

Animality Beyond Humanism in David Foster Wallace's *Consider the Lobster*

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Abstract

This article examines David Foster Wallace's "Consider the Lobster" through three interconnected perspectives: historical, literary, and philosophical. It explores the relationship between the figure of the lobster and the human, and, more broadly, the relationship between humanity and nature, with particular attention to bioethics and the question of killing and violence in the Anthropocene. The study also foregrounds the relationship between habitat and the living being, examining how the presence or absence of habitat, here represented by the body of water, can challenge the humanist framework. Through an engagement with different theoretical perspectives, the article demonstrates how Wallace's ethical position can be understood at the intersection of humanism and posthumanism.

Key words: David Foster Wallace; Posthumanism; Animal Ethics; Self and Other; New Humanism.

Introduction

David Foster Wallace published "Consider the Lobster," commissioned by *Gourmet Magazine*, in 2004. At that time, Wallace had already become a world-renowned writer following the publication of *Infinite Jest* (1996). He was a writer who introduced distinctive stylistic and poetic possibilities into the American novel, producing works that represented the complex entanglement of technology, humanity, and the world. Despite Wallace's fame and

popularity, “Consider the Lobster” was not well received by *Gourmet* readers (Eve 2017, 2). The essay, which was expected to be an engaging report on the Maine Lobster Festival, instead became a text that blurs the boundaries of journalistic reporting and moved toward a philosophical and critical form of auto-theory on bioethics.

It should also be noted that, beyond its subject matter and perspective, Wallace was an anti-genre writer. Whether writing novels, short stories, literary criticism, or reviews, he consistently disrupted the predetermined conventions of genre. His writing moves across boundaries that resist stable categorization. This border status is not merely epistemological; it also suggests a mode of thought and worldview. Borderline thinking emerges in a world where disciplinary boundaries have been violated, and where critical expression is closely tied to hybridity. Such a worldview resists simple or definitive answers: each question leads to another, and each world opens onto another.

Like many “postmodern” writers—the term itself suggesting an unresolved question rather than a stable category—Wallace critiques the inherent logic of the contemporary Western world that emerged from the Cartesian subject. At the same time, however, he also disrupts postmodernist logic itself, particularly its tendency toward the ironic representation. It is precisely at this point that humanist thought and its associated ethics become unsettled, opening new ways of understanding the world that may be described as a form of *new humanism*. This article follows Wallace’s essay step by step, examining both his historical approach to the lobster—its relation to food culture, ancient art, and systems of beliefs—and his ontological approach to the Anthropocene and speciesism, particularly the relationship between humanist and posthumanist ethics, as well as his movement across the boundaries of culture, philosophy, and literature.

To this end, the article addresses the relationship between human and non-human animals. Where are the boundaries between them? How can the human animal be defined through clear distinctions separating it from non-human animals? How is the killing of one species by another rendered legitimate? How can contemporary humans understand the dependence of species upon one another's bodies and exist within nature rather than above or outside it? How is the Other constructed? How does confronting the “ordeal of undecidability” (Wolfe 2019, 25) free ethics from the framework of absolutism? Most importantly, how do killability and the act of killing propose two distinct modes of thought and two different forms of response?

Literature Review

Numerous studies have examined David Foster Wallace's works. Despite its relatively short length, “Consider the Lobster” has attracted significant scholarly attention, largely because of its position at the intersection of philosophy, ethics, food culture, and literature.

Martin Paul Eve, through an intertextual reading of “Consider the lobster,” alongside Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener* and Samuel Beckett’s *Dante and the Lobster* explores the question of bioethics in Wallace's relationship to earlier literary texts (Eve 2017, 1-23). Eve's reading is particularly insightful in connecting food, class, and *Bartleby*, while also recognizing Wallace's use of “preference” as a philosophical and ethical concept. However, it overlooks a fundamental issue that Wallace briefly identifies in a footnote: the concept of “personal experience.” Ultimately, Eve's interpretation does not fully address the tension between Peter Singer's concept of “interests” and Wallace's notion of “preference.” Although Wallace treats “preference” as roughly synonymous with “interests,” his subtle emphasis on “personal experience” reveals his attempt to move beyond Singer’s utilitarian

framework. While this attempt does not transform the entire idea of humanism, it represents an important movement that exposes the limitation of concepts such as “interests” and “pain.”

Paul Giles, by contrast, directly addresses the relationship between Wallace and posthumanism (Giles 2007, 327-344). Giles points both to the relationship between technology and humanity in Wallace's broader body of work and to the relationship between humanity and nature in a text such as “Consider the Lobster.” Posthumanism encompasses both dimensions; indeed, it is the relationship among humanity, nature, and technology that clarifies the conflict between humanism and posthumanism at multiple levels.

What Giles does not fully address, however, is the extent to which Wallace relies on the humanistic framework of Singer's philosophy. This constitutes a crucial issue. There is an important contradiction here that cannot be easily overlooked: a posthumanist question is being approached through humanist conceptual tools.

Paul Giles uses the concept of “sentimental posthumanism” to describe Wallace’s approach (Giles 2007, 341). This designation, however, can be viewed with some skepticism, since Wallace does not adopt a fully posthumanist approach to the human-animal relationship. This article argues that Wallace attempts to address posthumanist questions in bioethics through a humanist system of thought, and this tension constitutes one of the central contradictions in his work.

This question is also reflected in Wilson Kaiser’s “David Foster Wallace and the Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism,” where, like Giles, he identifies Wallace's approach as a form of posthumanism (Kaiser 2014, 58). If one considers Wallace’s broader body of work, such a claim may be justified, particularly in relation to themes of technology and the human. However, when focusing specifically on “Consider the Lobster” and the question of bioethical posthumanism, the claim becomes more problematic. The fundamental issue with such

interpretations is that they tend to equate the critique of humanism, as well as forms of anti-anthropocentrism or anti-speciesism, with posthumanism itself. Yet throughout the long history of humanism, and more specifically liberal humanism, various intellectual traditions have criticized and revised different aspects of this system of thought. Such critiques do not necessarily imply an ontological transformation or a transition into an entirely new system of thought.

In this regard, Cary Wolfe's discussion of Peter Singer and Tom Regan illustrates this distinction:

“Just because a historian or literary critic devotes attention to the topic or theme of nonhuman animals doesn't mean that a familiar form of humanism isn't being maintained through internal disciplinary practices that rely on a specific schema of the knowing subject and of the kind of knowledge he or she can have. So even though your external disciplinarity is posthumanist in taking seriously the existence and ethical stakes of nonhuman beings (in that sense, it questions anthropocentrism), your internal disciplinarity may remain humanist to the core” (Wolfe 2009, 572).

This new humanism, which can neither be fully identified with posthumanism nor reduced to the Cartesian humanism from which it emerges, represents the underlying spirit of Wallace's broader intellectual project. As Mary K. Holland explains in her discussion of the new wave of novels that emerged after postmodernism in the second half of the twentieth century, including Wallace's work: “These novels assert most fundamentally a shift out of the antihumanism that had come to characterize postmodernism and postmodern fiction in the twentieth century, and into a new humanism that seems to be becoming characteristic of poststructural fiction of the twenty-first century”(Holland 2013, 3).

This intellectual space is where Wallace moves from postmodernist irony toward post-irony, from poststructuralist approaches to language toward the directness associated with new sincerity. Ultimately, this framework places contradiction, rather than postmodern uncertainty, against humanistic certainty and “decidability.”

The distinction between humanism and posthumanism is more ontological than epistemological. The bioethics that emerge from posthumanism are not simply new ethical frameworks for regulating the relationship between the human subject and nature. Rather, posthumanism involves a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between humans, technology, and the world (or nature). For this reason, it is difficult to characterize Wallace’s approach as fully posthumanist, since it remains deeply connected to the humanist framework underlying Peter Singer’s philosophy.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this article draws primarily on two groups of philosophical approaches. The first group addresses the relationship between humans and nature from an ontological perspective. The most important concepts in this regard are Bruno Latour’s “Great Divide” (Latour 1993, 97), Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Bestand* (Heidegger 1977, 17), and Baptiste Morizot’s notion of the “crisis of sensibility” (Morizot 2022, 5). Through Latour’s concept of the Great Divide, this study examines the separation between the “rational” human and the “irrational” non-human that emerges from the Cartesian subject and becomes one of the central pillars of humanism. The analysis shows how this division participates in the construction of nature as an Other. Through Heidegger’s concept of *Bestand*, or standing reserve, the study discusses the objectification of nature in the modern world. Finally, through Morizot’s notion of the crisis of sensibility, the study addresses the ways in

which contemporary humans have become impoverished in their experience of relating to nature.

The second group of theories concerns bioethical questions within the framework of posthumanism, particularly the works of Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe. Drawing on Haraway's distinction between killing and killability (Haraway 2008, 80), the paper examines how Wallace foregrounds the question of the killable. It also examines Wallace's ethical perspective in order to show how it differs from forms of animal rights activism, drawing on Cary Wolfe's interpretation of Derrida's concept of the "ordeal of undecidability" (Wolfe 2019, 25).

Anaphoric Language

"Consider the Lobster" is ostensibly a report on the Maine Lobster Festival (MLF), held annually in late July in the small town of Rockland. The opening contains all the characteristics of an objective and accurate report. Wallace describes the geography of the region, provides a brief history of the festival, defines the weather, and, most importantly, represents its atmosphere. His descriptions convey a sense of disgust toward the dense crowds, traffic, seafood odors, and surrounding noise. The two major industries in the area are tourism and lobster fishing, and Wallace presents the festival as "less an intersection of the industries than a deliberate collision, joyful and lucrative and loud" between these two summer industries (Foster Wallace 2004, 235).

Everything at the MLF revolves around the lobster, from costumes and badges decorated with painted lobsters to concerts, carnivals, and endless menus centred on lobster-based dishes. Wallace immerses the reader in the festival through startling statistics. During the summer of 2003, approximately 100,000 people attended the festival, and nearly 25,000 pounds of freshly caught lobster were consumed in the festival's main tent (Foster Wallace

2004, 236). The event thus becomes one of the largest gatherings of lobster enthusiasts in the modern world. It is as though ritual sacrifice and hedonistic celebration or, as Wallace suggests: “Roman circus or medieval torture-fest” (Foster Wallace 2004, 253), have been recreated in the modern era in a larger and more industrialized form.

In the opening paragraphs, Wallace clearly attempts to provide the reader with an accurate account of the festival without explicit judgment, almost like a film camera. Yet this “camera” moves beyond the role of reportage or festival promotions and narrates everything that can be observed. One significant feature from the very beginning is the constant repetition of the word “lobster.” Are we reading a report, or a menu?

In this essay of roughly twenty pages, the word “lobster” appears more than 150 times. From the outset, it becomes clear that Wallace does not write in the manner expected by the readers of a culinary magazine. It is as if the excesses of American consumer culture—the excesses of consumption, entertainment, or more broadly the return of a mythic Roman hedonism in the twenty-first century—manifest themselves in Wallace's excessive repetition of a single word, the central object of both the festival and the act of consumption itself.

In fact, even before Wallace explicitly raises questions concerning boundaries, alterity, and bioethics, it is his language that foregrounds the tension between human and animal. Through the use of anaphoric language, he attempts to move the lobster from the background to the centre of attention. In doing so, Wallace seeks to reverse the process of erasure through repetition. He attempts to separate the lobster from its ordinary context, removing it from the status of a mere object and presenting it instead as a living being. The lobster is brought back from the background into the foreground. For this reason, immediately after describing the festival, Wallace introduces the lobster not as a dish to be prepared, but as a historical figure.

Another issue here is the tension between narrative and information. In the MLF, the lobster is introduced not as a living being with the right to life without suffering, but as an object of celebration, gift-giving, joy, and nutrition. Wallace uses the information available in the MLF to represent the atmosphere of the festival at the beginning of the essay. The lobster is represented through images on “T-shirts and lobster bobblehead dolls and inflatable lobster pool toys and clamp-on lobster hats with big scarlet claws that wobble on springs.” (Foster Wallace 2004, 236). Martin Paul Eve points out “We can even note here the way in which Wallace connects each of these list items with ‘and’, rather than commas, to give the impression of an ultra-lengthy list in which finality is promised, only to be deferred, thereby deploying a deliberate rhetorical strategy to stress the extent of the festival’s commercial nature and to situate the event within a capitalist/market framework” (Eve 2017, 7). It is also featured in cooking competitions, in nutritional information, recipes downloadable from the festival website, and so on. This form of representation has become the dominant mode of knowledge in the contemporary world, knowledge based on information. This is an issue that Wallace repeatedly criticizes in both his fictions and his essays and lectures. Indeed, the emergence of myth in the twenty-first century and the painful ritual of sacrifice are closely connected to the limits of knowledge based solely on information. In this sense, we are confronted with the “poverty of experience,” drawing on Walter Benjamin’s notion of the loss of personal narration. For Benjamin, such impoverishment can give rise to a form of modern barbarism (Benjamin 1999, 732). It may therefore be argued that Wallace’s essay constitutes an attempt to resist this barbarism by encouraging readers to consider the lobster not merely as an object of pleasure and consumption, but as a living being.

Lobster: The Boundary Between the Sacred and the Profane

The lobster is an ancient aquatic arthropod. The species dates back approximately 400 million years (Frazier 2012, introduction). The English word “lobster” derives from the Old

English *loppestre*, itself rooted in *loppe*, meaning spider (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). For this reason, it can be argued that there has always been an insect-like dimension to the perception of this aquatic creature. Wallace similarly notes: “Midcoasters’ native term for a lobster is, in fact, ‘bug,’ as in ‘Come around on Sunday and we’ll cook up some bugs’ ”(Foster Wallace 2004, 237).

The relationship between lobster and excess has a long history that extends far beyond America and the consumer culture of the twenty-first century. Archaeological evidence from ancient Egypt indicates that lobster formed part of the human diet as early as 11,000 years ago (Lobster Anywhere, n.d.). In the second century AD, mosaics from ancient Rome demonstrate the important role of lobster in hedonistic feasts and celebrations (Fathy 2022, 32). This historical association is reflected in one of the mosaics discovered in Pompeii. This mosaic depicts the remains of food consumed during opulent Roman banquets. *Asàrotos òikos*, or *Unswept floor*, is the name of this historical mosaic, which includes chicken bones and legs, shells, pieces of fruit, olive pits, and, most significantly, a lobster claw (Frazier 2012, Chapter 2). The original mosaic dates back to the second century BC and is attributed to Sosos of Pergamon, although the original work has not survived. What remains today is the Heraclitus mosaic from the early second century AD (Fathy 2022, 32).

In *The History of Animals*, Aristotle also discusses lobsters, describing them as bloodless creatures (Aristotle 2018, Book 1). Likewise, one of the earliest texts that may be considered a guide to cooking lobsters appears in the Roman cookbook *De re coquinaria* (Frazier 2012, Chapter 2). Although lobster has historically been regarded as a delicacy in many parts of the world, it was not universally understood merely as a dish for ceremonies and banquets. In second-century Greece, almost contemporaneously with the Heraclitus mosaic, we read, Pausanias, the Greek geographer and travel writer, writes:

“The lobster was generally esteemed sacred by the Greeks and was not eaten by them; if the people of Seriphos caught a lobster in their nets they put it back into the sea; if they found a dead one they buried it and mourned over it as over one of themselves” (Frazier 2012, Chapter 1).

From this, it can be concluded that there was no uniform approach to the consumption of lobster, even within Europe itself. This issue also intersects with the Abrahamic religions and their legal traditions. In both Judaism and Islam, eating lobster is forbidden, whereas in Christianity this imposes no such restriction. For example, in the famous 1466 painting *The Last Supper* by Zannino di Pietro, commissioned by the Church, a type of crustacean belonging to the lobster family appears on the table of Christ and the apostles. As Nancy Frazier observes, the lobster is thus present on the most famous supper table in Western history (Frazier 2012, Introduction).

By contrast, in the Jewish tradition, Pliny writes in Chapter 30 of Volume 9, titled “Of the Many Foot Fish Called Ozaena, of the Nauplius, and Locusts of the Sea, or Lobster”:

“You shall not eat anything abhorrent ... These you may eat of all that live in the water: you may eat anything that has fins and scales. But you may not eat anything that has no fins and scales: it is unclean for you” (Frazier 2012, Introduction).

The notion of the lobster as “abhorrent” or “unclean,” which appears in both Judaism and Islam, stands at the opposite pole from the Greek conception of the lobster as a sacred creature. In one case, the lobster is not killing or eaten because it is regarded as a being connected to the divine; in the other, it is rejected because it is considered contaminated. We may conclude that it is a fundamentally borderline creature: one that moves between the worlds of the gods, hedonistic feasts, and demonic impurity.

From Symbolic Creature to Consumerism

In the seventeenth century, the lobster became a recurring motif in Dutch and German still-life paintings. This development coincided with the economic expansion of the lobster trade in Europe. These paintings appealed to the European petty bourgeoisie: “one purpose of the still life was to simultaneously celebrate the widespread taste for opulence and materialism among members of the new merchant class and scold them for it” (Frazier 2012, introduction).

Unlike seventeenth-century Europe, where the lobster trade flourished and even entered the realm of art, in seventeenth-century America lobster was commonly used as food for the poor, for prisoners, and as fishing bait. This association was so widespread that the remains of lobster found near a house could indicate that an impoverished family lived there. This social stigma attached to lobster became so strong that it was sometimes referred to as a “sea beetle” (Lobster Anywhere, n.d.).

This perception gradually changed during the eighteenth century, particularly with the expansion of the railroad system, the growth of tourism, and the development of food preservation technologies. In 1850, canned lobster cost eleven cents per pound, whereas baked beans cost fifty-three cents per pound (Lobster Anywhere, n.d.). Thus, even in the middle of the nineteenth century, although the earlier American stigma had begun to fade, lobster remained an inexpensive food. Wallace also indicates this historical transformation: “Up until sometime in the 1800s, though, lobster was literally low-class food, eaten only by the poor and institutionalized. Even in the harsh penal environment of early America, some colonies had laws against feeding lobsters to inmates more than once a week because it was thought to be cruel and unusual, like making people eat rats” (Foster Wallace 2004, 237–38). It was only with the rise of wealthy tourism in the New England region around 1860 that lobster gradually acquired remarkable popularity (Lobster Anywhere, n.d.). By the late nineteenth century, lobster had been transformed from a symbol of poverty into a symbol of wealth and excess.

During this period in New York, restaurants known as “lobster palaces” emerged on Broadway. These establishments became gathering places for wealthy New Yorkers and were associated not only with money and food, but also with sexuality, emotional affairs, and scandal. Numerous stories and reports from the period describe scandalous and even criminal relationships between wealthy men and young women, with lobster functioning as a main link within these encounters (Frazier 2012, Chapter 2). In this sense, another dimension of Roman hedonism—eroticism and sexuality—reappears in the lobster palaces of New York. These establishments gradually declined following the First World War and the outbreak of the Spanish flu, marking the beginning of a new era in the cultural history of lobster during the twentieth century (Frazier 2012, Chapter 2).

Wallace's Problem: Killing vs Killability

For Wallace, the question of the lobster cannot be reduced to the simple opposition between eating or not eating meat. He openly admits in the essay that “I like to eat certain kinds of animals and want to be able to keep doing it” (Foster Wallace 2004, 253); what troubles him instead are the methods through which lobsters are killed. At this point, the problem of desire itself—or, as Wallace frames it, a “matter of personal choice” (Foster Wallace 2004, 243)—comes into question. Is human desire entirely free and detached from nature? Wallace’s concern is to ask how a living being capable of feeling pain and suffering under crowded conditions should be understood within the frameworks of bioethics: “Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?”(Foster Wallace 2004, 243). The complexity of his position becomes clearer later in the essay: “the moral comparison here is not the value of one human’s life vs. the value of one animal’s life, but rather the value of one animal’s life vs. the value of one human’s taste for a particular kind of protein”(Foster Wallace 2004, 253).

To address the question of humanist desire, it is necessary to return to the Cartesian formula, “I think, therefore I am.” Within this concise statement, we can trace a condensed history of humanism that extends to the present day. Wallace himself briefly points to Descartes in a footnote, noting that: “[...] nonhuman creatures have no real feelings at all, merely ‘behaviors.’ Be further advised that this view has a long history that goes all the way back to Descartes [...]” (Foster Wallace 2004, 252).

Drawing on Bruno Latour’s ideas, with Descartes the Western worldview undergoes *le grand partage*, or the “Great Divide,” separating culture from nature (Latour 1993, 97). In this framework, the human as a “rational” subject perceives itself as separate from an “irrational” nature. Who is the Cartesian “I”? This “I” belongs to the human species and, by virtue of its first-person position, may also be understood as referring to Western man. At the same time, the distinction between this “I” and the “Other” is grounded in the capacity for thought. Existence itself becomes tied to the ability to think. Consequently, the Other is perceived as lacking the same capacity and, therefore, the same right of existence. The human animal, as a rational subject, thus positions itself above nature. This reveals how, throughout the long post-Renaissance history of humanism, human “desire” has gradually been privileged over other forms of beings.

The equal right of all humans to access food could be considered as one of the principles of humanism. At the MLF, according to Wallace, a lobster dish was sold for twelve dollars, roughly the same price as a McDonald's meal (Foster Wallace 2004, 238). This relatively low price makes it possible for different social classes to purchase what is otherwise an expensive dish, which Wallace describes as a form of democratization of food, while also raising the question of whether universal access to a variety of foods is necessarily a positive development. Here, Wallace questions one of the fundamental principles of humanism, namely

human dignity. In doing so, he highlights a tension between preserving human dignity and recognizing the dignity of all beings, a tension that forces a rethinking of morality itself.

For this reason, Wallace's question cannot be resolved through a simple choice between vegetarianism and omnivorism. As Wilson Kaiser observes, "The ethical concerns in this essay [*Consider the Lobster*] shift from the traditional problems of right action, such as whether or not one ought to eat another creature, to how we locate something as an entity and, as a result, how we register our responsibility toward experiential networks that are not necessarily anthropomorphic"(Kaiser 2014, 54). Moving beyond such dichotomous questions has also attracted the attention of several posthumanist thinkers. Donna Haraway reformulates the problem through the opposition between "killing" and "killability" (Haraway 2008, 80). How does an animal become recognized as a legitimate target of violence and death? For Haraway, food is an extremely complex issue that cannot be reduced to the binary of eating or not eating meat (Haraway 2008, 80). To transform food into a purely moral question is reductive, particularly when it assumes that all human beings possess equal access to dietary alternatives. For example, vegetarians in Europe generally have much easier access to diverse plant-based food sources than populations in parts of the Global South. Moreover, food is inseparable from economics, culture, health, customs, industry, and history (Wolfe 2019, 28). As noted earlier in the case of lobster, we are dealing with a culture that extends back approximately 11,000 years. Thus, while vegetarianism may have significant effects, it cannot be considered the sole solution, and in some cases, it may even replace scientific complexity with a form of moral absolutism.

For Haraway, the interdependence of living beings upon one another's bodies is a fundamental principle (Haraway 2008, 79). She neither views the human as a being outside nature—a perspective that erases humanity's dependence on other living beings—nor as a

being above nature, dominating it, a position that lies at the core of the anthropocentrism rooted in modernity and humanism. Rather, the human species is understood as existing within nature.

By contrast, conceiving of humans as existing outside nature can, to a large extent, lead to forms of ethics associated with countercultural, naturalistic, and neo-spiritual movements, which are often characterized by their rigorous opposition to modernity and its accompanying concepts, such as technology and progress. The hippie movement is a clear example of this tendency. Wallace distances his own ethical framework from such approaches when he ironically refers to PETA activists as “post-hippies” (Foster Wallace 2004, 244).

What is fundamentally at stake in these movements is the rejection of modernist centralism and a corresponding emphasis on the margin, or as Giles describes: “postmodernism, of course, tended ideologically to reverse the premises of this authoritarian distinction between center and margin, valorizing the latter at the expense of the former” (Giles 2007, 327). The margin may refer to the relationship between the west and the non-west, between one human group and another, or between the human animal and nonhuman species. Within this perspective, humanism is criticized through the logic of the center/margin opposition, making this dichotomous structure the driving force behind an anti-modernist ethical framework.

Similarly, Cary Wolfe argues that there is no secure or innocent moral position—a “beautiful soul” position—from which one can either consume or refuse meat while claiming to avoid participation in violence (Wolfe 2019, 28). Drawing on Jacques Derrida, Wolfe approaches the ethical problem through the concept of undecidability. In his view, one must confront the “ordeal of undecidability” rather than seek simple or definitive answers (Wolfe 2019, 25).

Within this context, the framework in which Wallace situates the figure of the lobster concerns not only methods of killing and violence but also a critique of certain animal rights organizations (in this case, PETA). The main problem here is the simplification of a complex question, particularly when responses are framed within a binary opposition between eating and not eating meat, and when they are articulated from a top-down position, from judge to accused: “Not that PETA’s any sort of font of unspun truth. Like many partisans in complex moral disputes, the PETA people are fanatics, and a lot of their rhetoric seems simplistic and self-righteous” (Foster Wallace 2004, 247). This discourse, in turn, risks producing a new Other: the morally “innocent” vegetarian human and the “guilty” meat-eating human.

At the same time, this mode of moral positioning recalls what Wolfe, in a Hegelian sense, calls the problem of the “beautiful soul.” Like Haraway and Wolfe, Wallace also regards violence as so deeply embedded that it cannot be resolved simply through forms of activism. What Wallace ultimately interrogates is a form of violence that is structurally rooted in humanism itself. In doing so, he also critically engages with the theory of the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer.

Wallace and Singer: Standing on the Border of Two Worlds

One can observe the footprint of Singer’s idea in Wallace’s essay from the very beginning, the title which suggests an emphasis on consideration of the lobster, and it recalls Singer’s first arguments in *Animal Liberation*: “The basic principle of equality does not require equal or identical treatment; it requires equal consideration. Equal consideration for different beings may lead to different treatment and different rights” (Singer 2002, 2).

For Singer, what matters is “interests” within a utilitarian framework, he argues that sentient animals possess interests that must be taken into account in bioethical reasoning. A sentient animal has interests that are opposed to suffering and pain; therefore, it cannot be

morally justified to force it to suffer. Therefore suffering is the driving force of Singer's idea, as he draws on Jeremy Bentham indicates: "The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a meaningful way"(Singer 2002, 7).

Singer's utilitarian ethics successfully dismantles the humanist hierarchy that places humans above nature, yet it does not fully integrate humans within nature. This limitation, can be seen as stemming from the concept of sentience. In Singer's framework, sentience is understood primarily through suffering, where pain diminishes a being's welfare and frustrates its interests (Singer 2002, 7–8). As Wallace himself suggests, however, pain is fundamentally a subjective phenomenon that cannot be straightforwardly understood across different forms of experience or across species (Foster Wallace 2004, 246).

The problem extends beyond the individual body and its pain receptors. Singer's framework isolates the sentient being to such an extent that its relation with other living beings and with its habitat largely disappears. The isolated subject comes to exist primarily through the nervous system that registers pain, while nature, understood as an interconnected network of living and non-living beings, remains largely absent. Once habitat is introduced as a shared ground for bioethics, significant contradictions emerge. For example, the proliferation of a species within a habitat may affect both the habitat itself and other living beings (sentient and non-sentient), generating conflicts of interest.

As has already been mentioned, there were earlier beliefs according to which lobsters were considered bloodless creatures incapable of feeling pain. This ancient assumption is also reflected in Wallace's narrative when he quotes part of the festival's pronouncement concerning lobsters and pain: "The nervous system of a lobster is very simple, and is in fact most similar to the nervous system of the grasshopper. It is decentralized with no brain. There is no cerebral

cortex, which in humans is the area of the brain that gives the experience of pain” (Foster Wallace 2004, 245). We now know that these claims are incorrect.

Although Wallace attempts to distance himself from Singer's perspective by substituting the concept of “preference” for “interests” and by raising questions that move beyond simple human-animal analogy, he nevertheless ultimately grounds his ethical response in the problem of suffering. Both Singer and Wallace employ classical humanist concepts in order to formulate a new ethical system within a new humanist framework. This is precisely the limitation that Wolfe identifies in his critique of Singer (Wolfe 2011, 61–62).

Because Singer bases his argument on utilitarianism and formulates ethics according to the principle of the greatest benefit for the greatest number, Wallace's central question cannot be adequately resolved through such ethical categories. In the case of the lobster festival, a large number of people derive pleasure from the “democratization” of lobster as food; therefore, within a utilitarian framework, the killing of the lobster acquires a degree of legitimacy. Wolfe demonstrates a similar problem through the example of circus animals, thereby exposing the impasse within Singer's bioethics (Wolfe 2011, 64).

Moreover, dividing living beings into sentient and non-sentient categories risks reinforcing a perspective that places suffering and pain at the centre of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate killing. At the same time, as Wolfe argues, living subjects cannot be reduced to mere containers or “receptacles” of pain (Wolfe 2011, 67).

Wallace largely aligns with this critique, yet he ultimately finds no way to support his ethical argument without reintroducing the lobster as a sentient creature through the frameworks of behaviourism and neuro-ethics. Wallace effectively demonstrates, through behavioural observation, that the lobster's attempts to escape from boiling water, as well as its

anxiety under crowding and the “stresses of captivity,” indicate that the creature experiences some form of suffering.

However, this approach also does not provide a clear escape from the general formulation of suffering. In fact, anxiety is also a form of suffering that is inferred through analogy between human and non-human animals, and although it may work here in relation to the lobster, it cannot create a coherent ethical system based on the collapse of the humanist hierarchy. Within such a framework, only those forms of life that resemble the human species acquire ethical value. The question that therefore emerges is this: how can forms of life that are radically different from the human species be included within the framework of human ethics? In this view, Wallace suggests that the lobster is capable of not only of feeling pain but also of feeling anxiety. However, from a posthumanist perspective, Wolfe’s interpretation of Derrida can be invoked: “Instead of recognizing the moral standing of animals because of the agency or capabilities they share with us (which has been the dominant strategy, most obviously in the animal rights philosophy of Singer or Regan), Derrida fundamentally questions the structure of the ‘auto-‘ (as autonomy, as agency, as authority over one’s autobiography) of humanist subjectivity by riveting our attention on the embodied finitude that we share with nonhuman animals, a finitude that it has been the business of humanism largely to disavow.”(Wolfe 2009, 570)

What are presented as specifically human capabilities, such as rationality, language, or the capacity to feel pain, cannot serve as ethical criteria based on analogy between species. Moreover, this approach also fails to account for ethical judgment within a single species. For instance, humans with brain injuries may have fundamentally different perceptions of pain, or reduced levels of rationality or self-consciousness. For this reason, Cary Wolfe, referring to “marginal cases,” considers analogy based on similarity to be an inadequate ethical criterion (Wolfe 2011, 58).

“What is fundamental to the ethical standing of both humans and nonhumans— and this is readily brought into focus in animal rights philosophy by the analogy between the situation of nonhuman ‘higher’ animals and severely disabled human beings— is not the contractarian idea ‘that only those who can join a contract as rough equals can be primary, nonderivative subjects of a theory of justice’, but rather the embodiment and finitude of creatures of whatever species who may be deemed, to use Tom Regan’s term, the ‘subject of a life’”(Wolfe 2011, 66).

Unlike Wolfe, Singer seeks to exclude non-sentient living beings from the framework of ethics through a humanist categorization based on analogy with pain: “If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account. So the limit of sentience (using the term as a convenient if not strictly accurate shorthand for the capacity to suffer and/ or experience enjoyment) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others” (Singer 2002, 8–9).

Otherness

Extreme forms of violence, such as boiling a lobster alive, become legitimate only after a living being has been transformed into an Other. This otherness exists on a spectrum rather than as an absolute condition. For example, the same degree and form of violence is not typically inflicted upon livestock. Wallace perceptively addresses the distinction in English between words such as *cattle*, and *beef*, or *sheep* and *mutton*. For him, this linguistic separation between the living animal and the meat consumed from it functions to soften the process of othering:

“Is it significant that ‘lobster,’ ‘fish,’ and ‘chicken’ are our culture’s words for both the animal and the meat, whereas most mammals seem to require

euphemisms like ‘beef’ and ‘pork’ that help us separate the meat we eat from the living creature the meat once was? Is this evidence that some kind of deep unease about eating higher animals is endemic enough to show up in English usage, but that the unease diminishes as we move out of the mammalian order? (And is ‘lamb’/’lamb’ the counterexample that sinks the whole theory, or are there special, biblico-historical reasons for that equivalence?)”(Foster Wallace 2004, 247)

This process of othering also contains additional dimensions connected to the historical context discussed earlier. First, the lobster is an aquatic creature rather than a mammal. The distance between mammals and aquatic species, together with the radical difference between land and sea as habitats, prevents any natural familiarity. Humans encounter lobsters primarily in seafood markets or on restaurant plates rather than in the sea as living beings.

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The distance between humans as mammals and lobsters as aquatic creatures, together with the profound difference in bodily form and habitat, seems to produce less empathy in human beings. In many ways, the lobster appears monstrous to the human gaze. It resembles a giant insect. Consequently, the lobster’s otherness becomes far more pronounced than that of domesticated animals such as cows, sheep.

Another important issue concerns the formation of mythological and inaccurate narratives around certain creatures. The lobster is one of the clearest examples of this phenomenon. It is represented as an insect-like and bloodless being, a creature associated with heightened sexual potency, and, most importantly, as an animal supposedly lacking the complex nervous system necessary to feel pain. These characteristics collectively construct the lobster as a strange being in relation to humans, a radical Other whose killing appears

permissible. In general, the process of othering is often accompanied by the production of monstrous representations. Certain “monstrous” qualities become attached to a biological creature, and these qualities that make it appear alien and fundamentally separate. As Nancy Fraser writes about the lobster: “lobsters were symbolic of indecision and the uncertainty of life, as well as sin and the devil, who also walked backward” (Frazier 2012, chapter 2).

On the other hand, totemic characteristics may themselves be understood as the reverse side of the monstrosity. In fact, totemization and sacralization remove the creature from the level of material and physical nature and attach it to something supernatural or metaphysical. In many cases, the othering carried out by modern humans has been shaped through the creation of supernatural and grotesque representations. Such grotesque imagery appears to provide a background for legitimizing the infliction of pain upon non-humans.

The image of the lobster as a giant insect recalls Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*. The word that Franz Kafka uses for Gregor after his transformation is *Ungeziefer*. This is an unusual term in German, although it is often translated into English as a “cockroach.” In Middle High German etymology, however, the word refers to “the unclean animal not suited for sacrifice” (Friedländer 2013, 35). The notion of impurity here returns us to the Jewish prohibition concerning the lobster. As we can see, there exists a religious connection between Kafka’s insect and the lobster, one grounded above all in the logic of monstrosity.

The degree of violence, killability, and othering is therefore directly related to the perceived distance between the self and the Other. The greater this distance becomes, the more legitimate acts of violence appear. Ethical relations between humans and animals cannot be established solely through similarity or analogy. This problem contains two dimensions, one of which is monstrosity. The creature that appears least similar to humans is often excluded from the sphere of human empathy.

By the twenty-first century, at the moment Wallace attends the festival, this “unclean demon” has become a sacrificial figure. The act of boiling lobster alive before thousands of spectators, followed by celebration and festivity, resembles a modern reenactment of a mythical sacrificial ritual, or as Wallace describes: “The truth is that if you, the festival attendee, permit yourself to think that lobsters can suffer and would rather not, the MLF begins to take on the aspect of something like a Roman circus or medieval torture-fest” (Foster Wallace 2004, 253).

Lobster, Bestand, and Nature as Background

This transformation of a living being to an object can be understood through Heideggerian terms. In this framework, nature is no longer perceived as a living and dynamic entity, but rather as a resource available for human exploitation: the *Bestand*. (Heidegger 1977, 17)

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When Wallace describes the process of transporting lobsters, he notes that they are kept alive in containers filled with seawater: “There’s no decomposition between harvesting and eating. And not only do lobsters require no cleaning or dressing or plucking, they’re relatively easy for vendors to keep alive. They come up alive in the traps, are placed in containers of seawater [...]” (Foster Wallace 2004, 242). Here, we are confronted with more than the captivity of the lobster alone. The habitat itself, in a sense, is also captured. The body of water is enclosed together with the lobster within the container. Wallace’s description suggests that it is impossible to speak adequately about “animal rights” without also taking habitat into account. Violence against non-human animals cannot be separated from the question of habitat.

Without this broader perspective, it may be possible to reduce violence in the epistemic representation of the human-animal relationship, yet the underlying humanist logic

governing the relationship between humans and nature remains unquestioned. The body of water is therefore not merely a background in which a sentient or non-sentient being temporarily exists. Rather, habitat is constitutively bound to the living being. What posthumanist thought describes as “embodiment” becomes fully intelligible with the inclusion what we consider as nature, and it is here that bioethics is also formed in relation to this embodiment, rather than in the isolation and separation of the part from the whole.

In the Heideggerian sense, we are confronted here with two forms of *Bestand*. The first is the body of water itself, which is reduced to a resource whose function is merely to sustain the lobster, or as discussed above, as a non-living being captured within containers. The second form of Bestand is the lobster itself, transformed into an object: a ready-to-eat commodity, an object of celebration, and a being rendered killable through various methods. Within this framework, both the habitat and the creature are simultaneously denaturalized and brought under human control.

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Wallace once more demonstrates how the aquatic habitat is transformed into a regulated, exploited space: “Since lobsters can live to be over 100, they can also get to be quite large, as in 30 pounds or more — though truly senior lobsters are rare now because New England’s waters are so heavily trapped” (Foster Wallace 2004, 241). Therefore, we are confronted with the objectification of the marine biome. In this sense, the habitat is no longer perceived as a biological community. The body of water ceases to appear as a diverse ecosystem of interrelated beings and is instead conceived as a standing reserve of energy and food. From this perspective, we are ontologically confronted with the absence of the marine biome from our contemporary experience.

This absence does not stem solely from anthropocentrism. It can also be observed within the framework of Singer’s ethical system, in which the body of water is recognized only

insofar as it encompasses a sentient being and contributes to its welfare. If, within anthropocentric thought, the body of water appears as Bestand, within this new humanist framework it is recognized only insofar as it serves the interests of sentient animal. Once again, we are confronted with a new kind of hierarchy which stems from humanism and functions by detaching a particular part from the whole, bringing certain forms of life to the foreground while relegating others to the background.

Baptiste Morizot extends Heidegger's concept by examining the denaturalization of nature and its transformation into a mere background (Morizot 2022, 8). In Morizot's view, contemporary human beings experience nature as something fundamentally strange and unfamiliar, as an Other that can only be understood in two forms: a material resource or a spiritual resource. Thus, if for Heidegger nature primarily became a material "standing reserve," for Morizot an additional dimension appears: a source of spirituality.

This distinction is important because it destabilizes the binary opposition between the "lover of nature" and the exploiter of nature. The person who exploits nature materially is not fundamentally different from the one who regards nature merely as a place of rest or relaxation. Both remain equally alienated from nature. For both, nature has become an Other and is therefore something available for exploitation. It may also be argued that Morizot's perspective highlights the contradiction in Singer's categorization discussed above, thereby clarifying Wallace's position at the border between two distinct ethical perspectives.

The otherness of nature is also reflected in language. Morizot argues that human beings possess an extensive vocabulary for describing relationships between humans, interactions with technological artifacts, communication with social institutions, and engagement with works of art. In relation to animals, however, this linguistic system becomes

impoverished (Morizot 2022, 6). Here, we may once again recall Benjamin's concept of the poverty of experience.

Morizot refers to a study showing that a North American child between the ages of four and ten can instantly recognize thousands of commercial logos, yet is unable to identify the leaves of ten trees native to the area in which the child lives. For Morizot, the consequence of this impoverishment is a decline in the sensitivity of human societies towards non-human beings (Morizot 2022, 6).

From this perspective, it becomes clear why Wallace devotes attention to introducing the lobster in detail. At the beginning of the essay, when presenting the lobster from a zoological perspective, Wallace writes: "For practical purposes, everyone knows what a lobster is. As usual, though, there's much more to know than most of us care about—it's all a matter of what your interests are" (Foster Wallace 2004, 236–37).

For Morizot, the legacy of Western modernity has led contemporary man to consider non-human beings as a background and a resource that can be used for production or as emotional and symbolic reflections. This leads to a loss of ontological coherence in relation to non-human beings. He states: "To be merely a backdrop and a prop for projection is to have lost one's own ontological consistency. Something loses its ontological consistency when we lose the faculty of paying attention to it as a full being, as something which counts in collective life. When the living world falls outside the field of collective and political attention, outside the field of what is deemed important, then a crisis of sensibility is triggered" (Morizot 2022, 5). For Morizot, this is called a form of "extinction of experience" of nature (Morizot 2022, 6).

Escaping from Philosophy to Fiction

Wallace's essay does not express its worldview solely through ethical philosophy. As noted earlier, he moves across several disciplines: journalism, philosophy, and literature. From

the very beginning, the title “*Consider the Lobster*” already establishes an intertextual reference to M.F.K Fisher’s “*Consider the Oyster*.” One of the key intertexts identified by Martin Paul Eve in Wallace's essay is Samuel Beckett’s short story “*Dante and the Lobster*,” which also stages the question of violence, the boiling of a lobster alive, and the human relationship to this creature. Perhaps the most significant intertext here, however, is Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*.

Wallace explains the substitution of “preference” for Singer’s concept of “interests”: “‘Preference’ is maybe roughly synonymous with ‘interests,’ but it is a better term for our purposes because it’s less abstractly philosophical — ‘preference’ seems more personal, and it’s the whole idea of a living creature’s personal experience that’s at issue” (Foster Wallace 2004, 251). The fundamental difference here is expressed in terms of “personal experience.” In fact, the core of Wallace’s thought is structured around a contrast between “personal choice” (a humanistic and anthropocentric concept) and “personal experience.” In light of what has been discussed above, Benjamin’s notion of “poverty of experience” and Morizot’s engagement with Robert Pyle’s notion of the “extinction of the experience of nature” (Morizot 2022, 6) can also be understood here in contrast with the personal experience of animality. More importantly, the animal becomes a subject that has an experience: a singular and personal experience that is not reducible to the experience of other forms of life. This experience generates a form of “preference” on the basis of which the animal refuses suffering, and through the recovery of “agency,” we are confronted with an independent subject rather than an object onto which human “personal choice” can be imposed. “Refusal” here returns to the intertext of *Bartleby*, particularly in the relation to labour and bureaucracy.

As Eve describes, In *Bartleby*, food functions as a central motif. The employees working alongside Bartleby in the office are named after food items—Turkey, Ginger Nut, and Nippers—and their moods shift throughout the narrative in relation to hunger and the rhythm

of meals (Eve 2017, 10). At the end of the story, Bartleby dies through starvation; his refusal to work extends into a refusal to eat, which can be read as an attempt to reclaim agency.

Bartleby initially refuses to perform his work duties by repeating the phrase “I would prefer not to,” and this refusal intensifies until it leads to his death by starvation. This phrase has been widely discussed in philosophical and political contexts, often interpreted through the lens of “personal choice,” a humanistic framework grounded in free will. The story concludes with the well-known lament: “Ah Bartleby! Oh humanity!” What becomes central in Melville’s text is therefore the question of humanism itself. Wallace’s use of the concept of “preference,” alongside our reading of *Bartleby*, opens new dimensions for reconsidering this issue.

Donna Haraway employs the concept of “labor” in her analysis of human-animal relations, suggesting that animals occupy specific forms of labor: “The problem is actually to understand that human beings do not get a pass on the necessity of killing significant others, who are themselves responding, not just reacting. In the idiom of labor, animals are working subjects, not just worked objects” (Haraway 2008, 80). If this notion is read alongside *Bartleby*, the relationship between Wallace’s lobster and Melville’s character can be understood more clearly within a posthumanist framework. The key issue here is the recovery of labor’s “agency”: labor must be transformed from an objectified position into a subject of experience. In this sense, Descartes’s formula “I think, therefore I am” can be reformulated as “I experience, therefore I am.” Rationality, traditionally associated with Western man, is no longer the sole ground of being; rather, being emerges through the subject of experience.

The relationship between “preference” and “experience” is therefore central to the constitution of the subject. When experience is disturbed—when there is a poverty of experience, or when subjects produce otherness through such impoverishment—rationality no longer guarantees value, and subjective agency, or the experience of being, gradually

diminishes. In this sense, when humans lose their relation to nature, they also risk losing their own animal subjectivity, even while maintaining the capacity to dominate and transform the natural world.

Conclusion

This article has considered the lobster as a historical figure, as well as its relation to human beings and to the condition of the Anthropocene. By addressing the poetic, historical, philosophical, and literary dimensions of Wallace's essay, I have sought to show how border thinking operates in Wallace's writing, extending beyond his novels. This border condition reflects a form of contemporaneity in which the hybridity of humans, technology, and nature becomes central. Through a trajectory engaging posthumanist theories, I have also aimed to show how narrative, beyond genre distinctions, relates to this trilogy, and how posthumanism is not merely an ethical stance but a broader framework that describes fundamental shifts in our worldview as contemporary subjects.

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