

“STILL STEAMING AS ITS MANY ARMS EXTENDED”

Pain in David Foster Wallace’s ›Incarnations of Burned Children‹

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Hitherto criticism on David Foster Wallace (b. 1962) has focused mostly on his impressive 1079 page novel ›Infinite Jest‹ (1996), which earned him the Lannan Prize for Fiction and a so-called ‘genius grant’ from the MacArthur Foundation, notwithstanding the fact that, apart from his non-fictional works, he has published three widely acclaimed short story collections as well. Although some of his stories also won him prestigious literary awards and prizes, so far only three studies have dealt with this part of Wallace’s oeuvre¹⁾ Here, I will focus on a story that is considered a “highlight”²⁾ of the 2004 collection ›Oblivion‹, namely ›Incarnations of Burned Children‹³⁾, first published in ›Esquire‹ in November 2000.

Even though it may be true that “most of ›Oblivion‹ owns prose that smolders like a slow-burning log”⁴⁾, ›IoBC‹ is special in several respects. A “masterpiece of heart-stopping brevity”⁵⁾, the “stunning” and “deeply disturbing” story⁶⁾ about

¹⁾ For an overview of all of Wallace’s works see IANNIS GOERLANDT and LUC HERMAN, David Foster Wallace, in: *Post-war Literatures in English. A Lexicon of Contemporary Authors* 56, Groningen 2004, p. 1–16, p. A1f., p. B1f. For studies on Wallace’s short fiction see *ibid.*, p. 5f., p. 11f., 14; – JAMES ROTHER, Reading and Riding the Post-Scientific Wave. The Shorter Fiction of David Foster Wallace, in: *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13,2 (1993), p. 216–234; – MARSHALL BOSWELL, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Columbia 2003, p. 65–115, p. 180–210.

²⁾ SCOTT BRYAN WILSON, *Oblivion*. David Foster Wallace, in: *Raintaxi Online Review of Books* (Fall 2004), <http://www.raintaxi.com/online/2004fall/wallace.shtml>

³⁾ DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, *Incarnations of Burned Children*, in: *Oblivion*, Boston et al. 2004, p. 114ff. (hereafter abbreviated as IoBC). Reprinted with kind permission of Little, Brown and Company, a division of Hachette Book Group USA. The page numbers refer first to the original collection, then to the story as it is reprinted here.

⁴⁾ STEPHEN SCHENKENBERG, David Foster Wallace. *Oblivion*, in: *Playback* St. Louis (June 2004), p. 30f., <http://www.playbackstl.com/classic/Current/SH/oblivion.htm>, here: p. 30.

⁵⁾ BOB WAKE, *Oblivion*. David Foster Wallace, <http://www.culturevulture.net/Books2/Oblivion.htm>

⁶⁾ SCHENKENBERG, David Foster Wallace (quot. note 4), p. 30.

pediatric burns is particularly interesting as a case study for one of the central themes in Wallace's work, viz. "in-depth representations of suffering".⁷⁾

The scope of this article is to analyze the textual strategy of the representation and evocation of burn pain. As reading the story involves more than getting acquainted noncommittally with pediatric burns' horrific effects, I will also investigate – by means of a close reading along rhetorical-narratological lines⁸⁾ – how ›IoBC‹ was strategically designed to affect its readership. Furthermore, I will briefly contextualize the results with respect to Wallace's other work.

INCARNATIONS OF BURNED CHILDREN

[114] The Daddy was around the side of the house hanging a door for the tenant when he heard the child's screams and the Mommy's voice gone high between them. He could move fast, and the back porch gave onto the kitchen, and before the screen door had banged shut behind him the Daddy had taken the scene in whole, the overturned pot on the floortile before the stove and the burner's blue jet and the floor's pool of water still steaming as its many arms extended, the toddler in his baggy diaper standing rigid with steam coming off his hair and his chest and shoulders scarlet and his eyes rolled up and mouth open very wide and seeming somehow separate from the sounds that issued, the Mommy down on one knee with the dishrag dabbing pointlessly at him and matching the screams with cries of her own, hysterical so she was almost frozen. Her one knee and the bare little soft feet were still in the steaming pool, and the Daddy's first act was to take the child under the arms and lift him away from it and take him to the sink, where he threw out plates and struck the tap to let cold wellwater run over the boy's feet while with his cupped hand he gathered and poured or flung more cold water over the head and shoulders and chest, wanting first to see the steam stop coming off him, the Mommy over his shoulder invoking God until he sent her for towels and gauze if they had it, the Daddy moving quickly and well and his man's mind empty [115] of everything but purpose, not yet aware of how smoothly he moved or that he'd ceased to hear the high screams because to hear them would freeze him and make impossible what had to be done to help his own child, whose screams were regular as breath and went on so long they'd become already a thing in the kitchen, something else to move quickly around. The tenant side's door outside hung half off its top hinge and moved slightly in the wind, and a bird in the oak across the driveway appeared to observe the door with a cocked head as the cries still came from inside. The worst scalds seemed to be the right arm and shoulder, the chest and stomach's red was fading to pink under the cold water and his feet's soft soles weren't blistered that the Daddy could see, but the toddler still made little fists and screamed except maybe now merely on reflex from fear the Daddy would know he thought it possible later, small face distended and thready veins standing out at the temples and the Daddy kept saying he was here he was here, adrenaline ebbing and an anger at the Mommy for allowing this thing to happen

⁷⁾ GOERLANDT and HERMAN, David Foster Wallace (quot. note 1), p. 11.

⁸⁾ Confer MICHAEL KEARNS, who considers "narrative from the perspective of the socially constituted actions it performs" (Rhetorical Narratology, Lincoln and London 1999, p. 2), as well as the concept of a structural-poietic-performative analysis of literature in THOMAS WÄGENBAUR, Narrative Ethik. Das Paradox der Ethik als KybernEthik der Literatur, in: Im Bann der Zeichen. Die Angst vor Verantwortung in Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft, eds. MARKUS HEILMANN and THOMAS WÄGENBAUR. Würzburg 1998, p. 229–253, here: p. 248.

just starting to gather in wisps at his mind's extreme rear and still hours from expression. When the Mommy returned he wasn't sure whether to wrap the child in a towel or not but he wet the towel down and did, swaddled him tight and lifted his baby out of the sink and set him on the kitchen table's edge to soothe him while the Mommy tried to check the feet's soles with one hand waving around in the area of her mouth and uttering objectless words while the Daddy bent in and was face to face with the child on the table's checked edge repeating the fact that he was here and trying to calm the toddler's cries but still the child breathlessly screamed, a high pure shining sound that could stop his heart and his bitty lips and gums now tinged with the light blue of a low flame the Daddy thought, screaming as if almost still under the tilted pot in pain. A minute, two like this that seemed much longer, with the Mommy at the Daddy's side talking singsong at the child's face and the lark on the limb with its head to the side and the hinge going white in a line from the weight of the canted door until the first seen wisp of steam came lazy from under the wrapped towel's hem and the parents' eyes met and widened – the diaper, which when they opened the towel and leaned their little boy back on the checkered [116] cloth and unfastened the softened tabs and tried to remove it resisted slightly with new high cries and was hot, their baby's diaper burned their hand and they saw where the real water'd fallen and pooled and been burning their baby boy all this time while he screamed for them to help him and they hadn't, hadn't thought and when they got it off and saw the state of what was there the Mommy said their God's first name and grabbed the table to keep her feet while the father turned away and threw a haymaker at the air of the kitchen and cursed both himself and the world for not the last time while his child might now have been sleeping if not for the rate of his breathing and the tiny stricken motions of his hands in the air above where he lay, hands the size of a grown man's thumb that had clutched the Daddy's thumb in the crib while he'd watched the Daddy's mouth move in song, his head cocked and seeming to see way past him into something his eyes made the Daddy lonesome for in a sideways way. If you've never wept and want to, have a child. Break your heart inside and something will a child is the twangy song the Daddy hears again as if the radio's lady was almost there with him looking down at what they've done, though hours later what the Daddy won't most forgive is how badly he wanted a cigarette right then as they diapered the child as best they could in gauze and two crossed handtowels and the Daddy lifted him like a newborn with his skull in one palm and ran him out to the hot truck and burned custom rubber all the way to town and the clinic's ER with the tenant's door hanging open like that all day until the hinge gave but by then it was too late, when it wouldn't stop and they couldn't make it the child had learned to leave himself and watch the whole rest unfold from a point overhead, and whatever was lost never thenceforth mattered, and the child's body expanded and walked about and drew pay and lived its life untenanted, a thing among things, its self's soul so much vapor aloft, falling as rain and then rising, the sun up and down like a yoyo.

Parental Responses

In the story, a child is playing in the kitchen where his mother has put a kettle on the stove, while his father is doing some odd jobs outside. Then the tragedy commences:

The Daddy was around the side of the house hanging a door for the tenant when he heard the child's screams and the Mommy's voice gone high between them. He could move fast, and the back porch gave onto the kitchen, and before the screen door had banged shut behind him the Daddy had taken the scene in whole, the overturned pot on the floortile before the stove and the

burner's blue jet and the floor's pool of water still steaming as its many arms extended, the toddler in his baggy diaper standing rigid with steam coming off his hair and his chest and shoulders scarlet and his eyes rolled up and mouth open very wide and seeming somehow separate from the sounds that issued [...]. (IoBC 114/298)

The setting contributes greatly to the story's nightmarish character, as the unexpected disturbance of the quiet domestic tableau is neither exaggerated nor grotesque, but painfully vivid and realistic. What Wallace portrays here is, as in so many truly frightening horror stories, a scene both plausible and probable.

Not only will most readers intuit the scene's probability and verisimilitude: from a medical point of view, samples of relevant statistical data on the etiology of pediatric burns support this intuition. In 1995, a U.S. survey estimated that "11.7 % of children younger than age 3 received medical care for a burn injury".⁹⁾ In that same year, Joel G. Ray reported on several studies on pediatric burns, from which two general trends could be discerned. First, "food preparation and consumption accounted for greater than 60 per cent of childhood burn admissions," and "an average of 40 per cent of children" in the reviewed studies "were scalded by hot liquids from stove pots, coffee pots and tea cups. Second, infants and toddlers [were] disproportionately represented in these numbers".¹⁰⁾ One of the likely reasons for this overrepresentation is the fact that though infants and toddlers have "the dexterity to grab or tip hot containers, their lack of mobility leaves them in a most vulnerable position".¹¹⁾ Other studies add infants' and toddlers' slow physical response time, as "increased time of contact with hot water increases the risk of significant injury".¹²⁾

Because of story's horrors credibility and verisimilitude, readers are more likely to empathize with the characters who are trying to handle the situation. The parents, however, react in utterly different ways to their child's pain. Therefore it is important to see how the text presents their different responses.

When the Daddy rushes into the kitchen "the Mommy [is] down on one knee with the dishrag dabbing pointlessly at him [the toddler] and matching the screams with cries of her own, "which must have been her immediate and only response to

⁹⁾ JANE E. CORRARINO, PAMELA J. WALSH and EDWARD NADEL, Does Teaching Scald Burn Preventions to Families of Young Children Make a Difference? A Pilot Study, in: *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 16,4 (2001), p. 256–262, here: p. 256.

¹⁰⁾ Burns in young children. A study of the mechanism of burns in children aged 5 years and under in the Hamilton, Ontario burn unit, in: *Burns* 21 (1995), p. 463–466, here: p. 463.

¹¹⁾ RAY, Burns in young children (quot. note 10), p. 465. Ray adds that this holds true particularly "in withdrawing from a tipping coffee pot," as is the case here, "or a scalding hot bathtub." Scalds from hot bath tubs or tap water, however, are less common, viz. only in between 10% and 15% of all scald burns. Compare *ibid.*, p. 464, Table II; COLIN MACARTHUR, Evaluation of Safe Kids Week 2001. Prevention of scald and burn injuries in young children, in: *Injury Prevention* 9 (2003), p. 112–116, here: p. 112; – P. C. GUZZETTA and J. RANDOLPH, Burns in children. 1982, *Pediatric Review* 4 (1983), p. 271–278, here: p. 272.

¹²⁾ DIRK W. HUYER and SONYA H. CORKUM, Reducing the incidence of tap-water scalds. Strategies for physicians, in: *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 156,6 (1997), p. 841–844, here: p. 842.

the accident, because the combination of “the child’s screams and the Mommy’s voice gone high between them” (IoBC 114/298) initially triggered the Daddy’s attention. We know that children consider burn pain “as one of the most painful traumas”¹³⁾ and that burn pain is “l’une des expériences les plus pénibles et les plus prolongées qu’il soit donné de rencontrer en pathologie humaine.”¹⁴⁾ The child’s screams and later on¹⁵⁾ his making “little fists” (IoBC 115/298) can be taken as textual indications of that pain.

The mother mirrors her son’s pain both by scalding herself as her “one knee and the bare little soft feet [are] [...] in the steaming pool” and by “matching the screams with cries of her own” (IoBC 114/298), while the father’s “man’s mind [is] empty of everything but purpose” (IoBC 114f./298). Were he to yield to stifling, freezing panic like his wife, who is “hysterical so she was almost frozen” (IoBC 114/298), it would “make impossible what had to be done to help his own child, whose screams were regular as breath and went on so long they’d become already a thing in the kitchen, something else to move quickly around” (IoBC 115/298). He has to instruct his wife to stop screaming and to get “towels and gauze if they had it” (IoBC 114/298).

To a certain point the Daddy is presented as the story’s main actor who has fulfilled all necessary steps in first aid treatment of burns.¹⁶⁾ His

first act was to take the child under the arms and lift him away from [the steaming pool] and take him to the sink [...] to let cold wellwater run over the boy’s feet while with his cupped hand he gathered and poured or flung more cold water over the head and shoulders and chest, wanting first to see the steam coming off him [...] (IoBC 114/298)

He also checks for blisters and finally swaddles his son in wet towels and sets him “on the kitchen table’s edge to soothe him” (IoBC 115/299). The Mommy, however, has been rendered very negative so far. She is petrified by shock and fear and hence is the last to take decisive steps: whereas the Daddy had already coolheadedly examined his son’s burns,¹⁷⁾ she cannot even try “to check the feet’s soles” until the Daddy has taken care of the situation and has their son wrapped up on the table, and even then she examines them “with one hand waving around in the area of her mouth and uttering objectless words” (IoBC 115/299). The father’s check-up

¹³⁾ J. LATARJET, C. POMMIER, A. ROBERT, J. P. COMPARIN and J. L. FOYATIER, Traitement de la douleur de l’enfant brûlé, in: Archives de Pédiatrie 4,3 (1997), p. 278–284, here: p. 278.

¹⁴⁾ J. LATARJET, La douleur du brûlé, in: Pathol Biol 50,2 (2002), p. 127–133, here: p. 128.

¹⁵⁾ This only holds true for the narrative time, not for the narrated time, as the child is “*still* [making] little fists” (IoBC 115/298, emphasis added) after the father had appropriately applied cold water to the affected areas, which suggests the child had been making this gesture all along.

¹⁶⁾ Compare CAROLINE DOWSETT, The assessment and management of burns in the community, in: British Journal of Community Nursing 7,5 (2002), p. 230–239, here: p. 232.

¹⁷⁾ “The worst scalds seemed to be the right arm and shoulder, the chest and stomach’s red was fading to pink under the cold water and his feet’s soft soles weren’t blistered that the Daddy could see” (IoBC 115/298).

can be interpreted as him trying to ‘read’ the body for signs telling what exactly is ailing his son. The color of the “burner’s blue jet” (IoBC 114/298), for instance, is transferred to the boy’s “bitty lips and gums now tinged with the light blue of a low flame” (IoBC 115/299). The heat has been incarnated in the child’s body.

For most readers, the text’s appreciation of the characters’ different responses will show the father to the best advantage, which makes him estimable and lends him an aura of heroism. The narrator artfully maneuvers the reader into siding with the Daddy’s perspective both by attributing to him the healing power of the “cold *well-water*” (IoBC 114/298, emphasis added) in the appraisal that he is “moving quickly and well” (114/298) and by granting access to his private thoughts. We also learn of the Daddy’s “anger at the Mommy for allowing this thing to happen just starting to gather in wisps at his mind’s extreme rear and still hours from expression” (IoBC 115/298f.). As we shall see, however, the problem of guilt (blame and self blame), which is one of the major intersubjective implications of scald burns, cannot be easily solved on a fictional level.¹⁸⁾

Not until after he has taken all possible medical steps, the father tries “to calm the toddler’s cries,” only then directly addressing the pain, metonymically still there in the cries, “face to face with the child.” Having “bent in” (IoBC 115/299), the Daddy has put himself on the same level, which allows for direct interaction – note that the mother had also instinctively kneeled when interfacing and empathizing with the child. Those screams he hears as “a high pure shining sound that could stop his heart” (IoBC 115/299), so finally he too starts to be overwhelmed and infected by pain. The mother’s reaction already showed how interpersonal, intersubjective pain relates to scald trauma, but because the text puts more emphasis on the Daddy’s responses via the focalizing narrative voice, his development is more important to the readers by the time the real tragedy begins.

Parental Pain

The Mommy and Daddy – both on the same level as the child – are by now “talking singsong at the child’s face,” but he is “screaming as if almost still under the tilted pot in pain” (IoBC 115/299). They both do not understand why he is still in pain, although in a complex and in hindsight meaningful past future tense, the

¹⁸⁾ These implications have been studied in medical literature: see L. WRIGHT and R. FULWILER, Long range emotional sequelae of burns. Effects on children and their mothers, in: *Pediatric Research* 8,12 (1974), p. 931–934; – S. A. MASON, Young, scarred children and their mothers – a short-term investigation into the practical, psychological and social implications of thermal injury to the preschool child. Part I. Implications for the mother, in: *Burns* 19,6 (1993), p. 495–500; – L. P. RIZZONE, F. J. STODDARD, J. M. MURPHY and L. J. KRUGER, Posttraumatic stress disorder in mothers of children and adolescents with burns, in: *Journal of Burn Care and Rehabilitation* 15,2 (1994), p. 158–163; – R. E. K. ZEITLIN, Long-term psychosocial sequelae of paediatric burns, *Burns* 23,6 (1997), p. 467–472; – J. M. BADGER, Burns. The psychological aspects, in: *American Journal of Nursing* 101,11 (2001), p. 38–42.

father had “thought it possible” that it was “on reflex from fear.” “A minute, two like this that seemed much longer” (IoBC 115/299) go by. This passage is the story’s real caesura, an instant of tense calm in the eye of the storm. At this point the narrator adopts the singsong voice in the anapestic “and the lark on the limb with its head to the side and the hinge going white in a line from the weight of the canted door” (IoBC 115/299), involving the readers in the moment’s tension. Then,

the first seen wisp of steam came lazy from under the wrapped towel’s hem and the parents’ eyes met and widened – the diaper, which when they opened the towel and leaned their little boy back on the checkered cloth and unfastened the softened tabs and tried to remove it resisted slightly with new high cries and was hot¹⁹), their baby’s diaper burned their hand and they saw where the real water’d fallen and pooled and been burning their baby boy all this time while he screamed for them to help him and they hadn’t, hadn’t thought [...]. (IoBC 115f./299)

Statistical evidence proves that genital and perineal burns in children are not exceptional, albeit not very common²⁰), so again, the dreadful events of ›IoBC‹ are not improbable at all. Depending on what charts and data we use,²¹ the boy’s scalds can be estimated to be ranging between 26.75 % and 65 % of the total body surface area, with his genital burns most certainly being severe because of the continued exposure to the hot water contained in his diaper, which Wallace emphasizes by adding “[a] minute, two like this that seemed much longer” (IoBC 115/199) after the initial burn, when the parents are talking singsong.²²

¹⁹) Note that here the source of the pain is identified with the same metonymy of sound, as it seems to be the diaper that somehow utters “high cries.”

²⁰) “The unique location of the perineum guarded by a deep furrow between the thighs, the looseness of the penile and scrotal skin, and the cremasteric reflex, which retracts the testicles to a safer position under stress are protective factors that make uniform, deep second-degree, or full-thickness burns to [the genital and perineal] area less likely to occur” (CARLOS ANGEL, TUNG SHU, DAN FRENCH, EDUARDO ORIHUELA, JAMES LUKEFAHR and DAVID N. HERNDON, *Genital and Perineal Burns in Children. 10 Years of Experience at a Major Burn Center*, in: *Journal of Pediatric Surgery* 37,1 (2002), p. 99–103, here: 100). As shows from the Galveston Shriners Hospital for Burned Children records of the years 1991 to 2000, however, 3.37 % of the children admitted with second-degree burns also sustained genital or perineal burns. For 96 % of those children they were part of a major burn, ranging from 2% to 98 % of the total body surface area (TBSA). 64 % of the burns were scald burns (ibid., p. 99). Though these figures may appear small, one should keep in mind that on average, in this Texan hospital alone, every year almost 5 children sustain burns similar to the toddler’s in Wallace’s story.

²¹) If we set the age of the child between one and two, and using the at times contradictory data the story provides, the Lund and Browder chart gives estimates of 26.75 % – 55.5 % of TBSA scalds (see C. C. LUND and N. C. BROWDER, *Estimation of areas of burns*, in: *Surg Gynecol Obstetr* 79 [1944], p. 352–358, quoted from DOWSETT, *The assessment and management of burns* [quot. note 16], p. 235, fig. 2), whereas the modified Lund and Browder chart gives estimates of 39 % – 65 % of TBSA scalds (ERIC D. MORGAN, SCOTT C. BLEDSOE and JANE BARKER, *Ambulatory Management of Burns*, in: *American Family Physician* [Nov. 1, 2000]), <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20001101/2015.html>, fig. 5). A scald in children exceeding 10 % of TBSA should in any case result in a hospital admission (DOWSETT, *The assessment and management of burns* [quot. note 16], p. 234).

²²) For a time-temperature table for scalds of adult skin see HUYER and CORKUM, *Reducing the incidence of tap-water scalds* (quot. note 12), p. 842.

The question of the attribution of guilt, guilt the Daddy had shifted onto the Mommy (the “wisps” of anger “at his mind’s extreme rear”), finds an echo in the assonant, ominous “first *seen* wisp of *steam*” (IoBC 115/299, emphasis added) coming from the baby’s diaper. The Mommy is “at the Daddy’s side” (IoBC 115/299), they *both* “hadn’t thought,” had not helped him, and now they burn “their hand” (note that Wallace uses a singular noun) on the diaper, sharing their son’s pain. The Mommy reacts more intensively: before, she had been “invoking God” (IoBC 114/298) until her husband volunteered more immediate, practical answers to handle the situation, now she “said their God’s first name and grabbed the table to keep her feet” (IoBC 116/299). The Daddy completely adopts the child’s initial response (making “little fists” [IoBC 115/298] and screaming): he “threw a hay-maker at the air of the kitchen and cursed both himself and the world for not the last time” (IoBC 116/299).

Narrative Control

This additional shock has devastating effects on another level too. Decisive in the story’s design is the careful patterning and control exerted by the narrative voice, set up to excite particular reader responses. Taking to heart the consequences of narrative progression and “the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time”²³), we must scan the text for details whose meaning shifts from minutiae to small indices of impending danger only with the wisdom of hindsight.

From the outset we could, or perhaps should have noticed the toddler’s “baggy diaper” (IoBC 114/298), but in an impressively artful double chiasmus the Daddy’s attention focuses solely on the head, the chest, the shoulders and the feet. The first occurrence of the toddler

standing rigid with steam coming of his hair and his chest and shoulders scarlet [...] and the bare little feet in the steaming pool

shifts to

[the Daddy] threw out plates and struck the tap to let cold wellwater run over the boy’s feet while with his cupped hand he gathered and poured or flung more cold water over his head and shoulders and chest (IoBC 114/298)

and then returns to

[t]he worst scalds seemed to be the right arm and shoulders, the chest and stomach’s red was fading to pink [...] and his feet’s soles weren’t blistered [...]. (IoBC 115/298)²⁴

²³) Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge 1980, p. 27. – See also KEARNS, *Rhetorical Narratology* (quot. note 8), p. 59–65.

²⁴) One could even add the onset of a third chiasmatic check-up as the Mommy again tries to “check the feet’s soles” (IoBC 115/299), but while interrupted by the caesura it is incomplete.

This double chiasmus guides away the focus from the genital area to the Mommy's frozen posture (reminiscent of the biblical Lot's wife's when she looked back to the burning cities God wanted to punish²⁵), the Daddy's swift movements and his anger at her. Thus, a blind spot in the readers' vision is created.

The numerous mentions of the child's sex as masculine, tellingly marked first in connection with that other indication gone unnoticed ("the toddler in *his* baggy diaper" [IoBC 114/298, emphasis added]), could have drawn our attention to the boy's genital area as well. As the story makes explicit use of this grammatical shift at the end after the child has irrevocably lost his genitals ("the child's body [...] lived *its* life untenanted, a thing among things, *its* self's soul so much vapor aloft" [IoBC 116/299, emphasis added]), these indications of the child's sex gain additional weight. Also, the question why the parental reactions had been structured along fairly stereotypical gender patterns, with the father being the active, the mother the passive character, is answered. One might have wondered why the domestic work is stereotypically divided among the Daddy and the Mommy (the generic names enhance this effect) and why it had to be the father taking up the seemingly heroic role. Because the child is a boy, the father's self-accusation becomes more powerful and compelling: it was him, maybe more than the mother, who should have thought about "what was there" (IoBC 116/299). From this point onward, however, the parents' reactions merge, the stereotypical patterns disappear, and we encounter a flashback with a non-stereotypical event (the father singing a song at the boy's crib), which levels the initial domestic gender imbalance.

We also could have noticed the seemingly superfluous repetition of the fact that water was pooling on the floor ("the overturned pot on the floortile" and "the floor's pool of water" [IoBC 114/298], again in a chiasmic distribution), which becomes meaningful when the parents see "where the real water'd fallen and pooled" (IoBC 116/299). The specification should have raised suspicion about the possibility of other pools. Furthermore, it is not coincidental that the anapestic singsong caesura contains a hint at the continued pain. The door's hinge the Daddy was fixing, which in the end breaks off, mirrors the catastrophe, and in the caesura the lark observes "the hinge going white in a line" (IoBC 115/299), which marks an 'incarnation' of 'pain' similar to the readable incarnation we have encountered in the boy's blue lips and gums. The parents had not noticed the similar evolution going on inside.

²⁵) See Genesis 19. Many aspects of the text are or can be related to religion, which is already suggested in the semantic potential of the title's "Incarnations." There is the mother's kneeling and invoking God while the father is trying to cleanse and heal their child with an act that can be interpreted symbolically as baptism. Moreover, when the catastrophe is revealed, the mother utters "God's first name," which could be simply 'Christ' as a curse, but which could also be seen as a breach of the promise never to call God by his 'first' name, the ineffable tetragrammaton YHWH, in Judaism, especially while the father "cursed both himself and the world for not the last time" simultaneously. In this respect, the "two *crossed* handtowels" (IoBC 116/299, emphasis added) in which the boy is diapered could also be meaningful. One could even interpret the many occurrences of chiasmic structures in the text as a hint at Christian religion.

Another indication which grants insight in the story's design is its title.²⁶⁾ The double plural of ›Incarnations of Burned Children‹, which at first glance seems inappropriate since there is only one burned child, hints at the fact that all characters (and by extension the readers) are 'scalded' during the succession of narrative events. The narrator's sole direct address, which adopts the message of a country song playing in the background at the scene of the accident ("Break your heart inside and something will a child is the twangy song the Daddy hears again as if the radio's lady was almost there with him looking down at what they've done"²⁷⁾), supports this interpretation: "If *you've* never wept and want to, have a child" (IoBC 116/299, emphasis added).²⁸⁾

Because these indices can be attributed only to the narrative voice, the divertive strategy is textual. Since the story is purposefully designed to ensure its readers side with the Daddy, its objective lies in *our* response of horror, because we as well "hadn't thought" (IoBC 116/299). Our reading abilities and our imagination to interpret what had really been going on are questioned and put to the test.

Comparing vs. Identifying

Admittedly, many David Foster Wallace stories take a profound interest in morbidity and pain to comment on the human condition. We find it for instance in ›Lyndon‹, a story from his first collection ›Girl with Curious Hair‹²⁹⁾, in the awe-inspiring sections of ›Infinite Jest‹³⁰⁾ on the comatose Don Gately suffering from a gunshot wound, as well as in many stories from ›Brief Interviews with Hideous Men‹, a collection which, like ›Oblivion‹, is an effort to deal with various "in-depth representations of suffering" and "mental pain".³¹⁾

²⁶⁾ In Wallace's fiction textual performance and audience response are often related to titles' functions. For a general typology compare LEO HOEK, *La marque tu titre. Dispositifs sémiotiques d'une pratique textuelle* (Approaches to Semiotics 60), The Hague 1981; for a discussion of these questions with respect to ›Infinite Jest‹ see IANNIS GOERLANDT, 'Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away.' Irony and David Foster Wallace's ›Infinite Jest‹, in: *Critique* 47,3 (2006), p. 309–328.

²⁷⁾ Music plays an important role in ›IoBC‹ on different levels: there is the radio song, the talking singsong, the silent songbird outside that finds its melody in the narrator's anapestic description, the (silent) singsong's ominous echo in the paronomastic etymological play "*canted door*" (IoBC 115/299, emphasis added), and the singing of the father at the crib. The radio song is special, though, because in the Daddy's mind it foreshadows the communal and cultural blaming he and his wife will have to live with, apart from their own feelings of guilt.

²⁸⁾ In literature, similar unexpected and universalizing second-person interpolations frequently occur. Another example is one of David Foster Wallace's ›Interviews with Hideous Men‹ (Interviews with Hideous Men, London 2001, p. 98–105) that ends with "What if I did it to you? Right here? Raped you with a bottle? Do you think it'd make any difference? Why? What are you? How do you know? You don't know shit" (105). For comments on this ending see Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (quot. note 1), p. 193f.

²⁹⁾ London 1999 [1989], p. 75–118.

³⁰⁾ Boston et al. 1996.

³¹⁾ GOERLANDT and HERMAN, *David Foster Wallace* (quot. note 1), p. 11.

For a brief comparison, however, the early *Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR*³²), in which a large company's Vice President in Charge of Overseas Production succumbs to a severe heart attack in the empty Executive Garage and gets help from the Account Representative, is more suitable, because it illustrates different literary treatments of sympathy and empathy. Whereas sympathizing is "an action that retains its object as distinctly 'other,'" Roy Schafer explains, empathizing "implies approximating identity of feeling, something akin to temporary subjective merging."³³) Furthermore, "at the height of the empathic moment, the subjective boundaries of self and other are assumed to be blurred."³⁴)

›LARKC‹ wants to relate physical pain and cultural, social distress. Even before the Vice President collapses, a feeling of helplessness had already emerged from "the obligation of conversation without the conversational prerequisites of intimacy or interests or concerns to share. They shared pain, though of course neither knew" (LARKC 48). The pain originating from the heart attack is a poetic means to draw the readers' attention to the human condition, of which the pietà-like tableau is exemplary:

'Help,' the working Account Representative called, feeling the stir of a tinely remembered humid wind and pausing, again, to look behind him [...] at the Ramp that spiraled up out of sight toward a street, empty and bright, before the Building, empty and bright, dispossessed, autonomous and autonomic. Bent to what two lives required, below everything, he called for help again and again. (52)

›IoBC‹ has a similar moment, namely when the Daddy thinks of his son who

might have been sleeping if not for the rate of his breathing and the tiny stricken motions of his hands in the air above where he lay, hands the size of a grown man's thumb that had clutched the Daddy's thumb in the crib while he'd watched the Daddy's mouth in song, his head cocked and seeming to see way past him into something his eyes made the Daddy lonesome for in a sideways way. (116)³⁵)

The maxim "If you've never wept and want to, have a child," which immediately follows this passage, thus also refers to a more general sadness that was already there before the accident. In ›LARKC‹, however, we can only compare our own pain to, but not truly identify with the characters' pain.³⁶)

When discussing the difference between identifying and comparing, one can also consider Wallace's essay ›Consider the Lobster‹ on the Maine Lobster

³²) In: *Girl with Curious Hair*, London 1999 [1989], p. 43–52 (hereafter abbreviated as LARKC).

³³) ROY SCHAFFER, *Narrative, Attending, and Empathizing*, in: *Literature and Medicine* 23,2 (2004), p. 241–251, here: p. 245.

³⁴) *Ibid.*, p. 246.

³⁵) Note that again music plays an important role and that the boy posture resembles the lark's that "appeared to observe the door with a cocked head as the cries still came from inside" (IoBC 115/298).

³⁶) For an explanation of these concepts see Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (quot. note 30), p. 345.

Festival,³⁷⁾ which of course also deals with the effects of scalding and boiling. In this essay, however, even though the issues pain and suffering are extensively commented upon³⁸⁾, the question of intersubjective pain could only be treated by means of comparison:

Since pain is a totally subjective mental experience, we do not have direct access to anyone or anyone's pain but our own; and even just the principles by which we can infer that other human beings experience pain and have a legitimate interest in not feeling pain involve hard-core philosophy.³⁹⁾

›IoBC‹, on the other hand, is a *fictional* device designed to make intersubjective suffering possible through rhetorical strategies. The story demands from its readers “responses that render verbal intercourse between writer and reader an important or even *real* event”.⁴⁰⁾ Its narrative is designed to induce a temporary subjective merging, which grants the possibility of genuine intersubjective sharing of pain and suffering. In order to create this effect, the story employs a kind of realism surpassing and supplanting impassibility. Moreover, it offers a narrative counterpart of the story's “scene” that, like the Daddy, readers had not taken “in whole” (IoBC 114/298), so that in the text's performance interpersonal feelings of pain can be established by structural analogy. ›IoBC‹ thus is not merely a smoldering “slow-burning log”⁴¹⁾; a metaphor even more appropriate is a “pool of water still steaming as its many arms extended” (IoBC 114/298) that scalds its audience. The story masterfully puts the audience in the initial position of the Mommy, one knee in the scalding water but frozen with horror. This narrative mode is a good example of Wallace's literary program, in that it wants to challenge reader responses not merely by articulating⁴²⁾, but in the case of ›Incarnations of Burned Children‹ by really *inducing* “what it is to be a fucking human,” which for Wallace is “what fiction's about”.⁴³⁾

³⁷⁾ Consider the Lobster and Other Essays, London 2005, p. 235–254.

³⁸⁾ Ibid., p. 243–252.

³⁹⁾ Ibid., p. 246.

⁴⁰⁾ DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young, in: Review of Contemporary Fiction 8,3 (1988), p. 36–53, here: p. 45.

⁴¹⁾ SCHENKENBERG, David Foster Wallace (quot. note 4), p. 30.

⁴²⁾ BOSWELL, Understanding David Foster Wallace (quot. note 1), p. 18, p. 194.

⁴³⁾ LARRY McCAFFERY, An Interview with David Foster Wallace, in: Review of Contemporary Fiction 13,2 (1993), p. 127–150, here: p. 131.