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"Am I really... merely... a conscious little rock?" Ethical Education in Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*

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ABSTRACT

Time and again Tom Wolfe has been criticized for holding conservative attitudes. Wolfe's third novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, published in 2004, has been considered by many critics as obvious evidence of his antipathy to political correctness, sexual liberty, and the American liberal education system in general. The few sympathetic critics who share Wolfe's anxiety over the life of young Americans at colleges assume that neuroscience—with its emphasis on the materiality of the mind and, consequently, the rejection of free will—has been partly responsible for the creation of conformist young people. In this article, however, we suggest that Wolfe's anxiety is not so much about neuroscience than the way it is taught at colleges and received by the public. We also show that Wolfe's criticism of liberal education rests mainly on the claim that it fails to cultivate autonomous, self-conscious students capable of critical thinking and instead fosters an egoistic, self-centered freedom which negates the Other. Here, it seems that Emmanuel Levinas's "Pedagogy of Becoming," based on his ethics of alterity, is most relevant to the idea of the desire for improving the education system.

Keywords: Tom Wolfe, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, ethical education, Emmanuel Levinas, Pedagogy of Becoming, autonomy and heteronomy, neuroscience, free will

Introduction

To write about Tom Wolfe, who has been frequently charged with conservatism in matters sexual, racial, and political, needs real courage. Although *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (*CS*) remained on a number of bestseller lists for several months in 2004, most reviews, both British and American, made disparaging remarks and criticized this novel for its banal and extremely graphic portrayal of sexual scenes which, according to reviewer Jeff Baker, leaves an impression on the readers that the

story has been narrated from the point of view of “a dirty old man” (7). It has also been censured for what is called its excessive repetition, unusual punctuation, stereotypical characters, and wrong choice of subject matter, the latter said to reveal its seventy-three-year-old author’s ignorance about the life of young college students. Andrew K. Koch in his thesis in 2008 argues that Wolfe’s constructive criticism of the commercialized college sports machine works as “a kind of Trojan horse”; it makes the public believe his scenario about college life and helps disseminate his conservative messages (161). Likewise, Michiko Kakutani, writing for *The New York Times* in 2004, proposes that it is a “flat-footed,” “cheap, jerrybuilt affair that manages the unfortunate trick of being messy and predictable at the same time” (33).

Favorable reviews, however, generally praised the novel for its honest depiction of political corruption, sexual degeneracy, and the immorality of the American universities. Mary Ann Glendon in her review of the book in 2005 asserts that the novel depicts “a parent’s worst nightmare” and shows how an intelligent, innocent girl surrenders to the pressures of the college life, “where young people are left almost completely free to act on their most primitive impulses” (41). John Derbyshire, writing for *National Review* in 2004, finds Tom Wolfe’s anxieties over the “darker side” of recent discoveries in the human sciences understandable. Advances in scientific fields such as neuroscience have created “a world without the self, what is virtue? What is wisdom? What is responsibility?” (38). In 2004, stronger support for the novel came from the novelist-critic Barbara Scrupski, who discusses why many critics condemned *I Am Charlotte Simmons* while they had praised earlier works of Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and *A Man in Full,* which were published in 1987 and 1998, respectively. She contends that in the latter novels, Wolfe “[satirizes] the sorts of people liberals love to hate (Wall Street big shots, rich businessmen),” whereas, in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Wolfe depicts “the very avatars of the liberal ethos, the practitioners of liberation—college students at an elite university” (89). Mickey Craig and Jon Fennell in 2007 refer to the neuroscientific teachings of Mr. Starling, the Nobel prize-winner professor at Dupont, as being partly responsible for weakening Charlotte’s faith in her “self,” her autonomy, and free will. Elizabeth Amato in 2011 also sees neuroscientific teachings as the basis for Wolfe’s criticism of America’s great universities, which have failed to fulfill their aims, that is, preparing students to live as free men and women—cultivating enough courage in them to stand against the mainstream’s corrupted student life and to pursue their own happiness apart from others (132).

In this article, however, we suggest that more than neuroscience, the very education system is the target of Wolfe’s criticism. The kind of liberal education the students receive at Dupont, which is a fictional composition of Duke, Stanford, Yale, and

the University of Michigan, cannot help them achieve higher goals of attaining autonomy, self-knowledge, or pursuing a more spiritually conscious life; instead, what they become good at is making money, raising their social status, and attaining immediate sensual gratification. Wolfe's is not the first critique of America's higher education and *I Am Charlotte Simmons* can be regarded as a fictional representation of the argument made previously by a number of prominent members of the neoconservative intellectual movement of the 1980s. Chief among these is Allan Bloom whose best-seller book *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987) attempts to explain what he sees as a crisis of nihilism in twentieth-century America in general, and in America's higher education, in particular. Following Nietzsche, Bloom regards nihilism as the modern loss of faith in any type of transcendental source of meaning—namely, God, religion, nature, and reason—which can provide commitment and belief. As a student of Leo Strauss, Bloom followed Strauss's critique of the Enlightenment liberalism promoted by Hobbes and Locke. Strauss believed that these early modern liberal theorists separated political philosophy from the Socratic search for the good life; instead, they supported individuals' lives, property, and right to pursue whatever good they choose, culminating in relativistic thinking. Although this early liberalism did not disregard the concept of philosophical truth, it paved the way for the complete rejection of the notion of absolute truth, giving way to relativism of modern philosophy and nihilism (Strauss 81-98).

The relativity principle, Bloom contends, is reflected in the recent education, which is centered on the idea of "openness"—being open to "all kinds of men, all kinds of life-style, all ideologies" with "no shared goals or vision of the public good," no "abandonment of old or new beliefs in favor of the natural ones" (27). He maintains that theories of "value relativism" emerged in America in the 1940s, when the exiled German professors popularized Nietzsche's philosophy in American universities, and later became more forceful in the uprisings of the 1960s, when any kind of authority was perceived as disdainful. The social, cultural, and political upheavals of the sixties not only decentered any sense of authority, but also made sure no one ever uttered any politically incorrect speech. Although the word "political correctness" is absent in Bloom's book, it is clearly implied in Bloom's critical stance against the idea of "no tolerance for the intolerant," which constrains academic discussions by causing people to self-censor their thoughts in fear of being accused of sexism, racism, and intolerance. He writes: "Freedom of the mind requires not only, or not even especially, the absence of legal constraints but the presence of alternative thoughts" (249).

Bloom's concerns about American nihilism, postmodernist cynicism and irony, relativism, and conformity imposed by political correctness, and his appeal to Classic philosophy to cultivate authentic human beings with an awareness of their souls are all reflected in Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* and his other non-fictional works. In his controversial essay, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" published in 1989, Wolfe censures American writers for embracing some imported literature celebrating nihilism, absurdity, play of language, and self-reflexivity on the grounds that American life no longer deserves the word "real" because it is fragmented and absurd (54). The nihilistic, hopeless, and loveless "Crash 'n' burn" culture in *A Man in Full*, the culture of soulless, free young girls and boys addicted to porn in *Back to Blood* and the "hookup culture" of cynic college students in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* reveal Wolfe's concern about the spread of nihilism, cynicisms, and relativity in American culture as well as the failure of America's higher education to cultivate scientific specialists who are also in search of some foundation for truth and some basis for their souls.

Considerable emphasis on human soul, agency, and authenticity situates Tom Wolfe and *I Am Charlotte Simmons* still in another context. By embodying the harmful consequences of cognitive science, especially discoveries in neuroscience, on the young people's perception of their "selves," this novel echoes the concerns of philosophers and ethicists who are critical of posthumanism, a concept referring to a condition emerging as a result of advances in Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information Technology, and Cognitive (NBIC) technologies which have dramatically altered the way we perceive ourselves as human beings. While different types of posthumanist thinkers can be discerned in the philosophical discussions about the future of humanity, they unanimously stand against what we know as a humanist—a philosopher and intellectual who believes that humans are "importantly distinct from non-humans and supports this distinctiveness claim with a philosophical anthropology: an account of the central features of human existence and their relations to similarly general aspects of nonhuman existence" (Roden 11). Most humanists philosophize about what gives human life distinctive value and dignity and how they are achieved. Humanists as diverse as Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Charles Taylor, and Kant believe that moral virtues are habits that can be instilled in children and adults through education and discipline. Tom Wolfe, by definition, is a prime humanist, who differentiates "the human beast" from other species by appealing to man's ability to speak. For him, "evolution came to an end when the human beast developed speech," which in turn developed reason, complex memory, religion, and culture ("The Human Beast"). For Wolfe, who believes in perseverance, individual transformation, self-discipline, postponement of gratification, and controlling the sexual appetite and aggression, education has

a central role in assisting human beings to become fully autonomous beings who can act from duty. In contrast, posthumanists, like N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, believe that theories like deconstruction and cognitive science as well as NBIC technologies have already exposed our machinic, inhuman nature. Hayles illustrates the difference between humanism and posthumanism as such:

> When the self is envisioned as grounded in presence, identified with originary guarantees and teleological trajectories, associated with solid foundations and logical coherence, the posthuman is likely to be seen as antihuman because it envisions the conscious mind as a small subsystem running its program of self-construction and self-assurance while remaining ignorant of the actual dynamics of complex systems. But the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. (286)

As a humanist, Wolfe expresses in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* his anxiety over the effects of rapid developments in cognitive science on young American students, who do not receive appropriate education in American colleges and universities. In this novel, Mr. Starling, coach Buster Roth, and the academic administration in general appear to be unable to cultivate critical thinking in the students; they do not take responsibility for educating ethical young beings. Here, it seems that French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's approach to teacher-student relationship can shed light on Wolfe's ideal system of education. Wolfe's last novel, *Back to Blood* (2012), has already been investigated through Levinas's ethics of alterity by Sahar Jamshidian and Hossein Pirnajmuddin with regard to race and sexuality. In their articles, they introduced Wolfe as an author in line with other post-postmodern writers who have attempted to revive the ethics of sensibility in opposition to postmodernism's nihilism and solipsism in such late twentieth- and twenty-first-century movements as neo-realism (Rebein), aesthetics of authenticity (Funk, Grob, and Huber), and new sincerity (Kelly). Once more, as this article represents, in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Wolfe proves to be on the side of ethical relationships between the self and the irreducible Other.

Charlotte at Dupont

Charlotte, who comes from Sparta, an impoverished and conservative town in North Carolina, can no longer proudly assert herself with her mantra "I'm Charlotte Simmons" at Dupont. While she could easily separate herself from the rest of the young people in Sparta and stand out as an intelligent and remarkable valedictorian,

she is unable to face the tremendous social pressure in her new environment. Miss Pennington, her best teacher in high school, Mrs. Simmons, and the whole Spartan community believe that Charlotte is a prodigy with extraordinary abilities; however, no one reminds her of her weaknesses and limitations. Miss Pennington even invokes the Nietzschean notion of Overman as she professes that Charlotte is "destined to do great things" and advises her to be wary of the revengeful tarantulas (*CS* 71). Her mother also frequently asks her to stand above the crowd and be proud of her Spartan heritage; she tells her when facing the pressure to do things she "don't hold with" at Dupont, to "only say I'm Charlotte Simmons, and I don't hold with things like 'at'" (*CS* 81). However, neither Miss Pennington's nor Miss Simmons's education seem helpful in protecting Charlotte against Mr. Starling's teachings and the peer pressure prevailing at Dupont.

Mr. Starling's teachings, in fact, serve as a catalyst for weakening Charlotte's self-esteem and turning her into an obedient, compliant person. In class, he explains the materialistic attitudes of such neuroscientists as Jose Delgado toward the effect that the brain constructs "the illusion of a self – 'me,' an 'individual' with free will and a soul" (*CS* 425). Charlotte, who until then had thought of her "self" as unique, is now disillusioned and perplexed. Her transformation at the university resembles that of the control group in Mr. Starling's own Nobel prize-winning experiment. In this experiment, normal cats develop the same bizarre behavior as the "amygdalectomized" cats they are clustered with. Similarly, Charlotte gradually adapts to the new environment by accompanying her only friends, Mimi and Bettina, to the bars and frat parties. This new environment is peopled with "a young world speaking 'fuck patois,' loaded with creatine and cocaine, . . . and charged by alcohol, [. . . and] ubiquitous sex" (Wolfe, "Liberal Elite").

At first, Charlotte thinks that she is able to remain an outsider to this "clump of humanity eagerly pressed against one another" (*CS* 378); nevertheless, her loss of belief in a commanding self and exposure to the social and sexual mores of her fellow students, together with her desire for social status and success, alter her behavior and cause her tragic fall. After surrendering to Hoyt's sexual fantasies and recovering from deep depression, she becomes the girlfriend of Jojo, the famous basketball player. At last, she feels proud to be transformed from a "little country girl from the Lost Province" to "quite a campus presence in a remarkably short time" (*CS* 734).

Neuroscience: Question of Free Will

The question Charlotte faces in Mr. Starling's class seems to be one of the oldest and most difficult questions in conceptual thought: "Do humans have conscious free will?" Historically, this question has been addressed by compatibilists and

incompatibilists, seeing free will as compatible or incompatible with determinism. However, what is discussed in Mr. Starling's class is based on the findings of cognitive neuroscience, which flourished in the second half of twentieth century. Some cognitive neuroscientists claim that mental functions can be completely explained in terms of unconscious mechanistic processes in the brain. The first neuroscientist to question the idea of conscious will on the basis of empirical evidence was Benjamin Libet. In a series of experiments conducted in the early 1980s, the participants were asked to flex their wrist or finger within a certain time frame. Libet noted that unconscious brain activity preceded the conscious intention to flex by 300 to 500 milliseconds. This suggests that the source of our actions is not within our conscious control and that our mental states have no causal role in producing them. Along the same line, psychologists like Daniel Wegner (97), Henry Roediger, et al. (208), and Joshua Greene and Jonathan Cohen (1781) surmise that conscious free will is an illusion since both genetics and the environment control our lives to the extent of leaving no room for free will or moral decision- making.

Central to the narrative, neuroscience, with emphasis on lack of free will, is easily seen as the main factor responsible for Charlotte's loss of self-confidence. Accordingly, one is bound to feel that in this novel, Wolfe blames neuroscience for Charlotte's tragic failure and thus dismisses it as a suitable field of study. Nevertheless, Wolfe had expressed his enthusiasm and interest for this field of research years before writing this novel, both in *Hooking Up* (2000) and in his interviews. In one interview, Wolfe mentions with reverence the sociobiologist, E. O. Wilson, deemed Darwin the second, who believes that human beings like other animals are affected by their genetic heritage. Since they are "essentially mechanisms that are programmed from birth," the idea of having an immaterial, transcendental mind or soul separate from the physical and material brain seems illusory (Wolfe, "Bug's Life"). However, as Wolfe reveals in the novel, Wilson is convinced that the genetic codes control one's life "enormously" but not "entirely" which "leaves some wiggle room for your free will to steer your genetically coded 'instincts' in any direction you want" (*CS* 306). Despite Wilson's belief in the possibility of free will and morality, his *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, published in 1975, is widely interpreted as if "saying our behavior and everything about our lives was determined by our genes" (Wilson, Interview). Such interpretation of neuroscientific findings in general, and not neuroscience itself, makes Wolfe anxious about the consequences of this new science on the public's mind, about "getting the message [...] that the fix is in" ("Bug's Life"). Mr. Starling claims that such conclusions—worrying people like Wolfe—are made by the "new generation of neuroscientists," like Jose Delgado, who "laugh at the notion of free will. They yawn at your belief—my belief—that each of us has a capital letter I, as in 'I believe,' a 'self,' inside our head that makes 'you,' makes 'me'" (*CS* 306).

Wolfe is not alone in his concerns about the consequences of rapid progress in neurotechnology and its ethical and social impacts. This concern, however, except for some sporadic writings, gained special attention only at the beginning of the twenty-first century with the growing number of publications, meetings, and organizations, such as Dana Foundation dedicated to the new discipline, “neuroethics” (Illes 32). As early as 2002, figures like Zach Hall, Patricia Churchland, and Antonio Damasio at the Dana Foundation Conference asserted the role of consciousness in making ethical decisions. Hall concludes:

> We do have the ability to make choices, as Dr. Moreno pointed out. . . . We also realize, however, that our ability to make ethical choices—and the range of those choices—are constrained by both biology and culture. . . . What we do in making ethical choices is bring matters into consciousness, where we can think about them, examine them, be aware of all the factors at play. (“Mapping the Future”)

For these neuroscientists, knowing that the mind-brain is a causal machine does not necessarily exclude free will and responsibility from our lives. Although Patrick Haggard, for instance, believes that we do not have free will in its traditional sense, he argues that our ability to respond to external reasons can influence processes at the neural level (“Neuroethics of Free Will” 225). He also emphasizes the role of education in forming free will: “conscious free will is learned”; both in children and adults, “associative learning could assist decision making about how to achieve goals and also inhibition about which motivations or spontaneous activities to suppress” (“‘Free Will’” 154). Churchland, likewise, emphasizes the role of learning in the process of gaining “self-control and habit formation,” regarding the concept of free will. For her, free will is not “uncaused,” but defined according to the degrees of “being in control.” Following Aristotle, she contends that “[a] substantial part of learning to cope with the world, defer gratification, show anger and compassion appropriately, and have courage when necessary involves acquiring appropriate decision making habits” (229-30). A believer in Darwin’s evolutionary theory, she maintains that as a social mammal, our large frontal cortex, responsible for planning, impulse control, and socialization, help us adapt to the social order.

As can be seen, the discussion on neuroscience and free will is open to debate, and that it is not a monologic discipline. Rather, there are other narratives regarding free will and moral responsibility which are not discussed by Mr. Starling in class. Wolfe’s stance regarding neuroscience could be located in the paratext of *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, where Mr. Starling’s Nobel prize-winning experiment is explained objectively in an untitled two-page section before the prologue. In this section, we do not hear the voice of the narrator since it has been made out that those pages

are directly taken from a book titled *The Dictionary of Nobel Laureates* according to the bibliographic information provided on the page. The experiment discussed in this fictional book is pivotal to the comprehension of the events in the following chapters, and it establishes a guide for the readers to differentiate between Wolfe the author and Wolfe the narrator, who becomes ironic at times.

In this experiment, Mr. Starling and his assistant surgically remove the amygdala, an almond-shaped mass of gray matter deep within the brain that controls emotions in higher mammals, from thirty cats. As a result, these cats show inappropriate emotions: boredom instead of fear, cringing instead of preening, and sexual arousal without the presence of a stimulant. These "amygdalectomized" cats are kept in the same room with thirty normal cats used as controls. Each day Mr. Starling opens the cages so the cats could come together on the floor, and sometimes these sex-crazed cats mount each other to create a chain as long as ten cats. One day, the cat first released springs onto the visitor's leather shoe and starts to thrust its pelvis on the shoe. Interestingly, they find out that the cat belongs to the control group, leading to the discovery of the existence of "cultural para-stimuli." The behavior of the control cat, which had watched the sexually maniac amygdalectomized cats over a few weeks, is altered dramatically. Mr. Starling discovers that "a strong social or 'cultural' atmosphere, even as abnormal as this one, could in time overwhelm the genetically determined responses of perfectly normal, healthy animals" (*CS* 2).

This experiment shows that Wolfe has accepted the principles of neuroscience, asserting that our behavior is controlled by the material brain whose alteration would affect our actions considerably. Nevertheless, it also shows that Wolfe believes in the environment and external influences even more. The existence of "cultural para-stimuli" and the hypersexuality of the amygdalectomized cats prepare readers for the sexual atmosphere of Dupont and help them grasp the negative effect of college life on Charlotte. Hence, readers will most probably understand the ironic twist of the ending of the story, where Charlotte congratulates herself for being Jojo's girlfriend. Charlotte is tickled pink by all the compliments she receives as Jojo's girlfriend. This position gets her invited to sorority parties, makes others' heads turn to her, and forces them to acknowledge that she finally belongs to Dupont's high social circles. Consequently, the seemingly happy ending of the novel described by the narrator ironically turns out to be "the most tragic of all possible endings," as Wolfe points out: "At the end, she is perfectly content to have high status solely because she is the girlfriend of the great basketball player" ("Critic in Full").

As Carol Mcnamara maintains: "the case of Charlotte suggests that it is difficult to resist those influences, especially when they conform with a status concern. . . . With the case of Jojo, however, Wolfe suggests that the content of the education a young

person receives makes all the difference” (131). Interestingly, Jose Delgado himself, whose experiments have led Mr. Starling to believe in the illusoriness of the self, highlights the role of education in realizing human freedom. He contends that the most essential element to generate the possibility of independent behavior is “awareness of the many factors influencing our actions in order to assure us that our responses will not be automatic, but deliberate and personal” (8). He asserts that the qualities which most distinctly separate man from other animals are “the awareness of his own existence and the capacity to resist and even change what appears to be his natural fate” (8). “Freedom must be taught and created,” Delgado concludes (65). Similarly, despite having faith in the findings of neuroscience and the materiality of our brains, Wolfe believes that education, self-awareness, and habit formation are key factors affecting our personality and free will. Accordingly, the liberal education at Dupont is criticized for failing to teach students true freedom and autonomous behavior—not for teaching neuroscience. Moreover, besides the “content of education” Mcnamara emphasizes, the way of teaching, as we will show, also makes an important difference.

Pedagogy of Becoming

Considering the result of Mr. Starling’s teaching neuroscience, it seems that his pedagogical method is problematic. Since education entails the encounter with the Other and responsibility for him, Levinas’s ethics of alterity and his concept of the Other, as an absolute unknowable, has been considered promising by educators (Todd 69). Levinas seems to suggest a kind of education which simultaneously promotes autonomy and heteronomy in the process of subjectification known as “Pedagogy of Becoming” (Zhao 73). Levinasian autonomy entails being “elected” to be responsible and concerned for the Other, so it is always tied to heteronomy (Levinas, *Righteous to Be?* 192-3). One’s subjectivity is formed by the self’s “sociality” and the nonsymmetrical intersubjective relation between the self and the Other: “I am subjected to the Other; and I am ‘subject’ essentially in that sense” (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 98).

In the traditional education system, the teacher-student relationship is based on alter egos rather than on an encounter with the Other as an irreplaceable singularity. As Kim Abunuwara explains, in such relationships, the difference between teacher and student is erased and the student needs to adopt the attitudes and beliefs of the teacher while a successful teacher “reproduce[s] herself in her students” (“Vulnerability and Salvation” 161). For Levinas, the self is characterized by his “proximity” to the Other, which is not an alter ego, but a singular being described in terms of love, that is, the Other is unique in the way the beloved is unique and irreplaceable (*Entre Nous* 194). Based on this argument, one becomes an ethical

subject, an "I," "once exposed to the unique Other who addresses me and looks for my response which comes in the form of my utter responsibility for the Other" (*Ethics and Infinity* 101).

Levinas's ethics challenges the power a teacher/master traditionally wields over the student/subject since the ethical relationship puts a premium on the possession of knowledge and its dissemination. Faced with the vulnerability of the student, Levinas contends that the teacher should yield his nominative position as an "I," who enjoys domination that oppresses. S/he, however, should avoid reinforcing his or her own existing system of ideas and instead encourage students' "self-awareness or self-discovery" (Morrison 5). In return, the student is both open to the teacher for genuine learning and disrupts the same, which saves the teacher from "an eternal replaying of her own possibilities" (Abunuwara, "Drawing on Levinas" 150). Moreover, in an "argumentative" and "polyphonic" educational environment, teacher and student as study partners should assert that there is always something more to be known. Unlike the Socratic method in which the teacher's inquiries and debates lead to one certain and identifiable truth, the polyphony of views not only teaches students to challenge and critically evaluate the text as Other, but also promotes openness to the Other and resistance to the absolute truth by underlining the process of questioning (Katz, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" 88-9).

Encountering her teachers, both in Sparta and at Dupont, Charlotte welcomes the teacher/Other and surrenders her egoistic and all-knowing nominative "I" in order to be in the accusative position of "me," whose openness to the Other paves the way for genuine learning. In relation to her teachers, she never uses her self-assertive mantra, "I'm Charlotte Simmons," which on other occasions gives her an aura of superiority over other students. Mr. Starling, as the Other, thematizes a new knowledge of neuroscience–something beyond her totality—which radically interrupts her previous belief system and makes her experience "a *kairos*, an ecstatic revelation of something too vast, too all-enveloping" (*CS* 427). Her openness to Mr. Starling enables her to learn new knowledge about the materialist neuroscience, which repudiates her belief about "self," "soul," and "free will."

Contrary to the Levinasian teacher, Mr. Starling, faced with the vulnerability of the Other, uses his knowledge to overpower his students; he imposes his own ideas on them and denies them intellectual freedom. Like a "conjurer," he uses his magic to persuade and dazzle them. On different occasions, Charlotte refers to the "theatricality" of Mr. Starling's class in which the arrangement of the seats and the lights makes him "the sublime figure on the stage" (*CS* 304). Here is Wolfe's description: "One of the amphitheater's down lighters happened to hit him dramatically, theatrically [it cast his face into planes of bright light and deep shadow] ... just so... and he

held the pose during the silence that ensued. In Charlotte’s estimation, the vision was… sublime,” “ineffably noble and majestic” (*CS* 304, 426). She is “transported,” “absorbed,” “spellbound,” and “swept away” by his “elegance,” and sublimity (*CS* 303-4, 423). Mr. Starling himself is consciously aware of the powerful influence and authority his presence and rhetorical eloquence create and seems “to be enjoying himself, perhaps because he knew he had them all” (*CS* 425). Such theatricality mesmerizes the students and deprives them of critical thinking. Like hypnotized spectators, they are not able to recognize Mr. Starling’s contradictory statements once he introduces Jose Delgado as one of the few scientists who stood up against Freud, developed brain physiology, and revolutionized the way the human animal sees himself. With a “self” like “a hotel lobby, [where] other people and their ideas and their mental atmosphere . . . can come walking right on in, and you can’t lock the doors,” Mr. Starling concludes, there is no possibility of resistance (*CS* 426). Nevertheless, he reserves his greatest praise for Delgado just because he was “a rare creature,” able to defy the mainstream Freudianism in the 1930s (*CS* 424).

Besides such theatricality which prevents critical thinking, Mr. Starling’s Socratic method of teaching lacks true argumentation. As Charlotte rightly notices, Mr. Starling in his classes “does not lecture, but uses the Socratic approach, asking his students questions and commenting on their answers” (*CS* 303). Through questions and comments, he leads the discussion to a desired conclusion, which at the end would make the students believe in what the teacher believes. Discussing the analogy of “the conscious little rock,” Mr. Starling guides his students to adapt the same idea. In this analogy, human beings are likened to a falling piece of rock which in midflight has been given consciousness and a rational mind. These acquired qualities lead it to think that its exercise of free will initiated the flight and gives it control over its route. Although he challenges his students by asking them to “decide for yourself: Am I really… merely… a conscious little rock?”, he immediately shapes their ideas by commenting that “We may have to change the name of our species to Homo Lapis Deiciecta Conscia— . . . Man, the Conscious Little Rock” (*CS* 307). Throughout the course, he popularizes his own understanding of the neuroscientific discoveries which could be wrong at times. It is not clear whether Delgado’s work has been misread by Wolfe or Mr. Starling when the latter mentions Delgado as one of the absolutist neuroscientists whose belief in the illusoriness of the self has omitted the possibility of being educated. Mr. Starling claims that the material of your brains make you behave in a way that “you couldn’t change even if you *trained* for a lifetime” (*CS* 426) while many other neuroscientists, including Delgado himself, as discussed earlier, do not deny the role of education in developing free will. His course is monologic, that is, it gives voice only to the side of the argument which disregards one’s freedom while ignoring the opposing narratives in the field

of neuroscience, which would credit free will and moral responsibility despite the belief in the physicality of the mind. Charlotte internalizes Mr. Starling's teachings uncritically, coming to believe that "*I'm Mr. Starling's rock ... and I only think I have free will*" (*CS* 366). Moreover, Mr. Starling, as a teacher, only aims at teaching science and does not care how this one-sided argument which fails to encourage students to see and think critically can affect their self-knowledge. Like Bloom, Wolfe censures teachers for training specialists without any sense of morality and philosophy, and as a humanist, he is concerned with the negative impact of cognitive science on the public and the students' understanding of themselves. Published in 2004, Wolfe's novel is a warning gesture cautioning against the growing field of neuroscience which, disregarding its effect on the public, has only focused on its own findings.

Wolfe shows that despite biological and environmental influences on one's freedom and consciousness, education can help students develop free will and to some extent autonomy in juxtaposing Charlotte's story of compliance and Jojo's relatively successful resistance to the mainstream. The relationship between coaches and the student-athletes is even worse than the one between Mr. Starling and his students. The former is characterized as a relationship between master and slave. As Andrew K. Koch asserts, the way the big-time coaches treat the scholarship athletes in most universities in America and in the fictional Dupont produces an "exploitative environment" since these student-athletes "generate large amounts of revenue for their coaches and institutions, [but they] get very little education in return" (145). Instead of focusing on "the life of the mind," these institutes utilize students as a way to secure the pursuit of money through big-time sports.

Coach Buster Roth in this novel not only overpowers his athletes but also somehow rules the entire university like an emperor. The Rotheneum (a derogatory word made up of Roth and atheneum), created specially as "an office facility for Buster Roth and his minions," was "the palace of the sports empire bearing a benign relationship with one of its most important colonies, Dupont University" (*CS* 198). To make more profits and to force these student-athletes to focus on their only task, that is, "TO DO THINGS WITH A ROUND ORAGNE BALL!" the coaches take up much of their time doing weight-training, video tape viewing, and other off-season activities, which significantly reduce the amount of time they can spend on their academic courses. The presence of "swimmies" who save the whole team from drowning academically—tutors who do their work assignments and teachers who are friends of the program—all create such an atmosphere in which going to the library, studying seriously, and trying to get good grades are considered dumb and uncool.

Before meeting Charlotte, Jojo was a typical student-athlete who was "insouciant" towards his studies: he ordered his tutor to write his paper while he spent his time working out at the gym or playing video games and hooking up with groupies. Once Charlotte confronts him with the truth that he played like a fool in class by giving the wrong answer to Dr. Lewin's question, Jojo confesses that he had to answer incorrectly otherwise his fellow student-athletes would find out that he had read the novel and cared for studying. Despite lacking enough courage to resist peer pressure, ironically, Charlotte takes the role of a teacher and reproaches Jojo for caring about his teammates' judgment. She looks at him "in a teacherly fashion" and describes what liberal arts education means by drawing a parallel between student-athlete's position in the commercialized sport program and the slaves in the time of Romans: The Romans would let "the slaves get educated in all sorts of practical subjects, like math. . . . But only Roman citizens, the free people?—liber?—could take things like rhetoric and literature and history and theology and philosophy? Because they were the arts of persuasion" (*CS* 195).

Jojo gets Charlotte's point: "athletes—we're like slaves. They don't even want us to think" (*CS* 196). Sticking to her "role as schoolteacher," she advises Jojo to take some classical philosophy courses, as would Bloom advise the American education system to recover from nihilism. To pursue his new aim, Jojo has to stand up against his teammates and Coach Roth, who tries to overpower him by ridiculing and calling him "simpleminded shit," "Socrates," and "sage of Athens" (*CS* 431). Unlike Charlotte who gradually loses her faith in free will and consciousness, Jojo decides (an act of free will) to pursue his desire for knowledge and enrolls in the "Age of Socrates" and later in an advanced French class. Although his grade in philosophy is not great, C-plus, and later he gives up to a groupie, his many hours of studying Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle introduce him to the world of virtue and ideas, to the life of the mind which strengthens his character and changes his way of life.

In addition to Mr. Starling and Coach Roth, who are more egoistic than responsible for the student Other, the whole university administration is irresponsible and unable to fulfill the goals of liberal education. Charlotte highlights their negligence by contrasting Dupont with her home in Sparta. She believes that in Sparta she was able to "be independent, march to a different drummer, swim against the current" because "at nightfall the skirmish was over, and [she] went home to Momma and Daddy"; she could enjoy the support of her responsible family (*CS* 163). At Dupont, however, while in her room, she cannot get away from all the immorality, sarcasm, irresponsibility, and unrestrained sexuality of college life. While anxious and desperate about the new atmosphere, Charlotte wishes she had "somebody wise who also knew and who would assure her that . . . it was her duty to hold firm

and remain independent, a rock amid the decadence all around her" (*CS* 163). That person, at Dupont, would be the resident assistant Ashley, who immediately takes her for a hopeless little girl and lies to her about "dormcest" and drinking at the campus. Left unsupervised, the new ethics of hooking up, sarcasm, and recklessness at the coed dorms rule, which ruins Charlotte's life.

As can be seen, Wolfe, who has always been criticized for his conservative attitudes, is very much concerned with freedom, individuality, and autonomy as well as the ways these virtues could be warped in society. While chronicling American life and capturing the spirit of the age in his journalistic pieces and fiction, Wolfe has tried to make sense of the networks of relationships, people's desires and ambitions, their failures and disappointments by appealing to Max Weber's concept of "status." Following Weber, Wolfe maintains that society is composed of multiple "status spheres" or groups, which would define individual identity. By providing their own rules and standards, the status groups influence the members and tell them who they are and what they want. The status seekers make every effort to be at the top of their social circles by doing whatever is fashionable and obeying the rules and values which have been dictated to them. Ray *Peepgass, Serena, and Roger White II in A Man in Full, and Magdalena and Dr*. Norman Lewis in *Back to Blood* are examples of conformity-ridden petty characters who yield to the pressures of society and are involved in the competition for social climbing and status seeking; all they strive for is to be recognized by members of high society as "one who belongs" (*CS* 214). Yet, Wolfe also offers examples of a few who go their own way and calls them "status Dropouts." Particularly, in *The Pump House Gang* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test,* he begins looking at the ways in which various kinds of people, including middle-class dropouts like Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, the La Jolla surfers, the pompadour hair boys, hot-rodders, rock 'n' roll kids, and Hugh Hefner, the successful businessman, create total "statuspheres" for themselves. What is important for him is the way they drop out of the status competition, rebel against the conventional status patterns, and "[start] their own league" (*Pump House Gang* 4). Surely, these status dropouts free themselves from the old status hierarchies, but this does not mean that they are not concerned with status competition anymore. These groups also create "their own, independent hierarchies, hierarchies that even the members of the older elite would have to reckon with. . . . The anxiety over status . . . reappears in just the place from which the bohemian or egalitarian think they have banished it" (Ragen 60-1). Ironically, those who reject traditional authority to seek freedom are struggling for leadership and social climbing within their own status spheres, thus limiting their newly found freedom.

Likewise, despite freeing themselves from old traditions, young students at Dupont experience a very inhibited freedom by entering status competition and

feeling anxiety over status, privilege, and membership in or exclusion from groups. Whoever does not conform to the new ethics is considered a "dork." The frat boys and the sorority girls who are experts in the new ethics "try to create an atmosphere of . . . you know, our way is the only cool way, and you're a total loser" (*CS* 617). Consequently, Charlotte who thinks Adam is "wonderful and charitable and loving," should not love him because according to the new rules he is a geek, a nerd, and "very low on the Cool scale and the Upscale" (*CS* 667). To prove that "*she belonged*," Charlotte raises the hem of her old dress using safety pins to show off her legs (*CS* 214) and Mimi smokes and drinks beer at the frat party. Charlotte confesses several times that the reason for their attempts "to belong" is that without conforming to the new rules governing the behavior of young people, one is left alone and excluded from society (*CS* 213, 384).

Freedom is still limited in another way in the supposedly liberal societies, where there is only an illusion of freedom under which conformity and homogeneity lurk. For instance, to bring social justice and respect for minorities, political correctness uses tolerance to achieve maximum inclusion of the marginalized people, which in turn compels all people to follow its norms. Therefore, liberalism in the sense of political correctness ignores people's individuality and is ironically intolerant towards other points of view and demands conformity to its own rules. Thus, what makes Wolfe critical of political correctness is the way it limits one's freedom of speech by indignantly rejecting rational arguments, open discussions, and scientific debates as well as responding with intense emotion, bias, and irrationality. Political correctness in this sense narrows down the range of acceptable opinions, enforcing the majority to accept certain ideas and suppressing whatever seems contrary to their beliefs. Sometimes these prejudices may result in self-censorship and holding back of scientific discoveries for fear of being recognized as having "poor taste," being rejected as "an educated person," or being labeled as "racist," "misogynist," or "homophobic" (*Hooking Up* 128). The consequences can get even worse: in some cases, being "politically incorrect" can endanger one's career or physical safety by being penalized, fired, or even taken to court.

Adam Gellin in the novel, for example, though a heterosexual, on "Stand Up Straight for Gay Day" feels "Morally, politically . . . not only duty-bound and righteous," but "courageous as well, a bit noble" for supporting gays (*CS* 648). The idea of supporting political correctness is so internalized in him that he feels guilty about the thought of leaving the demonstration or his dislike of being labeled as one of them: "he hated himself for even thinking such a thought, having any such faintness of heart" (*CS* 650). Political correctness with the slogan of freedom for everyone—including all the Others—ironically imposes itself on individuals. The sexual freedom resulting from the sexual revolution of the 1960s, for example, "freed" men and women,

old and young from sexual restraints to the extent that virginity now feels like a burden, for both boys and girls. Not only Charlotte, but also Adam feels ashamed of his virginity: "A senior at Dupont and still a virgin. Even in his own thoughts he said it softly. It was a failing he was desperate that the world not know of" (*CS* 136).

Besides being illusory, the freedom celebrated in liberal democratic societies seems to be self-centered and indifferent towards others. Drawing from Levinas and Theodor Adorno, Eric S. Nelson asserts that freedom

> with its dialectic of self-assertion— against those who are different, weaker, poor, foreign, 'the enemy' who is not with us— and authoritarian submission – to those whose image is 'like us', 'the friend' who is with us— is an all too apparent tendency in American media, politics and social life even as there are tendencies that challenge it. (65)

For the freedom and pleasure of the imperialist ego, others become obstacles to be removed, an attitude which makes both Levinas and Wolfe suspicious of liberalism. Levinas is an advocate of the French Revolution's Trinitarian slogan—liberty, equality, and fraternity—"insofar as solidarity, which is the asymmetrical ethical condition of the liberty of each individual, has priority over the liberty that can neglect or deny the other's suffering" (Nelson 73). In his essay, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," Levinas asserts that Nietzsche's philosophy, with an emphasis on power and self-assertion to the extent of ignoring the Other, paved the way for Hitlerism, which surprisingly has a lot in common with liberalism (11). Levinas prefers the Jewish concept of freedom over freedom in liberalism since the latter is more like "a heroic individualism" and reflects more a master morality, while the former recognizes the "intrinsic limitations of the human subject and the search for pardon" (Maldonado-Torres 34). By emphasizing "pardon," which is given by another person, the Judaic freedom is intersubjective and concerned with the Other (34). For the same reason, Levinas is unsympathetic to the social agitation of May 1968 and the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll culture of the 1960s. His criticism is not so much about sexual behavior itself than its libertine approach to life since at the end it is nothing more than the satisfaction of one's own desire. In his essay, "Anti-Humanism and Education," Levinas traces the progress of freedom, from economic freedom to sexual liberation, to the solitary ecstasy of drugs and at the end to a place where "everything is allowed . . . Nothing, perhaps, is forbidden any longer as regards our dealings with the other man" (284). Regarding the sexual revolution and the liberal attitudes of the young people in the Jewish community, he is more of a conservative and is critical of their life of "if it feels good do it" and "it's all about me" than to choose a life that is "for the other person" (Katz, "Difficult Freedom" 98).

Likewise, Wolfe is critical of such egoistic freedom and ignorance of the Other. In a sharp-witted article, entitled "Me Decade, and the Third Great Awakening," he tries to make sense of what he sees in the social scene during the 1970s. He believes that the postwar economic boom in America made it possible for the working class to do "something only aristocrats (and intellectuals and artists) were supposed to do— they discovered and started doting on *Me!*"; "They've created," Wolfe pungently adds, "the greatest age of individualism in American history!" (24).

Though attracted to this "age of Everyman as Aristocrat," Wolfe is not an uncritical fan of all the results of American materialism. He wonders how the new form of freedom can easily turn into overindulgence, excess, and extreme individualism. This new freedom from restraint and responsibility cares only about the "self" and is oblivious to the Other. Wolfe continues that people no longer see themselves as part of a community, nor "part of a great biological stream"; consequently, they feel no longer responsible towards their children, country, people, and neighbors ("Me Decade" 23). Such freedom is defined as "freedom *from* religion" not "freedom *of* religion" ("The Meaning of Freedom" 7). The new ethos is "Never mind 'take advantage of,'" which is reflected in many incidents of famous college athletes at major universities being accused of rape and molesting (11); in the appearance of "the village brothel" or "the house of prostitution," "X-rated movies," and pornography, as well as the rise in divorce rate (9-10). He reminds us that what is lacking today is "the greatest act of religion," that is, "sacrifice" (14). The concept of sacrifice implies the capacity to resist the "manic" and "magnetic" allure of hedonism, and selfish, self-destructive self-indulgence.

I Am Charlotte Simmons is an expression of this kind of uncompromising individualism and unbridled autonomy. In such a "postmodern" world where Nietzsche and neuroscience rule, people, free from the conception of an independent self, soul, and free will, are nothing but "bodies in motion" (Craig and Fennell 105). They are not capable of love and friendship since these concepts are also supposedly based on illusion (106). Now that love, moral virtue, and happiness do not govern relationships, they can be understood according to the principles of neuroscience such as allometry, "the study of the relative growth of a part of an organism in relation to the growth of the whole" (*CS* 676). The relationships between human beings (organisms) are "the result of a playing out of the growth (or the evolution or metamorphosis) of a separate and lone part in relation to other parts of a whole [which ends ...] in a competition, guided by nothing other than a desire for recognition" (Craig and Fennell 106). Therefore, status competition or competition for recognition not only forces conformity, as stated earlier, but also brings about war of all against all. What guides human relations is Nietzsche's will to power whereby

the stronger is encouraged to ignore and overcome the tarantulas. Consequently, every relationship is based on solitary enjoyment and imposing one's will on the inferior Other.

On the way to Saint Ray Formal in Washington DC, Charlotte, Nicole, and Crissy are involved in a power game. Nicole and Crissy are the sort of girls "who can cut you open before you even know the knife has gone in" through their sarcastic language (*CS* 459). Compared to Nicole and Crissy, the upper-class sororities, who are blond and skinny and are "dressed better and were cooler," Charlotte is a weak competitor in the recognition game. They ignore her altogether and do not even acknowledge her arrival: "while Charlotte stood there like an invisible waif, the two girls regaled each other with 'hilarious' accounts" (*CS* 463); they "acted as if Charlotte Simmons didn't exist" (*CS* 467). They treat her as the Other "who had no business even being among [them]" (*CS* 465). On the other hand, to assert herself and to prove that she belongs, Charlotte desperately tries to laugh at anything that seems intended as funny until one of the "inside jokes," which should not be funny to an "outsider," reveals "how frantically, how fawningly, she wanted to be one of the gang" (*CS* 471). In this battle for recognition, Charlotte "had no more fight left. She felt defeated and sad—sad about her amateurishness, her shortcomings as . . . a girl. . . . [She experienced] self-disappointment, self-pity, abject capitulation to a stronger foe" (*CS* 478). To compensate for her shortcomings, she makes compromises and conforms to the rules of this status group: she drinks heavily at Saint Ray Formal, wears a very short dress and finally gives up her virginity to Hoyt. The transformed Charlotte attracts a lot of attention and forces even Nicole "to call her by her name" and acknowledge her presence.

These young people, who cherish sexual freedom, feel free to abuse others for the sake of their own pleasure. After enjoying Charlotte's body, Hoyt dumps her and humiliates her by recounting her first sexual experience to his friends. He does not care how awful Charlotte feels after having such an animalistic sex without love. Charlotte's sex scenes, mocked as clinical, have honored Wolfe with a British award for the worst sex scene in a novel. However, criticizing Wolfe implies that critics have missed his point, which is to show that "much of modern sex is un-erotic, if erotic means flight of fancy or romantic build-up" (Wolfe, "The Liberal Elite"). He shows that now sex is all about bodies meeting each other while souls and love are absent because in this world, they are nothing more than illusions.

Conclusion

I Am Charlotte Simmons, as we have argued, reflects the concerns of intellectuals of the neoconservative movement over the American liberal education system as well as the anxieties of the ethicists and humanist philosophers about the implication of advances in NBIC technologies for posthumanism. Highlighting the role of education in this novel, we have contended that Wolfe practices what Levinas theorizes as “the Pedagogy of Becoming.” Levinas’s subject, though autonomous, is constantly challenged and regenerated by the interruption of the Other, which prevents the self from having a fixed and totalized egoistic power. Therefore, teachers should provide an opportunity for students to recognize the face of the Other and remind them that autonomy is only possible through the condition of existing in the community, “a community that makes demands on us, impresses on us and forms us in ways we cannot always control . . . and yet at the same time, [we] are acting, responding to those who address [us] in multiple situations, contexts and relations” (Strhan 91). What is important in education is first to have teachers who feel ethically responsible for the student/Other and second to cultivate critical thinking among students and equip them with the ability to recognize whether the Other facing them is tyrannical and oppressive with an ego that attempts to totalize them (e.g., subjection to peer pressure) or the naked vulnerable Other who demands their responsibility.

In *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Charlotte is shown as miseducated since she is unable to distinguish the tyrannical Other from the vulnerable one. She loses her autonomy under the influence of Mr. Starling’s unethical monologic teachings of neuroscience and her own compelling desire to attract attention. Hence, she stoops to the tyrannical rules of modern Dupont and participates in their belittling power games. Undergoing radical transformation, Charlotte comes to believe in the illusory nature of love, friendship and, like the rest of the egocentric and selfish Dupont students, she rejects sensible Adam, who is far from the ideal image of a “cool” person. Reading Wolfe’s novel in terms of Levinas’s ideas on ethics and their relation to education, it could be argued that what is overall implied is that the writer seems to be more or less in agreement with the Levinasian “Pedagogy of Becoming,” emphasizing both autonomy and heteronomy. Such pedagogy, Wolfe avers, is beneficial to the contemporary American education system which has failed in educating autonomous beings capable of resisting social pressures and being responsible for the Other.

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