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***Fake it Till You Make it*: Fraudulence and Performance in Postmodern American Literature**

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to all those who conceal their fragility behind masks

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Abstract

In the realm of contemporary literature, the portrayal of fraudulent characters has become increasingly widespread, reflecting the complexities and anxieties of the postmodern era. This thesis is dedicated to the exploration of fraud characters within postmodern American literature, attempting to understand their role in reflecting social expectations, the ambivalence between authenticity and artificiality, performative behaviors and the implications for individual identity formation. Through an analysis involving sociology, philosophy, and literary criticism, this study will attempt to outline the features of a phenomenon regarding not only certain members of society, but all of us. The primary bibliography of this thesis will be composed, respectively, of one short story and one novel belonging to postmodern American fiction: “Good Old Neon” by David Foster Wallace and “Leaving the Atocha Station” by Ben Lerner.

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Introduction

In this dissertation, I want to analyze the phenomenon of fraudulence as it is represented in two American fictional texts of the early years of 21st century: David Foster Wallace's "Good Old Neon" (2004) and Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011).

What I want to demonstrate is that adopting a fraudulent identity and telling lies are behaviors that, to a greater or lesser extent, belong to every individual of late capitalism and do not always represent, as it might be believed, a sort of deviance or mental problem. Fraudulence, therefore, emerges as a coping mechanism against the overwhelming demands and expectations imposed by a society regulated by consumerism, competition, and the cult of success. Pressured by such social requirements, the postmodern individual is forced to embrace performative behaviors, seeing himself as an actor on a stage who adjusts his performance according to the daily audience with whom he interacts. The characters I analyze in this study exemplify the popular expression 'fake it till you make it', which refers to the practice of acting as if one possesses qualities and skills that are not yet fully developed, with the belief that doing so will eventually lead to acquiring them. This expression reflects how individuals often prioritize the display of supposed abilities over the genuine attainment of those qualities. In this context, literature functions as a mirror reflecting the dissonance between one's true self and the roles people are expected to play in daily lives.

The first chapter will explore the theme of the impostor in literature. Starting from the early examples of fraudulent characters, the chapter will delve into the role and purpose of impostors in fiction by providing some literary and even cinematographic examples of fraudulent characters ranging from Shakespeare's tragedies to more contemporary depictions of impostors. By analyzing the motives behind writers' use of fraudulent characters, the chapter will reveal their thematic significance within a given text, starting from the research of scholars like Tobias B. Hug and Richard J. Walker on the early forms of imposture in modern times. In

this chapter, I will specifically focus on literary fraudulence resulting from the social and psychological effects of Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalist dynamics, such as alienation, existential angst, and fragmented identity.

The second chapter will be dedicated to the description of postmodernism and the historical and social context surrounding its foundation. Through the words of essential contributors to the postmodern theory – such as Jean Baudrillard, Brian McCale, Guy Debord and Bill Brown – I will particularly investigate postmodernism's attempts to debunk the master narrative of authenticity and I will explore how, in a world in which authenticity seems completely unreachable, if not lost, people tend to replace the originals with their copies, or simulations. As simulations have now replaced the authentic version of things, also the concept of 'true identity' is increasingly substituted by fake personalities adhering to social norms. This chapter will show postmodernism's interest in the themes of simulation and deception, thus reflecting a social context in which fraudulence functions as a strategy to conform to the demands of capitalism and consumerism.

The two writers analyzed in this dissertation actually belong to a late evolution of postmodernism which took the name of post-postmodernism. The features of this evolution will be examined while analyzing Wallace and Lerner's fictional works in the fourth and fifth chapters respectively, but such progression would not be clear to the reader without the overview of postmodernism provided by this chapter.

The third chapter will analyze the themes of fraudulence and performance through the work of sociologists such as Erving Goffman and Gilles Lipovetsky. It will explore how human behavior varies depending on the environment or, more accurately, the audience for which an individual performs. People tend to assume different roles based on who is observing them and the impression they desire to create, precisely as an actor who adapts his performance to fit his role and audience's expectations. This awareness often generates an intensified sense of anxiety

– specifically, performance anxiety rising from the fear of being socially judged and stigmatized if the performance does not meet the required expectations.

In the fourth chapter I will analyze David Foster Wallace's short story titled "Good Old Neon". I have chosen to analyze this story in depth because it perfectly exemplifies fraudulence as a response to social requirements in current society. The story's protagonist, Neal – a young American man living in Chicago – epitomizes the crisis of authenticity originating from the pressure to conform to social demands requiring success, personal realization and, essentially, perfection. Neal's self-awareness of his own fraudulent nature – his profound recognition that his life is a series of performances accurately modeled for external expectations – encapsulates the essence of the existential inner turmoil caused by late capitalism.

The fifth chapter will be dedicated to the close reading of Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, another example of American fiction which perfectly transposes the question of fraudulence in a (post-)postmodern context. Adam Gordon, the novel's protagonist, symbolizes the anxiety and disorientation resulting from the pressure of satisfying social and self-imposed expectations, especially as a young American artist living abroad. His reliance on deception and manipulation functions as clear evidence of the pressures to perform in a world in which success and appearance are deeply intertwined with one's personal value. The novel analyzes the thin and, sometimes, indistinguishable boundary between authentic self and constructed *persona*.

By analyzing Wallace's "Good Old Neon" and Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, I aim to show how postmodern, and more specifically its evolution in post-postmodern, American literature functions as a way to understand and critique a society driven by competition, social pressures, and consumerism. In this social and cultural context, individuals witness the erosion of the authentic self and, consequently, they see fraudulence and lies as the only alternative to survive to the mechanism of late capitalism. Through my analysis of Wallace and Lerner's

works, however, I argue that fraudulence and performative behaviors do not represent, as it might be believed, the adequate way to 'make it' in life. In fact, these behaviors inevitably generate feelings of dishonesty and disconnection from the protagonists' inner identity in contrast with the fake identity they project onto the outside world. Although late-capitalist society drives them to perform a fake version of themselves to adapt to its demands, the antidote to the social pressure and anxiety generated by such requirements will be found, as we will see, in the mutual comprehension and sincere connection suggested by the two novelists analyzed in this dissertation.

Why was it that his charm revealed
Somehow the surface of a shield?
What was it that we never caught?
What was he, and what was he not?

\- *Edwin Arlington Robinson*

1. Fraud Characters in Modern Fiction

The presence of fraud characters in literature is probably as old as literature itself. The literary motif of a character who pretends to be someone else or simply lies about some or every aspect of his own life has recurred several times throughout the history of literature. One of the first examples of such a fictional tool dates back to Greek mythology through the character of Prometheus, who deceived the gods to provide humanity the fire necessary to develop civilization and progress. However, as literature evolved, the archetype of the imposter gained complexity and popularity, especially during the Renaissance. In fact, in literary works of that epoch such as William Shakespeare's plays, characters like Iago in *Othello* or Falstaff in *Henry IV* largely adopted deception and manipulation for several personal gains, thus exploring the conflict between appearance and reality, personal and political spheres, morality and stratagems.

1.1 The Purpose of Fraud Characters in Fiction

Why do authors have always relied on the construction of fraudulent characters throughout the centuries? What makes such characters so fascinating regardless of the historical period and world location in which they were written? Essentially, fraudulent characters involve questioning our deepest selves, given that they embody the complexities of human nature, provoke moral reflection, and stimulate intellectual engagement, all the while driving the narrative forward with suspense, conflict, and tension. Tobias B. Hug pointed out that stories involving fraudulent identities do not simply serve as entertainment material, but they also “yield valuable insights into the processes of social definition and

labelling, the concern with social roles and how these were established and continuously negotiated, how individuals were identified, institutional weaknesses and clashes between different belief systems" (Hug B., 2009: 3).

Literature is permeated with characters who adopt fraudulent behaviors. For instance, Tom Ripley, the famous protagonist of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, represents a perfect example of the complexity of human nature through the depiction of a sociopath who manages to hide his intentions behind the façade of a charming, educated, and well-mannered gentleman. Similarly, the character of Becky Sharp from William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* adopts manipulation and fraudulence of her own identity to advance her position in society, thus illustrating the complexities of class and ambition in Victorian England.

The presence of fraud characters also raises moral dilemmas, such as the character of Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*, marvelously adapted by David Fincher from Gillian Flynn's thriller novel, whose meticulous and calculated plan, combined with an unreliable narration, makes readers question their perceptions of truth and morality.

Another purpose of fraudulent characters in fictional works is their stimulating function of readers' intellect. Indeed, by unraveling the intricacies of frauds' schemes and deciphering their true intentions, readers not only feel engaged in the storytelling, but their own critical thinking and problem-solving skills are challenged and improved. Considering, for example, the character of John Harmon from Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, readers of the novel witness a man who fakes his own death and pretends to be someone else just to observe the behavior of his heiress, thus transporting readers through a series of intricate deceptive actions that add layers of intrigue to the narrative.

However, one of the most interesting and, probably, unexpected aspects of fraudulence in narrative is the identification with manipulative characters that readers might go through. In

fact, despite their morally questionable actions, readers may find themselves identifying, to a certain extent, with fraud characters. Their flaws and vulnerabilities contribute to humanizing them by making such characters relatable, despite their deceitful nature. When watching the famous American television series *Breaking Bad*, the audience inevitably feels a conflicting set of emotions towards the character of Walter White, who hides his identity as a ruthless drug dealer behind the image of the chemistry high school teacher held for his entire existence. Although witnessing him committing several crimes and murders, viewers might identify with White's situation leading to blurring the lines between sympathy and judgment. Such a phenomenon takes the name of *negative empathy*, a mental process that Ercolino defined as "a cathartic identification with negative characters, which can be either open to agency – indifferently leading either pro- or antisocial behavior – or limited to inner life of the empathizing subject" (Ercolino, 2018: 252). Suzanne Keen furtherly analyzed the phenomenon by claiming that "[n]ovels can provide safe spaces within which to see through the eyes of the psychopath, to occupy the subject position of the oppressive racist, to share the brutalizing past of the condemned outcast" (qtd. in Ercolino, 2018: 251) suggesting that literature can serve as a cathartic method to fictionally immerse in someone else's shoes, even in the case of negative role models epitomized by misleading, deplorable and untrustworthy characters. This is also connected to what Adam Morton defined as the *barrier of decency*, that Ercolino described in this way:

> unlike life, works of fiction can provide the reader with a lot of information about characters, the motives of their actions, the different situations they live in, and which require them to act. In fictional worlds, complex historical and social contexts can be easily reconstructed with a very high level of precision, offering a rich background to the actions of negative characters with whom we can establish an empathic relationship; an empathic relationship that would be nearly impossible in a real situation. (ibid. 250)

As can be noticed, thus, fraudulent characters have been a constant presence in universal literature and what makes them captivating is the awareness that, most of the time, their deceit is never actually revealed or discovered. As Mark Osteen explains

> Forgeries and hoaxes are, indeed, all about recognition, not merely because they force us to question the provenance of a work of art and judge it genuine or fake, but because they require us to see every work again and try to attach its past to its present. More precisely, they are about misrecognition – identifying something or someone not present. The success of a forgery, one might say, depends on whether the misrecognition is re-recognized. […] Suspected or confirmed forgeries induce double vision, placing us simultaneously in two times, enticing us to enter a past that may never have existed. (Osteen, 2021)

Although Osteen is referring to the specific case of counterfeit texts and paintings, the same line of reasoning can also be associated with the presence of fraudulent characters in a narrative context.

Even though the presence of fraudulent characters aims at different narrative objectives, a common ground which they all seem to share can be found. Generally, characters who lie and pretend to be someone they are not usually suffer from some form of alienation within the society in which they live. This might occur because these individuals possess certain qualities that separate their identity from the intentions and expectations of the people and society with whom they interact. Fundamentally, fraud characters diverge from conventional norms and standards of evaluation, by embodying persistent skepticism. Their presence also implicitly leads to questioning the social system responsible for their judgment. As a coping mechanism, therefore, fraudulent people adopt a completely new identity or alter certain elements of their current personality to be accepted in a certain social context or to obtain some kind of personal profit. As Hug observed

> [a] person passes a 'test' to enter and become part of a particular group, for instance, by adopting certain behavioural codes or obtaining a diploma. An impostor, however, mocks and surmounts these control mechanisms and displays their weaknesses. He breaks taboos. (Hug B., 2009: 2)

The adoption of deceitful behaviors is not just a method to climb the social ladder, earning more money or reaching some sort of personal success; it also represents the conflictual relationship between individuals and society.

At the threshold of World War I, Emile Durkheim largely investigated the issue through his theory on the dualism of human nature, inspired by Pascal's *homo duplex* theory, suggesting the presence of "a double existence...the one purely individual and rooted in our organisms, the other social and nothing but an extension of society" (qtd. in Carrithers et al., 1985: 286). A duality characterized, however, by an intrinsic tension "between the demands of social life and those of [the person's] individual, organic nature, a tension which only increased with the advance of civilization" (ibid. 286). Fraudulent characters are, therefore, individuals whose relationship with society is largely antagonistic: they struggle to conform to its expectations while simultaneously yearning for acceptance and recognition within the same social structures. This tension will be further explored in Chapter 3.

1.2 Evolution of Fraud Characters in Literature

As already mentioned, fraudulent characters have been a constant presence in literature, which is the reason why it is still difficult to date it back to a precise era. Some of the early examples belonging to the fifteenth century portrayed false beggars and vagabonds as deceitful people, although the object of this study is mainly dedicated to the contemporary version of fraudulent characters. Nonetheless, while investigating the features of these early imposters, Hug outlined some similar themes in the depiction of both the first representations of imposters and the early modern ones, which are

> i) an understanding of deception as primarily a wicked (destructive or threatening) phenomenon; ii) attempts to categorise and classify human beings, connected to a desire to detect fraud and deception and aiming to reinforce social boundaries; iii) suspicion of geographically and socially mobile people; iv) the rise of written documents serving as evidence of identity and credentials; v) the misuse of fundamental social principles, such as the system of trust, to make financial gains; and vi) the importance of performative strategies concerning appearance, language and behaviour. (Hug B., 2009: 18)

Most of these characteristics fell into disuse throughout the literary evolution of imposters, but one of them undoubtedly remained constant even in the portrayal of more contemporary versions of fraudulent characters, which is the one regarding performative strategies (appearance, language, and behavior). Fraudulent characters always "perform" to obtain their purposes, regardless of the historical period in which they live. The correlation between fraudulence and performance will be largely investigated throughout this study, starting from the essential contribution of the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman in the 1960s who argued that a person can

> act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain […] because the tradition of his group or social status requires this kind of expression. (Goffman, 1959: 6)

thus anticipating the unrestrained performative direction that (post)modern society would take with the rise of television and social media in everyday life and the consequent necessity to embrace a completely made-up existence.

Although the presence of deceitful individuals seems to have crossed the entire history of literature, the highest point of their evolution can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution and its consequences on humanity and society. In the nineteenth century, in fact, identity

underwent significant and irreversible changes in highly industrialized countries, mainly caused by the increase of work in metropolises and the chaotic rhythms that characterize life in such environments. While analyzing a passage from William Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude*, Richard J. Walker highlights precisely the effects of city life on people during the Industrial Revolution, stating that "strange things start to happen to identity and the individual: the inhabitants of the city become a 'swarm', further dehumanizing the mass, and ultimately they are 'melted and reduced / To one identity'" creating thus a contradiction, since the city "generates a consciousness of the strange and the alien, yet also, through the creation of a dehumanized mass, induces uniformity" (Walker, 2007: 3).

In his fundamental *Communist Manifesto*, also Karl Marx investigated the chaos of modernity and the crisis of identity within industrial times, writing that

> Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones […] and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (qtd. in Walker, 2007: 17)

Therefore, living through the Industrial Revolution did not just lead to more progress and technology, but it also produced a negative impact on people's psyche, generating a difficulty for individuals to recognize their individual identities and, consequently, fostering the potential emergence of a double and artificial existence. This represented a coping mechanism against a perception of identity that was, simultaneously, a "difficult thing to establish or ascertain […] [and] reduced to a meaningless uniformity in the chaos of the crowd" (Walker, 2007: 291). In the nineteenth century, the private sphere was more and more reduced to urban spaces and such a shift had inevitable consequences on human behavior.

Focusing on 19th century America, Fritz describes the emergence of the figure of the *confidence man* by observing that "by the mid-nineteenth century the ideal of the unadorned private man

had given way to the reality of the public confidence man […] who concealed or transformed his or her private nature in the construction of a public identity" (qtd. in Young, 2017: 30). The figure of the confidence man represents a symbol of American culture for being deeply intertwined with another typical and recurring American concept: the self-made man. The relation between the confidence man and fraudulence in American society will be thoroughly explored in Chapter 2.

In the alienated context spawned by the Industrial Revolution, therefore, it is easy to understand the rise of forgery narratives, which sought to come to terms with widespread change and uncertainty. Fraud characters essentially attempted to answer the question "What or who is the real self?" (Walker, 2007: 286), disrupting the established order of things to highlight contemporary anxieties regarding the difficulty of distinguishing appearance from reality, and the fragile nature of individual and social identity.

However, in the twentieth century such anxieties intensified: alienation and existential angst became part of twentieth-century people's personalities. In some cases, the adoption of fraud *personae* served as a way to reject the social norms expected by hyper-competitive and hyper-industrialized metropolises. In such a context, in fact, people often struggled to find meaning and purpose in a world characterized by bureaucracy and mass culture. In the first half of the century, the notion of identity became increasingly blurred, fragmented, and unreliable, especially after the traumatic experience of two World Wars separated from one another by only two decades. The aftermath of the conflicts was disastrous: nobody escaped post-war mental crisis and, in the worst cases, PTSD; even those who had never held a weapon nor seen a battlefield experienced the same disturbance, though with milder symptoms. Memories, emotions, and reality seemed all confused and fragmented, subjected to the post-war man's crisis; a man who was lost, who could not recognize himself anymore in the chaos of a society in which not only things but also beliefs were now destroyed. The modernist

movement explored and implemented these themes and concerns through the literary form, by adopting a fractured and discontinued writing that reflected the psychological destruction of that time. Modernist writers, thus, made fragmentation an actual literary feature of their way of writing to reflect the lack of unity characterizing the outside world. In fact,

> Modernism is characterized both by a recognition of fragmentation and by a desire to resolve or overcome this through the integrity of aesthetic form. The urgency of achieving such integrity was apparently intensified by the traumas of the First World War. (Shiach, 2007: 10)

Unable to firmly reflect himself in a single idea of the self and crushed by social expectations of a world in which capitalist demands were starting to increase, the twentieth century post-war man often found himself in the position of adopting another identity. This became particularly prominent in the second half of the century, and it was epitomized by the postmodernist movement that was defined as "a continuation or extension of modernism" (Gladstone et al., 2016: 7) rather than a rupture with that previous movement.

Postmodernism has been, and continues to be, deeply engaged with the dichotomies that shape contemporary existence, such as authenticity/artificiality, falseness/truth, reality/simulation. The focus on characters who conceal their true selves behind a false identity perfectly reflects the co-existence of these dichotomies in late-capitalist society. Literary responses were, indeed, devoted to fictional reflections of the postmodern individual's crisis in which the

> alienated, absurd, existentialist anti-heroes were all in the same position, failing to find the clear meaning of a personal, identifiable, form of existence […] suspended between contradictory pressures of the environment and the self, estranged from a world in which they are outsiders. (Stan & Colipcă, 2012: 326)

It is precisely in this landscape that the two literary works of contemporary American narrative which are the object of this study position themselves. The protagonists of David Foster Wallace's "Good Old Neon" and Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* share the adoption of imposture to cope with the daily expectations and pressures of late-capitalist society, feeding their inner sense of alienation towards an environment that makes them feel as outsiders.

The next chapter will go in depth into the investigation of postmodernism, retracing its origin and capacity to reflect the social struggles and changes of the second half of the twentieth century up to present time. Specifically, the following chapter will explore the question of authenticity in a world in which artificiality dominates and how such a phenomenon led to the development of forgery narratives in American literature.

2. Simulated Selves: Authenticity in Postmodern Culture

In the previous chapter, it has been briefly investigated the question of authenticity in postmodernism and its representation in literature. But why is it such a significant matter? And most importantly, what is postmodernism? Providing an answer to this question is a difficult task, because postmodernism is, by definition, undefinable, considering that it represents a movement that "deconstructs boundaries, including the boundaries of its own genre" (Coenen, 2017: 12). Nonetheless, an attempt to outline the features of the movement and its effects on literary art will be made in the following pages.

2.1 Understanding Postmodernism

Not only is postmodernism difficult to define, but it is also complicated to locate in history. Specifically, what is confusing is the foundation of the movement, given that certain scholars position it in the late 1950s as a response to the Second World War, while others claim that it began in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Brian McHale, postmodernism's beginning can be traced back to 1966, for being a year connected to cultural deconstruction and "characterized by a series of 'breakdowns' – of developments that get ahead of themselves, that stall out and recoil on themselves" (McHale, 2008). Postmodernism, therefore, is characterized by the artistic materialization of crisis; a crisis that was perceivable in society and, as a result, in culture and art. "The case for its existence," as Fredric Jameson argued "depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or coupure" (Jameson, 1991: 1); or, as Ihab Hassan described it, postmodernism is "an ideology of fracture" (Hassan, 1981: 36). Postmodernist thought and aesthetics influenced several art forms, from literature to architecture, from cinema to visual arts, through new perspectives on reality that led to questioning reality itself. McHale, however, explains that

> Postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post modernism; it does not come after the present (a solecism), but after the modernist movement. Thus

> the term ‘postmodernism,’ […] signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism, and not some hypothetical writing of the future. (McHale, 2004: 5)

thus, implying that postmodernism is not necessarily related to futuristic avant-gardism, but it represents a response to its previous movement: modernism.

For certain aspects, postmodernism shares similar if not equal features with modernism, such as fragmentation, figural narration, and metanarrative; yet the two movements are respectively characterized by different approaches to narrative form and content. McHale, in fact, claims in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) that in the passage from modernism to postmodernism there has occurred a shift of dominance from epistemology to ontology. The former refers to the question of knowing and understanding; the latter, instead, refers to the question of being and existing. According to McHale, the modernist’s epistemological dominant is subjected to questions such as

> How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? […] What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability? (9)

While the ontological dominant of postmodernism would attempt to answer questions like the following:

> Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? What is a world? […] What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? (10)

passing, in other words, from investigating the knowledge of the world to questioning the actual existence and truthfulness of that same world. This kind of approach is a consequence of

poststructuralist philosophy which largely influenced the literary critics of the post-war decades. A philosophy which

> sought to decenter the "structures," systematicity, and scientific status of structuralism, to critique its underlying metaphysics, and to extend it in a number of different directions, while at the same time preserving central elements of structuralism's critique of the humanist subject. (Blake et al., 2003: 61)

According to this genealogy, post-structuralist philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Baudrillard and their different theories on deconstruction widely influenced postmodernist literature. Although it has been conveyed through different narrative forms, postmodernist literature possesses certain features that make it recognizable. Frederic Jameson, one of the most influential scholars of the movement, identified such features in his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991: 6) in which he lists depthlessness (or the simulacrum), a weakening of historicity, a new type of emotional ground tone, a deep relationship with new technology, and the political role of art in the late capitalist world as recurring elements of postmodernism. Some of these features will be further investigated in this study, also in relation to the two fictional works by Wallace and Lerner.

As mentioned above, in McHale's view, postmodernism involves an ontological approach to reality, unlike modernism which tended to be more epistemological. Such a shift in dominance led writers to focus more on the instability of truth and multiplicity of meanings rather than creating narratives whose purpose was to depict the deep meaning of existence and the presence of universal truth. Jean-François Lyotard famously argued "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv), thus implying that postmodernism is characterized by a shared skepticism towards those irrefutable and totalizing universal truths (or metanarratives) that have always controlled and influenced society, culture, and politics. Examples of metanarratives can be found in Marxism, the Enlightenment, religious doctrines,

Freudianism and so on which, according to Lyotard, have all been deconstructed and/or destroyed by modern science, particularly by technological progress, mass media, and communication. What remains are just *petits récits*, or little narratives, which act more locally and represent the "multiplicity of theoretical standpoints" (Peters, 2001: 7) substituting grand and universal truths.

Steluta Stan and Gabriela Iuliana Colipcă accurately explain the phenomenon by arguing that

> Entering postmodernity involved a long and painful process for the intellectual (and not only), trained in the spirit of humanist culture, and witnessing the destruction of most fundamental premises of his/her placement in the world. Restlessness and disorientation experienced when facing an apparently undetermined, chaotic and unstable world, become more and more intense for the individual attached to some ideals and values that he thought eternal. (Stan & Colipcă, 2012: 327)

Among the grand narratives that have been questioned and dismantled by postmodernism, it can also be included identity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the rise of capitalism, industrialization and post-war traumas led to the development of confusion, alienation, and fragmentation which inevitably resulted in a general crisis of identity. The concept of a stable identity has already been dismantled by modernism, but postmodernism truly explored the issue through the portrayal of doubtful characters and the usage of literary techniques capable of rendering the disintegration of identity and beliefs, such as unreliable narrators, fragmentation, metafiction, collage, and pastiche.

In a world in which capitalist demands were and still are more and more pressing, identity suffers a crisis of definition and consistency. Faced with the overwhelming complexities and uncertainties of the outside world, individuals often turn to the adoption of fake personalities as a strategy to regain a form of stability in their identities. This adoption is encouraged by the need to conform to pressing social expectations, which demand certain behaviors and traits for

acceptance and success. It is precisely in this context that the postmodern question of authenticity positions itself.

2.2 Deconstructing Authenticity

Among the narratives deconstructed by postmodernism, there is also authenticity. In the postmodern world, in fact, inauthenticity or artificiality have, in a certain way, replaced the notion of authenticity. However, what do we mean by authenticity? The definition of the concept is still largely debated, and most dictionaries define it as "[1] not false or imitation [2] true to one's own personality, spirit, or character [3] worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact" ("Authentic.", 2024), thus demonstrating how the term can refer both to objects and people. Philipp Vannini and Patrick Williams provided a quite explicative explanation of the notion by arguing that

> Authenticity is to be understood as an inherent quality of some object, person or process. Because it is inherent, it is neither negotiable nor achievable. Authenticity cannot be stripped away, nor can it be appropriated. In short, the object, person or process in question either is authentic or is not, period. (Vannini & Williams, 2016)

Nonetheless, things are not as simple as it seems. Authenticity, in fact, is undoubtedly an inherent quality but it is not as natural as it might appear. In fact, it is mainly perceived as a social construct, since it

> may be seen as some sort of ideal, highly valued and sought by individuals and groups as part of the process of becoming […] is often something strategically invoked as a marker of status or method of social control […] it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar. (Vannini & Williams, 2016)

Authenticity, therefore, is intertwined with the concept of self in relation to others and society. But what happens when the self undergoes a crisis generated by that same alienated society

with which it is supposed to connect and relate? This is the social and cultural situation that postmodernism attempts to reflect upon through art. As Andy Grundberg explains

> There is no place in the postmodern world for a belief in the authenticity of experience, in the sanctity of the individual artist's vision, in genius, or originality. What postmodernist art finally tells us is that things have been used up, that we are at the end of the line, that we are all prisoners of what we see. (Grundberg, 1999: 18)

Postmodernism not only unveiled the contemporary loss of authenticity but also the disappearance of meaning and depth of human existence. In a world in which the concept of authenticity is continuously being questioned, the postmodern man is left only with copies of the original, with fake versions of real objects, concepts, and even people. Nonetheless, postmodernism does not provide solutions to the lack of authenticity we experience, but rather it explores the issue and, sometimes, even contributes to inauthenticity. In other words, postmodernism is simultaneously the cause and effect of inauthenticity.

2.3 A World of Simulations

Jean Baudrillard, one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, investigated such a phenomenon in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). In the book, he argued that contemporary society is characterized by simulacra, which are copies of things that have no real origin, or have even never existed in their original form. Through the metaphor of the map that precedes the territory it depicts, Baudrillard criticizes the modern tendency to rely more on models of things than on things themselves, thus losing contact with tangible reality. Such a tendency would be exacerbated to such a point that reality itself ends up imitating its simulation or representation. As he writes

> It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly

> descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. (Baudrillard, 1994: 2)

The result of this substitution would be what he calls *hyperreality*. In other words, Baudrillard claims that the symbols and signs that pervade current society have essentially replaced perceivable reality and, consequently, what humanity experiences is just a simulation of a reality whose origin is no longer discernible or traceable. However, what Baudrillard points out is that hyperreality is often the simulation of something that does not exist at all. What occurs with hyperreality is, essentially, providing a simulated meaning to something that is formerly empty.

In a society where every aspect of reality seems to have been replaced by a simulation, also identity appears to be subjected to the same process. In the late capitalist epoch, specifically, personal identity is increasingly associated with one's material belongings rather than one's inner value. In the postmodernist dimension, in fact, cultural consumption is inevitably connected to the construction of an identity. In *The Consumer Society* (1970), Baudrillard overcomes the Marxist *use-value* theory by stating that

> you never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status. (Baudrillard, 2017: 80)

Through his *sign-value* theory, Baudrillard confirmed the relation between possessions and social position. In postmodernity, an object is not just a thing with a usage purpose, but it "stands for a sign of the consumer's prestige, rank, and social understanding […] An individual's recognition depends on which consumer object he uses" (Habib, 2018: 44). If affording and owning certain objects determines the social position of an individual, it is thus easy to understand why imposture narratives are so recurrent in postmodern fiction.

As it has been highlighted in the previous chapter, the presence of fraud characters has

represented a constant part of literature for centuries, to the point that "literature of fraudulence" can be defined as a literary genre on its own. However, as Wieland Schwanebeck observes, there is "a remarkable return of the impostor motif in popular culture over the past decade" (Schwanebeck, 2014: 159), especially in American literature.

For instance, a novel that perfectly epitomizes both Baudrillard's sign-value theory and the depiction of the modern imposter is the well-known *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis. The controversial novel criticizes 1980s *yuppie culture*, a term standing for 'young urban professional' and referring to a social group of wealthy and well-educated young Americans who were "career-minded, materialistic, self-serving, having a hedonistic lifestyle, and prioritizing physical fitness" (Kendall, 2024). In *American Psycho*, this social group is personified by the protagonist Patrick Bateman, a young and rich American man working as an investment banker in Wall Street, New York. During the day, his life revolves around the ostentation of an extremely wealthy lifestyle made up of expensive clothes and accessories, fancy restaurants and meticulous self-care, while at night he secretly commits rapes and murders, having thus a double life.

The objects possessed and constantly shown off by Bateman and his yuppie colleagues function as the only way to express their identities, or rather to replace the absence of a true actual identity, as if there was a hyperreal identity hiding a meaningless personality. Regarding this sort of paradox, Christian Knirsch notices that "an ever-changing identity is not so different from a non-identity, that the permanent changing of roles and masks also implies the danger of self-loss beneath these masks" (Knirsch, 2014: 148).

In the novel, only those yuppies' income, expensive experiences and branded commodities establish their social status, positioning the novel within Baudrillard's theories on sign-value and hyperreality. In fact, Martin Weinreich highlights the connection between the novel and Baudrillard by arguing that

> Patrick does not refer to the material object; he refers to the brand name, to the "object-become-sign" (Baudrillard, *Critique* 66). The incessant listing of Patrick's own and others' object-as-sign possessions denotes a form of consumption akin to Baudrillard's definition, doing away with the "myth" of the "empirical object" and introducing the sign instead as the only locus of consumption (*Critique* 63). Baudrillard replaces the notion of commodity fetishism with that of "a fetishism of the signifier." (Weinreich, 2004: 67)

The façade of a wealthy businessman is necessary to Bateman not only to hide his murderous identity, but also to be included as part of a certain social group, to fit in, to be accepted and respected. For such a reason, *American Psycho* positions itself also in the imposture narrative, for representing the need to perform a constructed identity in order to please the expectations and demands of late capitalist society.

In his fundamental study on society titled *The Society of Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord anticipated Baudrillard's theory by observing that the spectacle "is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity" (Debord, 1983: 21); this statement shows the now unbreakable bond between social status and consumerism. As Weinreich notices, Debord's illuminating and prophetic observations may undoubtedly act as the critical lens to interpret *American Psycho*, considering that

> Ellis's style creates the effect of a total visualization of everyday life under the sign of commodity. Through the eyes of Patrick Bateman, a total consumer, the commodity really is "all one sees," as his description of the environment never exceeds an abstracted matrix of commodity objects. (66)

In 2001, Bill Brown, an English professor at the University of Chicago, investigated Heidegger's object/thing distinction in late capitalist society through his Thing Theory. Heidegger's theory essentially claimed that "[a]n object becomes a thing the moment it fails to serve its common function" (Sandhu, 2021: 404), implying that it is the subject who attributes

a meaning to objects depending on their functionality in human life. Brown positioned such a distinction in consumerist world by stating that

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown, 2001: 4)

Through his theory, Brown confirmed how the objects we own are not just materiality, but they get to possess a meaning due to the social and personal function they play. His study "tries to prove that the present generation not only possesses the material things but also is possessed by them" and it also confirms "how all our obsessive efforts to possess accumulate and keep things throws flood of light on the strange fact that things play a great role in shaping our self-worth" (Sandhu, 2021 403).

The deep and persistent bond between humans and the objects they own is on display in several works of postmodern fiction. An author who particularly investigated the suffocating presence of objects in daily life is the American writer Don DeLillo. In more than one novel, DeLillo explored the intimate relationship that people establish with their material belongings, as well as the waste such belongings generate. One of his most famous characters is Jack Gladney, the protagonist of *White Noise* who, as Patrick Bateman, both personifies sign-value theory and imposture narrative. The entire novel perfectly renders Baudrillard's theory of hyperreal and postmodern thought, but the protagonist of *White Noise* particularly epitomizes the question of identity in a 1980s America bombarded by consumerism, performance, mass media, and technological advances. Jack, in fact, is a university professor specialized in Hitler studies, a field of study that he is said to have invented not only inside his college but also in

the whole country. Such a relevant position gives Jack a strong sense of responsibility, which pushes him to transmit the prominence of his expertise not only through his words but also through his appearances in order to be “taken seriously as a Hitler innovator” (DeLillo, 2009: 16). For such a reason, he chooses a completely new name, to be less stereotypical and more unique: J.A.K. Gladney, self-defined as “a tag I wore like a borrowed suit” (16). Those A. and K. are abbreviations of middle names that actually do not exist, a non-existence of which Jack is fully aware when he admits “I am the false character that follows the name around” (17) thus implying that he is wearing something that does not belong to him, but to someone else. In the same way, he also feels the urge to change his look in order to transmit more seriousness and authority, which is the reason why he intentionally gained weight: to speak about an important topic. Annjeanette Wiese notices that” [i]n order to be at the top of his field, Jack assumes a self-created persona: the J.A.K. Gladney who wears a robe, dark glasses, and has put on an “air of unhealthy excess” to help his career” (Wiese, 2012: 16). Despite having self-defined himself as America’s most competent scholar in Hitler studies, Jack does not speak German even though he pretends to, thus keeping it a secret from his colleagues. On one hand, therefore, there is the made-up façade of the authoritative-looking Hitler specialist; on the other hand, there is an insecure self-questioning man whose actual identity is just the result of the consumerism surrounding him. The way Jack behaves is not just a distinctive trait of his persona, but it represents a doubling which is typical of postmodern identities. In fact, as Brown notices,

> [t]hese gestures of self-hood are symptomatic of the decentering effects of post-structuralism and the consequent destabilisation of identity in a postmodern world […] In the case of Jack Gladney, his original conception of self is evacuated by the stereotype of a college don provided by his chancellor (a man who is both large and successful) leaving a vulnerable sense of identity which will later be occupied by stereotypes drawn from popular culture. (M. Brown, 2020: 22)

Postmodern humans are lost in a bewildering world; therefore, they search for the only comfortable certainty to which it can cling: the tangibility of objects. And Jack perfectly epitomizes such a phenomenon, considering that his "most complete sense of selfhood comes when he embraces the commodity environment and allows himself to be immersed in shopping" since "the commodity spectacle and the image offer Jack a temporary refuge from the insecurities of postmodern identity" (M. Brown, 2020: 23). It is exactly in this reassurance that Brown's Thing Theory finds its narrative concretization, given that objects are, for Jack and the other characters in *White Noise*, not just inanimate items but rather entities with which a deep connection is continuously established. To render such a pervasiveness of objects in the protagonist's postmodern existence, DeLillo fills his novel with several lists containing names of objects of daily use; a narrative method also applied by Ellis in *American Psycho*, where the protagonist proudly lists all the branded objects he owns for pages. In both cases, objects accumulated in the comfortable space of the house represent a material extension of the postmodern man who inhabits that house; a man who surrounds himself with materiality to cope with the loss of his real and authentic identity. As Baudrillard observes in his description of a bourgeois house in *The System of Objects*, "[t]here is a tendency to accumulate, to fill and close off the space. The emphasis is on unifunctionality, immovability, imposing presence and hierarchical labelling" which means that "[h]uman beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value – what might be called a 'presence'" (Baudrillard, 1996: 15-16). This sort of intimate attachment with objects inevitably influences the construction of identity, which in turn becomes nothing else than an artifice, a surface veil covering the absence of an authentic personality; in other words, a simulation. As Douglas Kellner observes,

> In the society of simulation, identities are constructed by the appropriation of images, and codes and models determine how individuals perceive themselves and relate to other people. Economics, politics, social life, and culture are all governed by the mode of

> simulation, whereby codes and models determine how goods are consumed and used, politics unfold, culture is produced and consumed, and everyday life is lived. (Kellner, 2020)

The postmodern man, as it can be noticed from the two literary examples provided, must necessarily own specific objects to be accepted inside a certain social group or environment; he must be, therefore, a consumer. People tend to accumulate certain items to feel part of a community dimension and, consequently, to feel at ease with themselves. However, as it has been said, such an accumulation of material belongings is nothing else than a method to hide one's authentic identity, whatever authentic means in postmodernity, to pursue the need for social acceptance in a capitalist world which wants all its members to consume the same commodities. The consumer identity replaces the original one, leading subjects to the fakeness of being and the construction of an artificial self-narration connected to the possession (or non-possession) of things; a possession that is not necessarily restricted to objects as such, but to any other thing that can be bought and provide access to social acceptance, being it a reservation at a specific restaurant or a trip to a commonly desired destination.

However, owning or pretending to own certain objects of capitalist desire is usually not sufficient to construct a fake identity necessary to be accepted in given social groups. Often, the impostor must also wear the costume of the confidence man. Although this kind of character can be found in literature from all over the world, it is particularly connected to American culture. It is not a coincidence, in fact, that the two novels briefly analyzed in this chapter, whose protagonists' self-confidence is itself made-up, belong to American literature. In the following pages, the features of the confidence man and its abilities to reflect American society will be unfolded.

2.4. America and the Confidence Man

In order to describe the confidence man, it is necessary to take a step backwards to the nineteenth century. As Barbara Wyllie reminds us, the confidence man, also called 'con man',

> is widely acknowledged to be an exclusively American phenomenon, a product of both the New World frontier and the growing urban centres of antebellum America. The term itself was coined by journalists during the trial of William Thompson in 1849, who had been arrested in New York for robbing over a hundred people. (Wyllie, 2016: 3)

The rise of this concept corresponds to a period of American history characterized by significant economic growth and westward expansion. The increase of commerce, banking, and new transportation systems like railroads not only generated numerous opportunities for financial profit, but also for fraud and deception. Moreover, as already mentioned in Chapter 1, cities were increasingly expanding and with them the anonymity that urban life could provide. People moved away from rural communities, where dwellers knew each other, to larger cities where individuals were more isolated and trusting strangers became necessary although risky. However, as Wyllie points out, the confidence man is more than a simple trickster, because "what distinguished him from a regular swindler was his tactic of manipulating an individual's instinct to *trust*, essentially of abusing their *confidence*" (3). Gary Lindberg, who explored the phenomenon in depth, observes that confidence man was largely influenced by the social migration occurring in the second half of the nineteenth century and the consequent sense of hope such migrations generated. In fact, "all the restless activities of continuing migration were interpreted as gestures of creation: making a new nation, making new villages and towns, making new selves […] What counted was not who one was but who one could become" (Lindberg, 1982: 16). Therefore, in a period of profound social change like nineteenth century America, everybody was hypothetically a stranger and, thus, everybody could create a new identity. Such an awareness instilled a sense of hope and promise in

American people, which, as Lindberg observes, had both positive and negative outcomes, given that

> On the one hand, American confidence was at its peak and the possibilities of self-creation seemed especially promising. […] On the other hand, the earlier feeling of opportunity was gradually slipping into something else, and the conventions of puffery, humbug, and promise were becoming so blatant that shrewd critics could both lampoon them and suggest their serious consequences. (11)

It is easy to notice how the concept of confidence man is intertwined with another typically American concept: the self-made man. Both figures are connected through the broader themes of ambition, individualism, and the pursuit of success, but mobilizing different ethical choices within that pursuit. In fact, if the self-made man relies on hard work and integrity, the confidence man is involved in deception and manipulation to fulfill his purposes. It can be therefore said that the confidence man would represent a dark reflection of the self-made man, because of the moral ambiguities he adopts in the pursuit of success. Theoretically, the self-made man and the confidence man would possess the same skills and ambitions to upgrade their social position, but, as George Pearson argues

> the confidence man was eternally self-aggrandizing. Blessed with superior wit, skill in the use of resources, adaptability and enthusiasm, he was a one-man enterprise. […] the trickster emerged as the archetypal American because the trickster represented man-on-the-make. (Peason qtd. in Wyllie, 2016: 4)

The main ability of the confidence man is found in the cunning usage of language, a powerful tool through which he tricks and manipulates other people into believing a fake narrative of himself. It can be defined, in fact, as a "manipulator or contriver who creates an inner effect, an impression, an experience of confidence, that surpasses the grounds for it. In short, a confidence man *makes belief*" (Lindberg, 1982: 7).

One of the literary works that largely contributed to spreading the popularity of the

confidence man in American culture was the homonymous novel *The Confidence Man* by Herman Melville, published in 1857. The novel, whose unsuccess at the time led Melville to abandon writing for twenty years, depicts the materialism of mid-nineteenth century America through its nameless protagonist who defrauds the passengers of a Mississippi River boat by means of his charm and tricks. In the novel, language plays an important role in the fulfillment of the frauds and Giancarlo Alfano highlights the relevance of language by arguing that

> with his persuasion capacity, the Confidence-Man wants to induce in the interlocutor the intention to trust that whoever is talking to him will behave in a way that merits the trust offered to him […] the confidence man produces, first of all, belief; and he does so through deceit. (Alfano, 2021: 157)[1]

Along with authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain, Melville helped integrate the figure of the confidence man not only in American literature, but also in American national identity. A feature that makes the confidence man so popular in fiction as a representative of American society is his performative nature. It is clear how he "exists among appearances. The model self lives for the public, always on stage or preparing for the performance" (Lindberg, 1982: 80); a performance that, in the past, was a decision often taken for fun or "intrinsic satisfaction" (88), while nowadays takes the shape of a necessity to adapt to late capitalist social demands. Such model self, a concept coming from Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, "tries out a series of identities and adapts himself to the situation and the audience" (88) rather than expressing himself, rather than being authentic.

By bringing the confidence man discourse back to the present day, Schwanebeck notices

[1] con i suoi esercizi di persuasione il *Confidence-Man* vuole indurre nell'interlocutore l'intenzione di confidare (*trust*) nella possibilità che chi gli sta parlando si comporti in modo tale da meritare la fiducia offertagli […] l'uomo di fiducia produce innanzitutto credenza; e lo fa esercitando la finzione.

the massive presence of con men even in current fiction, especially American, thus making it, as previously said, a typical American phenomenon. He argues, in fact, that although con men

> are by no means an exclusively American phenomenon, they appear in great numbers in American popular culture. Numerous scholars have investigated this phenomenon: some of them link it to the Baudrillardian conception of America as a mythical hyperreality […], some point to the American obsession with the authentic, in spite of the omnipresence of phonies in U.S. popular culture since the end of World War II […], others have commented on the con man's symbiotic relationship with the rise of capitalism and his role as the personified protean man. (Schwanebeck, 2014: 160)

The idea of the confidence man has strongly represented American society and attitude since the nineteenth century and, as it has been mentioned above, this concept is deeply intertwined with the idea of the self-man made. This last concept derives, in turn, from the epitome of American culture: the American Dream. The self-made man is the realization of an ideal which promises upward mobility and success to every citizen, as long as hard work and determination are being embraced. The confidence man, conversely, manages to climb the social ladder through deceit instead of hard work and authenticity. There is a feature, however, that the three concepts of American dream, self-made man and confidence man have in common: performance. The pursuit of success and social acceptance is always connected to the need to perform, which sometimes involves the displaying of fake identities to reach certain social goals.

The next chapter is going to analyze the question of performance in the realm of postmodern culture and literature and the tendency to wear a mask as a way to cope with pressing social expectations in American late capitalist society.

3. Performance and Social Expectations

In the previous chapter, I mentioned the concept of the American Dream. Although the idea largely influenced American society at least as far back as Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the term was coined less than a century ago, in 1931, by the art historian James Truslow Adams. Here is his definition:

> that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Adams, 2001: 214-215)

It is noticeable that the focus of the concept is on the authenticity ("recognized […] for what they are") of every individual as a resource to achieve the dream of "social order". The concept of the American Dream promises "opportunity for each according to ability or achievement", regardless of social status or race; as long as hard work, or simply the showing of certain capabilities, is proved. However, when such capacities are not 'innately' present but the dream of improving one's own social position still remains, the individual is sometimes faced with the alternative of performing a fake version of himself to adapt to social demands. Christian Knirsch argues that the presence of impostors in American literature is connected to the message transmitted by the American Dream. In fact, he writes that

> the particular prominence of impostors in American literature can at least partially be attributed to the radiance of the American Dream as a powerful concept in American culture – it is, one could say, essentially about becoming someone one is not, based on the commonly acknowledged possibility to create oneself anew multiple times. (Knirsch, 2014: 146)

In her analysis of the concept, Katalin Kis observes the correlation between the American Dream and the performative behaviors necessary to achieve it, by claiming that

> while it declares a foundational and final equality of persons, the [American] Dream nevertheless promotes the project of high performance and the effortful elevation of one's class and status. Thus, while it assumes a foundational equality (of opportunity) as a democratic principle, it also implies inequality of achievements as an outcome. (Kis, 2017: 2)

As seen so far, post-industrial society seems to be particularly obsessed with the necessity to show off and exhibit the best version of oneself to external peers in order to reach the desired approval and sense of belonging. However, when social expectations become more and more demanding and, sometimes, go along with social position and wealth, the postmodern man struggles to keep up with such demands when his actual life contrasts with the expected one. Therefore, the individual becomes a performer of his own life. There is a very famous idiom in the English language that perfectly epitomizes this quite modern tendency to adopt fake qualities or even entire fake personalities to achieve certain intents: *fake it till you make it*. The origin and etymology of the idiom are still uncertain but there is no doubt that it first appeared in the twentieth century, most likely around the 1960s/1970s.

The concept is rooted in the idea that by imitating confidence and competence individuals can realize those qualities in their personal and professional lives. This idiom implies that by acting as if one already possesses certain desired traits or skills, one can eventually achieve them. It is clearly noticeable the reason behind the popularity of an expression which essentially invites people to perform, to act as if, to pretend to own non-existent skills. In other words, to act a fake version of themselves. As mentioned so far, in a world dominated by media saturation and hyperreality, individuals often find themselves performing roles to meet social expectations and navigate the uncertainty of identity. For such reasons, performing a slightly or completely

different identity is not just a superficial act but a true adaptation to the pressures of a society that values appearance and confidence to achieve social conformity. What leads an increasing number of people to perform a made-up version of their own lives? And what are the causes behind such a phenomenon? In the following pages, the study will delve into the question of social performance within the postmodern context.

3.1 Life as a Performance

It would not be possible to explore the theme of social performance without referring to the studies conducted by the already mentioned Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman.

In 1959, Goffman published his ground-breaking *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, an innovative study that "resonates deeply with the work of several seminal postmodern theorists" (Hancock & Garner, 2015: 180), such as the analysis of contemporary society carried out by Baudrillard and Debord. As a sort of contemporary renewal of Shakespeare's famous adage – All the world's a stage – Goffman's research essentially compares social interactions to theatrical performances; an approach that he defines as "dramaturgical" (Goffman, 1959: 110). For Goffman, interactions should be seen as performances influenced by the surrounding environment and audience and constructed to provide this audience (i.e., other people) with the desired impression of oneself (17). According to Goffman, such a performance would occur with or without the individual's awareness of it, thus indicating the subconscious nature of the phenomenon and the fact that the audience would attribute meaning to the performance in any case.

The sociologist distinguishes two social dimensions in which the performer acts: the front and the back regions. The former corresponds to the performance itself, in which individuals give a certain impression of themselves crafted to be appreciated by the audience watching them; the latter is the private dimension in which the individuals prepare for their social role, a place "where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of

course" (112).

Inside the front region, according to Goffman, there are three elements that position an individual's social role within a dimension that confirms the performative nature of contemporary interactions. First, the setting, which is literally the physical space where the performance takes place (e.g., office, train, pub); often, different spaces require different roles and, consequently, a different set of performances. Second, the notion of appearance, which refers to the look through which an individual presents himself to the audience, and consists of clothes, body language, and way of speaking. Finally, the manner, which is to say how an individual behaves in front of others, adopting, for instance, a dominant or unassertive attitude. Apparently, each individual attempts to provide a certain idea of himself whenever found in face-to-face situations; in other words, he realizes a self-presentation of his persona. It seems that, nowadays, human beings cannot live without acting out a performance of their lives, but, as we will see in a moment, this process is not always deliberate.

This shaping one's character is defined by Goffman and other sociologists as *impression management,* which refers to "the actions actors take to encourage an audience to form a particular impression. To manufacture an effective social persona is the aim of the actor's impression management" (Shulman, 2017). Impression management is nothing other than the conscious or unconscious process adopted to control the way other people perceive us. Julia T. Wood points out that "sometimes an individual may be highly strategic in crafting an image but unaware that he or she is creating an impression" (Wood, 2004: 120). Likewise, impression management is influenced by a series of social conventions and unwritten rules that regulate public life and interactions. As Nicki Lisa Cole observes,

> front stage behavior typically follows a routinized and learned social script shaped by cultural norms. Waiting in line for something, boarding a bus and flashing a transit pass, and exchanging pleasantries about the weekend with colleagues are all examples of highly routinized and scripted front-stage performances […] The 'performances' people

> put on with those around them follow familiar rules and expectations for what they should do and talk about with one another in each setting. […] Whatever the setting of front stage behavior, people are aware of how others perceive them and what they expect, and this knowledge tells them how to behave. It shapes not just what individuals do and say in social settings but how they dress and style themselves, the consumer items they carry around, and the manner of their behavior. (Cole, 2019)

The presence of front regions and performative behaviors that are consciously or unconsciously adopted within them confirms how a part of people feel an indefinite necessity to play a role in order to feel accepted in social situations. This subtle need to feel accepted predeedes and influences the consequent performative attitudes. Forlenza points out that "[a]dapting our behavior in this way [according to impression management] increases the likelihood of being viewed positively and accepted in various forms of social groups" (qtd. in Cherry, 2024). The adaptive nature of the phenomenon demonstrates the inner inauthenticity of daily interactions in social environments and emphasizes the deliberate and calculated aspects of social behavior. Sometimes, acted performances might even reach the point of appropriation of a completely new identity. In that case, we are in the realm of fraudulence, as we will see later on.

In his *Being & Nothingness*, published in 1943, Jean-Paul Sartre already explored the contraposition between performative social role and real self, thus influencing Goffman and other theorists. In his *The Parisian Waiter*, Sartre criticizes the tendency of human beings to associate their entire identity to the social role that their jobs require them to perform, as in the case of a café waiter whose "movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid […] He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer" (Sartre qtd. in Phillips, 1981: 23). Through this example, Sartre highlights the forced behavior people adopt when performing their social role(s) in the front region, until reaching a kind of multi-personality which leads them to define their entire identity according to the different personae played in front of family, colleagues or

complete strangers.

Opposed to front regions there are, as mentioned, back regions. This concept refers to the private dimension, usually associated with domestic spaces, in which an individual can relax after his performance; the safe place in which the actor can remove his social mask. In back regions, people "let their guard down and behave in ways that reflect their uninhibited or 'true' selves" (Cole, 2019); considering the question of authenticity analyzed in the previous chapter, it is interesting to notice Cole's skepticism toward the existence of a true and authentic self, even in private spaces. She then continues by observing that when

> people are back stage, they often rehearse certain behaviors or interactions and otherwise prepare for upcoming front stage performances. They might practice their smile or handshake, rehearse a presentation or conversation, or prep themselves to look a certain way once in public again. So even back stage, people are aware of norms and expectations, which influence what they think about and do. (Cole, 2019)

Regardless of whether we consciously recognize it, our identities are inevitably fragmented and shaped by the different performances we adopt depending on the people we interact with. It is undeniable that people are deeply concerned with how others perceive them, often investing significant effort into creating the right impression to gain acceptance from the social groups they value. The necessity to perform the best version of ourselves in situations belonging to the front regions might generate a considerable amount of preoccupation, if not deep anxiety, even when we are alone in the back stage environment.

When analyzing Goffman's dramaturgical approach in contemporary life, David Shulman points out how it should be taken into consideration

> the priority people place on what others think of them and the stakes involved in influencing those impressions. Picture the intense introspective anxiety and self-conscious moments people have when they feel alone and isolated, burdened by a secret that they can't reveal for fear of embarrassment and being shamed. (Shulman, 2017)

The thought of how we appear to other people's eyes can become a true obsession even in those moments of supposed relaxation experienced in back regions. The individual might perceive a discrepancy between the performance acted in the front region and the version of himself he displays in the back region, to the point of seeing his 'real' version as a secret to keep hidden. Concerning this obsession, Shulman further continues by observing how

> People fixate on their secret and run through internal monologues that simulate what other people might say and think if they knew and acknowledged that secret. These self-absorbed worries represent a victory of social bonds in causing people to obsess on their own time about their 'fit' with the social groups that matter to them. (Shulman, 2017)

This kind of preoccupation is also visible in the two American novels analyzed in the previous chapter, where both the protagonists of *American Psycho* and *White Noise* hide certain aspects of their back-stage identity to fit in social groups belonging to the front region. The secrets they hide under a performative façade generate a strong sense of worrying that gives rise to real anxiety. The two literary works that will be analyzed in the next chapters – "Good Old Neon" and *Leaving the Atocha Station* – are characterized by the same kind of anxiety generated by the inconsistency between front-stage and back-stage identities, fake and authentic personalities, dishonesty, and truthfulness.

What is interesting to notice is how an individual associates his own value with other people's opinion and possible approval or disapproval; an opinion influenced by the social norms and expectations previously mentioned. Consequently, the individual "must perform to those expectations adequately enough to demonstrate them convincingly. People need others to recognize their claims of identity – of who they are in the world – in order to be held to represent esteemed attributes" (Shulman, 2017). In other words, we seem to need others to confirm who we are, which is a perspective that inevitably generates a form of anxiety whenever the

fulfillment of such expectations fails.

As Hancock and Garner notice, Goffman perceives reality as a dimension entirely constructed by social mechanisms regulating "patterns of existence". As they specify, "[i]t is only in the interaction that social reality exists; there is no world apart from daily interaction" (Hancock & Garner, 2015: 176). In his *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*, Goffman argues that our life is always an imitation of others' lives, thus implying that there is no authentic experience but rather copies of other copies. It is easy to see how Goffman anticipated Baudrillard's

> notion of simulation and simulacra in that what we do in daily life is to copy others' behavior, which in turn is itself always already a copy or simulacrum of "the real." In the end, there is no "real" for Goffman since all of social life is an imitation; imitation is all we have to guide us through everyday life. As a result, that which appears as natural is actually a social construction, and those social constructions are built on imitations of other imitations. (176)

The influence of Goffman is noticeable in Baudrillard's theorization of the hyperreal and simulations in the context of contemporary society. According to Goffman, human beings perform one or more constructed identities based on the models in their lives, namely, people they actually know or people coming from the media. However, such models

> are 'portraying themselves,' such that the model we emulate is [itself] modeling the referent of a model. Like a hall of mirrors, the models with whom we orient ourselves are themselves modeling other referents and therefore leave us in an infinite regress in which we can no longer discern where the real and the imitation begin or end. (Hancock & Garner, 2015: 180)

This sort of dependency on models becomes particularly evident with exposure to the media. Goffman wrote most of his main theories on social dynamics between the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which television was just beginning to exercise its power and influence, especially in

America. And yet, some of his observations already prefigured the impact of media on the construction of identity that will characterize the following postmodern discourses. In 1976 he published *Gender Advertisement*, a study on the representation of gender on media in which he described how humans react to the use of models in advertising as "the readiness of all of us to switch at any moment from dealing with the real world to participating in make-believe ones" (Goffman, 1979: 23). Living alongside mediated images, therefore, leads people to easily pass from their personal, tangible life to the artificial life portrayed by images, with a continuous switch from reality to fiction that influences the perception of the observer towards his existence. The result is, inevitably, a questioning of the structure, values, and especially lifestyle of the observer's private existence. Goffman does not simply mean that

> the boundaries between media and reality have blurred, he is documenting their very dissolution as the realms of art, advertising, and everyday life become one and the same. Thus we see many individuals whose gestures, voice patterns, and facial expressions perfectly replicate the faces, voices, and bodies of models in advertising or TV programs, rather than those of interaction partners in physically proximate social contexts, such as family and friends (Hancock & Garner, 2015: 180)

implying, in this way, that role models provided by media are at least as important and relevant for our perception of ourselves as the people who actually constitute part of our real life. It is clear that the media do not have a mere function of bearers of information and/or entertainment: mediated images can really "work to reshape consciousness" (Bailey, 2016: 17). Since the first usage of images in advertising, people have always been captured by other people portrayed in commercials. We are not just captured by the models we see daily in advertising, but we also feel a deep sense of desire, if not envy, towards perfectly depicted existences that are broadcasted by television, magazines, and now social media.

3.2 Stigmatization and Performance Anxiety

As I have already pointed out, Goffman managed to anticipate the struggle to distinguish between real and virtual existence decades before the appearance of the Internet and social media. In fact, in his *Stigma*, published in 1963, he already analyzed the concept of *virtual identity* as an identity separated from the actual one. According to Goffman, "stigma occurs as a discrepancy between 'virtual social identity' (how a person is characterized by society) and 'actual social identity'(the attributes really possessed by a person)" (Yang et al., 2007: 1525). The consequence of this discrepancy is stigma, intended as "a general aspect of social life that complicates everyday micro-level interactions – the stigmatized may be wary of engaging with those who do not share their stigma, and those without a certain stigma may disparage, overcompensate for, or attempt to ignore stigmatized individuals" (Clair, 2018). In other words, stigma leads to social disapproval and marginalization, which could generate in some individuals a discordance or gap between how they are perceived from the outside and how they actually are inside.

Goffman distinguishes three categories of stigma, namely "'tribal stigmas' (e.g., race, ethnicity, and religion), 'physical deformities' (e.g., deafness, blindness, and leprosy), and 'blemishes of character' (e.g., homosexuality, addiction, and mental illness)" (Clair, 2018). In the 21st century, stigmatization generated by religious, mental, or physical reasons has certainly decreased since the 1960s, but it has not completely disappeared. To these three categories that still influence the stigmatizer-stigmatized dynamic, a fourth and fifth categories can be added that incorporate the stigma discourse in the postmodern context: material possession and cultural elitism. As argued in the previous chapter through the analysis of consumer identity, in late capitalism there seems to be an obvious connection between an individual's personal value and the objects he is supposed to own. However, when the purchase of certain items or experiences cannot occur, usually because of scarce financial possibilities, the individual perceives an inescapable

sense of non-belonging and loss of personal values. As far as cultural elitism is concerned, people who yearn to belong to social groups characterized by sharing specific cultural interests might be stigmatized when the required knowledge in the fields of interest does not satisfy the expectations of the group. This dynamic does not necessarily regard only high culture environments, but also all those contexts in which sharing the same knowledge on a topic and the slang related to it results in a sense of belonging to a community. This last situation and the insecurity and self-doubt it produces in each protagonist will be particularly relevant in the close analysis of "Good Old Neon" and *Leaving the Atocha Station*.

Stigma is exactly what postmodern people fear, especially those who adopt imposture as a coping mechanism against this concern. Apparently, one of the main preoccupations that characterize postmodern society is to be left out, to be excluded by those social groups representing the values, lifestyle, and possessions that are subtly indicated as necessary to be accepted within society. The fear of feeling marginalized often leads people to lie, to a greater or lesser extent, so as to adapt to the normativity established by social criteria of belonging. Gilles Lipovetsky observes that

> what we fear the most in the current era is to be invisible, to be a 'loser,' and to feel responsible for one's failure to achieve the constantly changing criteria of 'success.' Thus, it is no longer sufficient to present oneself as decently educated, as having a comfortable life, and as being relatively successful in one's professional and domestic endeavors. One must also be healthy, attractive, happy, centered, at peace with oneself, flexible, cool, well-adjusted, spiritual, and above all, interesting and entertaining. In this new social theater, the most unforgivable sin is to be invisible or boring. (Gottschalk & Whitmer, 2016: 315-316)

This passage perfectly describes the enormous effort that people must make in postmodern society in order to avoid non-inclusion or, worst-case scenario, stigma. In this context, not only do people have to perform their own life, but also perceive themselves as a sort of product to

be sold every day. Lipovetsky is also the French philosopher who coined the term *hypermodernity*. According to the theorist, the term postmodernism would not be accurate enough to describe a society absorbed by consumerism; a society filled up, as he says, with "[h]ypercapitalism, hyperclass, hyperpower, hyperterrorism, hyperindividualism, hypermarket, hypertext - is there anything that isn't 'hyper'?" (Lipovetsky, 2005). Essentially, he sees hypermodernity as a new stage beyond postmodernity, characterized by an accelerated pace of life, heightened consumerism, and an intensified focus on individualism. Hypermodern society is characterized by the domain of excess and abundance influencing every aspect of life, from work to entertainment, and even social interaction. In such a context, every action is regulated by consumption, which is seen as the only way through which people can express themselves and form an identity. As Sébastien Charles maintains in in his introduction to Lipovetsky's book, hypermodern consumerism

> does not always manifest itself simply as a naked consumerism, but rather as an extreme form of individualism. The hypermodern individual lives a life characterized by flexibility, adaptability, and a demand for continuous improvement, both in the workplace and throughout his or her general life. But Lipovetsky is quick to point out a paradox here: the drive towards flexibility and improvement is something that is demanded of the hypermodern individual, as well as something that the hypermodern individual demands as a consumer. (Lipovetsky, 2005)

The hypermodern individual, therefore, is constantly pressed by a system that demands a 'continuous improvement' both in public and private life and, consequently, the individual is asked to continuously perform the most efficient version of himself, even when such an efficiency is humanly impossible to achieve. Apparently, in fact, "[h]igh achievements in every aspect of life and reaching them [...] is the norm for every individual in a hypermodern culture" (Verhoeven et al., 2018: 474) and the same Lipovetsky "specifically refers to the present as a 'culture of hypermodern performance,' as rooted in the 'extenuating weight of performance

norms'" (qtd. in Bailey, 2016: 60).

Unable to keep up with expectations and pressure, the individual finds himself overwhelmed by a form of anxiety generated by the social roles he is forced to perform. When it comes to leave the safety of the back region to perform one or more social roles in front regions, postmodern or hypermodern individuals might feel a variety of mixed feelings (e.g., tension, anxiety, self-doubt, discomfort, even fear) caused by the prospect of not being able to meet social expectations through (and in spite of) their performance. This form of anxiety is not the kind of deep concern related to uncertainty towards the future, nor is it caused by traumatic events of the past, but rather it is associated with the presence of an audience who is believed to exercise a constant judgment. In other words, it belongs to the category of social anxiety. Therefore, people who possess a higher sense of self-awareness tend to focus considerably on their own appearance, thus belonging to the other-oriented subject theorized by Riesman. In his analysis of consumer culture in America, David Riesman distinguishes two categories of individuals based on their approach to social norms: inner-oriented and other-oriented. The former "is a person who has since childhood interiorized social values and norms and consistently respects these values and norms in all circumstances" while the latter is "more focused on how a person appears […] [and] considers himself as something that needs to be marketed. He is constantly checking whether the aspects of his self-presentation conform with the image that he wants others to have of him" (Pattyn & Van Liedekerke, 2001: 93). The other-oriented subject is, as a result, constantly tormented by a sense of anxiety and uncertainty, typical of postmodern socialization according to Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 1992), someone who fills his mind with doubts such as "Am I doing this properly? Did I make the right impression? Am I wearing the right clothes? Am I driving the right car? Do I smell all right? Do I say the right things? Do I have the right taste in music?" (ibid. 93); as if there were a specific kind of model to follow to adhere to the image of a proper human being. In other

words, it is the case of a subject whose only way to feel a sense of value depends on other people's opinion.

In his analysis of performance anxiety and the consequent "combination of discontinuity and personalization" (Bailey, 2016: 86), Steve Bailey highlights the universal nature of this type of anxiety by claiming that it would be "the result not of a brain disorder or medical illness but of a social system demanding hyperconsumption and the adoption of personae that become increasingly difficult to maintain" (ibid. 86). Although the attempt to adhere to social models is connected to a sense of belonging, such belonging is almost never fully achieved. This occurs because the force dominating current society is, mainly, individualism which does not result in a form of individual hedonism, but rather in a constant tension connected to the performances required. As Sebastien Charles argues, in fact,

> Hypernarcissism is the name we can give to the epoch of a Narcissus who presents himself as mature, responsible, organized, efficient, and flexible – one who is thereby quite different from the Narcissus of the postmodern years, who was intensely hedonistic and libertarian. These days, Narcissus is gnawed by anxiety; fear has imposed itself on his liberation. (qtd. in Bailey, 2016: 59)

Individuals living in a late capitalist society are required to achieve perfect results at work while maintaining an active social life, impeccable mental and physical health, a variety of hobbies, and continuous skill development to face competition. Competition and expectations are fostered by the media, which present role models depicting high standards of life that, although almost impossible to reach, instill a subconscious desire in the audience. The desire towards others, more specifically towards what others seem to have that our existence lacks, is always a consequence of our watching them.

Watching others generates a desire for something they possess, and this desire results in imitation on the part of the gazer. René Girard defined such a phenomenon as *mimetic desire*

by observing how "[m]an is the creature who does not know what to desire, and he turns to others in order to make up his mind. We desire what others desire because we imitate their desires" (Girard, 1987: 122). The object of desire can be a physical object as such, or even something more abstract, like a lifestyle. When we see a certain type of lifestyle emphasized and craved by a large part of society, we will automatically feel the same desire towards it. This kind of mechanism is well known by advertising and, consequently, industries amplify mimetic desire by portraying desirable lifestyles and possessions, suggesting that happiness and social approval are always linked to consumer goods. The production of increasingly new goods generates a perpetual cycle of desire and consumption and, as a result, individuals struggle to keep up with trends and social standards but, at the same time, they are aware of the necessity to keep up with them to fit in society.

When an individual compares his lifestyle with one or many lifestyles portrayed by the media, the inevitable consequence is the rise of envious feelings. However, when the envious subject realizes how keeping up with the commonly desired lifestyle is actually challenging, instead of embracing the truth and admitting his failure, he pretends to have access to that lifestyle; he pretends to be something he is not, since, as we have seen, the worst consequence would be stigma. Although from the outside the subject might seem well adjusted and successful, his innermost thoughts are, instead, tormented by the anxiety generated by the one or many performances he must play daily in the front region.

In a system that praises appearance more than essence, the easiest way to present the best version of oneself to a daily audience is through a web of lies, which can be irrelevantly small or so extensive and out-of-control as to lead to the development of a completely different identity. The way people perceive us depends on how we self-present ourselves, and storytelling can inevitably shape one's identity. Knirsch highlights how recent neurological research in the U.S. and Europe have "declared identity a mere cognitive construct: Identity is

the story we keep telling us and others about ourselves; it is a story that is continually changing" (Knirsch, 2014: 144) thus noticing the power one has in deciding how to be perceived not only by others but also by himself. He then continues by arguing that

> It is not only the story we tell us about ourselves; we tell this very story or different versions of it to others and when others *believe* this story, the storyteller is considered to be authentic. Per definition, impostors consciously manipulate this narration and pretend to be a person they are not […] Impostors are as much part of an 'authenticity game' as they are part of a 'confidence game' – and authenticity is judged upon by members of a certain culture or sub-culture. If successful, this behavior is socially rewarded with public recognition, respect, or even admiration. (144-145)

This analysis perfectly epitomizes the core of this study by highlighting how impostors create a constructed identity supported by accurate storytelling that they attempt to present as authentic and whose authenticity can be determined only by an external gaze and, consequently, evaluation. When such artificial authenticity is believed by the social group, the impostor receives exactly what he fought for: public recognition, respect, and admiration. Each one of us plays one or more social roles on the stage of the front region, and such roles are, as contemporary neurologists claim, always sustained by self-narration. As Krisch notices, it can be said that

> every identity is a self-narration at a certain point in time; in this logic, impostors are simply people who brush up their narration to a degree that exceeds the norm. The respective environment continuously judges the authenticity level of this narration so that the narration can have different effects. It is either socially accepted and rewarded […] or it is rejected […] in this case one is stigmatized as an impostor. (156)

In the next three chapters, it will be seen how the themes discussed so far have been represented by two American writers. The two literary examples – "Good Old Neon" and *Leaving the Atocha Station* – deal with the postmodern dichotomy of authenticity/fraudulence and the

search for societal approval. Although in different ways, the three literary works depict deep explorations of identity, authenticity, and the psychological impact of social expectations and how fraudulence is adopted as a coping mechanism to deal with the social pressures analyzed and critiqued by postmodern philosophy and sociology investigated up to this point.

4. David Foster Wallace's "Good Old Neon"

"My whole life I've been a fraud. I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is to try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired" (Wallace, 2004: 141). This is how "Good Old Neon", one of the short stories contained in David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion*, begins. An incipit that immediately feels like a confession of a condition from which, as we will see, the protagonist admits he cannot find a way out. The protagonist's name is Neal, although his name is revealed after more than ten pages, quite far from the beginning. The short story is essentially a 40-page-long confession of Neal's fraudulence, indicated as a "part of me [that] was always there" (150) thus implying the innate nature of the psychological phenomenon. Throughout the story, the reader is accompanied by Neal inside his own thoughts until the tragic epilogue of Neal's suicide, foreshadowed by the same protagonist on the first pages of the story. The story is narrated in the first person but after the suicide of the protagonist, it switches to third-person narration through the focalization of another character: David Wallace. The narration, however, is more complicated than it might appear, building a sort of "labyrinthine maze" (Ardovino & Masiero, 2022: 69) that will be analyzed in detail further on.

The main theme of the story is, as mentioned, fraudulence. In fact, we see a 29-year-old American yuppie struggling with the discrepancy between his self-presented identity and the 'true' identity hidden from the external gaze. This discrepancy generates a fraud attitude that influences every aspect of his interpersonal relationships. Neal is obsessed, from the very first years of his life, by the need to be accepted by others. In school years, as he says, his whole motive

> wasn't to learn or improve myself but just to do well, to get good grades and make sports teams and perform well […] I didn't enjoy it much because I was always scared I wouldn't do well enough. The fear made me work really hard, so I'd always do well and

> end up getting what I wanted. But then […] I wouldn't feel much of anything except maybe fear that I wouldn't be able to get it again. (141)

Therefore, this constant act of searching for other people's approval and admiration leads Neal to work as hard as possible just to provide the most perfect version of himself, just to 'perform well', because he is convinced of not being able to do what he does. He is tormented by the fear of never being enough for social expectations, stating how "frustrating it was to get just good enough to know what getting really good at it would be like but not being able to get that good" (146). Once he manages to achieve the desired admiration, however, he does not feel any form of personal satisfaction or happiness, but rather fear of not being able to perform equally well a second time and, consequently, of being labeled as a fraud. In fact, he argues how it is "horrible to be regarded as a fraud or to believe that people think you're a fraud or a liar. It's possibly one of the worst feelings in the world" (149), thus confirming how stigmatization is truly one of the biggest preoccupations of people in postmodernity, as discussed in the previous chapter. Clare Hayes-Brady observes how the

> struggle to achieve perfection, and more significantly, approval, which is the witnessing of perfection, followed by a repudiation of the desire for perfection and approval, leading to self-loathing which in turn strengthens the need for perfection and approval, is a cycle that is explicitly revisited by the narrator of 'Good Old Neon'. (Hayes-Brady, 2016: 114)

Neal is a highly self-aware character who analyzes his fraudulent condition through ratiocination. He is conscious of his problems and detects their causes and effects accurately, to the point of making an auto-diagnosis of his torments. Nonetheless, he still embarks on a psychotherapy journey hoping that it could "help in getting out of the trap" (155). But considering his self-awareness and the fact that he auto-diagnosed the cause of his fraudulence, it is easy to imagine his skepticism towards therapy. He says,

> I tried analysis like almost everybody else then in their late twenties who'd made some money or had a family or whatever they thought they wanted and still didn't feel that they were happy. A lot of people I knew tried it. It didn't really work, although it did make everyone sound more aware of their own problems and added some useful vocabulary and concepts to the way we all had to talk to each other to fit in and sound a certain way (142)

thus implying that even therapy – namely a situation in which patients are supposed to be as honest as possible so as to emerge from it in a better psychological shape – is just another experience to be shown off in front of others, in order to 'fit in', to be accepted by the social group.

From this passage it can also be noticed the sense of superiority that characterizes Neal's personality; an attitude noticeable throughout the entire story that is probably a coping mechanism against the inner inferiority caused by his fraudulence. The relationship with Dr. Gustafson, the analyst, occupies the majority of the story and, from the very beginning, Neal shows his superiority and skepticism towards psychotherapy, insisting on his self-awareness. Indeed, he is intended to

> showing him that I wasn't just another one of those patients who stumbled in with no clue what their real problem was or who were totally out of touch with the truth about themselves […] I was trying to show him that I was at least as smart as he was and that there wasn't much of anything he was going to see about me that I hadn't already seen and figured out […] trying to anticipate all his questions so I could show that I already knew the answers. (143)

He is highly self-conscious and determined to show it off, even in front of a professional towards whom he feels skeptical. The verb 'show', in fact, recurs several times; it might not be a coincidence considering that is a verb related to the field of performance and focus on the gaze of others. But this necessity to prove his superiority and knowledge even in a circumstance in which there is no competition or award whatsoever, will inevitably throw Neal into the same fraudulent cycle from which he is trying to escape. In fact, he ends up adopting performative

behaviors in therapy sessions too, even after mentioning to Dr. Gustafson his problem with fraudulence. As he says, he admits to him how he had "been jerking him around early on and trying to make sure he saw me as smart and self-aware, and said I'd known early on that playing around and showing off in analysis were a waste of time and money but that I couldn't seem to help myself, it just happened automatically" (145), revealing how stuck and powerless he feels towards his own fraudulence, as if it were out of his control.

Neal presents his fraudulence as subjected to what he calls *fraudulence paradox*, one of the several paradoxes present in the story. He describes it in this way:

> the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside — you were a fraud. And the more of a fraud you felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likable image of yourself so that other people wouldn't find out what a hollow, fraudulent person you really were. (147)

The discrepancy between inner and outer identities is thus explained by the protagonist as a paradox that he says he had discovered during a mathematical logic course when he was nineteen. Due to his interest in logic and mathematics, Neal attempts to understand existence by applying logical rules even to psychological matters. Matt Prout observes how Neal has a tendency to "treat his psychological problems as though they were logical or philosophical problems […] Paradoxes are logical puzzles that are a source of fascination for Neal and provide him with a model for understanding his (psychological) problems" (Prout, 2022: 227). The same sentence that opens the story – 'my whole life I've been a fraud' – is itself a paradox since, as Stefano Ballerio points out, it reminds of the liar paradox, or Epimenides paradox – 'this sentence is a lie' – thus generating an infinite regression of truth and falseness (Ballerio, 2023: 208).

Speaking of his past self in third person, Neal anticipates or rather imagines his interlocutor's reaction to the explanation of this fraudulence paradox by saying

> you would think that the moment a supposedly intelligent nineteen-year-old became aware of this paradox, he'd stop being a fraud and just settle for being himself (whatever that was) because he'd figured out that being a fraud was a vicious infinite regress that ultimately resulted in being frightened, lonely, alienated, etc. But here was the other, higher-order paradox, which didn't even have a form or name — I didn't, I couldn't. (147)

From this passage it can be noticed how David Foster Wallace applies the typical postmodern skepticism towards the concept of authentic self through Neal's doubts about the attempt to become the true version of oneself, to which he ironically adds 'whatever that was'. Neal's main problem is not simply fraudulence, but the lucid awareness of this fraudulence. Although he is aware of it, he cannot get out of the fraudulence trap in which he is caged, confessing of feeling "as if I was trapped in this false way of being and unable ever to totally open and tell the truth irregardless of whether it's make me look good in others' eyes or not" (145). This circumstance recalls the famous Dostoevsky's quote stating how too much consciousness can become a true illness and, in fact, there seem to be some analogies between Wallace and Dostoevsky. Indeed, it seems that "their exploration of philosophical themes, rather than being conceptual or theoretical, is driven by a clear desire to express – and thereby allow the reader to experience – some of the most existentially urgent and painful aspects of human existence" (den Dulk, 2022: 116). In particular, Neal's personality and thoughts remind us of Dostoevsky's protagonist of *Notes from Underground* and, analogously, of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. But, as Tim Peters observes regarding this association among authors, "whereas Ivan Ilych only fleetingly thinks himself a phony, Wallace's Neal is so obsessed with his inauthenticity that he can seem to have more in common, consciousness-wise, with Dostoevsky's Underground Man – the wretched, spiteful, rambling star of *Notes from Underground* – than he does with Tolstoy's Ilych" (T. Peters, 2014). Wallace's admiration for both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and in particular for the two novels just mentioned, is not new, since the former – *The Death of Ivan Ilych* – was cited by Wallace "among the masterpieces that most influenced him" (Pitari, 2020:

96) and the latter – *Notes from Underground* – "had immeasurable influence on Wallace – he was known to recite the Underground Man's monologue in his creative writing classes" (ibid. 256). As we have just seen, the influence of the two Russian writers can be noticed in Wallace's literary work, included "Good Old Neon" whose protagonist, as I will analyze, can be defined a paradigm of his time – late capitalist America – as Dostoevsky's Underground Man is both "an individual with his own soul and his own specific existential troubles *and* a paradigm of the era he belongs to" (Pitari, 2020: 288).

Neal traces the origin of his fraudulence back to an episode that happened when he was four, in which he lied to his stepfather after having broken a bowl. He justifies the lie by arguing that he had

> realized somehow right in the middle of his asking me if I'd broken the bowl that if I'd said I did it but 'confessed' it in a sort of clumsy, implausible way, then he wouldn't believe me and would instead believe that my sister Fern, who's my stepparents' biological daughter, was the one who'd actually broken the antique Moser glass bowl that my stepmom had inherited from her biological grandmother and totally loved, plus it would lead or induce him to see me as a kind, good stepbrother who was so anxious to keep Fern (whom I really did like) from getting in trouble that I'd be willing to lie and take the punishment for it for her. (147-148)

It appears as a complicated justification and Neal is immediately aware of it when he says, "I'm not explaining this very well" (148) mostly because he attempts to make sense through words of a memory lived when he could not understand the meaning of his emotions yet. What is certain is that, from that moment onwards, he realized that he had the ability and power to generate a desired image of himself in other people's mind just by lying, given that, as he observes "by lying in such a deliberately unconvincing way I could actually get everything that a direct lie would supposedly get me" (148). Neal admits that, once he realized he had this capacity of deceiving other people, he did not feel guilty about it, but it rather "felt great. I felt powerful and smart" (149). And it is interesting to notice how he developed a complete

dependency on fraudulent behavior even though his stepparents raised him in a strongly honest environment in which "lying was the worst, most disappointing infraction you could commit, in their view as parents" (149). The need to be admired by others and fit in social groups is, therefore, stronger than the family values he inherited.

Throughout the story, Neal seems to progressively analyze himself to find a diagnosis of his fraudulence, and this constant self-analysis sometimes leads him to reconsider his previous statements. For instance, his reasoning over the origin of this fraudulence passes from the episode he had had at four to the idea of an innate form of fraudulence, positioning Neal in a universal dimension of shared struggle. As he argues,

> The point being that that was the start of my being a fraud, although it's not as if the broken-bowl episode was somehow the origin or cause of my fraudulence or some kind of childhood trauma that I'd never gotten over and had to go into analysis to work out. The fraud part of me was always there, just as the puzzle piece, objectively speaking, is a true piece of the puzzle even before you see how it fits. For a while I thought that possibly one or the other of my biological parents had been frauds or had carried some type of fraud gene or something and that I had inherited it. (150)

Den Dulk observes how Wallace's work suggests that "we are now practically born self-aware, susceptible from a young age to the feelings of fraudulence […] this feeling of fraudulence or falsity […] was already tainted with the other-worldly, with comparisons and contrasts to perfection, and consequently with the seeds of failure and resentment" (den Dulk, 2023: 6). We are all frauds since our birth, and Neal acts as a sort of spokesman of this universal fraudulence.

In the story, Neal often addresses the question of the limits of language. In fact, he seems to find in the incommunicability generated by language one of the main reasons behind fraudulence. He analyzes the phenomenon of human inability to truly know what another person is thinking and feeling because "[w]hat goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant" (151). The discrepancy between inner and outer identities that

generates the fraudulence paradox is therefore emphasized by the discrepancy between thinking-time and telling-time, with the former being enormously faster than the latter. And yet, language remains the only tool we can all use to express our interiority, despite its insufficiency. Neals adds

> Words and chronological time create all these total misunderstandings of what's really going on at the most basic level. And yet at the same time English is all we have to try to understand it and try to form anything larger or more meaningful and true with anybody else, which is yet another paradox. […] It is interesting if you really think about it, how clumsy and laborious it seems to be to convey even the smallest thing. (151-153)

Many times in the story, Neal refers to such limits as clichés that he constantly criticizes, as when he says at the beginning that he "wasn't happy at all, whatever happy means, but of course I didn't say this to anybody because it was such a cliché" (142). However, as Ballerio observes, Neal cannot avoid using language and its clichés in the exact story he is telling, since it remains the only way to make his life and interiority understood from the outside, thus creating a mediation between other people and his personal thoughts (Ballerio, 2023: 213). And he is again aware of it when saying, "[h]owever tedious and sketchy all this is, you're at least getting an idea, I think, of what it was like inside my head" (155). Neal seems to condemn clichés because he is afraid of thinking, speaking, and being like everybody else. When addressing his feelings of loneliness caused by fraudulence, he realizes that

> we're all lonely, of course. Everyone knows this, it's almost a cliché. So yet another layer of my essential fraudulence is that I pretended to myself that my loneliness was special, that it was uniquely my fault because I was somehow especially fraudulent and hollow. It's not special at all, we've all got it (153)

and proceeding then to recognize the commonness not only of his fraudulence, but also of the loneliness it might generate. Even before committing suicide, Neal seems disappointed to

realize how his thoughts preceding death are the same as anyone else's.

Regarding this passage, den Dulk argues that

> [w]hat we see here is – again – the excessive self-critique that detects fraudulence as the result of an impossible criterion, in this case having experiences that are purely one's own, not an imitation of others or gleaned from a TV show or novel [...] Neal's reflection tells him that it is all a cliché, and this is exactly the self-perception – of being some sort of performative, empty shell – that drove Neal to suicide in the first place. (den Dulk, 2023: 7)

The question of the constant repetition of experiences enhanced by media imitation is a matter highly discussed by postmodernism. Umberto Eco, for instance, defined such a phenomenon as *double coding,* explained through the example of

> a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly'. [...] If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated. (Eco, 1994: 67-68)

What Eco means is that, since the past is now emptied but cannot be eliminated, what remains to do is dealing with it re-signifying it through the adoption of layers of irony. David Foster Wallace largely investigated the question of irony in postmodernism, in particular in his essay *E Unibus Pluram*, in which he analyzed the usage of irony in media language and how media, especially TV, have appropriated and distorted irony which was a tool previously adopted by literature exactly to criticize society and popular culture. In *E Unibus Pluram*, Wallace writes

> irony essentially is, on the one hand, a form of double-coding that could be easily found, for instance, in certain nineties sitcoms (such as the covert allusions made to other movies or TV shows the actor has played in). On the other hand, it is a true zeitgeist, a

> way of communicating amongst people and incarnated first and foremost by the manners and style of hyper-famous TV hosts. (Brondino, 2023: 175)

The constant exposure to the language spoken by the media not only modifies our way to communicate with each other, but also our way of thinking. The appropriation of words and expressions heard in the media inevitably shapes common thought and generates the clichés that Neal criticizes. What is certain is that Neal feels a deep distress caused by the awareness of being unable to fully know what other people actually feel and think and, conversely, others' inability to truly understand Neal's interiority. This awareness, to which is connected to the question of the limits of language, results in skepticism towards the supposed honesty in interpersonal relationships. When observing the similarities between Wittgenstein and Wallace, Prout points out that

> the sceptic is struck (rightly, it seems) by the fact that human beings are not always wholly transparent to one another: I *can* lie to you about how I feel. The possibility of simulation (or dissimulation) leads the sceptic to the conclusion that I can never know (for certain) what sensations you are feeling – I can never know on the basis of your outward behaviour what is going on inside you. (Prout, 2022: 224)

And this is exactly the case of Neal, who is trapped in the awareness of a gap between inner and outer states that not even language can fill. The failure to understand others and, vice versa, to be understood by others also affects his relationship with Dr. Gustafson. After Neal's confession of his fraudulence, in fact, the analyst reports to his patient what he understood of the fraudulence paradox by outlining what seems as an accurate description of Neal's problem. Although mistrustful, Neal confirms Dr. Gustafson interpretations by saying "a little simplistic but basically accurate" (145). And yet, he perceives the confession of his fraudulence as another of his manipulations and argues that Dr. Gustafson was

> just as pliable and credulous as everyone else, he didn't appear to […] give me any hope of getting me out of the trap of fraudulence and unhappiness I'd constructed for myself.

> Because the real truth was that my confession of being a fraud and of having wasted time sparring with him over the previous weeks in order to manipulate him into seeing me as exceptional and insightful had itself been kind of manipulative. […] So the fact that I had chosen to be supposedly 'honest' and to diagnose myself aloud was in fact just one more move in my campaign to make sure Dr. Gustafson understood that as a patient I was uniquely acute and self-aware, and that there was very little chance he was going to see or diagnose anything about me that I wasn't already aware of and able to turn to my own tactical advantage in terms of creating whatever image or impression of myself I wanted him to see at that moment. (154)

Even when he tells the truth about his fraudulence, thus theoretically breaking the circle of the fraudulence itself, Neal still feels as if he is manipulating others. And even when other people, in this case Dr. Gustafson, seem to actually understand the nature of his problem, he "remains unwilling – even in death – to accept that others might see him more accurately than he himself does" (den Dulk, 2023: 8). Neal insists on Dr. Gustafson's incapacity to grasp the cause of his fraudulence, in spite of the evidence presented by the analyst, and he even describes the analyst's insight as "not only obvious and superficial but also wrong" (154-155), thus showing again his superiority and tendency to auto-diagnose the reasons of his fraudulence. Regarding this, Prout argues that for Cavell and Wittgenstein, it is the idea that the "obvious is necessarily superficial that leads to scepticism: overcoming scepticism requires rejecting sophistication in favour of an acceptance of the ordinary. None the less, from the standpoint of Neal's narrative (what we, as readers, have access to), Dr Gustafson has failed to grasp the complexity of Neal's problem" (Prout, 2022: 229), but this is, of course, only Neal's point of view. It seems, as den Dulk suggests (ibid. 8), that Neal refuses Dr. Gustafson's insight on his fraudulence because he does not want to be included in a diagnosis if not made by himself; in other words, he does not want to belong to a cliché like anyone else. He is strongly bond to this exceptional opinion of himself that prevents him to realize that

> the cure [for fraudulence] might not lie in him being aware of his own inconsistencies, but in acknowledging that others see these inconsistencies and the rest of his self more

> accurately than he himself does – suggesting a view of authenticity as intersubjective – as this would unravel Neal's 'exceptionalist' assumption that his experience is fundamentally private and impossible to put into words by and for others […] the story positions the reader to realize that they [Dr. Gustafson and others] see Neal more accurately than he himself does in his excessive self-critique. (den Dulk, 2023: 8)

Neal is convinced that nothing and nobody can now help him escape from the trap of fraudulence, and after the disappointment provoked by the realization that even Dr. Gustafson is easily manipulable, he loses faith also in therapy and starts to seriously consider suicide.

Before delving into the description of his suicide and the moments preceding the act, Neal reports some episodes of his life exemplifying the manifestation of his fraudulence. At first, he joins Naperville's church, hoping it could awaken him from the "fog of fraudulence" (156). While at first he genuinely seems a devoted prayer, he soon passes "from being someone who was there because he wanted to wake up and stop being a fraud to being somebody who was so anxious to impress the congregation with how devoted and active I was" (157). Essentially, Neal sees even religious practice as a performance in which he needs to demonstrate his best version not only to be accepted by the community but also to impress them. The performance goes on until he "suddenly experienced a flash of self-awareness or clarity or whatever in which I suddenly stopped conning myself and realized that I'd been a fraud all these months in the church […] I wanted everyone to think I was sincere" (158). When joining a Christian community failed, Neal attempts to overcome his fraudulence by attending a meditation course. Even in this circumstance, however, he feels compelled to behave as perfectly as possible by remaining "absolutely still and focused on breathing my prana with the lower diaphragm longer than any of them [participants], sometimes for up to thirty minutes, even though my knees and lower back were on fire" (159). Neal is clearly willing to ignore the physical pain in order to stage the most impeccable performance when other people's look is directed at him, or rather when he *believes* other people are looking at him. The desire to be

liked by others overcomes the pain felt to achieve this goal. At the end of the course his need to be noticed and appreciated is rewarded by the same instructor, Master Gurpreet, who hands him a certificate with the inscription "CHAMPION MEDITATOR, MOST IMPRESSIVE WESTERN STUDENT, THE STATUE" (160); an inscription that could be enough to make him feel satisfied of his physical and mental efforts, but not for Neal's intricate mind. Indeed, he believes that this certificate proves that Master Gurpreet discovered his fraudulence. He insists on how the certificate made him realize that

> Master Gurpreet had actually in all likelihood seen right through me the whole time, and that the certificate was in reality a subtle rebuke or joke at my expense. Meaning he was letting me know that he knew I was a fraud and not even coming close to actually quieting my mind's ceaseless conniving about how to impress people in order to achieve mindfulness and honor my true inner self. (160)

It is clear that Neal does not believe in the existence of his own skills in the activities he does. He feels a sense of personal value only when other people's look, and consequent judgment, is directed at him. Nonetheless, he tells his interlocutor that, before falling asleep, he practices the meditation techniques learnt at the course which "did turn out to be a phenomenal sleep aid" (160). This would demonstrate Neal's actual ability to do the things he pretends to be the best at even when he is not surrounded by other people. To say it in Goffman's terms, he can perform properly not only in the front region but also in the back region of his private environment. As den Dulk notices "while Neal emphasizes that he can only hold yoga poses for long, painful periods in order to be seen as the best student, he brushes over the fact that he is able to use meditation exercises, alone, before going to sleep, to help him deal with his sleeping problems" (den Dulk, 2023: 5). What is this if not a manifestation of imposter syndrome? By definition, the imposter syndrome is

> a behavioral health phenomenon described as self-doubt of intellect, skills, or accomplishments among high-achieving individuals. These individuals cannot

> internalize their success and subsequently experience pervasive feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, depression, and/or apprehension of being exposed as a fraud in their work, despite verifiable and objective evidence of their successfulness. (Huecker et al, 2023)

Neal undoubtedly matches the definition of imposter syndrome, given that his levels of self-critique and self-doubt are so elevated that hinder the recognition of his own abilities and successes. For this reason, he feels like a fraud in many aspects of his life ranging from work to social life. Paolo Pitari explains how the phenomenon of the imposter syndrome can be noticed in different Wallace's characters like Claude Sylvanshine from his unfinished novel *The Pale King* or Lane Dean from the short story "Good People". These characters share, along with Neal, a terror of other people's look and judgment. As Pitari argues

> If my meaning and value are what others say they are, then I within [me] possess no meaning nor value. The incurable evil of the impostor syndrome that affects Wallace's characters is not so much the idea of presenting a mask to other people (this is a symptom), but the more fundamental truth that I can never feel authentic, nor know who I am (and so whether I'm lying to myself or not), if the ones who decide who I am is other people. (Pitari, 2020: 363)

The complete dependency on other people's opinion on us inevitably generates an identity crisis, since we are no longer able to perceive our true and authentic value uninfluenced by others' judgment or evaluation. Pitari identifies the tragic aftermath of this situation in

> the complete loss of self-identity, feeling as nothing inside and not knowing who I am, believing that other people decide who I am. Once that feeling is established, terror of the other's look – and so performance, fraudulence, and narcissism – are unavoidable. Paralysis so becomes the inevitable feeling of our perception of existence and its resulting impossibility of establishing a self-identity. (ibid. 363)

As I analyzed in the previous chapters – especially Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 – societal pressures and expectations in late capitalism inevitably generate the need to perform an identity adequate to such expectations. However, when maintaining this performance becomes a struggle for the

individual, the result might be the rise of strong anxious feelings, more precisely of performance anxiety. The same dynamic occurs in "Good Old Neon", and according to Dr. Gustafson, it might be caused by America's expectations on its male citizens. As Neal says, the analyst believes that America's culture had a

> uniquely brutal and alienating way of brainwashing its males from an early age into all kinds of damaging beliefs and superstitions about what being a so-called 'real man' was, such as competitiveness instead of concert, winning at all costs, dominating others through intelligence or will, being strong, not showing your true emotions, depending on others seeing you as a real man in order to reassure yourself of your manhood, seeing your own value solely in terms of accomplishments, being obsessed with your career or income, feeling as if you were constantly being judged or on display, etc. (163)

Already in 1963, Goffman discussed the issue regarding the universalization of stigma by arguing that

> Any male who fails to qualify [with a social ideal] in any one of these ways is likely to view himself– during moments at least – as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior; […] to find himself being apologetic or aggressive concerning known-about aspects of himself he knows are probably seen as undesirable. The general identity-values of a society may be fully entrenched nowhere, and yet they can cast some kind of shadow on the encounters encountered everywhere in daily living. (qtd. in Bailey, 2016: 13)

In the era of digital media, this phenomenon is not simply regarded to belong to 'masculinity' but rather to define 'toxic masculinity'. This term particularly refers to the traditional role of men in Western societies inherited by centuries of patriarchal dogmas. The concept of toxic masculinity includes behaviors like suppressing emotions or masking distress, maintaining an appearance of hardness and using violence as an indicator of power. As Maya Salam argues, toxic masculinity is "what can come of teaching boys that they can't express emotion openly; that they have to be 'tough all the time'; that anything other than that makes them 'feminine' or weak" (Salam, 2019). Because of the legacy left by patriarchy, men feel the necessity to demonstrate and show their 'virility' and toughness in order to be accepted, taken seriously and

appreciated by a society that is still highly founded on gender differences. As women have to keep up daily with beauty standards, men, on the other hand, feel the pressure to adhere to the social standards established by masculinity. In both cases, individuals are forced to wear a mask, to perform the identity required for their gender. And Neal is clearly a victim of an America which values its male citizens according to their exhibition of masculine attitudes. According to Dr. Gustafson, these social expectations towards American men would result in an impossibility to love. Neal reports Dr. Gustafson's statement by saying that

> one of the worst things about the conception of competitive, achievement-oriented masculinity that America supposedly hardwired into its males was that it caused a more or less constant state of fear that made genuine love next to impossible. That is, that what passed for love in American men was usually just the need to be regarded in a certain way, meaning that today's males were so constantly afraid of 'not measuring up' […] convincing others of their masculine 'validity' […] in order to ease their own insecurity, making genuine love next to impossible. (164)

When reflecting on Dr. Gustafson's words, Neal seems to agree at first with this possible connection between male social expectations and lack of love, arguing that the idea made him realize that "maybe the real root of my problem was not fraudulence but a basic inability to really love" (165) proceeding then to list the people with whom he established a relationship throughout his life, from his stepparents to his lovers. Neal himself links the impossibility to love – generated by the fear of not being able to fulfill America's expectations on men – to the beginning of his fraudulence. Additionally, Neal autonomously associates his fraudulence not only to the inability to love others, but also and foremost to the inability to love and appreciate himself, which inevitably generates the high self-critique that characterizes his personality. In fact, he argues that

> being unable to really love was at least a different model or lens through which to see the problem, plus initially it seemed like a promising way of attacking the fraudulence paradox in terms of reducing the self-hatred part that reinforced the fear and the

consequent drive to try to manipulate people into providing the very approval I'd denied myself. (Dr. G.'s term for approval was *validation*.) (166)

But as Ballerio observes, although this self-reflection seems to suggest a hopeful perspective against Neal's fraudulence, this same hope rapidly disappears when Neal returns to his resisting approach of intellectual superiority towards any attempt of diagnosis proposed by Dr. Gustafson (Ballerio, 2023: 214). Regarding this, Prout notices how "Neal re-enters the intellectual arms race rather than admitting that his 'competitive achievement-oriented' attachment to intellectual superiority might be part of the problem." (Prout, 2022: 230)

Now completely hopeless towards the possibility of receiving external help because, according to him, everybody can be manipulated, Neal receives the coup de grâce when an old *Cheers* episode is broadcasted on tv. Neal deeply identifies with the episode when the character of an analyst says "If I have one more yuppie come in and start whining to be about how he can't love, I'm going to throw up" followed by "a huge laugh from the show's studio audience, which indicated that they – and so by demographic extension the whole national audience at home as well – recognized what a cliché and melodramatic type of complaint the inability-to-love concept was" (168). He therefore sees himself and his inability to love reflected not simply in a cliché but also in a category mocked and, probably, stigmatized. The two things he fears the most – cliché and stigmatization – seem now an inescapable fate and this awareness unsettles him. First, he realizes that his problem is not a unique experience but rather a struggle shared by many other people to the point of representing a commonplace; second, he understands that confessing his impossibility to love and, consequently, his fraudulence, could lead other people to make fun of him and stigmatize him as we have seen in that *Cheers* episode. The episode represents the trigger that will lead Neal to consider suicide since, as he claims, the episode

> more or less destroyed me, that's the only way I can describe it, as if whatever hope of any way out of the trap I'd made for myself had been blasted out of midair or laughed off the stage, as if I were one of those stock comic characters who is always both the butt of the joke and the only person not to get the joke — and in sum I went to bed feeling as fraudulent, befogged, hopeless and full of self-contempt as I'd ever felt, and it was the next morning after that that I woke up having decided I was going to kill myself and end the whole farce. (169)

After all the efforts and attempts to overcome his fraudulence and to reach a more authentic version of himself, Neal gives up and realizes that the only way out of the 'farce' is to kill himself, to stop existing.

From this point, the anticipatory phase preceding the suicidal act begins: Neal writes a note to Fern, his stepsister, in which he explains the reasons behind his future disappearance. With the lucidity that distinguishes him, Neal argues that he intends to kill himself firstly because he is a "fraudulent person who seemed to lack either the character or the firepower to find a way to stop even after I'd realized my fraudulence" and secondly because he felt as "nothing but just another fast-track yuppie who couldn't love and [...] was evidently so hollow and insecure that I had a pathological need to see myself as somehow exceptional or outstanding at all times" (173).

Neal confirms again how his mind is influenced by TV opinions because he is aware that such opinions reflect deeply entrenched American beliefs and, consequently, the possible causes of stigma. This dependency on the opinions vented on TV does not belong to Neal only, but it is a feature of postmodern times. In 1999, David Foster Wallace published a piece for *Rolling Stone Magazine* titled *100-word Statement on the Millenium* which was dedicated exactly to this issue. He wrote:

> We're all – especially those of us who are educated and have read a lot and have watched TV critically – in a very self-conscious and sort of worldly and sophisticated time, but also a time when we seem terribly afraid of other people's reactions to us and very

> desperate to control how people interpret us. Everyone is extremely conscious of manipulating how they come off in the media; they want to structure what they say so that the reader or audience will interpret it in the way that is most favorable to them. (Wallace, 1999: 125)

It is inevitable to think of the social media impact that we all experience since their first introduction around the half of the 00s, which demonstrates how David Foster Wallace already prefigured the negative effect of the media – TV in his time – on the individual's relationship with himself and other people.

Already imagining Fern's reaction to the admission of fraudulence, Neal proceeds to explain the discrepancy between his staged life and how he actually felt inside. As he says

> my whole life I'd often said and done things designed to prompt certain people to believe that I was a genuinely outstanding person whose personal standards were so high that he was far too hard on himself, which in turn made me appear attractively modest and unsmug, and was a big reason for my popularity with so many people in all different avenues of my life […] but was nevertheless basically calculated and fraudulent. (173)

In other words, he purposefully crafted his popularity but at the same time he always managed to appear modest in order to be further appreciated; a modesty that was, in turn, calculated and inauthentic. The need to perform obsesses Neal even in the hours of preparation before the suicide that he defines as "ceremonial" (175), such as reflecting on actions done for the very last time or reflecting on all the things he will not do again like watching a sunrise or biting a pear. He fantasizes even on the suicide act and its performative energy by "evaluating the scene, and thinking what a fine and genuine-seeming performance in a drama it would make if only we all had not already been subject to countless scenes just like it in dramas ever since we first saw a movie or read a book" (176). Neal feels the need to perform even in the moments anticipating his own suicide, thus confirming how his reliance on other people's watching and opinion persists even after his own death. But he also points out the impossibility of reaching

a high dramatic effect due to the *already-seen* nature of suicide. He highlights the inescapable repetition of experiences caused by media exposure analyzed, as we have previously seen, by Eco's *double-code*. In fact, he goes on by clarifying that

> the reason scenes like this will seem stale or manipulative to an audience is that we've already seen so many of them in dramas, and yet the reason we've seen so many of them in dramas is that the scenes really are dramatic and compelling and let people communicate very deep, complicated emotional realities that are almost impossible to articulate in any other way. (176)

The same act of writing a suicide note – a scene read or seen in many books and movies – seems to follow a sort of script due to the influence of media on postmodern people and this results in a decrease of authenticity of that same action. Even in this action, in fact, Neal notices his fraudulence since he feels as

> the very same manipulative fraud writing the note to Fern that I had been throughout the life that had brought me to this climactic scene of writing and signing it and addressing the envelope and affixing postage and putting the envelope in my shirt pocket (totally conscious of the resonance of its resting there, next to my heart, in the scene), planning to drop it in a mailbox on the way out to Lily Cache Rd. and the bridge abutment into which I planned to drive my car at speeds sufficient to displace the whole front end and impale me on the steering wheel and instantly kill me. (176)

He already has a plan because he has seen the same or similar scenes in several movies portraying suicide's anticipation. Moreover, he fantasizes about the effects of his own death on the people he knows, thus performing the orchestration of his suicide in the best possible way. It is curious, however, that although he performs the moments preceding his suicide, he wants the actual act to be the least performative. He wants the act to be as isolated as possible, so that

> there would be as little an aspect of performance to the thing as I could manage and no temptation to spend my last few seconds trying to imagine what impression the sight and sound of the impact might make on someone watching. I was partly concerned that it might be spectacular and dramatic and might look as if the driver was trying to go out

> in as dramatic a way as possible. This is the sort of shit we waste our lives thinking about. (177)

However, this attempted disinterest in performance is itself a performance. In fact, it is “a mere performance of disinterest about performing, that is, he wants people to think he committed suicide without thinking of what people would think” (Pitari, 2019: 191), as he says, some pages before, that “it doesn’t really matter what you think about me, because despite appearances this isn’t even really about me” (152). And yet, the conclusion of that passage sheds light on the universality of such performative pressures, expressing at the same time Neal’s realization of the pointlessness of tormenting ourselves with similar thoughts about the impression we make on other people.

The last four pages of the short story present not only the climax – represented by the foreshadowed suicide – but also a plot twist with the introduction of the character of David Wallace in the narration.

In the very last moments before the suicide, Neal further reflects on the concept of incommunicability and the struggle it generates with the awareness that people will never manage to fully express their inner thoughts and feelings. He expresses the idea through the metaphor of a tiny keyhole as the only way to access to the “enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe […] and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes […] [a]s if we are trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes” (178). Neal dreams of a way to completely access the interiority of a person, as well as make his own interiority fully accessible; a perspective that would enable him to overcome the limits of language to the point that “you don’t even need any organized English, you can as they say open the door and be in anyone else’s room in all your own multiform forms and ideas and facets” (178). But since this complete openness is impossible to achieve, people only show a small part of their interiority, thus leaving the rest of the ‘whole

universe' under the surface. According to Neal, this is the reason why we are all frauds. He directly addresses his interlocutor, although clearly referring to himself, by arguing that "of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part" (179). The actual suicide occurs between page 179 and 180 but David Foster Wallace decides to report it in a footnote, a technique largely adopted in many of his works, especially *Infinite Jest*. It is a technique that, as George Kowalick observes, is "borne out of postmodern irony but strive[s] for the authentic communication of necessary affective detail" and it "epitomises the endless referentiality and interconnectivity of post-postmodernism" (Kowalik, 2023: 4). Post-postmodernism and its critique to postmodern irony will be further described in the section of this chapter dedicated to the narratological and theoretical analysis of the story. Now the focus will be mainly dedicated to the close reading of the story's plot.

In this footnote, Neal lingers on some reflections about the passing of time, more precisely about the discrepancy between objective and subjective time or, to say it in modernist terms, between chronological time and duration. According to Henri Bergson's *Time and Free Will*, the former refers to the objective time, measurable, for example, through clocks; the latter, instead, is the time of the mind, which transcends regular measures for being a timeless dimension (Lawlor & Valentine Moulard, 2022). In the footnote, Neal reflects on the paradoxical nature of the constant conflation of past, present, and future, all while driving the car whose imminent and deliberate impact will end his life. He reflects on the unstoppable passing of time which seems increasingly fast as he approaches the end of it all; a time that goes at the same speed as the car. He clearly refers to the common idea that on the instant before death, one's life flashes before one's eyes, to which he had already referred earlier when he said that

> the cliché about people's whole life flashing before their eyes as they're dying isn't all that far off – although the whole life here isn't really a sequential thing where first you're born and then you're in the crib and then you're up at the plate in Legion ball, etc., which it turns out that that's what people usually mean when they say 'my whole life,' meaning a discrete, chronological series of moments that they add up and call their lifetime. It's not really like that. (151)

Neal has attempted to debunk clichés throughout the entire story, but now that he is truly approaching death, he realizes that that cliché is actually true, and his entire life is flashing before his eyes in the form of an infinite now. He says,

> what if in fact this *now* is infinite and never really passes in the way your mind is supposedly wired to understand *pass*, so that not only your whole life but every single humanly conceivable way to describe and account for that life has time to flash like neon shaped into those connected cursive letters that businesses' signs and windows love so much to use through your mind all at once in the literally immeasurable instant between impact and death, just as you start forward to meet the wheel at a rate no belt ever made could restrain – THE END. (179)

This passage constitutes not only the end of the footnote, but also the end of the narration carried out by Neal while alive. It should be noticed that Neal's posthumous voice appears from the very beginning of the story, but after the portrayal of Neal's suicide it seems to acquire even more relevance within the text.

From this passage, it is interesting to notice the reference to the title of the story when Neal addresses the light produced by neon as a metaphor for the flashing passage of images before one's eyes prior to death. Den Dulk provides an interesting interpretation of this reference to the neon which could be also connected to the choice of naming the protagonist as Neal:

> 'Neal' yields two homophones that stand in similar relation to each other: the name might be understood as 'kneel'– evoking humility and surrender – or alternatively as 'nil'– suggesting emptiness or absence. Additionally, in the story, Neal is associated with 'neon'; he is described as having a 'seemingly almost neon aura around him' in school. Neon is both a mesmerizing light and a weightless gas, an emptiness, a mere

> exterior – which appropriately captures how Neal is perceived by others and by himself, respectively. […] Wallace's work abounds with thematically symbolic acronyms and, as Stephen Burn points out, "'Good Old Neon's' initials'– G.O.N. – 'yield the appropriately bleak homophone gone' […] suggest[ing] absence, a vacating of position or loss of meaning. (den Dulk, 2023: 4)

Therefore, naming this protagonist as 'Neal' does not seem to be a random choice, but it subtly communicates his feelings of emptiness caused by fraudulence even more than his words do. But despite feeling empty inside, he still emerges through his actions, standing out as a neon surrounded by darkness. The acronym of the title – G.O.N. – suggests the disappearance of Neal, as it occurs at the end of the footnote with the suicide. After the suicide, David Wallace is described while looking at Neal's yearbook photo dated back to 1980. While looking at the photo, David Wallace is "trying to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to my suicide in a fiery single-car accident he'd read about in 1991" (180). Therefore, David Foster Wallace introduces a new character with his same name but not completely ascribable to him, as we will see, who imagines the reasons behind Neal's suicide, who happens to be one of his former schoolmates. David Wallace struggles to understand how someone like Neal killed himself, considering that he remembers him as someone having a "seemingly almost neon aura around him all the time of scholastic and athletic excellence and popularity and success with ladies" (180). Neal had, therefore, a great reputation caused by his success not only in school but also in sport and social life; a description of him which contrasts with his inner thoughts exacerbated by self-critique analyzed up to this point. This character, David Wallace, used to compare his inadequacy with Neal's ease in navigating school years saying that "whenever David Wallace struck out looking in Legion Ball or said something dumb at a party, [he found] how impressive and authentically at ease in the world the guy always seemed" (180). But as we know, Neal's ease is only a performance, and the use of the term 'authentically' with reference to Neal's constructed confidence generates, for us readers, a kind of ironic effect.

David Wallace even describes his young version as a "ghost of a person" (181) who witnessed Neal's apparent perfect existence imagining him as "happy and unreflective and wholly unhaunted by voices telling him that there was something deeply wrong with him that wasn't wrong with anybody else and that he had to spend all of his time and energy trying to figure out what to do and say in order to impersonate an even marginally normal or acceptable U.S. male" (181). Here David Wallace is clearly referring to his own negative thoughts and low self-esteem, but readers know that that same description perfectly fits Neal's case as well.

David Wallace is aware that "the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid" (181) and yet he still tries to imagine the thoughts and feelings that led Neal, an apparently successful person, to end his own supposed perfect life. However, here readers start to doubt the entire narrative they have read up to this point by trying to answer the question: who is actually speaking? In the following pages, I will attempt an explanation of the intricate narrative structure of the short story.

3.1 Narratological and Theoretical Aspects

As I previously mentioned, "Good Old Neon" begins with a first-person narration embodied by Neal, the protagonist. However, the narrative situation is immediately complicated when he foreshadows his own suicide by warning his interlocutor and apologizing, saying "I know this part is boring and probably boring you, by the way, but it gets a lot more interesting when I get to the part where I kill myself" (143), which introduces the concept of posthumous narration, thus explaining the retrospective adoption of past tense narration. The fact that he is reporting events from the afterlife gives him "inherent privileges – first and foremost omniscience. […] Being-posthumous turns out to provide a frame, an interpretative key, that juxtaposes knowledge with invention" (Ardovino & Masiero, 2022: 71). However, the structure changes towards the end of the story, when the main narrative splits into two narratives. On one hand there is a narrative that "continues in a footnote two pages before the

end of the story and might be said to ‘remain’ Neal’s perspective, further describing the run-up to the car crash suicide”; on the other hand, there is “the other narrative line, in the remainder of the main text, [that] gradually reveals David Wallace as the imaginer of Neal’s story” (den Dulk, 2023: 12). This passage is characterized by a shift from the first-person narration to the third-person narration corresponding to the introduction of David Wallace in the story.

This is exactly when the entire narrative gets complicated, becoming itself one of the paradoxes to which Neal is so interested during the story. The introduction of David Wallace and his admission of having imagined what his former schoolmate was probably going through before killing himself leads the reader to reconsider every word read up to that point not as coming from Neal’s autonomous voice but rather from his voice as imagined by another person, David Wallace. Adriano Ardovino and Pia Masiero interpret the narrative structure of the story in this way:

> it is a first-person narrative offered in the final paragraph as attributable to a David Wallace. Readers, therefore, face a referential tangle in which the first-person narrator names himself as the narrated and are consequently asked to reconfigure what they have read so far, to try to reconcile what seems like a Möbius strip: the narrator (partially) recedes into the background, bringing to existence (a version of) his creator who thus crosses diegetic boundaries and becomes imaginatively reflected upon. (Ardovino & Masiero, 2022: 70)

But as they point out, the narrative situation is much more complex than this, because the fact that David Wallace is named almost as the actual writer, David Foster Wallace, implies the existence of a metafictional level. The problem is not only to understand who is speaking, but also whether the speakers are positioned inside or outside of the narrative universe, namely if they are intra- or extradiegetic. For such a reason, Ardovino and Masiero rephrase their previous description by claiming that the narrative frame of “Good Old Neon”

> can be read against an interpretative horizon constituted by the diegetic relationship between Neal – David Wallace (and their respective, shifting roles), the extradiegetic

> relationship between David Foster Wallace and the reader, the inherently metaleptic David Wallace himself, and the pervasive second-person pronoun *you*. All these textual and extratextual positions, each with its own specific perspectival underpinnings, take on a paradoxical duplicity – a multi-layered reiteration or refraction that is extremely challenging to navigate, let alone master. The difficulty is amplified by the issue of the story's being posthumous, which represents the thematic centre of the text. (ibid. 71)

Despite the almost complete homonymy, David Wallace should not be perceived as a complete reflection of his author, David Foster Wallace, but rather as a character on his own. Nonetheless, as den Dulk notices,

> while we should make sure not to equate David Wallace with David Foster Wallace, the (implied or real-life) author of the story, the character-narrator does 'remind' us of the author […] [and] by casting Neal's monologue as 'David Wallace's' projection, Wallace both invites and dares his readers to read Neal's story as thinly disguised autobiography. (den Dulk, 2023)

Therefore, although David Wallace and its author are not the same person, it cannot be denied the autobiographical and, consequently, metafictional nature behind the choice of the name. While analyzing Wallace's usage of metafiction, Lee Konstantinou observes that

> Wallace pulls away the 'fourth' wall of the fictional world of his story, revealing that what readers were led to believe was fiction (and specifically postmodern metafiction) may in fact be a kind of meta-nonfiction. The purpose of this revelation seems to be to cause the reader to experience a form of connection with Wallace as a writer […] not 'Dave Wallace' the character, but the author. (Konstantinou, 2012: 99)

Den Dulk additionally observes that the "appearance of the author underlines the urgency of the story's existential thematics and enters into dialogue with the reader" (den Dulk, 2023: 11).

Jan D. Kucharzewski explored the concept of 'authorial impostors' in contemporary American fiction, taking some examples from American narratives such as John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast for Champions*, Charlie Kaufman's screenplay for

the movie *Adaptation* and even Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy,* although this last does not belong to American literary tradition. As he points out, while

> none of these examples present themselves as autobiographies of their creators, they nevertheless productively engage with the notion of the autobiographical self. By including the writer's namesake as an 'authorial impostor', these fictions not only explore the problem of textual referentiality but also the narrative nature of identity [...] authorial impostors derive their power from an absence: The author is there and not there at the same time. (Kucharzewski, 2014: 103)

The same definition can also be applied to the narrative structure of "Good Old Neon" in which, as we have seen, David Foster Wallace introduces a new narrator who, although not entirely associable with the writer, still maintains his name, thus establishing a form of metafictional connection between narrator and author. Regarding this aspect, Ardovino and Masiero argue that the

> fact that David Wallace is a fictionalized version of the real author creates a refraction and gives the text its peculiar circular (and paradoxical) aspect: Neal imagines all the people that inhabit his world because this is part and parcel of feeding his basic need to be approved and loved – and he goes as far in his narcissistic trajectory as to imagine occupying the mind of the would-be author. (Ardovino & Masiero, 2022: 78)

A short story containing a level of narrative complexity like the one in "Good Old Neon" is inevitably subjected to different interpretations. The reading that seems the most sustained is the one analyzed so far, according to which Neal is a creation of David Wallace, or better say Neal's inner thoughts read until the last two pages are imagined by David Wallace while looking at Neal's yearbook photo following the news of his suicide. However, there is another interpretation of the role of David Wallace which believes that David Wallace is, on the contrary, an invention of Neal. In fact, the interpretation that sees Neal "imagining himself imagined by someone might easily be taken as the perfect instantiation of a narcissistic impulse: conjuring up someone who is so engorged in figuring himself (Neal) out that he

invents an immersive first-person monologue" (Ardovino & Masiero, 2022: 73). In terms of plot, however, it seems more reasonable to recognize David Wallace as a character owning "an authenticity that defies Neal's manipulative strategy" considering his role of "decentring subject capable of listening who possesses a gaze which conjugates penetration and discernment with care" (ibid. 74). David Wallace is undoubtedly summoned by Neal by the end of the story, but it is unlikely that he was completely invented by the protagonist.

The necessity to find a caring subject to whom expressing one's innermost thoughts, hoping to find understanding and compassion, is represented in the story by the recurring 'you' that Neal often refers to. The identity of this interlocutor is never actually clarified, nor is his position in the story. It is not clear, in fact, if he is intradiegetic or extradiegetic as well as if Neal is referring to the reader, to himself, to David Wallace, or to his sister Fern to whom he writes a suicide note. What is certain is that Neal feels the necessity to have an audience, first, to keep his constant performance going; second, to cope against the loneliness that his fraudulence has generated. According to den Dulk, who made a critical comparison between Wallace's "Good Old Neon" and Camus's *The Fall*, the protagonists of both novels continuously address the interlocutor because "they seek the interlocutor's – and in the end the reader's – affirmation of their self-accusatory logic in order to set themselves apart, to feel confirmed in their exceptionality" (den Dulk, 2023: 9), which is exactly what Neal does. At the same time, however, he deeply desires to be understood and loved despite his fraudulence because, as he claims, "you simultaneously want to fool everyone you meet and yet also somehow always hope that you'll come across someone who is your match or equal and can't be fooled" (155). Therefore, the role of the 'you' is the one of a listener who does not judge but rather attempts to understand as if he were in Neal's shoes. The usage of the second-person is "as much required as the first-person […] to shape a form that might be experientially more relatable" (Ardovino & Masiero, 2022: 73). Neal wants to find someone who understands his

fraudulence, loneliness, and struggles and, in writing this story, David Foster Wallace managed to create a protagonist who is relatable for "potentially every inhabitant of our post-industrial times" (ibid. 73).

This attempt to find a connection with fictional characters, hoping to improve the interpersonal relationship with real people, is essentially the purpose of literature for Wallace. Ballerio mentions an interview held by Larry McCaffery in 1993 in which Wallace claimed that non-mainstream literature should provide an access to other people's interiority, thus allowing a form of empathy that is no longer visible in the real world. By doing so, literature could serve as an antidote against the pervasive loneliness of postmodern times. This happens because, as Wallace said when interviewed by Laura Miller in 1996, literature has the ability to establish intersubjective understanding between reader and characters as well as between reader and author (Ballerio, 2023: 216).

This attention to affection and mutual understanding against late-capitalist solitude stands at the core of post-postmodernism, an extension of postmodernism to which Wallace belongs, representing one of its the main exponents. As postmodernism, also post-postmodernism questioned the lack of authenticity in society but, unlike its predecessor, it wished to retrieve it through literature rather than just criticizing its absence. Postmodernism exposed the inauthenticity of present times through the adoption of techniques like "irony, experiment, subversion, and manipulation of the real" (Kowalik, 2023: 2) while post-postmodernism's purpose was to overcome the "tyranny of irony in American culture" (Kelly, 2016: 198). This post-ironic approach to inauthenticity takes the name of *New Sincerity*, which derives from Lionel Trilling's 1972 definition of the term that he, already at that time, contrasted to the notion of 'authenticity'. By referring to Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Trilling observed that nowadays "we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it

is not authentic" (Trilling, 1972: 10). But whereas "sincerity places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others […] authenticity conceives truth as inward, personal, and hidden, the goal primarily of self-examination rather than other-directed communication" (Kelly, 2016: 199). In other words, sincerity is the public display of feelings that are purposefully constructed to be subjected to an everyday audience; conversely, authenticity regards one's actual and inner feelings that do not need to be shaped for someone else's judgment. An individual is sincere when publicly expressing what he feels, but to be truly sincere he must be authentic to himself first. Felix Haase argues that "[w]hat we deem authentic in others or ourselves is authentic precisely because we cannot communicate it – it stands outside of social constructs, norms and codes." (Haase, 2022: 11). Post-postmodernism's concept of New Sincerity involves "different components of twenty-first century sincerity such as resistance of late capitalism, mental health struggle, and racial inequalities" and its representative authors are interested in "the *access* to authenticity that these different obstacles limit, but do not prohibit" (Kowalik, 2023: 2). Wallace respected and adopted many narrative techniques of postmodernism but at the same time he tried to overcome them because, according to him, literature should return to a condition in which "the reader feels like someone is talking to him rather than striking a number of poses" (Wallace, 2012: 61). In this way, as Adam Kelly comments, "fiction would become a conversation, the primary aim of which would be to make the reader and writer feel less lonely in the face of the contemporary world" (Kelly, 2016: 200). Wallace sees communication as a tool offering "the potential liberation of the late-capitalist subject from the radical individualism that had overtaken the society within which Wallace found himself working" (Hayes-Brady, 2016: 6). Loneliness is seen as the social evil nourished by neoliberal capitalism and, as Noreena Hertz explains, we are experiencing a

> self-obsessed, self-seeking form of capitalism that has normalised indifference, made a virtue out of selfishness and diminished the importance of compassion and care. […] It's not that we weren't ever lonely before. It's that by redefining our relationships as

> transactions, recasting citizens in the role of consumers and engendering ever greater income and wealth divides, forty years of neoliberal capitalism has, at best, marginalised values such as solidarity, community, togetherness and kindness. (Hertz, 2021)

The attention to meaningful interpersonal communication stands at the core of post-postmodernism, which creates a relief from "postmodernist narcissism and the threat of solipsistic entrapment" (Hayes-Brady, 2016: 6). Wallace largely discussed the threat of existential solipsism, which is essentially the result of the scattered individualism characterizing current society and generating a shared loneliness. This theme recurs in several of Wallace's works, such as in *Infinite Jest* in which Hal provides a perfect definition of the term by declaring "welcome to the meaning of *individual*. We're each deeply alone here. It's what we all have in common, this aloneness" (Wallace, 1997: 112). What post-postmodernism attempts to do is acknowledge the solipsism and alienation experienced by late-capitalist humans and, instead of facing the issue through the detached approach of postmodern ironic cynicism, it tries to embrace it through a restoration of affection and optimism. For post-postmodernist authors like Wallace, the purpose is "to follow postmodernism without merely rejecting it and returning to the mode of the pre-postmodern, or even the premodern" (Boswell, 2020: 10).

This recovery of a more positive outlook towards interpersonal relationships is precisely what occurs in "Good Old Neon", in which the character of David Wallace embodies the spirit of New Sincerity. David Wallace is said to have experienced struggles similar to the ones narrated by Neal and because he has "emerged from years of literally indescribable war against himself" (181) he has the empathic capacity to imagine Neal's pain and truly understand it. And he managed to overcome the spiral of self-critique because there was "the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him commanding that other part to be silent" (181). Exactly because David Wallace's more sentimental side defeated the negative one, he has the power to break the cycle and avoid being trapped in the same thoughts that led Neal to

kill himself. For this reason, the story ends with David Wallace saying, “Not another word” (181). Stephen J. Burn observes that, through these last words, “Wallace bends the story back to himself in an attempt to self-consciously escape the self-conscious cynicism of the ironist, and establish a form of empathy” (qtd. in Ballerio, 2023: 215). Through David Wallace, David Foster Wallace wants, as Ballerio points out, to establish a different mode of existence represented by the possibility of compassion and renounce of irony and resistance (ibid. 215). Therefore, Neal represents the typical postmodernist mentality characterized by skepticism, cynicism, and irony that obstruct the possibility of an honest and deep connection with other people; a connection which Neal, however, confesses to desire. On the contrary, David Wallace embodies the post-postmodernist positive attitude towards interpersonal relationships which leads him to empathize with other people by understanding and caring for them and their sufferings.

As previously said, David Wallace’s actions and thoughts are not narrated through first-person narration as in Neal’s case, but through the adoption of third person. The passage from the first-person narration to the third one is gradual until one disappears to leave space for the other. As Ardovino and Masiero explain

> The powerful first-person voice that has been in charge so far seems to collapse and vanish into the third, never to return. This pronominal shift, however, may be interpreted as not interrupting the flow of Neal’s speaking but manifesting the strongest form of his authority: he continues narrating in a different guise, looking at himself through David Wallace’s perspectival positioning. […] [T]he tone and style remain the same, but Neal’s posthumous positioning entails both omniscience and the (likely) resolution of his manipulation. (Ardovino & Masiero, 2022: 76)

According to them, therefore, at the end of the story Neal does not completely disappear but his voice can still be heard through the perspective of David Wallace who, after all, is inventing not only Neal’s personality but also his way of speaking. This shift raises questions regarding

the focalization in the story. Ardovino and Masiero claim that this peculiar narrative situation is characterized by a partial figural narration, in which

> Neal leaves behind his narrating-I and becomes an external narrator who positions David Wallace's internally focalized perspective on himself. This is a figural narrative of sorts for two reasons: because Neal's omniscience and extradiegetic positioning are specifically ascribed to Neal's afterlife existence (whereas the omniscience of the typical external narrator is axiomatically posited), and because the focalizer's gaze is reflectively directed towards the narrator himself. This figural narrative is partial and not absolute, since the narrator's idiom, Neal's, is recognizable: despite the pronominal shift, the voice is seamlessly his. (ibid. 77)

What is certain is that trying to simplify the narrative structure of "Good Old Neon" is essentially ineffective, because its paradoxical puzzle-like narration perfectly embodies the paradoxes surrounding Neal's fraudulence. The narration deliberately shifts between different narrative positions, thus belonging to *multiperson narration*. This concept was theorized by Brian Richardson in *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, according to whom multiperson narration occurs when narrators progressively multiply with increasing complexity and he specifically refers to those texts which blend first, third, and even second person in the narrative (Ballerio, 2023: 206). In "Good Old Neon", as we observed, there is an alternance between 'I' and 'you' throughout most of the story – "this whole seemingly endless back-and-forth between us" (180) – until the shift to the third person in the last two pages. As previously anticipated, it is not clear the identity of the 'you' often addressed by Neal, but the most logical interpretation sees David Wallace as Neal's interlocutor before the unveiling of his identity. Neal brings his listener with him inside the car whose crash will cause his suicide and, in that situation, the alternance of 'I' and 'you' becomes a 'we', which refers both to Neal and his interlocutor but also to readers as well. Essentially, we are all caught in the same trap: incommunicability and performance. We are all in the same car – metaphor for late-capitalist society – and fraudulence is a deadly trap producing loneliness and

disconnection.

Den Dulk argues that readers

> can understand David Wallace to have been the story's silent interlocutor to whom Neal had been telling his story. Two pages before the eventual perspective shift, it is revealed that Neal is sitting in a car with the interlocutor who is considering to commit suicide, while David Wallace is later described as 'having emerged from years of literally indescribable war against himself', suggesting that he has contemplated suicide. (den Dulk, 2023: 10)

Den Dulk also notices how the tense in the car scene is no longer past but shifts to the present; a choice which "may be seen to preface the shifting perspective" (ibid. 10) from Neal to David Wallace. This choice seems to be particularly meaningful in the passage where Neal reflects on the worsening of visibility while driving in the fog if high beams are on, while using the low beams improves visibility in such a critical situation. He claims that it is a "minor paradox, that sometimes you can actually see farther with low beams than high" (177). The usage of the present tense in this passage "appropriately accompanies the shift toward and revelation of David Wallace as narrator" (den Dulk, 2023: 10).

The complexity of the short story's narrative structure analyzed in this paragraph represents itself another example of the fraudulence characterizing "Good Old Neon". Fraudulence is, in the story, like an illness that

> potentially infects everything that happens within it: fraudulence is the unassailable core of Neal's perception of himself, whether we take him to be a first-order character or we take him to be the instantiation of David Wallace's hypothesis on the 'luminous guy' (second-order character). It is also what we might experience as readers who have been led to believe in Neal's first-order existence. (Ardovino & Masiero, 2022: 79)

Fraudulence is the narrative thread connecting every aspect of "Good Old Neon" and it represents, as we have seen, the inevitable coping mechanism against a society that prioritizes

performance, display of success, and excessive individualism over mutual caring and affection that only a stable community system can provide. When capitalism and consumerism destroy the sense of community, interpersonal relationships get irreparably affected. This results in a rise of fraudulence and dishonesty which are the consequence of pressing social demands requiring perfection, success, and stability.

The next chapter will analyze the same themes of fraudulence, performance, and social anxiety observed in Wallace's "Good Old Neon" through the analysis of *Leaving the Atocha Station,* another literary work of contemporary American narrative from an author who, as we will see, shares similar thematic and stylistic features with David Foster Wallace.

5. Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*

This chapter will explore the themes of fraudulence, social expectations, and performance seen in "Good Old Neon" through the perspective of a young American who, like Neal, embodies the pressure and anxiety of meeting external expectations, in this case coming from the artistic environment. Through the analysis of Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, I will show another American perspective on the critique of how late capitalist expectations shape and often distort personal identity by forcing the individual to perform a fake version of himself in order to satisfy a stereotyped image of the contemporary poet.

Leaving the Atocha Station is Ben Lerner's debut novel and, since its publication in 2011, it quickly became a classic of contemporary American literature.

The novel is set in 2004 and describes the experience abroad of Adam Gordon, a young American poet who won a prestigious fellowship to conduct his research in Madrid, Spain. The research is dedicated to "the significance of the Spanish Civil War" in literature and poetry but, as he admits immediately afterwards, it is a topic "about which I knew nothing" (Lerner, 2011: 23). Adam Gordon's personality, in fact, is characterized by self-doubt, insecurity, and anxiety towards his work and identity; an attitude which, as we will see, also influences his interpersonal relationships.

He does not trust his writing skills, and he feels as if he does not deserve to be in Madrid, financed by his country to research a topic on which he feels distant and unprepared. He seems to be affected by imposter syndrome, which is immediately detectable at the beginning of the novel, where he reflects on his tendency to find poetic beauty in prose "[a]lthough I claimed to be a poet, although my supposed talent as a writer had earned me my fellowship in Spain" (8).

In the first chapter, Adam seems to belong to the typical stereotype of someone who has just moved to a foreign country and feels overwhelmed by a profound sense of bewilderment. He tackles this feeling of disorientation towards the new culture and habits through slow mornings,

weed-smoking, and long walks through the city during which, occasionally, he reads Lorca's *Collected Poems* and John Ashbery's *Selected Poems* or writes on his notebooks. Or rather, it is better to say, he *pretends* to read and write, as if an audience is constantly judging his role as a poet. Adam feels insecure towards his poetic abilities but at the same time he wants to be recognized and appreciated as a real poet having an "aura of profundity" (53) to preserve. As a consequence, he begins to tell lies about himself, his family, his life in America and his present in Spain to instill a desired image of himself in others; to provide a crafted version of himself that matches his role of self-proclaimed poet. And he is aware of his fraudulence, but he alternates a profound sense of shame and guilt – "I felt wave after wave of intensified remorse" (101) – with the belief on the universality of such a fraudulence when he claims: "that I was a fraud had never been in question – who wasn't? Who wasn't squatting in one of the handful of prefabricated subject positions proffered by capital or whatever you wanted to call it [...] who wasn't a bit player in a looped infomercial for the damaged life?" (101). Felix Haase comments on this passage by noticing that "[a]ccording to Adam, he is fraudulent because he pretends to have an authentic self. In fact, his identification is predetermined by the logic of capitalism" (Haase, 2022: 113), confirming the correlation between late capitalism's social demands and the necessity to build an artificial identity. Haase furtherly explains that

> The relation between human beings becomes reduced to the logic of objects and their use value. Under capitalism, individuals come to perceive themselves and others as goods that can be bought, sold, produced, repaired and discarded. This reification pervades all spheres of life, even art. The allusion offers an explanation for Adam's behavior in LTAS [Leaving the Atocha Station]. He attempts to market himself by pretending to be a genius. (Haase, 2022: 114)

This ambivalence of opinions towards his own fraudulence inevitably recalls the protagonist of "Good Old Neon" and the similarities between the two characters, as well as between Lerner and Wallace, are several, as we will see later. Haase points out that Adam "seems to be aware

of the rift between his aspirations and his actual work, as he often describes himself as a 'fraud.' He does so not only because he views himself as a fake poet, but also because he is a pathological liar" (Haase, 2022: 91). Adam adopts fraudulent behaviors firstly because his self-doubt prevents him from dealing with the pressures of artistic performance in a postmodern context, secondly because he seems unable to believe in the authenticity of many aspects of existence, starting from art itself.

In the first chapter of the novel, we see Adam involved in one of his walks through Madrid during which he decides to visit the Prado Museum as part of his usual "morning ritual" (8). Once inside, he notices a man in front of Roger Van der Weyen's *Descent from the Cross* having a strong reaction to the painting that causes him to break "suddenly into tears, convulsively catching his breath" (8). A reaction that makes Adam wonder if the man was dealing with some sort of personal grief or if he was undergoing a "*profound experience of art*" (8). He is skeptical and suspicious about the possibility of feeling and showing emotions to such an extent, wondering if the man might be an artist who "doesn't feel the transport he performs" (10). Adam is, in fact, marked by an emotional, or affective, detachment towards not only the experience of art, but also existence. He says, "I was intensely suspicious of people who claimed a poem or painting or piece of music 'changed their life', especially since I had often known these people before and after their experience and could register no change" (8). Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse analyzed this aspect of Adam's personality by observing that

> Adam is wary of the man's melodramatic, immediate and intense experience, as he is himself incapable of having such an experience. […]. The novel conceptualizes this sense of contemporary disconnected experience through the various issues the novel addresses: its questioning of authentic experience (of both art and existence), its reflections on the aesthetics and politics of poetry, and its exploration of intersubjective relations and contact. Adam, the novel suggests, is trapped in a circular logic of cognitive skepticism and affective detachment. He is skeptical about the possibility that existence can be truthfully represented and authentically experienced. More precisely,

> in his view the impossibility of truthful representation feeds back into existence, rendering lived experience inauthentic. (Demeyer & Vitse, 2021: 10)

The lack of authenticity explored by postmodernism is epitomized in *Leaving the Atocha Station* by the artistic form, whose depth seems unable to reach the protagonist. The belief that everything around him is inauthentic leads him to become a product of this pervasive inauthenticity, lying and ultimately becoming, to some extent, an impostor. Although Adam finds it hard to feel an authentic artistic involvement, he still looks for it in the poetry he writes and in other artistic media. In fact, for him, "experience is authentic: it cannot be represented or communicated through language. […] At the same time, he yearns for the transcendence of a 'profound experience.' It is a yearning that must necessarily be frustrated" (Haase, 2022: 93). As Neal, also Adam seems to believe that language is a tool not powerful or accurate enough to truly express one's feelings and establish interpersonal connections. Specifically, he perceives this impossibility in the artistic medium as a reflection of daily human communication.

The first period of his life in Madrid, corresponding also to the first pages of the novel, is marked by Adam's attempts to integrate with a foreign culture as an American expat while striving, at the same time, to give the impression of having already settled in. For instance, he deliberately sends a limited number of emails to his American friend Cyrus, although having a well-functioning internet connection in his apartment, because he thinks that this "would create the impression I was offline, busy accumulating experience, while in fact I spent a good amount of time online" (19). Expressions like 'create the impression' recur many times in the novel, as seen some lines after the one just quoted in which Adam fantasizes about how mastering Spanish language would improve his relationships with locals by "giving the impression less of someone from a foreign country than someone from a foreign time […] I imagined myself from their perspective once I'd obtained fluency in this elevated idiom" (19). As Neal in

Wallace's short story, also Adam largely associates his personal value with the possible external opinions of him, leading him to hyper-focus on the impression he might give to other people, especially locals, in social contexts. One night he decides to join Madrid's nightlife because he feels "desperate for some form of participation" (21) but, being forced to go out by himself, he undergoes a series of anxious and paranoid thoughts regarding the opinion that others might have while witnessing his solitude. Therefore he wears the mask of a confident person and realizes that he "could leave my apartment and enter the flows of the night unashamed so long as I walked purposefully, *pretending* I had somewhere to be [my emphasis]" or again later "I could order a drink and stand looking bored in the middle of the bar and *people would suppose* I pertained to one of the adjacent parties [my emphasis]" (21). Although dominated by nervousness, this tactic does really help him in getting a new friend, Arturo, the owner of an art gallery, who will turn out to be a crucial character throughout the novel. But to impress his new interlocutor, Adam immediately lies by claiming that he comes from New York, although he is from Topeka, Kansas. And when asked the motive of his stay in Madrid, he says "I delivered a version of the answer I had memorized […] a long answer composed by a fluent friend, regarding the significance of the Spanish Civil War, about which I knew nothing, for a generation of writers, few of which I'd read; I intended to write, I explained, a long, research-driven poem exploring the war's literary legacy" (25). This passage exemplifies Adam's performative behavior: even his personal answers are accurately memorized in order to impress, as if he were an actor on a stage. Adam exercises a strict and constant self-control over his words and actions to give the desired impression of the intellectual and confident artist although, behind this performance, he is strongly insecure and anxious. When Arturo invites him to a party full of "a lot of handsome people" (26), he manifests his need to perform the best version of his artistic persona to adhere to that social context by showing a crafted confidence. He wears the mask of the confidence man and says:

> I was acutely aware of not being attractive enough for my surroundings; luckily I had a strategy for such situations […]: I opened my eyes a little more widely than normal, opened them to a very specific point, raising my eyebrows and also allowing my mouth to curl up into the implication of a smile. I held this look steady once it had obtained, a look that communicated incredulity cut with familiarity, a boredom arrested only by a vaguely anthropological interest in my surroundings, a look that contained a dose of contempt I hoped could be read as political, as insinuating that, after a frivolous night, I would be returning to the front lines of some struggle that would render whatever I experienced in such company null. The goal of this look was to make my insufficiencies appear chosen, to give my unstylish hair and clothes the force of protest; I was a figure for the outside to this life. (26-27)

In this passage we can really see how Adam perceives social gatherings as a stage in which wearing a mask of the haughty and bored, but politically engaged, contemporary artist. The whole novel criticizes the contemporary art environment characterized by pretentiousness and the need to show off one's artistic and intellectual side in front of other self-proclaimed artists. Adam is undoubtedly an anxious person, but his anxiety seems to increase in social situations where members of Madrid's artistic scene get together. And the case of Arturo's party represents one of the examples in the novel of this specific form of social anxiety. In this situation, in fact, he meets Teresa, one of Arturo's friends, to whom Adam immediately feels attracted. But being Teresa another member of Madrid's artistic scene, he cannot avoid creating lies about his life to impress or generate empathy in her. He therefore manages to cause compassion by saying that the reason behind his negative mood is his mother's recent death but, immediately after, he seems to regret having told such a serious lie and observes,

> At first I felt something like accomplishment at my performance and excitement at the contact with her body but this quickly gave way to a sinking feeling as I began to imagine my mom, how she would feel if she knew what I had done, my self-disgust giving way in turn to the fear that somehow this lie would have material effects, would kill her, or at least that, when something did in fact happen to my mother, as happen it must, I would always feel and be at least in part responsible, that whatever she suffered

> would be traceable in some important sense to this exact moment when I traded her life for the sympathy of an attractive stranger. (29)

Adam feels extremely guilty about the lies he tells to achieve other people's appreciation and yet he does not seem able to stop – "I was a liar of the most disgusting sort" (81), he says. The same happens with Wallace's Neal who, despite being aware of his fraudulence, cannot find an escape from it and ends up, instead, in a cycle of self-despise. It is also crucial to notice the self-aggrandizing nature of fraudulent people, here epitomized by Adam's belief that his lies might have real consequences for the status of people he lies about, as if he had a sort of prophetic power.

The lie about his mother opens the way to a series of lies in the novel which demonstrates Adam's nature as a pathological liar. For instance, he also lies about his father by claiming he is a fascist, although in reality he is "the gentlest of men" (63). But when Teresa asks him what he means by 'fascist', he is surprised since "[n]obody, at any stage of my project, had ever asked me what I meant by 'fascist' or 'fascism'", so he proceeds to provide an unconvincing and banal answer by saying "'He is a man of right-wing politics,' I said, meaninglessly. 'He only respects violence' (85). The naivety of this answer confirms how "Adam uses words on their affective level in order to elicit people's affection. Whenever he is confronted with the meaninglessness of those words new lies are needed to counter the threat of disclosure" (Demeyer & Vitse, 2021: 14). Haase points out that almost "all of his interactions with others involve deceptions and manipulations. Some of his lies are white, others dark and shocking. As the plot develops, it becomes obvious that this behavior takes a psychological toll on Adam. He suffers from anxiety attacks, sleeplessness and depression. He also begins to suspect that he might be a drug addict" (Haase, 2022: 92).

The more Adam lies, the more he is afraid of people finding out the truth about himself. Among all the people he meets, he seems particularly worried about Teresa, since he is convinced that

“she could see through me, that my fraudulence was completely apparent to her” (35) and he also finds himself “avoiding her eyes, because when I looked at or into them, I believed I saw she saw right through me” (84).

When Arturo and Teresa invite Adam to publicly read his poems at Arturo’s gallery, he already prefigures his failure. Devoured by fear, he considers “claiming I was too ill to continue, surely I looked sufficiently pale, but I was worried that failing to appear in front of María José would somehow constitute the breaking point of my relationship with the foundation, that the total vacuity of my project would finally be revealed and I would be sent home in shame” (35). Maria José is the director of the foundation that finances Adam’s fellowship in Madrid and he is afraid that, by providing an unsatisfactory performance of his poems, he might risk not only the interruption of his loan, but also public stigmatization. For these reasons, he gets overwhelmed by anxiety before reading his own poems and here Lerner perfectly describes the physical symptoms of a form of social anxiety that gives rise to anxiety attacks. Lerner has Adam describe his nervousness in this way:

> Everyone began to take their seats; the gallery was long and narrow with high ceilings and white walls and it was full; there were probably eighty people. There was a podium with a lamp and microphone and a small pitcher of water and as I sat [...] pissed off, nauseated with anxiety (36)

On the same page, Adam Gordon’s name is revealed to the reader for the first time, representing a parallelism with Wallace’s choice of revealing Neal’s name well into the story. Adam mentions the use of tranquilizers which help him to calm down his anxiety in social situations. From the usage of tranquilizers to weed addiction, it is clearly noticeable his reliance on substances to numb consciousness when performance anxiety and social pressures overwhelm him.

Adam’s anxiety is generated, as I said, by the need to impress others and, consequently, establish a connection with them, especially intimate ones. In the novel, Adam feels attracted

to two Spanish women: Teresa and Isabel, but the truth is that he is not actually interested in getting to know them better. Indeed, he seems to be interested only in how they perceive him and in learning if his performance as a poet convinced them. “I had not realized how much I was invested in the idea that Isabel and Teresa were invested in me” (101), he says. And, as Demeyer and Vitse writes, “Adam experiences the affective forms that stick to love scenarios, but only at a distance from himself” (Demeyer & Vitse, 2021: 14). As in Neal’s case, although he constantly undergoes self-critique, anxiety, and imposter syndrome, he still remains a narcissist. Sheila Heti analyzed the role of these two women in Adam’s life abroad and noticed that

> he thinks of them in distorted ways, and always in relation to himself. Mostly they are tempting him in their unconscious poses, or giving him what he wants, or withholding it. This makes it difficult for us to connect to them (just as he doesn’t), or to understand their motivation (he doesn’t), or really to tell them apart (he barely can; he longs for one when he is with the other; he thinks he prefers Teresa; no, he prefers Isabel; no, he prefers Teresa). In the end, it doesn’t really matter which he chooses. They function as talismans, to ward off the spectre of (masculine) inferiority. Adam’s true love affair is with himself. (Heti, 2012)

Essentially, Adam needs other people’s recognition of his value to believe in it himself. After the poetry reading at Arturo’s gallery, in fact, he seems to become aware, for the first time, of the effect of his poetic voice after Arturo’s translation of his poems in front of the Spanish audience. He reflects on this aspect by observing:

> as the poem went on I slowly began to recognize something like my voice, if that’s the word, a recognition made all the more strange in that I’d never recognized my voice before. Something in the arrangement of the lines, not the words themselves or what they denoted, indicated a ghostly presence behind the Spanish, and that presence was my own, or maybe it was my absence […] it was like seeing myself looking down at myself looking up. (41)

Demeyer and Vitse analyze this passage, and particularly the last sentence, through the lenses of interpersonal perception. They argue that

> The virtual possibilities that people might project upon Adam are far more interesting than the actual Adam he can possibly be. Therefore, he turns to several tactics of displacement: Adam puts masks on, tells lies, performs emotions and talks enigmatically. This causes an endless regression of projections and stimulations of how one is perceived or thinks to be perceived – 'it was like seeing myself looking down at myself looking up' (41). Although these performances could be read as raising epistemological and ontological questions on authenticity and identity, their dominant function is affective: to serve Adam's affective needs, and in particular his desire to be liked and admired. (Demeyer & Vitse, 2021: 13)

This attention to affection in the novel clearly positions *Leaving the Atocha Station* in post-postmodernism's New Sincerity frame, as we will see in the paragraph dedicated to the theoretical analysis of the novel.

Adam exacerbates his performative behaviors especially when people are looking at him. For instance, when he is visiting a cathedral in Toledo with Isabel, he is awed by the indoor light which resembles dusk light. He immediately reaches for his notebook and "jotted down the idea about the dusk and the cathedral, aware and encouraged that Isabel was watching as I wrote. I arranged my face into a look of intense concentration, a look that implied I'd had a lighting flash of intellection" (52-53).

Still in Toledo, Adam and Isabel, who are now in a sort of relationship although he remains attracted to Teresa, visit Isabel's aunt, Rufina. Once there, Adam attempts again to perform the stereotyped role of the poet taking notes but, when Isabel and Rufina leave the room, he immediately feels ashamed. In fact, he says:

> I stopped and blushed, at least my face was hot. Why would I take notes when Isabel wasn't around to see me take them? I'd never taken notes before; I carried around my bag because of my drugs, not because I intended to work on my 'translations,' and the idea of actually being one of those poets who was constantly subject to fits of inspiration

> repelled me; I was unashamed to pretend to be inspired in front of Isabel, but that I had just believed myself inspired shamed me. (57)

The performance is acted only in social environments where Adam is aware of being perceived by other people; when he is alone, he feels all the pointlessness of that same performance and, consequently, a deep sense of shame. The encounter with Rufina puts a lot of pressure on Adam's fraudulence, because she continuously disputes and mocks those foreigners who come to Spain claiming to be artists while their parents finance their stay, which fits precisely Adam's situation. While trying to defend his position, he betrays himself by referring to his living mother, while Isabel was told, as Teresa, that Adam's mother was dead. In this situation, Adam finds himself forced to make a partial confession by arguing that his mother is not dead, but she is about to die because of a critical illness; a lie purposefully created to cause empathy. This admission is followed by another confession in which he alternates truth and lies to explain his behavior:

> 'I came here,' I began, 'and nobody knows me. So I thought: You can be whatever you want to people. You can say you are rich or poor. You can say you are from anywhere, that you do anything. At first I felt very free, as if my life at home wasn't real anymore.' […] 'But then the reality returns. And I have constant terror. I call her all the time. She says she is fine, but I don't know for sure. […] And then when I meet someone important,' I said, looking directly at Isabel, 'I lied. To see. If I could say even the words [his mother's death].' Isabel appeared to understand. 'I am crazy, I know,' I said, placing my head in my hands. Then I said, looking up at Isabel again, 'I am sorry. I am sorry to her. I am sorry to you.' I *contemplated crying* [my emphasis]. Isabel came to me and pulled my head against her and said something to comfort me that included the word 'poet.' (62-63)

Although in this passage he confesses the nature of his fraudulence, he still manages to create compassion and empathy in his interlocutors, obtaining not only forgiveness, but also affection and admiration. Once noticed the successful reaction following this confession, Adam decides to use the same exact words with Teresa to justify the lie about his mother's status (85). In

doing so, he does really behave as an actor who repeats his script over and over again in front of different audiences. Adam is extremely afraid of other people finding out his 'real' personality under the surface of the mysterious poet and, regarding this worry, Haase observes that

> If Isabel were to find out who the actual Adam really is – if he were to betray himself in conversation – she would no longer be interested in him. Adam seems to have a clear idea of what this actual self is like: boring, vacuous, vain, narcissistic, and desperate for attention. He is afraid that others might glimpse even an inkling of what he perceives as his real personality. This actual self is transparent only to him. (Haase, 2022: 102)

Essentially, Adam "believes himself to be a poem" (Heti, 2012), which is why he adopts fraudulent behaviors and pretends to wear the costume of the mysterious, intellectual, and pretentious poet. Adam "invites others to read him as a poem. This affective aura depends on gaps and absences: the meanings that get lost in translation and lead to a silence that creates depth […]. His only chance to be liked resides in acting as a screen onto which others can project favorable self-images […]. In a comparable way, Adam uses the others as a screen that allows him to attend to his own consciousness" (Demeyer & Vitse, 2021: 14). Adam's efforts to be perceived externally as a poem demonstrate his narcissistic personality which is, on the other hand, interchanged with his self-accusatory side. In certain circumstances, he sees himself as a great poet having thoughts like "why wouldn't she [Isabel] have faith in my talent, given that I'd attended a prestigious university and received a prestigious fellowship" (53) or "both women [Isabel and Teresa] would realize that they had been in the presence of a poet who alone was able to array the fallen materials of the real into a song that transcended it" (104). In other cases, he is completely overwhelmed by self-doubt and low self-esteem, resulting in harsh inner thoughts towards himself.

An exemplifying scene is when, on a second public reading, he confuses the names of two Spanish poets, causing him a huge embarrassment, which he sees as a tragic end of his

fellowship: "it was too late; I had embarrassed myself, the foundation, and I had ruined everything with Teresa. María José said we would take only one more question because of time, but surely she meant because of shame, because of the great shame the foundation felt at sponsoring an American phony" (177). But, as in other similar moments in the novel, the worst-case scenario imagined by Adam and fostered by his anxiety does not actually occur. By the end of the novel, Adam becomes more aware of this ebb and flow of superiority and self-condemnation characterizing his persona, defining it as "the tissue of contradictions that was my personality was itself, at best, a poem" (164).

Before achieving such a level of self-awareness, however, Adam undergoes some problems with substances when he decides to increase the dosage of tranquillizers – defined in the novel as *yellow pills* – and what could be, although never specified, antidepressants – defined as *white pills*. During one of the lowest periods of his stay in Madrid, following a crisis with both Isabel and Teresa, Adam self-isolates in his apartment to focus on his research, although it is obvious now that his constant reference to "'project,' 'phase' and 'research' becomes a running joke throughout the novel. It demonstrates that Adam does everything but working on the poem that is his reason for being in Spain. Yet every mundane detail […] is somehow connected to his 'project'" (Haase, 2022: 115). Heti observes that this project "seems to be something more than just an artwork, and more diffuse, something vital at which he might fail. It also seems to be something of which he is the true audience, and most ruthless judge" (Heti, 2012).

In this moment, as mentioned, he autonomously increases the medication dosage, which makes him realize how he "was incapable of facing the world without designer medication" (100). Along with the increase of white pills and tranquilizers, he also increases the consumption of alcohol and weed, thus amplifying his self-sabotage tendency caused by his low self-esteem. This combination leads him to numb his consciousness in order to forget his discomfort and

the conviction of being an impostor, but the main side effect turns out to be "a mild dissociation, the world curling at its edges" (102). This dissociation leads Adam to experience a contrasting set of emotions, since, on the one hand he "now felt nothing, my affect a flat spectrum over a defined band", but on the other hand "I felt a kind of euphoria at my sudden inability to feel, an exaggerated second order of feeling that did not alter the first order numbness" (103). This affective detachment is connected to Adam's belief, previously mentioned, in the impossibility of expressing authentic experiences because of art's (and life's) inherent inauthenticity. As Heti notices "[h]is anxiety about whether anyone can have a profound experience of art extends to not believing that anyone can have a profound experience of him" (Heti, 2012), thus affecting his interpersonal communication. Adam feels the need to be understood and appreciated by others, but at the same time he obstructs other people's access to his interiority, precisely as Neal who strives to be authentically understood but cannot flee his cage of fraudulence. And for both characters, language has a considerable responsibility in impeding sincere communication among people because of its inner narrowness, and in Adam's case this limit is amplified by the language barrier between English and Spanish. The limit manifests because "[w]hat we deem authentic in others or ourselves is authentic precisely because we cannot communicate it – it stands outside of social constructs, norms and codes" (Haase, 2022: 11). Once they realize the obstacles of establishing authentic and exhaustive communication with others, both Adam and Neal rely on fake identities, lies, and substance usage to deal with 'social constructs, norms and codes'. Adam, as Neal, "strives to appear authentic through inauthentic gestures" (Moore, 2024: 7).

After this low period characterized by insecurity, isolation, and substances, Adam's relationship with himself and, consequently, with his Spanish friends seems to improve. He decides to completely confess his fraudulence and the lies told in the previous months, now providing an entirely honest admission rather than a partial confession of the truth. Firstly, he

confesses to his parents the lies he invented about them: "I hesitated and, voice crackling, said that I had done a terrible thing. What, they said, and I told them that I had claimed in the presence of various people that my mom was dead or gravely ill and my dad was a fascist. Why, one of them asked, confused, but not upset. To get sympathy, I guessed" (119). Adam's answer to his parents' confusion contains the essence of his fraudulence: he continuously lies because he hopes to evoke feelings of compassion and empathy in those people with whom he wants to be friend or lover. He believes that only by generating such feelings he can be accepted by the social groups that he desires to join.

He confesses this necessity to be accepted in Madrid's artistic scene also to Teresa, telling her "I'm worried you're too cool for me, that you'll realize I'm in fact a fraud. An inelegant fraud. I won't be able to fool you and you'll get bored" (141-142); a confession that, as it occurred with his parents, does not generate the rejection or stigma that his anxious mind expected. Although he has removed this burden from his chest, Adam still experiences anxiety and paranoid thoughts about the possibility that other people might find the truth about himself and, now that he confessed his innermost fear to Teresa, he is worried that "she was going to reveal to the foundation and her distinguished peers that I was, at best, a charlatan" (167). What he really needs is someone who reassures him of having inherent value despite thinking of not being enough, or worse, of being nothing else than an impostor. And this occurs at the end of the novel, when he is invited again to read his poems, this time in front of a wider audience. When he admits to Teresa that he is willing to resign because he believes that his Spanish skills are not adequate, she replies,

> 'I have known you for six or seven months,' she said, almost sadly. 'We only speak Spanish. When are you going to admit that you can live in this language? […] Adam, you are a wonderful poet, a serious poet. If I weren't sure about that, why would I be translating you? When are you going to stop pretending that you're only pretending to be a poet? […] We sat in silence and I wondered if Teresa was right; was I in fact a

> conversationally fluent Spanish speaker and a real poet, whatever that meant? […] They wanted the input of a young American poet writing and reading abroad and wasn't that what I was, not just what I was pretending to be? Maybe only my fraudulence was fraudulent. (168)

It is through these words, representing an external perspective on himself, that Adam realizes he is affected by impostor syndrome – although the condition is never mentioned by name in the novel. Heti observes that "[w]e realise, as Adam does, that it's true. He's no impostor. His anxiety and poses have just been a way of elaborating and extending himself, a drug more potent than his pot or his pills. Adam is not a poem. He's a person. The American ideal of freedom and self-invention has its limits; he's a product of his context and class" (Heti, 2012). In other words, despite the attempts to free himself from the image of the typical American living abroad and building his artistic career from scratch, he remains what he escapes from. Not even telling lies and crafting a new identity will save him from himself. He comes to the realization that "nothing was more American, whatever that means, than fleeing the American, whatever that is, and that their [Americans] soft version of self-imposed exile was just another of late empire's packaged tours" (49).

Convinced by Teresa's words, Adam attends the reading organized by his foundation, although the fear of public speaking and a subtle insecurity are still maneuvering his thoughts. In the moments anticipating his reading turn, he experiences again a strong anxiety attack. He is

> practicing my memorized passages, reminding myself to breathe. I had three tranquilizers in the pocket of my jeans. I put my hand in my pocket to confirm their presence and contact with the denim made me exclaim internally: Why, in the name of God, was I wearing jeans? And worse: a T-shirt. In two days of panicky anticipation I had failed to concern myself with my appearance. I felt nauseated as I imagined the men in suits. (171-171)

He still relies on the presence of his pills in his pocket, but he does not take them immediately. He is also extremely self-conscious of his appearance and convinces himself that, along with its scarce Spanish knowledge, also his clothes could be a cause of shame. In his head, he is already comparing himself with the other participants. He therefore manages to change his clothes into an elegant suit and heads to the foundation:

> I entered the building and made my way to the auditorium; to my horror, it was considerably larger than I expected, seating perhaps two hundred people, and it was full; […] my anger was nothing compared to my anxiety; I had no idea what to say. I reached into my pocket for my tranquilizers and realized, no doubt blanching, that I had failed to transfer them to my suit pants from my jeans. I felt a surge of terror so intense I was dizzy. […] The audience was invisible from the stage because of the lights but I could sense its presence, its attentiveness; Teresa made a joke and they laughed and the many-headed laughter was terrible to me. […] Use your memorized lines, I told myself, but could not remember them. I was going to flee or vomit or faint. […] I could feel a change in pressure on my face, the effect of the audience focusing its eyes upon me. I heard myself say, my voice sounding to me as though it issued from the back of the auditorium. (172-174)

This passage contains an accurate description of anxiety symptoms, especially that type of anxiety related to performances and/or social situations: temporal loss of memory, dizziness, sweating, nausea, paranoia of having all the audience's eyes on him and, at the end, dissociation, as if he was watching himself from the outside. And to worsen the situation, Adam is aware that he cannot rely on the tranquilizers he forgot in the jeans. However, despite his inner turmoil, Adam manages to read and answer questions in a proper way, even if he confuses the names of two Spanish poets as I quoted some pages above.

After the reading, he receives positive feedback from Teresa, who smiles "as if nothing had happened, assuring me I had done wonderfully", but he still believes in having completely failed. In fact, he categorically says to himself "[y]ou'll be gone in six weeks. You will never see any of these people again. María José cannot nullify your fellowship because you mangled

names. None of this matters. Not Teresa or the panel or Spain or Spanish literature or literature in general. […] I have never been here, you have never seen me" (178). This passage shows Adam's pessimism and self-critique of his own art, which are enhanced by his inability to accept personal failure. Demeyer and Vitse comment this passage by observing that "[w]henever he allows himself to think he is leading himself astray or whenever he fears the other might be aware of their own projections, his sense of loneliness, fraudulence and lack of essence (his contingency) are reinforced" (Demeyer & Vitse, 2021: 15).

In the very last section of the novel, however, we see this hopelessness dissipate when Adam, still in Madrid, attends another reading at Arturo's gallery without any form of anxiety, nervousness, or insecurity. While reading his poems, he does not even "hear the American accent" and once inside the gallery he "was pleased to see [it] was overflowing. If I was nervous, it was only about the fact that I wasn't nervous, which might mean something was wrong with me" (180). He is clearly suspicious of being happy, calm, and confident. Even medication stops from being his priority, since he "thought about my tranquilizers in my suit jacket only because I was surprised not to want one" (181).

As John Graney comments, "[i]n the closing scene, Gordon seemingly overcomes his imposter-syndrome and performs calmly in a poetry reading" (Greaney, 2024: 127), with a calm that, I would add, surprises him. Once he overcomes the imposter syndrome, it is clear that he also overcomes his doubts about prolonging his stay in Spain, given that the novel ends with a traditional happy ending in which Adam claims "I planned to live forever in a skylit room surrounded by my friends" (181).

5.1 Narratological and Theoretical Aspects

As we have seen. *Leaving the Atocha Station* is narrated through a retrospective first-person narration. In the novel, the narrator and the protagonist are the same person, therefore Adam is an autodiegetic narrator. However, as Haase points out, the fact that Adam

compulsively lies generates a subtle distinction between his role as experiencing-I and the one of narrating-I. Haase explains the reasons behind Adam's misleading behavior by arguing that his "wish to protect himself is only one reason for his behavior. He also attempts to anticipate the reaction of others and tries to manipulate their impression of him." (Haase, 2022: 104). Considering his behavior, according to Haase it is "necessary to distinguish between Adam's role as a protagonist (experiencing-I) and as the autodiegetic narrator of his story (narrating-I). Where the former is portrayed as a mythomaniac (by himself, no less), the latter provides a painstaking account of his deceptions" (ibid. 104). To explain this distinction, Haase brings the example of a passage in which Adam has just been hit by a Spanish guy because, while a Spanish girl was reporting a personal traumatic story, Adam was smiling to show his participation even though he was not understanding the language, thus generating a misunderstanding. In the passage he quotes, Adam deliberately worsens his wound by biting harder in order to "deepen the cut so that I would appear more injured and therefore solicit sufficient sympathy to offset the damage my smiling had done" (13). It is a strategy to appear more vulnerable and, consequently, generate compassion in other people, hoping to receive forgiveness. As Haase points out

> There is a contrast here between the action Adam narrates and his style of narration. He describes how he manipulates his physical reactions to appear more vulnerable. This is noteworthy because the body is often understood as a site of authenticity […] yet it becomes just another tool in Adam's performance. At the same time, Adam narrates the action in a detailed, matter-of-fact manner. He discloses the motivation behind his deception to the reader. By sharing this ethically questionable behavior, Adam as narrating-I makes himself vulnerable in a way that would have been foreign to Adam as experiencing-I. The relationship of the narrator to the reader is therefore entirely different than the one between the characters. (Haase, 2022: 105)

In other words, Adam as narrator seems to be willing to show his ethical side by explaining the reasons behind the questionable deceiving behaviors of the experiencing-I, thus creating an

idea of vulnerability that the reader associates with Adam. But, as Haase says, the experiencing-I in the story would not have had the same ethical standard while living as the narrating-I does while narrating in the present, keeping in mind that the narration is retrospective. Haase reports Johannes Völz's interpretation of

> the narrative situation in LTAS and other, similar New Sincerity novels as a sincerity effect. By way of an 'open, honest and transparent form of exchange,' the novel as a medium is prioritized as a site of sincerity. […] [T]he contrast between Adam's past actions and his unsparing narration becomes a speech act. It signals the reader that the narrator is sharing his or her mistakes, and that the relationship between them is built on trust. The narrative situation creates the effect of sincerity. (ibid. 105)

Therefore, *Leaving the Atocha Station* belongs, as "Good Old Neon", to post-postmodernism and its New Sincerity movement. The concept of sincerity is detectable in many aspects of the novel, starting from the sincerity effect that Völz describes. Indeed, the vulnerability Adam conveys symbolizes the unavoidable nature of failure and, therefore, the acceptance of life's imperfection. Adam, with his anxiety attacks and constant lies, shows to the reader his flaws and, consequently, his human fragility, as Neal who openly admitted his fraudulence to his interlocutor. But this kind of existential failure does not generate resignation, apathy, or stigma; on the contrary it "is welcomed, as it produces trust on both a communicative and an ethical level. […] Lerner emphasize[s] that [he] attempt[s] to express authentic experience even though language can never fully represent it" (Haase, 2022: 12).

Despite the awareness of language's limits in expressing authenticity, New Sincerity authors still attempt to create an empathic bond with their readers. And to achieve such a bond, these authors, including Ben Lerner, "valorize the transparent disclosure of moral failings. Their texts relentlessly catalog lies, embarrassing moments and shameful experiences. Through their characters, the authors make themselves vulnerable and show that their narratives involve an actual risk to their reputation, which is again intended to create trust" (ibid. 12). Language has

its inherent limitations in representing authenticity, but by portraying situations of failure, shame, or embarrassment, authors manage to make their narratives relatable to the reader, who recognizes himself in those fictional situations. Völz argues again that "the staging of shame in New Sincerity novels creates a sincerity effect. The characters expose their vulnerability and create a bond with the reader, who is able to feel their embarrassment by proxy" (Haase, 2022: 103). In the novel, Adam suffers because he refuses to accept the risk of stigmatization resulting from the experience of shame. In fact, "he does not even attempt to be sincere. Whenever his carefully composed performance is questioned or shows a gap, Adam reports intense sensations of anxiety and embarrassment" (ibid. 103). For this reason, he adopts fraudulence as a coping mechanism against the sincerity of shame. However, the main consequence of fraudulence is not the success and social acceptance he hopes to receive, but rather an increase in anxiety and depression. By doing so, he "demonstrates the pitfalls of giving up sincerity. Lerner makes the case that the desire of sincerity must be pursued, even though it can never be fulfilled" (Haase, 2022: 91). The concept of risking one's reputation for art's sake is perfectly expressed by Wallace in *E Unibus Pluram.* In the essay, Wallace writes about the concept of 'anti-rebels', namely those artists who dare to

> back away from ironic watching […]. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. (Wallace, 1993: 193)

New Sincerity's anti rebels should, according to Wallace, question and debunk postmodernist irony by re-establishing the lost affection, interpersonal connection, and mutual comprehension that postmodern skepticism has annihilated. These anti-rebels should regain compassion and care, even if this requires risking their reputation by being defined as banal, sentimental, or melodramatic. But, as we have seen in the chapter dedicated to "Good Old Neon", only this kind of affection can work as an antidote against the pervasive solitude – or solipsism – enhanced by late capitalist society. A cultural and social perspective where literature, as other forms of art, positions itself as the medium through which the connection among lonely people can be achieved.

In *Leaving the Atocha Station*, although the narrator and the protagonist are the same person, the former represents New Sincerity while the latter embodies skepticism. Indeed,

> Where the protagonist piles lie upon lie to mask what he perceives as his real, despicable personality, the narrator does the opposite. He discards the protective veil of the virtual and relinquishes control about the reaction of the reader. This rhetorical strategy does not make Adam's narrative sincere per se. It does, however, carry the potential of creating a sincerity effect for readers that respond to his signals. They have the possibility of interpreting LTAS as an actual attempt to represent lived experiences, memories, feelings. As a narrator, Adam actually risks something. (Haase, 2022: 109)

In a certain way, this aspect parallels the sincere function of David Wallace opposed to Neal's postmodern irony and skepticism in "Good Old Neon", although with a less complex narrative situation than the one Wallace's short story showcases.

"Good Old Neon" and *Leaving the Atocha Station* also share an autobiographical component, even though Lerner adopted a different name for his alter ego "[i]n contrast to other autofictions that belong to the New Sincerity" (Haase, 2022: 112). Adam seems to represent the literary version of Lerner because they "both are young poets raised in Topeka, Kansas; both spent time in New York among 'the dim kids of the stars'; both spent a year in Madrid on a poetry

fellowship (Adam's unnamed; Lerner's a Fulbright)" (Heti, 2012). Between the author and the character there are not only biographical similarities, but also intellectual affinities. In fact,

> Adam's works are often exact allusions to Lerner's oeuvre. There is, for example, the poem Adam finds in Teresa's apartment. He claims to have written it in Providence about Topeka (see 127). The poem was, in fact, published in Ben Lerner's chapbook *The Lichtenberg Figures*, his first volume of poetry. […] This entanglement is crucial in creating the recognizable voice of Adam. […] The reader is therefore invited not just to associate Adam Gordon with Ben Lerner, but also to extend their philosophical similarities to the intention behind the novel. (Haase, 2022: 110-111)

The novel is not only autobiographical but also metafictional. In fact, "[i]n a metafictional turn, the 'project' becomes the very narrative that constitutes LTAS. Adam's 'research' provides the raw material for this narrative in form of lived experiences" (ibid. 115). The 'research' to which Adam is working is more related to his social life in Madrid than to any kind of study on Spanish poetry, and the reader sees the construction of the novel's plot in the making. As Haase observes

> the autobiographical elements of LTAS are balanced by metanarrative passages that deal with the gap between lived experiences and linguistic representation. When Adam reflects on the act of narrating, this disconnect becomes obvious. He mentions that his time in Spain falls into two categories: directionless, passive stretches of time and intense, incisive moments. Narrative form cannot represent either of them truthfully. The long stretches of inactivity would be 'falsified by any way of talking or writing or thinking that emphasized sharply localized occurrence in time' (64). The brief bursts, however, were 'equally impossible to represent because the ease with which they could be represented entered and canceled the experience' (64). This separation of language and experience is a clear signal to readers that they have no access to Adam's authentic experience. Presumably because of this fact, Adam vows to 'never write a novel' (65). The existence of LTAS makes clear that he broke this vow and willingly accepted the 'falsification' of narrative. (ibid. 112-113)

Essentially, as the reader cannot have authentic access to Adam's actual experiences, reflexively he cannot either access Lerner's past experiences. Therefore, although the novel

takes inspiration from the author's personal life experiences, it is still closer to fiction than to autobiography as such. This is why Haase often refers to this novel as autofictional, since it "revolve[s] around the question to what extent authentic experience can be communicated to others – not just within an artistic medium, but in everyday conversation as well" (ibid. 89), representing, as we have seen, the core of *Leaving the Atocha Station*.

New Sincerity, autobiography, and metafiction are part of David Foster Wallace's narrative as well. However, as Giuseppe Carrara noticed, Ben Lerner has never officially included David Foster Wallace among his inspirations. But it cannot be denied the similarity in their perceptions of the role of literature. Moreover, in his *Americana*, Luca Briasco detects a branch of American literature deriving from Wallace's legacy and including, among authors such as George Saunders and Richard Powers, also Ben Lerner (Carrara, 2017: 94). As Wallace, also Lerner often criticized the pretentiousness of avant-garde, experimental writing (ibid. 95), and, again as Wallace, he sees in literature a way to abandon intellectual pessimism, as Gramsci claimed, to embrace a totalizing form of optimism which might help all of us to face the consequences of late-capitalism. (ibid. 105).

Conclusions

The aim of my analysis was to investigate the presence of fraudulent characters in two exemplary fictional texts belonging to post-postmodern American fiction reflecting the need to perform in current society. As we have seen, the self-presentation of a contrived identity based on a series of lies seems to be a common coping mechanism against a society which increasingly pressures its members to perform the best version of themselves in order to be accepted within certain social groups. Due to social pressures, expectations, and adherence to unwritten norms, some individuals feel their true identity is insufficient for acceptance and success leading them to construct fake identities tailored to meet external expectations.

The first chapter was dedicated to the examination of the presence of imposters in literary history, with a particular focus on narrative fraudulence from 19th century to the present days, which is to say from the Industrial Revolution and its alienating effects on population to late capitalism's influence on identity and interpersonal relationships. The chapter also explored the purpose of fraudulent characters in fiction, by investigating their mirror-like role of figures reflecting and questioning the social norms regulating daily existence. Through this general overview on the phenomenon of fraudulence in fiction, I have demonstrated how the presence of these anti-heroes might lead readers to feel an empathic connection with them, precisely because, through their controversial nature, they actually show their human side.

The second chapter delved into the analysis of postmodernism by outlining the historical context surrounding its foundation as well as the narrative, sociological, and philosophical features of the movement. The chapter specifically investigated the loss of authenticity in postmodern times, which Baudrillard addresses in his theory of simulacra, which explains how copies replace the original. As originals are replaced by copies, or

simulations, authentic identity likewise gives way to fraudulent personalities. In a society prioritizing consumerism, identity too becomes commodified, pressuring individuals to 'sell' the best version of themselves by pretending to be something they are not. To achieve this, persuasive skills are essential, enabling the impostor to convince others of their disguise; a concept epitomized by the quintessential American figure of the *confidence man*. In this chapter, I provided an insight into the features of a cultural movement which keeps guiding us despite its alleged death to comprehend the reality we experience daily. Through the description of postmodernism, I have shown how fraudulence, deceit, and manipulation are not only part of our current existence, but also a consequence of the overwhelming demands of a society regulated by capitalism and consumerism.

The third chapter represented an inquiry on the sociological aspects of my study, starting from the outline of Goffman's theories on an individual's self-presentation in social contexts. The chapter examined how human behavior varies depending on the context, specifically how individuals adjust their actions based on the audience they are interacting with in their daily lives. Indeed, every person plays different roles depending on the people observing them and the impression one wants to give, exactly as an actor who adapts his performance according to the role he is required to play and to the audience watching and judging him. Such an awareness leads people, as we have seen, to feel a deep sense of anxiety or performance anxiety, to be more precise caused by the fear of being stigmatized by society if the performance does not suit expectations and requirements. This chapter provided a crucial analysis of the correlation between fraudulence and performance. Adopting a fake identity is inherently linked to the need to perform in order to keep the credibility of the false persona. However, this effort inevitably creates pressure and anxiety for the impostor.

The fourth chapter was dedicated to the literary analysis of David Foster Wallace's "Good Old Neon". By analyzing this short-story, I provided a narrative example of the social

and philosophical theories on performance and fraudulence explored in the previous chapters. The protagonist's fraudulence exemplifies a condition common to many people who, in a society more and more demanding, feel the necessity to present themselves through their best-performing version. Although at first fraudulence seemed the solution for all his problems, the protagonist rapidly realizes to be trapped in an inescapable cycle of deceit and self-critique.

In the fifth chapter I analyzed Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, whose protagonist is a young American in search for authenticity in art while being itself a personification of inauthenticity. Adam's fraudulent approach to both his interpersonal relationships and self-perception symbolizes the influence of a capitalist society which values appearance and performative success over genuine identity and, consequently, the acceptance of one's flaws.

Both "Good Old Neon" and *Leaving the Atocha Station* stand as literary representations of the concept of 'fake it till you make it', although in different ways and with different outcomes. In "Good Old Neon", Neal's awareness of his fraudulence leads to a deep existential crisis. For his whole life, he certainly manages to 'fake it' by externally projecting a constructed idea of his persona that does not correspond to his inner thoughts, but he never actually 'makes it', because the feelings of alienation and disconnection generated by his fraudulence culminate in a tragic end. Similarly to Neal, Lerner's protagonist fakes his way through social interaction by lying about himself and his art but, in contrast with Neal, Adam's fraudulence does not lead him to a tragic outcome. Instead, Adam seems to gradually accept the role he is performing, since by pretending to be the confident poet he ends up believing and making others believe in this version of himself, thus managing, in a certain way, to 'make it'.

Despite the different outcomes, by analyzing these two works of American fiction I have demonstrated that the adoption of fraudulent behaviors does not always create the interpersonal connection and social success desired by the protagonists. Instead, it ends up increasing their insecurity, resulting in anxiety and often solitude when these impostors inevitably struggle to keep up with the performance they contributed to create.
Although at first fraudulence might appear as the temporary solution to an individual's insecurities and self-doubts, it inevitably turns out to be a cage of lies devouring the impostor's integrity. In a society dominated by individualism, inauthenticity, anxiety and loneliness, the antidote is found, as shown by the post-postmodernists Wallace and Lerner, in empathy, sincere connection, and acceptance of our human failure. And thanks to its introspective power, literature positions itself, as these fictional works evidenced, as the medium capable of helping all of us escape the cage of fraudulence and performance in which late-capitalism keeps us trapped.

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