kojève, a philosopher whose main preoccupation (in the midst of the atrocities of the Second World War) was the essence of the juridical phenomenon. As we can see from Zevi's questioning over the tenability of legal equality, *El traductor* positions itself in the same genealogical line of philosophical thought on which Fukuyama's article drew around the same time, and it is for this reason that various elements of Kojève's influential interpretation of Hegel resound within it. According to Kojève, the essence of the juridical phenomenon lies in its impersonality, here intended as the intermission of a third persona between the two contenders in any given dispute. Ethics is the field in which the individual entertains a monodic relationship to the self and his own beliefs; politics is the dyadic encounter with another; and justice, Kojève concludes, necessarily and fundamentally requires a triad, in which the judge observes from a standpoint in which it is not her own personal interests that matter, but rather the impersonal character of her rational application of the law. Ultimately, the juridical does not only represent a necessary abstraction from politics—that is, an oasis in the midst of the violent conflicts raging the world—but it will eventually evolve into the characterising state of the world to come as the synthesis of the contradictions of the present. The 'universal homogenous state', as the final phase of human history, is one in which the impersonality of the juridical phenomenon expands to become the dominant mode of social relations[348].

[348] Kojève 2000, 1.

As Roberto Esposito notes in his summary and interpretation of Kojève's philosophy as a thought 'of the impersonal', the predominance of the juridical at the end of history is partially incompatible with another central thesis put forward by the philosopher[349]. For in his appropriation of Hegel's thought, Kojève maintains that the path of civilization necessarily entails, on the level of the individual, an abandonment of his animal substratum in favour of the rational and ethical qualities that make a person of the individual. The animal-like dimension that is present within human beings corresponds to the same selfish impulses that find an obstacle in the right of others. Self-preservation and the satisfaction of one's own ego drive the self to its initial violent stance towards others. At the same time, however, the subjectivity of every individual, according to Kojève, fundamentally originates in a desire to be recognised by his fellow human beings as a peer and, as such, as an end in himself. Here the Hegelian master-slave dialectic describes the inevitable conflict at the heart of society. In Kojève's reading of Hegel, this conflict erupts in the persona of the Citizen, as the ultimate synthesis between man's violent animality and the need for others as sources of recognition and validation. As Esposito summarizes, this process of becoming-person proceeds in parallel with the constitution of the juridical: 'the element that defines the most intrinsic juncture between the dynamics of humanization and the genesis of the juridical phenomenon lies precisely in that process of de-animalization, and consequent personalization, that presides over the constitution of the subject of law'[350].

It is at the intersection between these two mutually necessary movements that Esposito identifies an aporia in Kojève's thought. For the individual needs to become a person in order to call into being the end of history and the victory of the juridical, and yet this phase needs to be transcended in its own time, as the individual-as-person, as we

[349] For Esposito's reading of Kojève's thought as one that implicitly contains elements of 'the philosophy of the impersonal' see Esposito 2012, 109-115.
[350] Ibid., 112.

have seen, needs to shed its personal content in favour of an impersonality that alone can guarantee the emergence of the 'universal homogeneous state'. The implication of this—fully acknowledged by Kojève himself—is that, at the end of history, humans will necessarily rediscover the impersonal animality which they had so laboriously left behind and subdued in their own being: 'Man remains alive as animal in *harmony* with Nature or given Being[351]. In such a state of things, the individual will live and act in the society-at-the-end-of-history as a singular instantiation of the encounter between the general and the particular and, as such, will be lacking in any personal content. Every act and every event will be an emanation of justice as the general principle now regulating human society. Consequently, every citizen will live as 'anyone at all' or, in other words, as an impersonal individual[352]. Of course, for this to be possible, the society that is to come at the end of time needs to coincide with the whole of humankind, incorporating all possible particular interests—of all individuals and communities alike—into a worldwide community of equals. As Fukuyama acknowledges in his own treatment of the end of history (one that does indeed take Kojève's reading into account) the kind of totality envisioned by both Hegel and Marx is 'a society involving universal recognition'[353]. No personal quality can be more important than any other, as it is the very premise of discretional recognition that is undermined as an impediment to the emergence of a just society.

Of course, 'universal recognition', as a concept, can be more easily ascribed to a progressive political outlook, one in which the idea of fairness is associated with the basic equality of all parts involved. However, the end of history as it can be perceived from the offices at Turba, Zevi realises, does not appear to correspond to that universalistic ambition at all, but resembles instead the definitive victory of the powerful over the

[351] Kojève 1980, 158, emphasis in the original.
[352] Kojève 2000, 91.
[353] Fukuyama, 1992, 301.

oppressed. The supposed hegemony of liberal democracy is accompanied by the increasing currency of neoliberal ideology, and the consequences can be seen on the world-stage as well as on the more local level of the changing power relations within Turba. In a world in which the Gaitanes have the power, as well as the legal right, to sack or relocate tens of people for the sake of maximising the value of their own wealth, the generalised impersonality of the state envisioned by Kojève appears like a distant dream. Rather, the particular historical juncture that Zevi is living more closely resembles a rightwing utopia of sorts founded upon principles in alignment with Nietzsche's reactionary thought. It might well be that the mechanics of capital make capitalists themselves little more than puppets in the end of a (different) impersonal logic, but it is nevertheless clear that the power that derives from wealth alone—increasingly so, in this 'new world' of neoliberalism—is constantly deployed at the service of those animalistic and inherently violent impulses that characterize the first end of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. The only right that is being respected, at Turba, is that of the Gaitanes, while Zevi himself is actually stripped of all kind of recognition for the work he has been doing for years when he is denied further assignments as a translator and *de facto* demoted to the role of generic secretary.

When he expands the content of his 'End of History?' article into his 1992 book, Fukuyama tackles the existential implications of the possible demise of conditional recognition, and he does so particularly in his chapters about 'the last man'—the subject living at the ultimate stage of human development. Seen from Fukuyama's standpoint, the kind of social recognition that is dependent upon achievement is far more desirable than the relativistic and pseudo-democratic outlook that 'the universalization of Western liberal democracy' brings with it[354]. While reading Brockner, Zevi is pushed by the German thinker towards conclusions that, while a lot more radical than Fukuyama's,

[354] Fukuyama 1989, 1.

nevertheless proceed from the same negative assessment of unconditional recognition. Brockner deems the dominance of the masters absolutely necessary to the general wellbeing of humankind, as they are capable of rational thought, the only guarantee of order and efficiency. Conversely, Zevi notes, the equality of all (a social contract that includes those now at the bottom of society as peers among peers) is rejected by Brockner as an impossibility and an abomination, 'como si lo único que pudiera brotar de un amor primigenio supuestamente predominante en los de abajo fuera fusión total, pegoteo, indiferenciación, desorden, anarquía, reiteración recurrente de lo mismo, asimilación rutinaria a lo existente, carencia absoluta de creatividad' (*ET* 278)[355]. It is this 'indifferentiation' that, in Brockner's view, constitutes a fatal regression from the personal prestige of the elite and towards the impersonality of the masses.

Brockner's vision for the world that is about to come into being is one in which democracy is in no way antagonistic to the emergence of a class of dominators that are stronger and more powerful than ever. Neoliberalism and liberal democracy can cover the same territory, and mutually reinforce one another, Brockner contends, because in this new phase there will be no contradiction between the domination of the few and the equal right of the many: in fact, a supposedly meritocratic system, the German philosopher contends, is one that is more apt than any other to justify existing social inequalities as the result of different individuals' different capacities and efforts. '*No se trata de resucitar al nazismo*', Brockner carefully warns, '*se trata de recrearlo*[:] *la democracia es el sistema válido para el dominio de los superiores*' (*ET* 267, italics in the original)[356]. Zevi, too, admits that Brockner's views are far less unlikely to be accepted in the increasingly democratic landscape of international relations than he would have thought: he comes to

[355] 'As if the only thing that could spring from a primeval love supposedly predominant in those at the bottom were total fusion, stickiness, indifferentiation, disorder, anarchy, recurrent reiteration of the same, routine assimilation to what exists, absolute lack of creativity'.
[356] '*It's not about resurrecting Nazism. It's about recreating it. Democracy is the valid system for the domination of superiors*'.

the realisation that 'el aristocratismo de Brockner tomaba del acervo occidental de los conceptos implícitos en el arte de dominar solo los que no molestaban la conciencia moderna de los propios amos y podían ser difundidos en democracia' (*ET 278*)[357]. The cult of competition and the free market that is taking over in the world at large as well as within Turba's offices testifies to a victory on the part of the dominant classes, which pertains, first and foremost, to the level of ideology: it is a cult that necessarily morphs into the cult of the leader and his personality. For this to happen, Brockner is only too ready to repeat, a return to totalitarianism is not at all necessary: '*hoy ya no tiene sentido pensar como en 1930 que una sociedad jerarquizada debe ser fascista en el sentido original*' (*ET* 280-1, italics in the original)[358]. Even the most marginalised communities and individuals will see that, in a world in which conflict is abandoned in favour of the mere resolution of technical problems, those at the top are the only ones in a position to lead the rest of humanity towards its desired ends.

Zevi himself, however influenced by his reading of Brockner, sees the coming of this supposedly 'universal homogeneous state' with the puzzlement of a person with a whole intellectual baggage shaped in the context of Marxism and progressive politics. Interestingly, he, too, deploys the imaginary of flatness and impersonality when describing the deep and confusing impression that Brockner's work is having upon him:

> Desde que había empezado a traducir a Ludwig Brockner todo se me aparecía por momentos bajo esas formas crudas y obscenamente simples. La complejidad arborescente de las ambiciones humanas, la diversidad de sus valores, podía ser de golpe triturada en el orden unidimensional de mandar y ser mandado, de comprar y ser comprado. Era una sensación muy parecida a la que había tenido de chico al leer los análisis de Marx sobre el capitalismo. Pero aquello había sido un deslumbramiento. Ahora la revelación era un espanto. [359] (*ET* 25)

[357] 'Brockner's aristocracy drew from the Western heritage of the concepts implicit in the art of mastering only those that did not disturb the modern consciousness of the masters themselves and could be disseminated in democracy'.
[358] *'Today it no longer makes sense to think as in 1930 that a hierarchical society must be fascist in the original sense*'.
[359] 'Ever since I had started translating Ludwig Brockner everything appeared to me at times in those crude and obscenely simple forms. The tree-like complexity of human ambitions, the diversity of its values, could

The reason why reading Marx and Brockner elicits the same intensity in Zevi is that the analyses of capitalism they conduct are both presented as proof of the ineluctability of what lays ahead. For the former thinker, what is inevitable is the demise of capitalism, for the latter, conversely, it is its final victory as a system of domination. Class relations are not to be eliminated or overcome, but rather reinstated and reinforced. The master-slave dialectic is now the regulating principle of all social relations, and it is here to stay. In the deep despair that this view provokes in him, Zevi is left to wonder what he is to do himself: should he abide by the new ruling values of his time, and crush or be crushed in the competitive environment in which he finds himself? Should he rather resist the temptation, and hang on to his old personality and value-system, however disproved by the victory of neoliberalism? As I have anticipated in the introduction, the 'espanto' he feels is first and foremost existential: Zevi's deeper question is really what happens to personal identity in a world reduced to a field for competition by the impersonal logic of economic thinking.

'Giving Up an Identity': Zevi Beyond Zevi

As we have already noted at the beginning of this chapter, *El traductor* is structured around Zevi's first-person narration which, with its self-conscious and solipsistic undertones, calls to mind both Dostoevsky's and Arlt's anti-heroes. It is in particular the genre of the 'confession to the reader' that is reminiscent of Arlt's *El juguete rabioso* (1926), as well as of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) and *Humiliated and Insulted* (1861). We are presented with a protagonist-narrator who deems his life worthy of a long and detailed description to be offered to the reader, thus implicitly presenting the facts narrated as both of great interest and somewhat obscure, and therefore

be suddenly crushed into the one-dimensional order of command and be commanded, of buy and be bought. It was a feeling very similar to the one I had had as a boy reading Marx's analyses of capitalism. But it had been a dazzling experience. Now the revelation was a dread'.

in need of clarification. While Zevi repeatedly manifests a consistent degree of self-doubt and, occasionally, even some remorse, the general tone of his narrative is far from apologetic. Some of his actions are indeed morally horrifying, making him similar to his literary predecessors. Just like Raskolnikov, for example, Ricardo organises his life upon a careful delimitation of spaces, with his small apartment functioning as the place in which he can gain some distance from the frustrations and anxieties of the outside world and meditate on how to revenge his marginalisation. Money, in particular, is as crucial to Zevi as it is to Raskolnikov and Artl's Erdosain, and each of them will discover himself to be capable of the most horrendous acts in order to obtain more of it and thus restore a faltering sense of personal worth[360]. Madness is also another element shared by this triad of anti-heroes; this complicates the reader's stance towards the facts reported, as the narrator displays varying degrees of reliability. This is not only due to his ambiguous moral standards, but also to his traversing several phases in which his lucidity is compromised.

Against this familiar background, Benesdra stages the tale of a man collapsing from a life of moral and intellectual certainties to abjection, but with a twist added to the well-known script: Zevi never becomes an 'underground man', in the sense of being excluded or marginalised from society in any significant sense. His is rather the parable of an impoverished middle class, who sees its stability—in terms of both financial liquidity and social recognition—eroded by President Menem's economic reforms. Significantly, his walks through Buenos Aires do not resemble the nervous meanderings of Raskolnikov and Erdosain, which are deployed as a narrative expedient to explore and represent the lives of those at the bottom. During his walks, in fact, Zevi is not exposed to an urban and social environment much different than his own. The places in which *El traductor* is set

[360] 'Both Raskolnikov and Erdosain repeatedly refer to their deeds as "that"', Dina Odnopozova writes in her study of Russian-Argentine literary exchanges, 'and their perception of time changes into "before" and "after" the moment when their crimes were conceived' (2012, 70).

are very much Zevi's workplace and his apartment. Even his rants both resemble and transfigure the monologues of his models. Erdosain, in particular, who is determined to kill the entire population of Buenos Aires, is obsessed with the lives of 'great men', both fictional and historical:

> Veíase convertido en Dueño del Universo. […] ¡Y él! Erdosain, Augusto Remo Erdosain, el ex ladrón, el ex cobrador, se levantaba […] Una palidez terrible le inmovilizaba con su frío delicioso. Héroes de todas las épocas sobrevivían en él. Ulises, Demetrio, Aníbal, Loyola, Napoleón, Lenin, Mussolini…[361]

Ricardo does indeed share some of the same delusions of grandeur and yet, after the beginning of his decline at Turba, his hopes are devoid of any content that can be traced back to his personality. It is not so much that he wants his inner beliefs and strengths to be affirmed, as he now conceives of them as hindrances to the full unfolding of his powers:

> Sentía cada vez más hasta en el último poro de mi piel que estaba incorporándome por primera vez en mi vida a la realidad. Estaba actuando sobre el mundo y produciendo resultados. Los resultados no guardaban casi relación alguna con mis proyectos y mis deseos. Más aún, la relación que guardaban era casi la de una caricatura con su modelo. Pero eran resultados extremadamente difíciles de lograr, eran hechos tremendamente improbables y habían ocurrido pese a todo sin lugar a dudas en la realidad, y solo porque yo me había empeñado en provocarlos.[362] (*ET* 434)

If we take his words at face value, what matters to Ricardo, at this stage, is merely the possibility of exerting power on others, rather than succumbing to their will. In this light, it does not matter at all if the trajectory which his life has taken is coherent with his personal history.

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[361] 'He would see himself transformed into the Master of the Universe […] And he! Erdosain, Augusto Remo Erdosain, the ex-thief, the ex-collector, was rising. […] A terrible paleness immobilised him with the delicious cold. Ulysses, Dimitry, Hannibal, Loyola, Napoleon, Lenin, Mussolini…'. Both the original quote and the translation are from Odnopozova 2012, 55. The translation is hers. The quoted passage is from Arlt 1981, 298.

[362] 'I felt more and more down to the last pore of my skin that I was entering reality for the first time in my life. I was acting on the world and producing results. The results bore almost no relation to my projects and my desires. Moreover, the relationship they bore was almost that of a caricature to its model. But they were extremely difficult results to achieve, they were tremendously improbable events, and they had nevertheless undoubtedly occurred in reality, and only because I had insisted on provoking them'.

Yet his words tend to hide from view a repressed truth which readers have come to recognise since the very first pages of the novel. Questions regarding the quality and coherence of Ricardo Zevi's personality, we learn, are profoundly important to Ricardo Zevi himself. The matter of personal identity, for him, is one and the same with the issue of political coherence. With his baggage of revolutionary theory and his experience in the progressive struggles of his country, Zevi is bound to think of himself as a deeply committed defender of the exploited, rather than as marginalised himself. Speaking seven languages and making his living through his intellectual skills at a publishing house, Zevi can certainly not be included in the ranks of the working class. Thus, the double qualification of leftist intellectual constitutes the core of what he sees as his most defining identity. Given such premises, the personal crisis that he undergoes when the first signs of change appear at Turba is understandable. For Zevi, we learn, is put in a very precarious situation by the decisions that are being made by the Gaitanes. At one point in the novel, he will be practically stripped of all of his duties and responsibilities, while a much younger and unexperienced translator will be hired and assigned to the desk right next to his, so that the intention of humiliating him can be made clear to both him and the rest of the office. Here, too, Ricardo resembles his literary predecessor Erdosain, whose resentment towards the world at large is connected by the narrator of *Los lanzallamas* to his social and psychological wounds: 'más tarde, el comentador de estas vidas supuso que la actitud de Erdosain provenía del deseo insconsciente de vengarse de todo lo que antes había subido'[363]. Intimidations from the Gaitanes will lead, at the very end of *El traductor*, to Zevi's betrayal of his ideals of resistance and solidarity, when he gives in and accepts a relatively generous severance pay.

Thus, Zevi does in fact lose a great deal of his personal identity—inasmuch as his job as a translator was an essential component of it—just as he had feared at the beginning of

[363] Arlt 2000, 49. 'Later, the commentator of these lives assumed that Erdosain's attitude stemmed from an unconscious desire to take revenge for all that he had been subjected to' (my translation).

the novel. It is only natural, then, that the crisis of the ideology on which he had founded his own intellectual life causes the necessity to reconsider his own life and identity from scratch. As he readily admits upon first encountering Romina, 'sin las armas del pensamiento yo era nada' (*ET* 19)[364]. The last few pages describe a defeated protagonist who has left much of his former combativeness behind him, and who is now content with the relative financial stability that he has found at last. That such stability comes from having been made redundant and now making his living as a taxi driver is something that embitters him, but he has resignedly accepted that he and many of the educated people of his country and generation have lost the Argentinian chapter of the class struggle and are now confined to marginal roles in society. The persona of the leftist intellectual, however, is not the only identity that Zevi can claim for himself. Of course, within the broad spectrum of leftism, being a Trotskyist has implications of its own. Beyond political engagement, too, Zevi indeed represents the intersection of multiple and mutually interfering identities: he is a Sephardic Jew, for example, although relatively unattached to his ethnic and religious roots. The transformations that he will be forced to accept prompt Zevi to question the very value and credibility of personal identity: '¿Por qué tanto aspaviento con eso de abandonar una identidad? ¿Estaba tan seguro de haber tenido alguna? ¿Había sido acaso de veras alguna vez un trotskista? ¿Me había mantenido desde entonces en la izquierda, aunque fuera en algún lugar reservado al francotirador?' (*ET* 283)[365].

In the context of his musings over the value of identity, his job as a translator acquires a special metaphorical significance. At first, he maintains that his current position has not resulted from a deliberate career-choice, but is almost a fortuity—the most convenient way to make a living with a white-collar job, if you are well read and can speak seven

[364] 'Without the weapons of thought I was nothing'.
[365] 'What's the fuss about giving up an identity? Was I so sure I had had one? Had I ever really been a Trotskyist? Had I always stayed on the Left, even if it was somewhere reserved for the sniper?'.

languages. What he laments about his job is precisely the impossibility of contributing anything *personal* to the task, and therefore of gaining the kind of recognition that accompanies purely intellectual endeavours. At Turba, Zevi aspires to the role of reader: his desire is 'de salir del trabajo casi mecánico y agotador de la traducción para dedicarme a leer y comentar los textos que debían publicarse, por un salario mucho mayor que el que se gana quemándose las pestañas para encontrar la palabra justa que solo detectarán los lectores finales, jamás el editor que paga el trabajo' (*ET* 65)[366]. Here he seems to adhere to Brockner's values at least in one respect: it is a certain kind of distinction that he is after, one that is not merely prestige, as his mention of a higher salary testifies.

In the novel, Zevi often reiterates similar views on his job, but begins to see different aspects of it when he manifests the first signs of madness and is interned in a psychiatric hospital for the first time. His psychosis provokes in him hallucinations over the course of which he believes he can establish connections between facts and events that had previously gone unnoticed. During such episodes, he seems to be able to reconcile conceptions of the world that until then had appeared totally incompatible, such as his own views and those of Brockner. Ultimately, what he believes he is able to attain, during his psychotic fits, is 'un saber equizofrénico, propiciador de jerarquías oscilantes, móviles, donde cada verdad y cada rango tuviera su turno para gobernar' (*ET* 485)[367]. Zevi believes that contradictions and antagonisms can be solved into this new, homogeneous form of knowledge—even that fundamental conflict at the heart of Marxist ideology, i.e. class struggle. The skills of a translator are essential to what is ultimately a form of transcultural exchange and synthesis, as Zevi's own choice of words reveals: '¿No podía descubrirse una forma de traducir al lenguaje del patrón el alma del trabajador, para

[366] 'Leaving the almost mechanical and exhausting work of translation to devote myself to reading and commenting on the texts that were to be published, for a much higher salary than that earned by burning your eyebrows to find the right word that only the final readers will be able to detect, never the editor who pays for the work'.
[367] 'A schizophrenic knowledge, propitiating oscillating, mobile hierarchies, where each truth and each rank had its turn to rule'.

que el poder se viera en un espejo apaciguador en lugar de proyectar su propia envidia?' (*ET* 484)[368]. Zevi is even more explicit in making a connection between his craft and this kind of utopian synthesis when, in the hospital, he reflects that he, as a translator, 'había estado buscando los puentes, las transiciones, las reglas de pasaje y conversión, los códigos capaces de traducir el odio de un lenguaje a otro, el amor de un sentido a otro' (*ET* 481)[369]. In this 'poliglotismo de las ideas', as he defines it, humanity will finally be cured from the interrelated malaises of hatred, violence and misunderstanding (*ET* 481)[370].

However, as desirable as such a peaceful prospect might seem at first, Zevi's state of mind—as well as the violent acts that he is yet to perpetrate against Romina—discourages a positive interpretation of his visions, and the just society that he envisions can perhaps be dismissed as the wishful thinking of one who has abandoned any ambition to an understanding of the world in favour of utopian sentimentalism. The transitions and bridges that a translator is able to establish, Zevi maintains, would be able to show the existing relations of continuity between 'el deseo del amo el las fórmulas del esclavo [y] el colectivismo de los individualistas en el individualismo de los comunistas' (*ET* 481)[371]. This does not sound like the powerful and creative process of reaching an historical synthesis between opposites, but rather the reductionist—and, ultimately misleading—discourse of those who proclaim that ideologies are dead, and that behind layers of differences and conflicts lays an impersonal and irreducible sameness. Thus, his breakdown merely represents a consequence of his loss of identity, and an aggravation of it[372]. Indeed, over the course of his stay at the psychiatric hospital, Zevi seems

[368] 'Couldn't a way be found to translate the employer's soul back to the language of the worker, so that power would be able to see itself in a calming mirror rather than projecting its own envy?'.
[369] 'He who had been searching for the bridges, the transitions, the rules of passage and conversion, the codes capable of translating hatred from one language to another, love from one sense to another'.
[370] 'Polyglotism of ideas'.
[371] 'The desire of the master in the formulas of the slave [and] the collectivism of the individualists in the individualism of the communists'.
[372] I believe it is to the scenes at the psychiatric hospital that Belén Santana, too, is referring when she connects the theme of madness to that of the translator. However, for the reasons I outline in this chapter, I

discouragingly close to Fukuyama's dismissive interpretation of Kojève's 'last man': not only has he not reached an enlightened state, but he has regressed to an almost animal-like stupidity, in which any attempt at a proper understanding of the world around him is inconsequential[373]. What is more, this understanding corresponds to a state of mental suffering which he is ready to acknowledge: 'estaba convertido en un cerebro incapaz de percibir otra cosa que el infierno permanente en el que se había convertido mi mundo interior y el universo que me era accesible' (*ET* 524)[374]. Over the course of his stay at a mental hospital, he starts to believe that he has learned a language which allows him to communicate with aliens, only later to realise that 'estaba mezclando todas las lenguas que conocía' (*ET* 535)[375]. In the scenes recounting his fall into madness, his reliability as a narrator is seriously imperilled, thus calling into questions even previous parts of the narrative[376].

In contrast with Zevi's hallucinatory theorizations, the rest of the novel depicts the experience of being a translator as one in which a certain loss of the self is necessarily involved. Zevi's work on Brockner's original text somewhat accelerates his fall from grace and the certainties of a stable personal and political identity. For one thing, Brockner

disagree with her view that 'the translator as a character is the bearer of a vitally important message, such as in religious texts or science fiction' (Santana 2011, n.p., my translation).

[373] Fukuyama writes, criticising Kojève: 'in these post-historical animals, there would no longer be any '[discursive] *understanding* of the World and of self'' (1992, 312, emphasis in the original).

[374] 'I had become a brain incapable of perceiving anything other than the permanent hell that my inner world had become and the universe that was accessible to me'.

[375] 'I was mixing all the languages I knew'.

[376] On this point, I disagree with Sandra Contreras, who writes that *El traductor* is 'a novel in which [...], taking the immanent possibilities of the type to their maximum development, the issue is that of positively substantiating the outstanding, singular attitude of the characters, their existential distance from the average, in a movement that descends from the norm to madness and which, on this slope, surpasses the stereotype' (Contreras 2006, 4-5, my translation). First, while the critic writes of 'characters' in the plural, Ricardo's perspective and interior states are the only ones to be considered in the novel. As we shall see, once Romina starts to acquire a higher amount of character space, her personality has already been flattened out by a considerable extent. The 'figurants' appearing at Turba are nothing more than types, with little or no distance 'from the average'. And Ricardo's madness, in particular, endangers his tenability as an individual character. What we testify to in the scenes at the psychiatric hospital, rather, is the progressive dissolution of his individual point of view, and of the relevance of 'character' in these passages as a consequence. As Contreras's discussion of *El traductor* is part of a wider consideration of the state of realism in the contemporary Argentinian narrative, I would argue that the novel incorporates significant elements from modernism, intended in its Anglo-American sense, thus complicating to a significant extent the realist effects of its prose.

occupies of course a very different place in the ideological spectrum from Zevi. Having been used to translations commissioned by a publishing house which is (at least ideally) perfectly in line with his own beliefs, he is not at ease with the fact of practically having to lend his voice and skills to the benefit of Brockner. This is someone who is openly welcoming the kind of changes which are permanently transforming the world and marginalising Zevi himself and most of his colleagues in the microcosm of Turba. As he is himself about to be made redundant by his own local masters, Zevi is further humiliated by a task that he sees as little more than playing the role of a ventriloquist's puppet. But what intensifies to an even greater extent his feeling of being crushed by events and ideas is how convincing Brockner sounds to him at times, and how easily the German thinker can make the leftist intellectual in him vacillate. At one point, he even acknowledges that 'es muy diferente traducir que leer o releer', and that the task of translating involves something less than the proper understanding normally associated with intellectual discoveries: 'el esfuerzo de la traducción desensibiliza en cierta forma la conciencia y hace más tolerables algunas lecturas' (*ET* 235)[377]. In one early passage, Zevi describes his first impression of Brockner's views:

> Me dije que tal vez era cierto después de todo que las ideologías están muertas […]. El sol volcaba su fiesta de distinciones sobre todos los objetos de esa esquina, pero yo sentía que por todas partes estaba drenando una noche gris de gatos universalmente pardos, una apoteosis de la indiferenciación que por primera vez no lograba despertarme miedo.[378] (*ET* 17)

The change that is here occurring in Zevi is, indeed, the narrative engine of the rest of the novel: even more than with the loss of stable beliefs, the fall of the protagonist begins with his realization that there might be some pleasure and comfort to be gained in the

[377] 'It's very different to translate than to read or re-read'. 'The effort of translation somewhat desensitizes the conscience and makes some readings more tolerable'.
[378] 'I said to myself that maybe it was true after all that ideologies are dead […]. The sun was throwing its party of distinctions on all the objects in that corner, but you felt that everywhere a grey night of universally brown cats was falling, an apotheosis of indifference that for the first time did not manage to awaken fear in me'.

transition towards this seemingly homogenous new world. The same 'indifference' that until very recently would have outraged the leftist in him is now perceived as an opportunity for the self. After all, the very first changes at Turba do not negatively impact Zevi's tasks or salary, for the time being: he might as well enjoy the ride, and see what opportunities he can find beyond the idea of himself that he had coveted up until that point. In this 'noche gris de gatos universalmente pardos', he will find excitement and pleasure in the submission of his newly found girlfriend Romina.

'I Would Be Your Puppet': Ricardo, Romina and the Master-Slave Dialectic

As the coherence of Ricardo's personal identity crumbles, and he succumbs to an increasingly more impersonal and animal-like state, he becomes something more of a 'flat protagonist', as Nick Shay, Amalfitano and Hal Incandenza were in their respective novels. *El traductor* differs from the examples of the neoliberal novel already discussed, however, for the particular way in which it rehearses the contrast between 'protagonists' and 'figurants'. On the one hand, in this novel, groups of people are often evoked: indeed, Ricardo is shown to ponder changes to the world economy that will impact the lives of millions across the globe, and a synecdoche of these epochal changes is rendered through the depiction of workers' assemblies at Turba, which constitute an occasion for Benesdra to show the dismemberment of collective, and not only personal, identities[379]. The realism of *El traductor* has little time for providing Zevi's colleagues with anything close to a personality, as they are always shown only briefly. These characters are flat inasmuch as

[379] I agree with Flavio Lo Presti when he writes that 'the workers of Turba are the target of a soft viciousness, made more damaging by the indulgent deafness with which Benesdra administers it: the "turberos" are left-wing amoebas incapable of a stronger workers' response than a sad petition (ironically suggested by Zevi, little more than a pariah in the company)' (Lo Presti 2012, n.p., my translation). It is also important to note that the weakening of unions constitutes a key aspect in President Menem's restructuring program to combat inflation and increasingly privatise the Argentinian economy. As historian Eduardo Silva writes, 'getting control of the CGT [the 'General Confederation of Workers'] was critical to Menem's neoliberal project' (2009, 60). What is more, 'to ensure labour quiescence to neoliberal reforms, Menem also manipulated union competition' (ibid.). Benesdra is therefore also representing a very precise social and historical dynamic through his portrayal of the 'turberos'.

they serve the only purpose of representing the lack of social cohesiveness inherent in neoliberal society. They are personifications of ideas, mere names (Fernández, Martín, Andrés, among others) whose role in the novel can be summarised by Zevi's comment that, although Turba is a left-wing publishing house with a strong union representation, at a time when many are going to be 'desubicados', or 'reassigned', 'lo que nadie estaba dispuesto era a enfrentar el problema como un drama real, suma de drama individuales' (*ET* 369)[380]. These are not characters that are rendered through the kind of 'magnified flatness' which defines the neoliberal novel, but rather flat characters in a much more traditional sense, in which no kind of specificity is ever developed. Nonetheless, they stand for the focus on global masses which the genre dramatizes. Figurants are conspicuous in *El traductor*, too, but with the caveat that they are invoked rather than displayed: the novel gestures towards their presence, but is for the most part content on registering Ricardo's point of view on them rather than actually shifting the focalisation of the narrative.

On the other hand, Benesdra's novel, too, features an example of a flat and supposedly minor character displaying the features of 'magnified flatness'. Here, another comparison with the text's literary referents is apt: Odnopozova notes that 'the characters of Arlt and Dostoevsky feel the need to see themselves through the eyes of those who are even more humiliated than they themselves are, in particular, through the eyes of a woman, whom they name and insult'[381]. The same applies to Ricardo Zevi, of course, as his psychological specificity is juxtaposed, in the novel, not only with the minor characters in the background of Turba's office, but also with the 'magnified flatness' of his girlfriend Romina. In her portrayal, questions of the relationship between impersonality and gender are raised, as the character evolves, over the course of the novel, from being suffocated by the protagonist's first-voice narrative and patronising tone to gradually acquiring a

[380] 'What no one was willing to do was to confront the problem as a real drama, a sum of individual dramas'.
[381] Odnopozova 2012, 56.

certain degree of independence in both aesthetic and thematic terms. By the end of Zevi's process of de-personalization, she will be his main source of psychological stability, as well as the material provider for their conjunct household. However, even at the end of this process, Romina remains flat as if it was not possible for any distinctive personality of hers to emerge, regardless of her strengthened agency and the amount of character space which is dedicated to her. As we shall see, she acquires independence only inasmuch as she plays into the hands of Ricardo's sexual fantasies. The kind of freedom that she has gained, thus, is indistinguishable from the erasure of what she had been previous to their encounter. At one point, for example, the 'adventista' from Salta rhetorically asks an incredulous Ricardo: '¿Vos te creés quo yo sigo creyendo en Dios?' (*ET* 561) [382]. *El traductor*, then, modulates the relationship between protagonists and figurants typical of the neoliberal novel on a reduced scale. The ongoing attempts at subjugation between Ricardo and Romina, in fact, explore the dynamic between the personal and the impersonal which in the other novels had revolved upon countless short portrayals of minor characters. Clearly, the composition of this minimal cast bears important implications regarding the intersection of gender and the impersonal. Aníbal Jarkowski's opinion is that Benesdra's novel is representative of what is 'more a problem of Argentine literature in general than of this novel in particular: the construction, the imagination, first of all, of female characters, and then their representation'[383]. To the contrary, Benesdra's flat rendition of Romina should be considered, at least in part, as an aesthetic choice, and not as a shortcoming of the novel's prose.

In other words, *El traductor* denounces the depersonalization of Romina, which is carried out through Ricardo's distinctive male chauvinism. This confirms what we have seen in the Introduction about the relationship between impersonality and gender: the two do not stand in any pre-determinate relation to one another, but the former certainly is

[382] 'Do you think I still believe in God?'.
[383] Quoted in Zunini 2012, n.p., my translation.

one of the forms in which objectification—including the kind conducted on the basis of gender—can manifest. In fact, the concept of identity that Zevi has so far questioned is inherently political: identities represent communities regulated by the principles of exclusion and inclusion, and one's place in the world—whether individual or collective—is always characterised in terms of difference from what is perceived as other than the self. This is particularly true when it comes to relationships of domination and submission. It is only possible to consider oneself a worker in opposition to a capitalist; a slave in opposition to a master; the representative of a minority in opposition to a hegemonic group. As we have seen, in the dark, homogeneous time that is approaching, Zevi will ultimately be defeated: the unrestricted and inherently violent pleasures of the dominant class are unavailable to him in the public realm. The encounter with Romina, however, convinces him that what he is not able to attain in his workplace or in the nightlife of the city can finally be found in 'the Periscope', as he refers to the modest round attic in which he lives. That Romina immediately occupies a position of inferiority in the couple is made clear to the reader by Ricardo's particular manner of courting her. With her rural background and lack of formal education, the young woman from Salta comes across as lost and ingenuous to him, and he reads in her a desperate desire for guidance and belonging in the big city to which she has just moved. Their random encounter in a bar, chronicled in the first chapter of the novel, is not perceived by Zevi as one between equals. In this, the brief parable of courtship that ensues is perfectly comparable to Ricardo's other encounters with the opposite sex in the novel, in which he is primarily looking for solace and self-affirmation through the conquest of what he fundamentally sees as sexual prey.

Romina, however, represents for Zevi a slight detour from his womanising habits. He is in a deeply vulnerable place when he meets her, and her lack of intellectual sophistication genuinely fascinates him. Now that the ideological foundations of his being

in the world have crumbled, the combination of naivety and strongly held beliefs that she represents appears to him as appealing, even redeeming[384]. Nonetheless, his attitude is accompanied, over the course of their relationship, by an equal and corresponding desire, on her part, to be educated by him in all sorts of matters. Thus, for example, he is free with suggestions and indications on what novels and essays to read, and she is conscientious in following his advice. Similarly, her relative inexperience in all things sexual casts him in the role of connoisseur and educator, and it is here that Ricardo will find that he cannot quite conquer her the way he aspires to. For Romina, however remissive in their physical encounters, cannot bring herself to show any genuine satisfaction, and the lack of such manifestations drives Zevi mad. A series of attempts at creating the right atmosphere and situation for her orgasm follow, with a lack of success that redoubles the frustrations Ricardo is experiencing at Turba. Such a crescendo of perceived humiliations pushes him towards madness, in the form of the deeply held conviction that it is only the complete subjugation of the other in this sentimental relationship that will allow him to find the stable identity he is so desperately longing for. He then holds Romina captive in his apartment for a few days, torturing and manipulating her into becoming a prostitute, so that she can finally reach sexual satisfaction with other men.

Romina cedes after almost a week of imprisonment, and Ricardo's thoughts in the taxi that is driving them both to her first client are indicative of what he is ultimately yearning for: 'al subir al taxi tenía ya por primera vez desde que salía con Romina la sensación física, íntima, intelectual y afectiva de que éramos dos personas' (*ET* 411)[385]. In other words, Ricardo thinks that the mutual recognition of personhood between him

[384] In this, I disagree with Silvia G. Kurlat Ares when he writes that Romina, in Zevi's eyes, 'represents everything pure, beautiful and innocent that the interior of the country can give' (1999, 133-4, my translation). It is not the content of Romina's faith that he is after, as much as the subjective experience of stability and serenity that she derives from it.

[385] 'When I got into the taxi, I had the first physical, intimate, intellectual and emotional feeling that we were two persons'.

and his partner can only occur in the context of what is nothing less than a tremendous act of violence perpetrated against her. It is not really the idea that the masters are taking over that Zevi has derived from the crisis at Turba; more importantly, it is the notion that human relationships always and necessarily imply the relative dominion and opposition of the parts involved. Thus, it is only by exacerbating such elements of prevarication that mutual recognition and encounter can take place. And Romina, of course, acquires, in Ricardo's mind, a significance that goes well beyond the context of their romantic relationship:

> esa propia frigidez se me aparecía de golpe como un resumen abigarrado de tanta barrera refractaria que había encontrado en el mundo a lo largo de toda una vida, y que por causa de un azar dichoso se había concentrado en esa muchacha para librar una última batalla crucial contra mi esperanza, y había sido sin embargo inesperadamente derrotada por una fe obstinada. [386] (*ET* 663-4)

The 'stubborn faith' Ricardo is here referring to is precisely what, in his eyes, makes him a 'proper individual'—one which is able to express and affirm one's desires and powers in the world. Shortly after having committed that irreversible act of humiliation—the first actual encounter between Romina and a client—Ricardo admits that 'era como si hubiera atravesado un Rubicón de autenticidad' (*ET* 388)[387].

It is also interesting that Zevi should feel that he and his partner are 'two persons' at the very moment in which he is managing her as if she were his own property. What Ricardo is about to perform, really, is an economic *transaction* in which the real actors are himself and another man. It is not Romina that is selling her time and body, really, as the agreement between the two partners is that she will only do it when and if he demands it, and therefore all control is bestowed upon him. Ricardo takes pleasure in seeing a person converted into a commodity, thus projecting upon her the frustrations of what has

[386] 'That very frigidity suddenly appeared to me as a variegated summary of the many refractory barriers that I had encountered in the world throughout my life, and that by a happy chance had concentrated on that girl to wage one last crucial battle against my hope, and yet it had been unexpectedly defeated by a stubborn faith'.
[387] 'It was like I'd gone through a Rubicon of authenticity'.

been done to him socially and professionally. It is essential to him that she does not have any say in the choice of her partner, and that she makes herself attractive to a gaze that is as-yet undetermined. In prostitution, Ricardo is looking for the re-enactment of the logic itself of human capital, in which an individual has to make himself attractive for the exigencies of others, rather than making independent choices—choices which might hurt his future chances at employability. It is no coincidence, however, that Benesdra chooses the sphere of the relationship between genders as the backdrop for Zevi's re-enactment: as philosopher Joseph Weiss recalls, in fact, 'even in earlier forms of production, woman […] was always the primary commodity in history, always the prostitute whose collective social labour is the motor to the phallocentric spirit of capitalism'[388]. The fact that Romina has now been converted into a prostitute, for Ricardo, does not at all imply that he cannot feel love and affection for her: this is coherent with his commodifying impulses, as, in the words of Walter Benjamin, '[l]ove of the prostitute is the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity'[389]. This, as Weiss concludes, might be a contradiction, but one which nonetheless holds true for nineteenth-century capitalism as well for our neoliberal moment. The ultimate value of the human being, in this epoch, is defined by their potential for exchangeability. Romina's ritual of preparation before an encounter with a client is what Weiss defines as the 'self-styling sexualisation without any private reflex, any bourgeois retreat to interiority, or any will against this abstract being-for-another' which, in the neoliberal age, 'makes all desire virtually prostitution'[390]. The impersonality of the individual bearer of human capital is brought to the extreme in Romina's sexualised commodification.

It should be noted that, in his fascination with the sexual enactment of the master-slave dialectic, Zevi is attracted to both positions in equal parts. Just like the Hegelian

[388] Weiss 2020, 122.
[389] Quoted ibid., 123.
[390] Ibid.

master—who is in a position of dominance, but whose practical interactions with the world are entirely delegated to his much more skilled slave—Zevi now depends on the labour of the very 'other' he has subjugated, as much of his household income is now to be credited to Romina's activity. Soon, the money Romina receives from her clients is enough to purchase the couple's most expensive pleasures, and both seem to enjoy the double-edged character of the dynamic. Of course, an element of humiliation, for him, is already present in the very arrangement of having his girlfriend engage in sexual encounters with strangers, and the cuckolding plot is played out most explicitly when Ricardo watches one of Romina's intercourses with a client, hiding inside a closet in their bedroom. Just like, in *Los lanzallamas*, the narrative voice describes 'ese deseo de Erdosain hombre de contraer matrimonio con una mujer que le impusiera tareas humilliantísimas para su dignidad', so does Zevi enjoy being shown how sexually inept he is[391]. More than anything else, however, what he seems to enjoy the most is the de-personalisation involved in forcing an individual into doing something that is not in their will. This explanation is offered to Romina when she is talked into becoming a prostitute: 'la única esperanza de que vos pierdas la frigidez es que no cojas por el gusto de hacerlo, sino por deber' (*ET* 394)[392].

Crucially, however—and regardless of his own conclusions—Ricardo does not ever seem to recover any stable sense of self. If he has taken it so far, he admits, is 'por el interés pedestremente egoísta de saber quién soy, por la curiosidad casi científica de saber cuánto de maldad puede incorporar uno' (*ET* 668)[393]. Beyond the boundaries of the Ricardo Zevi that he used to be, however, the 'Rubicon of authenticity' he believed he had crossed seems to give way only to a definitive dismemberment of identity, and the

[391] Arlt 2000, 234. 'Erdosain's desire, as an adult, to marry a woman who would impose on him tasks that were most humiliating and detrimental to his dignity' (my translation).
[392] 'The only hope that you will lose your frigidity is that you will not fuck for pleasure, but out of duty'.
[393] 'For the unoriginal interest in knowing who I am, for the almost scientific curiosity to know how much evil one can incorporate'.

fading into a merely negative state of impersonality[394]. The pages of the physical and psychological torture he inflicts upon Romina are telling in this respect, in that they register the dissociation from the self that the protagonist is experiencing by switching from the usual and asphyxiating first-person narration to the third. Indeed, even Zevi himself acknowledges the change, as while beating Romina he realizes that 'ese loco que ella tenía encima ahora no era Ricardo' (*ET* 390)[395]. And, in accordance with the detachment that is registered by his use of the third person, Ricardo realises in the very act of bestially imposing himself on another who is unable to counter the blows that 'todo lo que había de Ricardo Zevi en mí huyó en ese momento despavoridamente' (*ET* 389)[396].

The novel also encourages its readers to ponder what remains of Romina's inner life. If it is true that the narrative is as if unwrapped in Ricardo's voice, on the other hand Romina's voice can be heard in brief passages in which direct dialogue is reported. It is important to note that she is heard more often after she has turned to prostitution. In one such passage, one of the central dramatic nodes of the novel—her frigidity—is discussed by her for the first time, as she reports to Ricardo that

> cuanto mejor cojo con los demás más te quiero a vos, más cosas siento que te debo, más te respecto. Pero más difícil se me hace calentarme pensando en vos, y si te tengo cerca mucho menos. […] Es como si estuviera con un pastor de la Iglesia o con mi padre, o con un profesor de la Universidad. Siento que me enseñaste la mayor parte de las cosas que sé de la vida y además los juegos, y los deportes, y a leer, porque yo no leía nada antes de conocerte. Pero es como si la calentura se hubiera desarrollado por otro lado, con otra parte de mi personalidad que desaparece cuando te veo a vos. […] No es porque no te admire sino al revés. Es como si te tuviera miedo. Si además de admirarte me calentara con vos siento que estaría frita, que no

[394] Zevi's laments, unsurprisingly, are reminiscent of those of Erdosain. Paula Sozzi Saslow summarises the latter's own crisis of personal identity by listing a significative number of his emotional outbursts 'across his fictional life', as she writes (2011, 6). These include: 'no soy el que soy' ['I am not who I am'] (Arlt 2000, 154), 'soy algo así como el no ser' ['I am something similar to non-being'] (154), 'pensaba en su vida como si fuera la de otro' ['he thought of his life as if it were someone else's'] (267), the idea that he lives 'simultáneamente dos existencias' and would like to 'recuperar su yo' ['two lives simultaneoulsy' and 'recuperate his self'] (42), 'ya no está en él ni es él' ['he is no longer in himself and is no longer himself'] (46). Translations are mine.

[395] 'That madman she had on her now wasn't Ricardo'.

[396] 'All that there was of Ricardo Zevi in me fled at that moment terribly'.

> me quedaría ninguna parte mía, ninguna personalidad, ninguna fuerza. Sería tu títere.[397] (*ET* 561-2)

Romina's frigidity, then, is also, and perhaps above all, a defence strategy against Ricardo's aggressive and subjugating instincts. Clearly, this was the case even before he turned into an aggressive and demanding master, as he has become so partly as a response to a lack of manifest satisfaction on her part: even when explicit and physical violence was absent from their relationship, Romina felt that she had to protect herself from the influence of her newfound partner. Her respect for Ricardo's intellectual interests corresponds to the sense of superiority that he is so accustomed to feel in his relationships with women. Romina has already discounted her own personality by accepting to be in a relationship completely shaped by her partner, and she chooses the orgasm as the last barrier between Ricardo and her own personality.

Yet now that she has satisfied his fantasy of having intercourse with strangers, she is arguably more of his 'puppet' than ever. Ricardo himself measures his success with the distance she has gone in order to please him: 'no menos completa era la certidumbre de que mi poder de transformar su vida tenía que ser apreciable para haberla podido llevar a contramano de su Biblia y de todos sus intereses más visible a ese extremo' (*ET* 434-5)[398]. Her desire to hold on to a personality which is distinctively her own, however, represents a goal that she is never to attain in the novel. Romina's acceptance of the role in which Ricardo has cast her represents a surrender of personality which runs parallel to his progressive retreat to a pre-personal animality. Interestingly, she also operates a retreat from affect—the missed manifestation of her sexual and sentimental attraction to her

[397] 'The better I fuck with others the more I love you, the more I feel I owe you, the more I respect you. But the more difficult it is for me to get horny thinking about you, and if I have you near me, much less so. [...] It's as if I were with a pastor at church or with my father, or with a professor at the University. I feel like you taught me most of the things I know about life and also games, and sports, and how to read, because I didn't read anything before I met you. But it's as if the horniness has developed somewhere else, with another part of my personality that disappears when I see you. [...] It's not because I don't admire you, but the other way around. It's as if I were afraid of you. If in addition to admiring you, I feel that I would be fried, that I wouldn't have any part of me left, no personality, no strength. I would be your puppet'.

[398] 'No less complete was the certainty that my power to transform her life had to be as considerable as to have been sufficient to turn her against her Bible and all her most visible interests to this extreme.'

sentimental partner—which is as depersonalising as it is self-protecting. Romina's 'magnified flatness', then, is constituted by the many scenes in which she plays along with Ricardo's script, even while the activity of prostitute is thought of by both members of the couple as one in which self-independence and self-ownership are asserted. We are repeatedly shown Romina's impersonation of the role assigned to her, rather than anything that might be more intuitively compatible with the 'adventista' from Salta whom we have been introduced to in the first chapter. As we have already noticed, the lack of individualisation inherent in Romina's characterisation might be taken to be a shortcoming of the novel itself, as if the specificity of her feminine role in the narrative had not been sufficiently brought to the fore. Instead, we can see now that Benesdra's treatment of Romina through this variety of 'magnified flatness' parallels her own coping strategy with regard to the chauvinistic depersonalisation attempted by Ricardo. She embraces impersonality to the extent that it entails a retreat from affect, so that a part of her more genuine self can be preserved from the invasion of Ricardo's own suffocating narrative voice.

El traductor, then, is also a novel about the ways in which impersonality can be deployed to various ends relating to gender difference. In Ricardo's hands, flatness and impersonality are tools to be used to liberate the masculine self and let its most aggressive aspects run wild, up to the point of forcing a lover into selling her body. Once Romina is confronted with the threat of being tortured to death if she does not abide by his new rules, she descends into an impersonal state which should be thought of as a protective shell guarding her interiority from the harm which is being done unto it. Significantly, Romina's variety of impersonality consists in the subtraction of feelings and affects which find their origin in the self but are directed towards others. She depersonalises herself to continue loving Ricardo, even though this entails almost total annihilation. A further step is taken when she adds to this a kind of impersonal detachment which ultimately preserves

her affection and makes the continuation of the relationship possible. Conversely, by staging the intense physical and emotional encounter with his partner which he desires for himself, Ricardo delves deeper into the depths of an impersonal state which coincides with the destruction of the self. In one scene, he observes, Romina and her client are losing themselves into the pleasure they are able to give one another 'y en ese mismo acto me aniquilaban[,] destruían hasta la última gota de mi orgullo, de mi dignidad y de todo lo que pudiera haber habido en el pasado de valioso en mi persona' (*ET* 333)[399]. It follows that the masculine variety of impersonality enacted by Ricardo has an ambivalent relationship to personal identity, in that its necessity and desirability arise from a personal defeat which makes revenge necessary for the self to survive. Thus, *El traductor* confirms that while varieties of impersonality as both a mode of valuing the self and as an aesthetic modality do not have an inherently gendered dimension to them, the neoliberal novel can mobilise both flatness and impersonality to represent contemporary forms of gendered exploitation.

In *One-Dimensional Woman*, cultural critic Nina Power notes the gender-inflected nature of certain forms of depersonalisation which nonetheless have their matrix in the more encompassing logic of human capital. Power, too, notes the parcelling out of personal identity which has been outlined in the Introduction to this thesis. In one passage, she registers how young women are being encouraged to think of parts of their bodies as if they were assets with some degree of autonomy from the rest of their personae, a phenomenon which she dubs 'the autonomous breast'. The language she uses to describe it has much to do with both impersonality and the gender dynamic exposed in *El traductor*:

> What the autonomous breasts and the concomitant becoming-CV of the human means is that the language of objectification may not be useful any longer, as there is no (or virtually no) subjective dimension left to be colonized. The language of

[399] 'And in that very act they annihilated me[,] they destroyed every last drop of my pride, my dignity and whatever there might have been in the past of value in my person'.

> objectification demands on a minimal subjective difference, what Badiou quaintly identified in the realm of personal relations as 'the intangible female right […] to only have to get undressed in front of the person of her choosing'. In the realm of work, we could call this the right not to have to lay bare one's entire personality and private life. [400]

The neoliberal novels discussed in *Impersonal Selves* testify to a historical phase in which the spheres of human existence which we associate with personality have indeed been colonised to a significant extent. Romina certainly cannot choose the person who will be looking at her while she gets undressed, and this is true in a very literal sense. How much more freedom, however, do the women working in the Mexican *maquiladoras* have in choosing the circumstances of their lives? They, too, have been depersonalised to an extreme extent and the little impersonal justice that can be done unto them merely consists of a way of preserving their dignity against the further commodification of their personalities. The mental and emotional exhaustion perceived by Hal Incandenza and Nick Shay, too, seems to demonstrate that very little space is left for 'one's entire personality and private life' in the age of neoliberalism.

In *El traductor*, impersonality is the state of those who have become barbarians again, whether at the hands of others or by their own initiative. They have done so at what might be the end of history but, contrary to Kojève's 'last man', they have not managed to reach any peaceful agreement between peers. The 'noche gris de gatos universalmente pardos' befalling Turba, Argentina and the world is the realm of ferocious beasts competing against one another. Being impersonally, for Zevi, is exchanging one's own knowledge, values and feelings for the self-forgetful embrace of one's bestiality. The difference between Kojève's vision of the 'universal homogeneous state' in which man lives impersonally at the end of history and the 'noche' of *El traductor* can be gauged by

[400] Power 2009, 25-6.

comparing Ricardo's thoughts to the philosopher's idea of animality. Having surrendered in his battle at Turba—and now working as a cab driver—he ideally welcomes the new world in which he has been gradually making his own way:

> Un mundo donde la crueldad y la pornografía, que hacían toda la nostalgia dionisíaca que Nietzsche sentía al contemplar al hombre civilizado y privado de la satisfacción de sus instintos animales más salvajes, se ejerzan en la libertad y riesgo del dominio privado—donde toda sumisión puede trocarse en dominio, toda jerarquía es reversible y toda esclavitud es un aprendizaje para el oficio del amo, y viceversa—en lugar de regir como ahora ilimitadamente en el dominio público, donde las leyes, las costumbres o la fuerza brindan al patrón el derecho a dejar sin trabajo, torturar salarialmente y someter al trabajador, donde toda jerarquía tiene el lastre de un orden patrimonial irreversible.[401] (*ET* 669-70)

What makes such a world fundamentally different from the one envisioned by Kojève is precisely its being fundamentally heterogeneous, in that it is characterised by the crucial difference between public and private. In a state of things in which the master-slave dialectic has been resolved in the figure of the Citizen, such distinction collapses, and the mutual recognition of personhood extends in every realm of human experience: the transformation from which the 'last man' originates is complete and it involves all of his relationships. Ricardo's hope of finding in love the kind of recognition that he has been denied in work insists on the possibility of a duality that is denied by Kojève: 'after the end of history, men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts'[402]. All of man's activities are now animal-like and, therefore, impersonal. But such bestiality excludes the violent oppression Ricardo registers in his time, which is due to

[401] 'A world where cruelty and pornography, which made all the Dionysian nostalgia that Nietzsche felt in contemplating civilised man deprived of the satisfaction of his wildest animal instincts, are exercised in the freedom and risk of private domination—where every submission can be turned into domination, every hierarchy is reversible and every slavery is an apprenticeship for the master's trade, and vice versa—rather than ruling as now without limit in the public domain, where laws, customs, or force give the employer the right to put the worker out of work, torture him with low wages, and subject him to the burden of an irreversible patrimonial order'.

[402] Quoted in Fukuyama 1992, 387, footnote.

the increasing prevalence of the economic over the political: 'what disappears is Man properly so-called', Kojève writes, 'that is, Action negating the given, and Error, or in general, the Subject *opposed* to the Object'[403]. Not only does Ricardo acknowledge that the wider context of society at large remains one of 'Subjects' and 'Objects', but he even welcomes the permanence of both roles in the private sphere, however fictitious and interchangeable they may be.

There is no such harmony in his world, and one can be *impersonally* only inasmuch as he temporarily de-personalizes himself in order to play the role of the slave within an amorous relationship or at work. In exchange for this, there is no guarantee of public recognition of one's value as a person, but rather the re-affirmation of the violence and prevarication rampant in the outside world. Ricardo enacts the role of the master in private precisely because he is aware that his dignity and value could be denied in public, as in fact it is at the end of the novel. The parable of Romina and Ricardo begs a question that echoes the one asked by Ricardo on the ethical and political tenability of liberal democracy in the neoliberal world: is justice at all compatible with a kind of recognition that is conditional? *El traductor* suggests that this is hardly a possibility, and necessarily so: the very idea of an 'intrinsic human equality' points to an idea of impersonality closer to Kojève's thought than to Ricardo Zevi's violent and private fantasy. The 'noche gris' of neoliberalism is a world that is only 'negatively' impersonal: it is populated by persons whose dignity and status are denied—non-persons, that is, and not impersonal individuals. For, as Kojève reminds his readers, it is 'the real and actual opposition between man and the animal in man [that] justifies the notion of "subject of *Droit*" in general, and that of 'moral person' in particular'[404]. The story of Ricardo Zevi's disorientation tells us what happens when that distinction collapses.

[403] Ibid., 311.
[404] Kojève 2000, 217.

CONCLUSION
IMPERSONALITY, ORDER AND CHANGE

As the preceding chapters suggest, the relationship between the dimension of the personal and what exceeds it is, ultimately, one in which power and authority can be established, but also eroded and escaped. The four novels analysed in *Impersonal Selves* display a range of meanings and potentialities of the idea of impersonality in the age of neoliberalism. Mostly, but not exclusively, the realm of person and personality is conceived as a territory to be at least momentarily transcended, if not always necessarily abandoned, in favour of more egalitarian and emancipating modalities of being. Even when a retreat from personal identity corresponds to a form of oppression, as in the case of Ricardo Zevi, the particular individual embracing this loss confronts the opening up of new forms of experience which had, up until that point, been precluded to him by the reifying logic of the person. In *El traductor*, Ricardo realizes that the often violent and grotesque behaviour he has acquired after his gradual marginalization at Turba puts him in situations that are completely new to him, and that he finds liberating. Gone is the necessity to fight for his own political ideals, as well as the urge to defend his intellectual and professional credentials in the workplace. The selfishness and violence that he discovers himself to be capable of do not correspond to a more authentic part of himself, but rather to a dimension of being and experience that lays *beside* his capacity for self-expression. In other words, it is not the repressed self of psychoanalysis that he uncovers in the process of satisfying his impulses, but the animal substratum of the individual that is often thought as less-than-personal. Even when he is on the receiving end of humiliation, Ricardo finds in self-erasure an intensity of pleasure that was previously unknown to him:

> allí estaba listo yo una vez más para poner la cabeza de mi orgullo en la guillotina pornográfica, para lijarle a mi sistema nervioso toda la costra de identidad, y dejarlo pelado, despersonalizado, domesticado, libre de todo lo que no fuera goce y percepción del goce, como una membrana capaz de resonar en armonía con cualquier onda y de hacer de todo sonido una música para mí, que ya no era yo, sino mi sexo, o simplemente, sexo.[405] (*ET* 333-4)

In a way, then, what it is possible to access once the 'costra de identidad' has been left behind, is a truer life of the body, whose pleasures and potentialities had to some extent been neglected in favour of the depths of individual personality[406]. Crucially, this intensity of pain and pleasure is accessible only once the parts of the self that are more closely associated with identity and rationality have been abandoned, together with all ethical concerns.

A similar connection between pleasure, violence and the shredding of personal identity recurs in *2666*, in a passage concerning the *ménage à trois* between Pelletier, Espinoza and Norton. The three of them are sharing a taxi to her apartment when the driver, a Pakistani immigrant, offends Norton by making an unfortunate remark about her lack of decency in relating to the two men. Enraged and seemingly possessed by a brutality that they will later find difficult to justify or even explain, Pelletier and Espinoza stop the taxi and throw the driver out of it, proceeding to beat him. In the weeks that follow, they attempt to make sense of their behaviour:

> Hablaron de la sensación que ambos sintieron mientras golpeaban el cuerpo caído. Una mezcla de sueño y deseo sexual. ¿Deseo de follar a aquel pobre desgraciado? ¡En modo alguno! Más bien, como si estuvieran follando a sí mismos. Como si escarbaran en sí mismos. Con las uñas largas y las manos vacías. Aunque si uno tiene las uñas largas tampoco se puede decir que tenga necesariamente las manos vacías. Pero ellos, en esa especie de sueño, escarbaban y escarbaban, desgajando tejidos y

[405] 'There I was ready once again to put the head of my pride on the pornographic guillotine, to sand off all the crust of identity from my nervous system, and leave it bare, depersonalised, domesticated, free of everything that was not pleasure and perception of pleasure, like a membrane capable of resonating in harmony with any wave and of making every sound into music for me, which was no longer me, but my sex, or simply sex'.
[406] 'Crust of identity'.

> destrozando venas y dañando órganos vitales. ¿Qué buscaban? No lo sabían. Tampoco, a esas alturas, les interesaba. [407] (*2666* 105)

The quest for personal identity—the process itself of 'digging into themselves'—is here described as something that is necessarily bound to fail, because no metaphysical centre can be gazed upon beneath the 'fabric', 'veins' and 'vital organs' they are ripping apart. And it is through their bodies (or rather *because of* the 'combination' of animal-like 'sleepiness and sexual desire') that they have committed a crime for the first time in their lives.

Through their depiction of sexuality and violence, both passages refer to the private sphere of the individual, but they also point to a dimension of impersonality that is more properly political. What connects the different explorations of the concept which I have expounded in the present thesis is the strong interrelation between the private and the political that is implicit in them. Functioning like a hinge between the two, the idea of the person demarcates their respective spheres. Impersonality, conversely, allows us to reconcile the mutual relationship between these two areas in useful and productive ways. As Brian Massumi has remarked in a recent interview, 'the political is what breaks through the personal, shattering the hold of the accumulated power effects that are part and parcel of its constitution, liberating self-affirming powers of primary resistance that co-occur with identity but do not belong to it, that open instead on the outside, onto new affective vistas of collective becoming'[408]. In this formulation, the political occupies a position in relation to the personal that almost overlaps with that of the impersonal. Given the centrality of affect and the body in Massumi's notion, as well as in the two passages from *El traductor* and *2666* above, it is possible to interpret the workings of impersonality

[407] 'They talked about what they'd felt as they rained blows on the fallen body. A combination of sleepiness and sexual desire. Desire to fuck the poor bastard? Not at all! More as if they were fucking themselves. As if they were digging into themselves. With long nails and empty hands. Though if your fingernails are long enough your hands are never really empty. But in this dreamlike state, they dug and dug, rending fabric and ripping veins and puncturing vital organs. What were they looking for? They didn't know. Nor, at this stage, did they care' (*2666* [English] 76).
[408] Massumi 2017, n.p.

in the neoliberal novel as a parable of power in an age of biopolitics, in which domination is exerted not only through the persuasion of rational individuals, but also through direct and affective influence upon their bodies. This state of things is aptly described by recurring to the idea of 'posthegemony', a concept borrowed from the field of Latin American political theory. According to Jon Beasley-Murray, the Gramscian notion of hegemony is not only outdated but misleading, as the power of the state is not—and, incidentally, never has been—established through consent and coercion. Rather, 'social order is secured through habit and affect', and the same applies to its unravelling, i.e. social change[409]. The former element of posthegemony is adapted from Bourdieu and deployed to highlight the trans-individual aspect of this power. As for the latter, it is the one that most clearly resembles Massumi's notion of the political, as well as the overall valence of the impersonal that emerges from *Impersonal Selves*: tellingly, Beasley-Murray defines affect as 'the impersonal and embodied flow of intensities that undermines any concept of a rational subject who could provide or withdraw his or her consent'[410].

Yet, as we have seen in the Introduction, affect theory can certainly be accused of neglecting aspects of neoliberalism that are central to its functioning and expansion, and which pertain primarily to the sphere of ideology. Conversely, what the analysis of the four novels in the preceding chapters suggests is that, just like Jeremy Gilbert has argued, neoliberalism is a complex social formation which functions on multiple levels[411]. The picture of this formation provided by the genre of the neoliberal novel encourages us to think of hegemony and post-hegemony as dynamics which can work in conjunction with one another, rather than being alternative modalities for the exertion of power. In a similar fashion, impersonality does not exclusively pertain to either affect or ideology, either, but

[409] Beasley-Murray 2010, ix.
[410] Ibid., x.
[411] See supra 29-30.

rather describes stances towards the 'dispositif of the person' which entail the mobilisation of both the bodily and the cognitive. What is more, impersonality is not, in and of itself, conducive to either subjection or emancipation, but rather constitutes the plane on which either process can take place. If it feels liberating it is because it always represents an escape route from the cage of the person, and it can be valued as such. The proper subject of posthegemonic power, in Beasley-Murray's formulation, is the 'multitude', the notion developed by Italian political theorist Antonio Negri. As a conjunction of individuals which pre-exists the foundation of the social body and survives in it, the multitude 'is an agent of violent transformation and also the constitution of what is to come'[412]. This collective subject, then, can be thought of as the real protagonist of the neoliberal novel, which as a genre tends to portray characters only inasmuch as they are shown to be permeated by forces, ideas and affects that do not directly pertain to what is personal and specific in them. Sister Edgar, Morini, Don Gately and Ricardo Zevi are all, in different ways and to varying degrees, described in terms that call to mind the nodes in a network more than discrete and self-sufficient subjects. What animates the genre is, ultimately, the tension between the different political outcomes that are possible within the multitude. Impersonality can be conducive to the simple reinstatement of hierarchies and forms of oppression that are inherent in consolidated power, or that contribute to their unravelling. Each instantiation of the neoliberal novel is interesting in that it traces its own cognitive map of the different forces making up the plane of the impersonal.

In *Underworld*, consumerism and fear are central to the collective identity of the American crowd attending a baseball match. Affects run through the stadium in the form of enthusiasm and apprehension, but these, as it is common in sports events, are also symptomatic of a set of ideological coordinates relating to the cult of the individual. In *2666*, homicidal violence pervades Santa Teresa, and the plane of impersonality on which

[412] Ibid., xv.

portrayals of the murdered women are organised offers the possibility for an act of politicization of the femicides much more radical than the mourning of personalised identities. This, too, is an ideological perspective which generates, in turn, powerful affective responses. *Infinite Jest* depicts forms of impersonality that can be both complicit and alternative to the neoliberal exploitation of self and others. The state of detachment that allows Don Gately to overcome his drug addiction is also described in terms that link it to the impersonal, thus showing that indeed, habit and affect can be created and re-created in different configurations and with varying distance from power and authority. And yet, as we have seen, a celebration of the impersonal qualities of work can hide hideous class implications, thus propagating an ideology serving the interests of the capitalist class of the neoliberal age. That a retreat from personal identity is not necessarily a form of emancipation from different kinds of oppression is well dramatised in *El traductor*, where Zevi merely reproduces within the domestic sphere the same prevarication that he has experienced outside of it, merely switching from the role of oppressed to that of oppressor. What unites these four novels is the capacity to represent such a wide range of varieties of impersonal experience in relation to the historical problems posed by a specifically neoliberal variety of biopolitics, functioning at the intersection of hegemony and post-hegemony. The kind of neoliberal novel described in *Impersonal Selves* is an aesthetic object which rests on both ideological and affective grounds. On the one hand, flatness of character elicits an affective response in readers, as expectations connected to previous modalities of characterisation go unmet. On the other, however, these affects trigger the cognitive reinterpretation of the neoliberal landscape.

Individual characters in these texts are flat in the sense that they are part of a network of influence that can take different shapes at different times, and which is always constituted at the intersection of multiple forces. In these multitudes, it is possible to experience dimensions of being that exceed and precede the individual-as-form, in ways

that can be violent, emancipatory and oppressive, depending on the circumstances. The novel registers these possibilities by extending its typical focus on the individual character to the composite entity that emerges out of countless flat renditions of personality. These 'impersonal selves' can sometimes 'dig into themselves', just like Espinoza and Pelletier, but they rarely find in their innermost feelings and thoughts the real forces behind their behaviours. What makes the neoliberal novel such a fascinating object of study is the possibility to indirectly contemplate these multitudes through its pointillist structure and consider what forms of power run through them. Particular conclusions will vary from text to text, but a good example of what is at stake in observing them is to be found in one of the ekphrastic passages from *Underworld*, in which *The Triumph of Death* we have observed in Chapter Two is juxtaposed to another painting by Bruegel—*Kinderspielen* ['Children's Games']. Here is a representation of hundreds of children scattered across a town square, and mostly divided in small groups in which a particular game is played. Some appear unquestionably joyous, other might seem a little aggressive, or overexcited. The picture allows for different modalities and intensities of contemplation, as it makes it possible to focus on some individual faces as well as swiftly shifting our attention from one group to another. Impressions, of course, differ, and they do so in *Underworld*, too. Klara Sax is made somewhat uneasy by the sight:

> I don't know what art history says about this painting. But I say it's not that different from the other famous Bruegel, armies of death marching across the landscape. The children are fat, backward, a little sinister to me. It's some kind of menace, some folly. Kinderspielen. They look like dwarves doing something awful. (*U* 682)

Violence, mockery and subjugation, according to Klara, can be found even in children's games, and the energy that transpires from such a vibrant scene can be perceived as threatening. It is perhaps ironic, then, that *Kinderspielen* is also the object of reflection of Klara's ex-husband, in a scene set in another decade. Albert recognizes the dubious character of the painting in an actual game played in the streets of the Bronx. Considering

the fate of a young boy who has just been humiliated by his peers, he asks himself: 'is that what being *it* means? Neutered, sexless, impersonalised' (*U* 675). To an extent, Albert is right, in that he realizes that the plane of the impersonal can never be completely bereft of violence. As Sharon Cameron has remarked in her own work on impersonality, violence is a necessary element of the destructive movement from personality to impersonality, as individuals surrender to 'a force that effaces what individuates them'[413]. The neoliberal novel offers us a glimpse into what kind of constrictions can be challenged through such destabilising effects.

[413] Cameron 2007, 12.

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