Whether life is worth living and when—this question is not asked by medicine. Natural science gives us an answer to the question of what we must do if we wish to master life technically. It leaves quite aside, or assumes for its purposes, whether we should and do wish to master life technically and whether it ultimately makes sense to do so.¹

The worlds of the American cult writer Chuck Palahniuk are worlds haunted, even defined, by pain and suffering. Over the course of his twelve novels, Palahniuk, still perhaps best known for his 1996 debut novel Fight Club, explores the role and character of the human body in a heavily rationalized culture, and does so in a manner that makes his work a valuable site for the study of the contemporary religious landscape. Palahniuk’s confrontational, controversial novels seek to revalue both brute physical pain and the more active process of suffering. They seek to remove both from strictly biomedical and therapeutic settings, at the same time recalling—though never recreating—forgotten or undervalued understandings of suffering, some of which echo traditional Christian conceptions of the transformative potential of such suffering. That being said, Palahniuk revels in ambiguity and misdirection; his attitude towards the body is profoundly ambivalent and is thus difficult to articulate clearly. At the same time that he affirms the truth of the fully rationalized understanding of the human body dominant in modern biomedicine, he rejects absolutely conventional biomedical ideas about the value of physical pain and suffering. As Rebecca Sachs Norris notes, the valuation of pain within biomedicine is narrowly prescribed within a diagnostic framework: “In Western biomedicine, pain and the suffering it entails are understood to have no value except as an indicator of a biomedical condition; pain is a

symptom to be alleviated . . . there is no framework for pain as a meaningful or transformational experience except as a necessary component of treatment or cure of the physical body . . . The meaning of pain or suffering is strictly utilitarian."

In contrast to this highly instrumental view of pain, Palahniuk's novels explore and affirm the possibility that pain undertaken as an act of will represents not only a conscious rejection of the rationalization of the body but also a reclamation of agency and authenticity in a culture that has commodified the individual and turned living bodies into mere instruments. It is crucial to note at this point that pain and suffering are matters not only of individual human bodies but also of culture, making pain and suffering into an ideal site for the exploration of religion and the body. It is also essential to be clear that pain and suffering are not simple cognate terms; as Ariel Glucklich has argued: “pain must be distinguished from suffering; it is a type of sensation usually—though not necessarily—associated with tissue damage . . . Suffering, in contrast, is not a sensation but an emotional and evaluative reaction to any number of causes, some entirely painless.” Nor is the line between pain and suffering clearly drawn; perhaps suffering can best be understood as an interpretive act, a ‘reading’ of pain; however, the individual’s experience of pain, as Norris and Glucklich both note, is always already embedded within the cultural frameworks that define and delimit both the value and the range of acceptable meanings granted to the experience of physical pain. In other words, within a given cultural context, a body is expected to understand pain in certain ways and to suffer according to convention and societal norms.

Many of Palahniuk’s characters, through various means—bare-knuckle boxing (Fight Club), staged automobile accidents (Rant: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey, 2007), horrific acts of self-mutilation (Haunted, 2005; Invisible Monsters, 1999; and to a lesser extent Diary, 2003 and Snuff, 2008)—invite pain into their lives and imbue it with a transcendental,