

Enjoying the Symptom: David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

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Abstract

This article investigates David Foster Wallace's subversion of masculinity in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. The loud and rambling monologues of the male characters embody instances of objectifying women, glorifying predatory sexuality, and equating masculinity with quick sexual gratification. The male characters, however, seem to be constantly plagued with the threatening presence of women. In the "Brief Interviews" sections of Wallace's collection of stories, the paradoxes and inconsistencies of the male discourse reveal the symptoms of male neurosis connected with the repressed female, the most conspicuous evidence of which is the silenced figure of the female therapist/interviewer. Rendered through dark and subversive humour, the symptoms indicate the male anxieties related with the inability to represent women. Drawing on the central concepts of Lacan and Freud, I aim to show the ways in which Wallace undermines the hegemonic notions of masculinity through his subversive use of the symptom. I argue that Wallace's portrayals of the interviewees' enjoyment of the symptom underlies his subversive ridicule of the male attempts of sustaining the illusory pleasure.

Keywords: masculinity; the male discourse; the symptom; the symbolic order; *objet petit a*; *jouissance*

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David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* has been regarded as a work that deals with male sexuality more freeheartedly than his earlier fiction. The sections entitled "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" stand out in the collection as a series of interviews held with sexually alienated, white, middle-class, urban men who objectify and degrade women, glorify predatory sexuality, equate masculinity with quick sexual gratification, and yet, are forever plagued by the female "threat." The ironic and intriguing aspect of "Brief Interviews" is that "hideous men" impart their symptoms to a "silenced" female analyst in a series of psychotherapy sessions (Wallace 1999, 17). Ironically, the neurotic male discourse suggests that the repressed female returns in the form of the symptom and plagues the interviewees. Wallace's ridicule of the male dread of female sexuality is conveyed through the neurotic symptoms which take the form of male speculations, fantasies, and misogynistic constructs of the female other. The manner in which "woman" is constituted through the male discourse opens the interviews to a reading based on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory. A well-known fact about Lacan is that his break with traditional psychoanalysis occurs through his reformulation of the unconscious as a formal structure replicating the mechanisms of language: "the unconscious is neither primordial nor instinctual" (Lacan 2001, 187). Predicating his entire theory on the unconscious as the product of the symbolic order, Lacan designates desire as an effect of language. Reading Wallace's interviews via Lacan's theory of desire reveals invaluable hints about the fantasies of "hideous men." Lacan argues that marked with the lack of "the phallus," the privileged signifier of the pre-symbolic object of desire, "woman" cannot be represented in the symbolic system. She is, therefore, relegated to the status of *pas-tout*¹ by the symbolic system based on the Father's Law. Lacking the phallus, woman as the non-symbolisable other destabilises subjectivity fundamentally understood as "male." In "Brief Interviews," "woman" features as a construct associated with male fears and anxieties. Her pervasiveness as an ambivalent and elusive construct suggests that while provoking anxiety, she also sustains the illusion of pleasure by filling the gap opened up by the pre-symbolic object of desire. The evidence of this can be found in the contradictions of the male discourse. Symbolised as either the threatening or the sexualised other, "woman" paradoxically emerges as the main support of masculinity.

A Lacanian reading of the "Brief Interviews" sections reveals masculinity as an unstable construct. Reproducing the psychoanalytical setting in which the male analysands discuss their symptoms in the presence of a "silenced" female analyst, Wallace mocks the hegemonic constructions of masculinity along with the psychiatric

¹ The central point of Lacan's theory is that sex and gender are not biological, but constituted through language. Pointing out the constitution of woman in language in terms of incompleteness—as opposed to man—Lacan refers to her as *pas-tout*, which is translated into English as "not-all." According to Lacan, "anytime a speaking being of any sort, male or female, assumes a role under the banner of woman, ... that being is situated within the phallic function as '*pas-tout*'" (Clark 2014, lvii).

institution capitalising on the male fears of castration. Throughout the interviews, a central paradox determines the male discourse, that is, the repressed figure of the female, who, on the one hand, returns as the symptom and destabilises masculinity, and on the other hand, guarantees the recognition that the male subjects need. Having made radical revisions to the theory of the symptom, both Freud and Lacan suggest that the symptom is a formal function of language and the fact that it persisted. Defining the symptom as uncontrollable thoughts, speech, and behaviour (e.g., slips of tongue), Freud points out the return of the repressed. One of Freud's most notable discoveries is the fact that psychotherapy does make the symptoms permanently go away. Focusing his attention on the drive, Freud argues that the persistence of the symptom suggests that the ultimate goal of the drive is not satisfaction. Freud's reformulation of the symptom as the indicator of the fact that the drive does not seek fulfillment radically shifted psychoanalysis. A subscriber of Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacan founded his theory of psychoanalysis on the paradoxes of pleasure, namely, pleasure derived from the lack of satisfaction. Referring to Freud's controversial understanding of the relationship between the symptom and the drive, he also argues that the aim of the drive is not satisfaction: "the drive does not reach its object in order to obtain satisfaction; rather, the drive traces the object's contour, and on the arch of the way back it accomplishes its task" (Braunstein 2003, 106). Lacan's theory of the drive is equally controversial as he points out that the drive has no other goal than reproducing itself as drive. A contemporary Lacanian, Slavoj Žižek clarifies Lacan's distinction between the aim and the goal of the drive: "Lacan's point is that the real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim: the drive's ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal" (Žižek 1992, 5). Such a radical shift in the theory of the drive further alters the notion of desire and enables Lacan to locate it in the purely formal symbolic order. For Lacan, the symptom is produced by the symbolic order. He is quite explicit when he declares that the symptoms "take on their full meaning only when oriented in a field of language, only when ordered in a relation to the function of speech" (Lacan 2001, 43). He posits the symptom as an arbitrary and ambivalent symbolic construct which produces the effects of a meaningful goal for the drive to attain. Freud and Lacan thus challenge the conventional relationship between the symptom and the repressed drives and desires. While Freud sets forth the mechanical, repetitive, and ambivalent nature of the symptom, Lacan posits it as an elusive symbolic effect caused by the differences underlying the entire system of language rather than a dual structure with a manifest and latent content. Wallace's ridiculing exposition of the male discourse in "Brief Interviews" displays a creative slant on these groundbreaking views of the symptom as a product of the symbolic order. His sarcastic display of the contradictions of masculinity centralises the repressed figure of "woman" who returns as the symptom. Her elusiveness and ambivalence suggest the instabilities of masculinity.

Throughout the interviews, the female is suppressed. Her appearance is limited with the ambivalent and irregular constructs of the male discourse. At times she appears as a paranoid partner, a sexualised object, or an unpredictable and threatening other. Wallace

foregrounds such contradictions of the male discourse in a manner that ridicules and undermines the hegemonic and solidified notions of masculinity. While the interviewees construct “woman” as the negative other and adopt a suppressive discourse of the female, it is evident that her return as the symptom produces *jouissance*. In “B.I. # 11,” the interviewee claims that his partner torments him with ungrounded accusations and makes him feel “on eggshells all the time” (Wallace 1999, 20). While he laments that her paranoia about his leaving her “breaks [his] heart,” his ditching her shows that he is not sincere: “Maybe if I loved you less or cared about you less I could take it. But I can’t. So, yes, that’s what the bags are, I’m leaving” (1999, 20). His pretense of love and sincerity evaporates in the moment of his construction of the paranoid other who gives him a hard time over nothing. His discourse justifies her paranoia; the interviewee turns out to be an unreliable and manipulative partner. Wallace’s display of the contradictions of the male discourse is almost always related with the symptom. In this case, the interviewee’s symptom is manipulation, which repeats itself in every relationship he is in and it is clear that he derives a fair amount of enjoyment from it as his relationship pattern is repetitive. Emphasising the characters’ insincerity and manipulateness in “Brief Interviews,” Marshall Boswell points out Wallace’s portrayals of the male “solipsistic dread” which inevitably reduces the interviewees’ perceptions of women to “falsifying codes and conventions” (2003, 183–84). Wallace’s interviewees are not only dishonest and manipulative towards their partners, but they also admit to their dishonesty and manipulation. Pointing out the characters’ “self-professed ‘openness’” about their sexual pursuits, Boswell argues that sex functions as “popular entertainment or drugs” for them (2003, 183–84). Self-reflexivity is an effective strategy “hideous men” use to manipulate their partners (Wallace 1999, 17). They confess their insincerity and yet turn it into another mode of manipulation. The interviews suggest that the interviewees’ self-reflexivity suggests a repetitive pattern of manipulation. In “B.I. #2,” therefore, the interviewee mentions a symptom that he cannot control. He tells the analyst that he approaches unsuspecting women with the pretense of love and commitment, but he quickly walks out on them. He declares that he cannot help “coming on very fast and hard in the beginning of the relationship,” which has “the effect, naturally, of seeming to make them truly believe I really am in love—which I am” (Wallace 1999, 92). Just when his partners trust him and begin to “think in terms of future,” he backs out of the relationship (Wallace 1999, 92). His complaints reveal a pattern in which the symptom never disappears and the reason for that is it produces enjoyment. Identifying the interviewees as “metafictionalists of their own feelings,” Marshall Boswell contends that their honesty about manipulating women is an “even more sinister form of deception” (2003, 184). The interviewee’s final outburst about how he is “terrified” that he “cannot love” partakes in the subversive humour of “Brief Interviews” which is based on ever-renewed forms of manipulation and deception (Wallace 1999, 99). While the vortex of manipulation portrayed in the interviews reveals the constructedness and ambivalence of the symptom, it further suggests the interviewees’ enjoyment of the symptom. The central motif of Wallace’s sarcastic approach to masculinity is, then, the self-reflexive discourse of “hideous men” which functions as the symptom they enjoy.

While some of David Foster Wallace's critics have addressed his psychologically impaired male characters, some of them have deplored the privileged status of the white male and the eclipse of the female in his works. Clare Hayes-Brady emphasises "the comparative lack in his writing of fully developed female characters" (2016, 132) and argues that "it is a notable feature of Wallace's writing that his writing of both female characters and romantic relationships is patchy at best and enormously problematic at worst" (2016, 167). According to Hayes-Brady, while Wallace's perfunctory treatment of female characters in his fiction can be deplored, his awareness of gender inequality and the privileged status of the white male cannot be missed in his non-fiction such as *Signifying Rappers*, which he co-authored with Mark Costello. A similar criticism about Wallace's downgrading of female characters has been put forward by Blakey Vermeule who focuses on "The Suffering Channel." Pointing out the oversexualised female protagonist, Amber Moltke, who "sexually smothers" the male character "in her fold and her girth," Vermeule suggests that Wallace saves existential questioning for male characters while his female characters come to represent the shallow and petty aspects of the human condition (Vermeule 2014, 110). Wallace's privileging of the white male has been pointed out by Catherine Nichols, who makes an argument about the centrality of the dead father, James Orin Incandenza, in *Infinite Jest*. Nichols contends that Wallace's centralising the father image reproduces male privilege and authority (Nichols 2001, 3). There have been further discussions about the connection between the centrality of male identity in Wallace's fiction and its ideological grounding in neoliberal capitalism. Edward Jackson contends that his works "are embedded in, and complicit in reproducing its key logics" (2020, 4–5). Focusing on Wallace's fiscal metaphors of "sexual hideousness" in *David Foster Wallace's Toxic Masculinity*, Jackson maintains that the neutrality of these metaphors redeems the toxic aspects of masculinity let alone viewing male hegemony from a critical perspective. Jackson charges Wallace with amending the toxic male behaviour by naturalising the hegemony of the white male as part of the neoliberal reality (2020, 5). The centrality of the white male in Wallace's works has thus been the target of some biting criticism. While his diagnostics on the alienation of white middle-class urban men has been appreciated, his reproduction of the sexist norms has been deplored. "Brief Interviews," however, is an exception to this case with its subversive attack on the white middle-class urban male. In this work, Wallace dismantles masculinity by foregrounding the symptom, that is, the suppressed female who returns and threatens the male subject.

Wallace's subversive eradication of the conventional perceptions of masculinity is founded upon the symptom which determines the male discourse. In many of the interviews, the symptom appears in the form of lewd fantasies, bizarre speculations, misogynistic constructs, and illusory objects of pleasure. The male subjects' enjoyment of the symptom enables Wallace to generate a subversive humour. The interviewee's compulsive yelling of "Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom" during the sexual relationship in "B.I. #14" suggests that without the symptom, he is unable to enjoy sex (Wallace 1999, 17). Baffled and distraught, he tells the female analyst about the uncontrollable symptom and how it ruins his sexual life. The analyst, who diagnoses

his case as “the uncontrolled yelling of involuntary words” (Wallace 1999, 17), is as puzzled as the analysand, who blubbers in despair: “It’s cost me every sexual relationship I ever had. I don’t know why I do it. I’m not a political person” (Wallace 1999, 17). The persistence of the symptom shows that “hideous men” are unable to derive pleasure if it is not for the symptom. Wallacian ridicule of masculinity is, therefore, based on a perverted enjoyment of the symptom. Further instances of the absurdities of desire can be seen in the interviewees’ fantasies and speculations about female sexuality. The neurotic obsession with female sexuality indicates a desire for recognition and approval by the female other. In “B.I. #31,” the interviewee points out men who are given into “thinking they’re Great and they know how to please her” and condemns them for “seeing themselves as a Great Lover doesn’t mean they give any more of a shit about her than pigs do” (Wallace 1999, 29). Making fun of men who are “counting the lady’s orgasms,” he claims that such behaviour is equal to “having a Porsche and driving it to church” (Wallace 1999, 29). Men, therefore, should stop racking their brains about sexual performance and let “ladies” figure out how to give pleasure (Wallace 1999, 29). In the interview, nonsense functions as the symptom. The interviewee’s brash and cheeky nonsense about female sexuality, which clanks like a stone in an empty bucket, exposes the hollowness of the fantasy constructs supported by an overblown masculinity. In Wallace’s sarcastic reproductions of such saucy instances of the male discourse, the symptom appears in the form of the male sexual fantasies which have a relieving impact on the male subject who is threatened by the unknown female. As the puzzling and unknowable other, she can only be integrated in the male discourse as a fantasy construct. Slavoj Žižek states that, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, fantasy is a symbolic construct which “designates the subject’s ‘impossible’ relation to *a*, to the object-cause of its desire” (1992, 6). Lacan’s *objet petit a* refers to any object which substitutes the pre-symbolic object-cause of desire and maintains the illusion of pleasure. It is the driving force of the male discourse based on a desire for recognition and affirmation. The elusiveness of the female other suggests the gap which determines the male subject.

The non-symbolisable, traumatic female other, who plagues the interviewees, is the unifying centre of Wallace’s series of psychotherapy sessions. His relentless sarcasm involves the representations of the vain attempts to repress her who returns as the symptom and dominates the male discourse. A visible evidence of this is the female analyst to whom the “hideous men” impart their neurotic disturbances. While silent and subdued throughout, she facilitates a revelation of the male neuroses and traumas which signify the flimsiness of the hegemonic constructs of masculinity. While a shallow reading of the interviews suggests the passivity of the female analyst, she is a central figure who plays the leading role in Wallace’s relentless dismantling of masculinity. As the interviewee in “B.I. #48” relates the traumas caused by his mother, he adopts an abusive attitude towards the female analyst. Termed as “transference” in psychoanalysis, such behaviour involves the analysand redirecting his feelings to the analyst. In this case, the interviewee’s anger for his mother is deflected to the female analyst, which hints at a deep level of neurosis, implying a disintegration of the male

subject (Wallace 1999, 106). Midway through the interview, the analysand begins to spew misogynistic abuse and verbally harasses the female therapist. He apparently deflects his frustrations about his mother who is “by vocation a professional clinician, a psychiatric case-worker” to the analyst (Wallace 1999, 111). The session begins with the interviewee’s revelation of his fantasies about dominating women. He mentions his fantasies of BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism): “The play is in your freely and autonomously submitting to being tied up. The purpose of the contractual nature of masochistic or *bonded* play—I propose, she accepts I propose something further she accepts—is to formalize the power structure” (Wallace 1999, 106). The ironic outcome is that the fantasy of the bonded game turns out to be a pretext for the analysand to return to the childhood scene of pain and suffering. He describes how he takes women to the bedroom where he sets the stage for the Oedipal scene: “I weep and explain to them the psychological origins of the game and the needs it serves in me” (Wallace 1999, 114). His compulsive desire for playing the bonded game, therefore, has the goal of catharsis. The fantasies of domination help the neurotic male subjects to cope with the traumatic mother.

Associating the fantasies of domination with the traumas caused by the mother, Wallace sets the stage for *jouissance*. In “Brief Interviews,” the characters’ symptoms disclose a perverse enjoyment of pain which in Lacanian theory is referred to as *jouissance*. In Lacan’s work, *jouissance* is a travestied form of pleasure derived from pain: ““What I call *jouissance*—in the sense that body experiences itself—is always in nature of tension, in the nature of forcing, of a spending, even of an exploit. Unquestionably, there is *jouissance* at the level at which pain begins to appear”” (Lacan quoted in Braunstein 2003, 105). This antithetical notion of pleasure goes back to Freud’s Oedipal law based on the father’s ban on satisfying the mother who lacks the phallus. While the anxiety of castration is thought to interfere with pleasure, a well-known Freudian point is the fact that civilisation allows partial compensation. Renouncing the full pleasure of satisfying the mother, the male subject can have access to partial pleasure. Hence the compulsion to repeat the traumatic scene is related with illusory control which produces pleasure. Freud gives the famous example of the “*Fort-Da* game” to illustrate the paradox of pleasure. The game, which evokes the traumatic scene of his mother leaving, shows a little boy’s attempt to cope with the painful absence of his mother. Repetitively throwing his toy away and finding it, the boy gains an illusory mastery of the situation. Similarly, in the interview, the analysand is able to derive pleasure from the illusory control and power provided by the bonded game. His compulsive desire to play the bonded game is the symptom of the interviewee’s issues with the traumatic mother who is a major source of frustration and anxiety. Her unresponsiveness to his demands for love is the cause of his “psychological complexes having to do with power and, perhaps, trust” (Wallace 1999, 107). As Adrian Johnston points out, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the mother “is an obscure omnipotent presence who is the source of all-important love. Because of the combination of her obscurity and importance, the mother *qua* Real Other also is a source of deeply unsettling anxiety for the very young child” (Johnston 2013). The analysand further informs the therapist that his mother holds “a *Master’s Degree in Clinical Social*

Work” and she has always regarded him as “some sort of laboratory specimen” (Wallace 1999, 111; italics added). He admits that his “mother’s imago all but rules [his] adult psychological life” (Wallace 1999, 111). The interviewee’s compulsive urge to play the bonded game is a coping mechanism. To cope with the traumatic image of the M/other, he resorts to BDSM, which, by allowing a restaging of the traumatic scene, provides him with an illusory pleasure of control and domination. In his discussion of the causes of male neurosis, Slavoj Žižek refers to the M/other’s inaccessibility “to the male phallic economy” (2005, 65). He argues that the non-symbolisable M/other causes the fantasies of domination. In the interviews, male anger and frustration, which are related to the inability to implement male privilege, are projected as objectification, debasement, and abuse.

The symptoms of misogyny take the form of objectification and abuse. The interviews feature neurotic male subjects who suffer from these symptoms. The interviewee in “B.I. # 46” claims that he has married his wife “because of the way she had a good body even after she’d had a kid. Trim and good and good legs—she’d had a kid but wasn’t all blown out and veiny and sagged” (Wallace 1999, 27). The nervous question that he poses the female analyst—“Does that sound shallow? Tell me what you think” (Wallace 1999, 27)—suggests his deep-rooted dilemmas and insecurities related with his identity as a male. Featured as a fantasy construct, the female body becomes the centre of male anxieties about maintaining authority and privilege. The female body, therefore, functions as Lacan’s *objet petit a*, that is, the illusory object that sustains male pleasure and privilege. A psychoanalytical concept designated by Lacan, *objet petit a* functions as a surrogate for the lost object of pre-symbolic pleasure. Wallace’s parodies of the objectifying and misogynistic male discourse expose the symptoms related with the illusory object of pleasure. “B.I. #3” features a striking instance of such discourse based on the illusion of the sexual domination of the female other (Wallace 1999, 21). The obscene and degrading remarks of two “hideous men” engaging in a conversation about a young woman suggest the male inability to represent the female other save as a passive object of male pleasure (Wallace 1999, 21). In a jeering tone, one of the conversationalists declares that he has manipulated a young woman by pretending to empathise with her trouble, yet his intention was a brief hook-up. The quotation below shows how the young woman is construed as a sexualised object of male pleasure through the male gaze:

She swears she’ll be there with the tits to meet him, and how she tells all her friends she’s finally in love with the real thing [...] gets her hair done up all big with spray like they do and dribbles perfume on her you know zones and all that business like the usual story and puts on her best pinks jeans did I mention she’s got on these pinks jeans and heels that say fuck me in like myriads of major world languages. (Wallace 1999, 24)

Wallace’s deliberate reproduction of “the locker-room talk” conveys the degrading objectification of the male gaze. The young woman is deplorably relegated to the status of an object in a dehumanising way. According to Mary K. Holland, the objectifying male gaze negates the possibility of an empathetic relationship between men and women

(2013, 112). Wallace's sarcasm stems from the conversationalist's sinister pretense of empathy. While the dehumanising objectification of the female body is deplorable, the scene further lends itself to an analysis of *objet petit a*. The body as *objet petit a* is illustrated in one of Lacan's anecdotes about "the parakeet who was in love with Picasso" (Lacan 1999, 6). In the anecdote, Lacan refers to a parakeet showing great interest in Picasso's clothes: "From the way he nibbled the collar of his shirt and the flaps of his jacket, indeed, the parakeet was in love with what is essential to man, namely, his attire (*accoutrement*)" (1999, 6). According to Lacan, the parakeet constructs Picasso's body under the clothes as a fantasy object which sustains the promise of pleasure where there is no possibility of it: "what lies under the habit, what we call the body is, perhaps but the remainder (*reste*) I call *objet a*," which "sustains desire through its lack of satisfaction and even its impossibility" (Lacan 1999, 6). The body as a fantasy object suggests the paradox of desire founded upon the impossibility of satisfaction. In the interview, the conversationalist's obscene gaze similarly constructs the female body as an illusory object which sustains masculinity as a fantasy founded upon the desire of dominating the female other. The gaze functions as the symptom which produces enjoyment.

In "Brief Interviews," misogyny emerges as a symptom related to the failure to control and contain "woman." Representing the instances of the male discourse that provoke a symptomatic reading of what cannot be said rather than what is said, "Brief Interviews" invites the reader to investigate the male rhetoric of entitlement. Misogyny, for example, is a constitutive symptom of the male discourse hidden in plain sight. In "B.I.#30," the interviewee justifies his advocacy of abuse by pointing out the detrimental aspects of stereotyping women as "fragile as little dolls" and claims that abuse helps women grow up and strengthens them: "who are we to say getting *incested* or abused or violated or whatever can't also have their positive aspects for a human being in the long run" (Wallace 1999, 116–17). The interviewee's absurd and outrageous points about the positive role abuse plays in achieving individuality reveal that what cannot be openly expressed—misogyny—in the male discourse can appear in various guises. The ineptness of the interviewees in suppressing their misogyny underlies the subversive sarcasm of "Brief Interviews." The conversationalists' degrading and misogynistic constructions of the female "other" in "B.I. #28" suggest the male anger and resentment related to the inability to control and contain her (Wallace 1999, 226). The sarcasm ensues from the conversationalists' pretense of empathy with feminists. As typically is the case with the interviews, the characters' vested interest in degrading women is so blatant that this renders their arguments totally groundless. The question they pose shows their disquiet: "What does today's woman want. That's the big one" (1999, 226). Unable to contain and control the female other, "hideous men" indulge in an abusive rant: "That it's OK to be sexual, that it's OK to whistle at a man's ass and be aggressive and go after what you want. That it's OK to fuck around ... if you're a feminist" (1999, 227). They intentionally distort feminist ideas and try to discredit feminism: "it's also not OK to fuck around because most guys aren't feminists and won't respect you and won't call you again if you fuck around ... Do but don't, a double bind" (1999, 227).

Their blatantly manipulative, sinister, and biased discourse reproduces the codes of toxic masculinity. While they pretend to empathise with the feminist revolt against patriarchy, the conversationalists claim that women cannot be sexually liberated since they conform to the sexist dichotomies imposed by patriarchal authority: “Madonna-versus-whore” or “Good girl versus slut” (Wallace 1999, 227). Engaged in a drawn-out discussion, the conversationalists produce misogynistic stigmas and binaries. The conversationalists intentionally misrepresent feminism and hunt for contradictions in feminist theory. They allege that “‘the new feminist-slash-postfeminist’ expectation that women are sexual agents, too, just as men are” is untenable since women internalise the male gaze and they avoid being pinned as sexually promiscuous (Wallace 1999, 227). Adam Kelly refers to “B.I. #28” as “[a] parody (a feminist parody) of feminism” (2018, 82) and argues that the “double silencing” of “woman” shows the male desire of affirming male power and authority (2018, 84). While the interview reveals a strong desire to reinforce male authority and entitlement, rather than parodying feminism, it parodies the male anxieties of control and authority. The contradictions of the male discourse reveal the inability to contain the female other. To discredit feminism, the two “hideous men” initially claim that feminists incarnate the male norm; then, they argue that feminism is outdated, and finally, they state that its claims are disproved by postmodernists. After giving a slapdash summary of the postmodern subversion of the subject, they declare that the female subject does not exist. Not only does “Brief Interviews” ridicule the contradictions of masculinity, but it also makes fun of shallow postmodernist arguments grounded in simplistic antinomies. As the conversationalists compare feminist and post-feminist theories, they end up defending biological determinism. They, therefore, declare that women’s efforts to defy masculinity are futile given the biological superiority of the male. Openly contradicting with their claims about post-feminism, their relegation to biological determinism shows a desire to essentialise gender differences, justify gender inequity, and therefore, reinforce hegemonic masculinity. What is held back in the conversation is an open acknowledgement of a male supremacist perspective. Encouraging the reader to do a symptomatic reading of the male discourse, therefore, “Brief Interviews” reveals the male supremacist and misogynistic take on women that the conversationalists hide behind pseudo-intellectual babble and manipulative antinomies.

The psychoanalytical context enables Wallace to represent the gaps of the male discourse and the instabilities of masculinity. It also allows him to make demands on the reader to do a symptomatic reading of the interviews. In the last part of my discussion, I hope to show how reading the interviews symptomatically reveals the substitutes of “the phallus.” An arbitrary and ambivalent symbolic marker, “the phallus” takes the form of travestied and grotesque objects. These repellent surrogates of “the phallus” figure as the persistent symptoms of predatory sexuality, such as “B.I. #40,” in which the character Johnny One-Arm uses his amputated arm to exploit women’s sense of pity and make sexual passes at them. He calls his disabled arm as “the Asset,” a grotesque stand-in for “the phallus,” and uses it to force his preys into ethical dilemmas: “I ask them do they want to see it. I say how I’m shameful of the arm but somehow I

trust them and they seem very nice and if they want I'll unpin the sleeve and let the arm out and let them look at the arm if they think they could stand it" (1999, 84). The arm as the obscene and repulsive object undermines masculinity and supports Wallace's subversive humour. Peter Sloane regards Wallace's provocative use of defects and disabilities as "evidence of his routinely dark, even perverse humour" (2019, 97). The representations of disability and defect allow Wallace to ridicule the travestied objects of male pleasure. Johnny One-Arm tells the interviewer how he outrages women's modesty: "It's So Hot I Feel Like Taking My Shirt Off [...] There's numerous, like, stages. I never outloud call it The Asset believe you me. Go on and touch it whenever you get a mind to" (Wallace 1999, 84). The arm as the grotesque substitute for "the phallus" becomes an instrument of sexual harassment. As the privileged construct of pleasure, "the phallus" stands for male authority and privilege in Freudian psychoanalysis. Lacan argues that in Freud, "the phallus is not a phantasy, if by that we mean an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (part-, internal, good, bad, etc.) in the sense that this term tends to accentuate the reality pertaining in a relation. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolizes" (Lacan 2001, 316). Pointing out Freud's analysis of the phallus as a "simulacrum," Lacan concludes that "the phallus is ... intended to designate as a whole the effect of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier" (Lacan 2001, 316). As an effect of the symbolic system, "the phallus" functions as the privileged cultural marker not only of sex, but also of subjectivity. It marks the male subject as "I" and the female subject as "not-I" (Benvenuto et al. 1988, 189). Representing the lack of "the phallus," the female other is denied subjectivity by "hideous men" (Wallace 1999, 21). Yet, she returns as the ultimate symptom causing much anxiety and distress. The travestied substitutes of "the phallus" such as Johnny One-Arm's amputated arm show the male attempts to make up for the lack. Figuring as the grotesque emblem of predatory male behaviour, "the Asset" reminds of Julia Kristeva's abject which she defines as "neither subject nor object" (Kristeva 1982, 2). Representing the limits of subjectivity, it "has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (1982, 2). It is possible to describe "the Asset" using Kristeva's terms, namely, as the thing "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1982, 1). Similarly, pushing the limits of the tolerable, "the Asset" destabilises masculinity and its claims to define and totalise subjectivity.

The "Brief Interviews" sections in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) represent a sustained questioning of the instabilities of masculinity. Wallace's ridicule of masculinity as an unstable construct is based on the repressed figure of the female other who returns as the symptom. The interviews portray neurotic male characters who suffer from the persistent symptoms of anxiety related with the inability to control and contain the female other. Yet, the interviews also show that the symptoms persist, that is, the male characters derive an illusory sense of pleasure from the symptoms. The enjoyment derived from repeating what is traumatic—defined as *jouissance* in Lacanian psychoanalysis—is about providing reimbursement for the loss of the primordial object of pleasure. Capitalising on *jouissance*, the interviews expose the male attempts to

compensate for the total lack of satisfaction. The surrogates of “the phallus,” therefore, figure quite often in Wallace’s instantiations of the male discourse.

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