

An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace

Larry McCaffery/1993

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LARRY McCAFFERY: Your essay following this interview is going to be seen by some people as being basically an apology for television. What's your response to the familiar criticism that television fosters relationships with illusions or simulations of real people (Reagan being a kind of quintessential example)?

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE: It's a try at a comprehensive diagnosis, not an apology. U.S. viewers' relationship with TV is essentially puerile and dependent, as are all relationships based on seduction. This is hardly news. But what's seldom acknowledged is how complex and ingenious TV's seductions are. It's seldom acknowledged that viewers' relationship with TV is, albeit debased, intricate and profound. It's easy for older writers just to bitch about TV's hegemony over the U.S. art market, to say the world's gone to hell in a basket and shrug and have done with it. But I think younger writers owe themselves a richer account of just why TV's become such a dominating force on people's consciousness, if only because we under like forty have spent our whole conscious lives being *part* of TV's audience.

LM: Television may be more complex than what most people realize, but it seems rarely to attempt to *challenge* or *disturb* its audience, as you've written me you wish to. Is it that sense of challenge and pain that makes your work more "serious" than most television shows?

DFW: I had a teacher I liked who used to say good fiction's job was to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. I guess a big part of serious

fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves. Since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of *generalization* of suffering. Does this make sense? We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might be just that simple. But now realize that TV and popular film and most kinds of "low" art—which just means art whose primary aim is to make money—is lucrative precisely because it recognizes that audiences prefer 100 percent pleasure to the reality that tends to be 49 percent pleasure and 51 percent pain. Whereas "serious" art, which is not primarily about getting money out of you, is more apt to make you uncomfortable, or to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort. So it's hard for an art audience, especially a young one that's been raised to expect art to be 100 percent pleasurable and to make that pleasure effortless, to read and appreciate serious fiction. That's not good. The problem isn't that today's readership is *dumb*, I don't think. Just that TV and the commercial-art culture's trained it to be sort of lazy and childish in its expectations. But it makes trying to engage today's readers both imaginatively and intellectually unprecedentedly hard.

LM: Who do you imagine your readership to be?

DFW: I suppose it's people more or less like me, in their twenties and thirties, maybe, with enough experience or good education to have realized that the hard work serious fiction requires of a reader sometimes has a payoff. People who've been raised with U.S. commercial culture and are engaged with it and informed by it and fascinated with it but still hungry for something commercial art can't provide. Yuppies, I guess, and younger intellectuals, whatever. These are the people pretty much all the younger writers I admire—Leyner and Vollmann and Daitch, Amy Homes, Jon Franzen, Lorie Moore, Rick Powers, even McInerney and Leavitt and those guys—are writing for, I think. But, again, the last twenty years have seen big changes in how writers engage their readers, what readers need to expect from any kind of art.

LM: The media seems to me to be one thing that has drastically changed

this relationship. It's provided people with this television-processed culture for so long that audiences have forgotten what a relationship to serious art is all about.

DFW: Well, it's too simple to just wring your hands and claim TV's ruined readers. Because the U.S.'s television culture didn't come out of a vacuum. What TV is extremely good at—and realize that this is *all it does*—is discerning what large numbers of people think they want, and supplying it. And since there's always been a strong and distinctive American distaste for frustration and suffering, TV's going to avoid these like the plague in favor of something anesthetic and easy.

LM: You really think this distaste is distinctly American?

DFW: It seems distinctly Western-industrial, anyway. In most other cultures, if you hurt, if you have a symptom that's causing you to suffer, they view this as basically healthy and natural, a sign that your nervous system knows something's wrong. For these cultures, getting rid of the pain without addressing the deeper cause would be like shutting off a fire alarm while the fire's still going. But if you just look at the number of ways that we try like hell to alleviate mere symptoms in this country—from fast-fast-fast-relief antacids to the popularity of lighthearted musicals during the Depression—you can see an almost compulsive tendency to regard pain itself as the problem. And so pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself. It's probably more Western than U.S. per se. Look at utilitarianism—that most English of contributions to ethics—and you see a whole teleology predicated on the idea that the best human life is one that maximizes the pleasure-to-pain ratio. God, I know this sounds priggish of me. All I'm saying is that it's shortsighted to blame TV. It's simply another symptom. TV didn't invent our aesthetic childishness here any more than the Manhattan Project invented aggression. Nuclear weapons and TV have simply intensified the consequences of our tendencies, upped the stakes.

LM: Near the end of "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," there's a line about Mark that "It would take an architect who could hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetrate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict." Is that the kind of cruelty you feel is missing in the work of somebody like Mark Leyner?

DFW: I guess I'd need to ask you what kind of cruelty you thought the narrator meant there.

LM: It seems to involve the idea that if writers care enough about their audience—if they love them enough and love their art enough—they’ve got to be cruel in their writing practices. “Cruel” the way an army drill sergeant is when he decides to put a bunch of raw recruits through hell, knowing that the trauma you’re inflicting on these guys, emotionally, physically, psychically, is just part of a process that’s going to strengthen them in the end, prepare them for things they can’t even imagine yet.

DFW: Well, besides the question of where the fuck do “artists” get off deciding for readers what stuff the readers need to be prepared for, your idea sounds pretty Aristotelian, doesn’t it? I mean, what’s the purpose of creating fiction, for you? Is it essentially mimetic, to capture and order a protean reality? Or is it really supposed to be therapeutic in an Aristotelian sense?

LM: I agree with what you said in “Westward” about serious art having to engage a range of experiences; it can’t be merely “metafictional,” for example, it has to deal with the world outside the page and variously so. How would you contrast your efforts in this regard versus those involved in most television or most popular fiction?

DFW: This might be one way to start talking about differences between the early postmodern writers of the fifties and sixties and their contemporary descendants. When you read that quotation from “Westward” just now, it sounded to me like a covert digest of my biggest weaknesses as a writer. One is that I have a grossly sentimental affection for gags, for stuff that’s nothing but funny, and which I sometimes stick in for no other reason than funniness. Another’s that I have a problem sometimes with concision, communicating only what needs to be said in a brisk efficient way that doesn’t call attention to itself. It’d be pathetic for me to blame the exterior for my own deficiencies, but it still seems to me that both of these problems are traceable to this schizogenic experience I had growing up, being bookish and reading a lot, on the one hand, watching grotesque amounts of TV, on the other. Because I liked to read, I probably didn’t watch quite as much TV as my friends, but I still got my daily megadose, believe me. And I think it’s impossible to spend that many slack-jawed, spittle-chinned, formative hours in front of commercial art without internalizing the idea that one of the main goals of art is simply to *entertain*, give people sheer pleasure. Except to what end, this pleasure-giving? Because, of course, TV’s *real* agenda is to be *liked*, because if you like what you’re seeing, you’ll stay tuned. TV is completely unabashed about this; it’s its sole *raison*. And sometimes when I look at my own stuff I feel like I absorbed too much of this *raison*. I’ll catch

myself thinking up gags or trying formal stunt-piloting and see that none of this stuff is really in the service of the story itself; it's serving the rather darker purpose of communicating to the reader "Hey! Look at me! Have a look at what a good writer I am! *Like me!*"

Now, to an extent there's no way to escape this altogether, because an author needs to demonstrate some sort of skill or merit so that the reader will trust her. There's some weird, delicate, I-trust-you-not-to-fuck-upon-me relationship between the reader and writer, and both have to sustain it. But there's an unignorable line between demonstrating skill and charm to gain trust for the story vs. simple showing off. It can become an exercise in trying to get the reader to like and admire you instead of an exercise in creative art. I think TV promulgates the idea that good art is just that art which makes people like and depend on the vehicle that brings them the art. This seems like a poisonous lesson for a would-be artist to grow up with. And one consequence is that if the artist is excessively dependent on simply being *liked*, so that her true end isn't in the work but in a certain audience's good opinion, she is going to develop a terrific hostility to that audience, simply because she has given all her power away to them. It's the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction: "I don't really care what it is I say, I care only that you like it. But since your good opinion is the sole arbiter of my success and worth, you have tremendous power over me, and I fear you and hate you for it." This dynamic isn't exclusive to art. But I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader.

LM: In your own case, how does this hostility manifest itself?

DFW: Oh, not always, but sometimes in the form of sentences that are syntactically not incorrect but still a real bitch to read. Or bludgeoning the reader with data. Or devoting a lot of energy to creating expectations and then taking pleasure in disappointing them. You can see this clearly in something like Ellis's *American Psycho*: it panders shamelessly to the audience's sadism for a while, but by the end it's clear that the sadism's real object is the reader herself.

LM: But at least in the case of *American Psycho* I felt there was something more than just this desire to inflict pain—or that Ellis was being cruel the way you said serious artists need to be willing to be.

DFW: You're just displaying the sort of cynicism that lets readers be manipulated by bad writing. I think it's a kind of black cynicism about today's

world that Ellis and certain others depend on for their readership. Look, if the contemporary condition is hopelessly shitty, insipid, materialistic, emotionally retarded, sadomasochistic and stupid, then I (or any writer) can get away with slapping together stories with characters who are stupid, vapid, emotionally retarded, which is easy, because these sorts of characters require no development. With descriptions that are simply lists of brand-name consumer products. Where stupid people say insipid stuff to each other. If what's always distinguished bad writing—flat characters, a narrative world that's clichéd and not recognizably human, etc.—is also a description of today's world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world. If readers simply believe the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then Ellis can write a mean shallow stupid novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything. Look man, we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this dark world *and* to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it. You can defend *Psycho* as being a sort of performative digest of late-eighties social problems, but it's no more than that.

LM: Are you saying that writers of your generation have an obligation not only to depict our condition but also to provide the *solutions* to these things?

DFW: I don't think I'm talking about conventionally political or social-action-type solutions. That's not what fiction's about. Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be. This isn't that it's fiction's duty to edify or teach, or to make us good little Christians or Republicans; I'm not trying to line up behind Tolstoy or Gardner. I just think that fiction that isn't exploring what it means to be human today isn't good art. We've got all this "literary" fiction that simply monotones that we're all becoming less and less human, that presents characters without souls or love, characters who really are exhaustively describable in terms of what brands of stuff they wear, and we all buy the books and go like "Golly, what a mordantly ef-

fective commentary on contemporary materialism!" But we already all *know* U.S. culture is materialistic. This diagnosis can be done in about two lines. It doesn't engage anybody. What's engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price? And can these capacities be made to thrive? And if so, how, and if not, why not?

LM: Not everyone in your generation is taking the Ellis route. Both the other writers in this issue of *RCF* seem to be doing exactly what you're talking about. So, for example, even though Vollmann's *Rainbow Stories* is a book that is in its own way as sensationalized as *American Psycho*, the effort there is to depict those people not as flattened, dehumanized stereotypes but as human beings. I'd agree, though, that a lot of contemporary writers today adopt this sort of flat, neutral transformation of people and events into fiction without bothering to make the effort of refocusing their imaginations on the people who still exist underneath these transformations. But Vollmann seems to be someone fighting that tendency in interesting ways.

This brings us back to the issue of whether this isn't a dilemma serious writers have always faced. Other than lowered (or changed) audience expectations, what's changed to make the task of the serious writer today more difficult than it was thirty or sixty or a hundred or a thousand years ago? You might argue that the task of the serious writer is *easier* today because what took place in the sixties had the effect of finally demolishing the authority that mimesis had assumed. Since you guys don't have to fight that battle anymore, you're liberated to move on to other areas.

DFW: This is a double-edged sword, our bequest from the early postmodernists and the poststructuralist critics. On the one hand, there's sort of an embarrassment of riches for young writers now. Most of the old cinctures and constraints that used to exist—censorship of content is a blatant example—have been driven off the field. Writers today can do more or less whatever we want. But on the other hand, since everybody can do pretty much whatever they want, without boundaries to define them or constraints to struggle against, you get this continual avant-garde rush forward without anyone bothering to speculate on the destination, the *goal* of the forward rush. The modernists and early postmodernists—all the way from Mallarmé to Coover, I guess—broke most of the rules for us, but we tend to forget what they were forced to remember: the rule-breaking has got to be for the *sake* of something. When rule-breaking, the mere *form* of renegade avant-

gardism, becomes an end in itself, you end up with bad language poetry and *American Psycho*'s nipple-shocks and Alice Cooper eating shit on stage. Shock stops being a byproduct of progress and becomes an end in itself. And it's bullshit. Here's an analogy. The invention of calculus was shocking because for a long time it had simply been presumed that you couldn't divide by zero. The integrity of math itself seemed to depend on the presumption. Then some genuine titans came along and said, "Yeah, maybe you can't divide by zero, but what would happen if you *could*? We're going to come as close to doing it as we can, to see what happens."

LM: So you get the infinitesimal calculus—the "philosophy of as if."

DFW: And this purely theoretical construct wound up yielding incredible practical results. Suddenly you could plot the area under curves and do rate-change calculations. Just about every material convenience we now enjoy is a consequence of this "as if." But what if Leibniz and Newton had wanted to divide by zero only to show jaded audiences how cool and rebellious they were? It'd never have happened, because that kind of motivation doesn't yield results. It's hollow. Dividing-as-if-by-zero was titanic and ingenious because it was in the service of something. The math world's shock was a price they had to pay, not a payoff in itself.

LM: Of course, you also have examples like Lobochevsky and Riemann, who are breaking rules with no practical application at the time—but then later on somebody like Einstein comes along and decides that this worthless mathematical mind game that Riemann developed actually described the universe more effectively than the Euclidean game. Not that those guys were breaking the rules just to break the rules, but part of that was just that: what happens if everybody has to move *counter-clockwise* in Monopoly. And at first it just seemed like this game, without applications.

DFW: Well, the analogy breaks down because math and hard science are pyramidal. They're like building a cathedral: each generation works off the last one, both its advances and its errors. Ideally, each piece of art's its own unique object, and its evaluation's always present-tense. You could justify the worst piece of experimental horseshit by saying "The fools may hate my stuff, but generations later I will be appreciated for my groundbreaking rebellion." All the beret-wearing *artistes* I went to school with who believed that line are now writing ad copy someplace.

LM: The European avant-garde believed in the transforming ability of in-

novative art to directly affect people's consciousness and break them out of their cocoon of habituation, etc. You'd put a urinal in a Paris museum, call it a "fountain," and wait for the riots next day. That's an area I'd say has changed things for writers (or any artist)—you can have very aesthetically radical works today using the same features of formal innovation that you'd find in the Russian Futurists or Duchamp and so forth, only now these things are on MTV or TV ads. Formal innovation as trendy image. So it loses its ability to shock or transform.

DFW: These are exploitations. They're not trying to break us free of anything. They're trying to lock us tighter into certain conventions, in this case habits of consumption. So the *form* of artistic rebellion now becomes . . .

LM: . . . yeah, another commodity. I agree with Fredric Jameson and others who argue that modernism and postmodernism can be seen as expressing the cultural logic of late capitalism. Lots of features of contemporary art are directly influenced by this massive acceleration of capitalist expansion into all these new realms that were previously just not accessible. You sell people a memory, reify their nostalgia, and use this as a hook to sell deodorant. Hasn't this recent huge expansion of the technologies of reproduction, the integration of commodity reproduction and aesthetic reproduction, and the rise of media culture lessened the impact that aesthetic innovation can have on people's sensibilities? What's your response to this as an artist?

DFW: You've got a gift for the lit-speak, LM. Who wouldn't love this jargon we dress common sense in: "formal innovation is no longer transformative, having been co-opted by the forces of stabilization and postindustrial inertia," blah blah. But this co-optation might actually be a good thing if it helps keep younger writers from being able to treat mere formal ingenuity as an end in itself. MTV-type co-optation could end up a great prophylactic against cleveritis—you know, the dreaded grad-school syndrome of like "Watch me use seventeen different points of view in this scene of a guy eating a Saltine." The only real point of that shit is "Like me, because I'm clever"—which of course is itself derived from commercial art's axiom about audience-affection determining art's value.

What's precious about somebody like Bill Vollmann is that, even though there's a great deal of formal innovation in his fictions, it rarely seems to exist for just its own sake. It's almost always deployed to make some point (Vollmann's the most editorial young novelist going right now, and he's great at using formal ingenuity to make the editorializing a component of his narrative instead of an interruption) or to create an effect that's internal

to the text. His narrator's always weirdly effaced, the writing unself-conscious, despite all the "By-the-way-Dear-Reader" intrusions. In a way it's sad that Vollmann's integrity is so remarkable. Its remarkability means it's rare. I guess I don't know what to think about these explosions in the sixties you're so crazy about. It's almost like postmodernism is fiction's fall from biblical grace. Fiction became *conscious* of itself in a way it never had been. Here's a really pretentious bit of pop analysis for you: I think you can see Cameron's *Terminator* movies as a metaphor for all literary art after Roland Barthes, viz., the movies' premise that the Cyberdyne NORAD computer becomes conscious of itself as *conscious*, as having interests and an agenda; the Cyberdyne becomes literally self-referential, and it's no accident that the result of this is nuclear war, Armageddon.

LM: Isn't Armageddon the course you set sail for in "Westward"?

DFW: Metafiction's real end has always been Armageddon. Art's reflection on itself is terminal, is one big reason why the art world saw Duchamp as an Antichrist. But I still believe the move to involution had value: it helped writers break free of some long-standing flat-earth-type taboos. It was standing in line to happen. And for a little while, stuff like *Pale Fire* and *The Universal Baseball Association* was valuable as a meta-aesthetic breakthrough the same way Duchamp's urinal had been valuable.

LM: I've always felt that the best of the metafictionists—Coover, for example, Nabokov, Borges, even Barth—were criticized too much for being only interested in narcissistic, self-reflexive games, whereas these devices had very real political and historical applications.

DFW: But when you talk about Nabokov and Coover, you're talking about real geniuses, the writers who weathered real shock and invented this stuff in contemporary fiction. But after the pioneers always come the crank-turners, the little gray people who take the machines others have built and just turn the crank, and little pellets of metafiction come out the other end. The crank-turners capitalize for a while on sheer fashion, and they get their plaudits and grants and buy their IRAs and retire to the Hamptons well out of range of the eventual blast radius. There are some interesting parallels between postmodern crank-turners and what's happened since post-structural theory took off here in the U.S., why there's such a big backlash against poststructuralism going on now. It's the crank-turners' fault. I think the crank-turner's replaced the critic as the real angel of death as far as literary movements are concerned, now. You get some bona fide artists who

come along and really divide by zero and weather some serious shit-storms of shock and ridicule in order to promulgate some really important ideas. Once they triumph, though, and their ideas become legitimate and accepted, the crank-turners and wannabes come running to the machine, and out pour the gray pellets, and now the whole thing's become a hollow form, just another institution of fashion. Take a look at some of the critical-theory Ph.D. dissertations being written now. They're like de Man and Foucault in the mouth of a dull child. Academia and commercial culture have somehow become these gigantic mechanisms of commodification that drain the weight and color out of even the most radical new advances. It's a surreal inversion of the death-by-neglect that used to kill off prescient art. Now prescient art suffers death-by-acceptance. We love things to death, now. Then we retire to the Hamptons.

LM: This is also tied to that expansion of capitalism blah blah blah into realms previously thought to be uncommodifiable. Hyperconsumption. I mean, whoever thought rebellion could be tamed so easily? You just record it, turn the crank, and out comes another pellet of "dangerous" art.

DFW: And this accelerates the metastasis from genuine envelope-puncturing to just another fifteen-minute form that gets cranked out and cranked out and cranked out. Which creates a bitch of a problem for any artist who views her task as continual envelope-puncturing, because then she falls into this insatiable hunger for the appearance of novelty: "What can I do that hasn't been done yet?" Once the first-person pronoun creeps into your agenda you're dead, art-wise. That's why fiction-writing's lonely in a way most people misunderstand. It's yourself you have to be estranged from, really, to work.

LM: A phrase in one of your recent letters really struck me: "The magic of fiction is that it addresses and antagonizes the loneliness that dominates people." It's that suggestion of antagonizing the reader that seems to link your goals up with the avant-garde program—whose goals were never completely hermetic. And "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" seems to be your own meta-metafictional attempt to deal with these large areas in ways that are not merely metafiction.

DFW: "Aggravate" might be better than "antagonize," in the sense of aggravation as intensification. But the truth is it's hard for me to know what I really think about any of the stuff I've written. It's always tempting to sit back and make finger-steeple and invent impressive-sounding theoretical

justifications for what one does, but in my case most of it'd be horseshit. As time passes I get less and less nuts about anything I've published, and it gets harder to know for sure when its antagonistic elements are in there because they serve a useful purpose and when they're just covert manifestations of this "look-at-me-please-love-me-I-hate-you" syndrome I still sometimes catch myself falling into. Anyway, but what I think I meant by "antagonize" or "aggravate" has to do with the stuff in the TV essay about the younger writer trying to struggle against the cultural hegemony of TV. One thing TV does is help us deny that we're lonely. With televised images, we can have the facsimile of a relationship without the work of a real relationship. It's an anesthesia of *form*. The interesting thing is why we're so desperate for this anesthetic against loneliness. You don't have to think very hard to realize that our dread of both relationships and loneliness, both of which are like sub-dreads of our dread of being trapped inside a self (a psychic self, not just a physical self), has to do with angst about death, the recognition that I'm going to die, and die very much alone, and the rest of the world is going to go merrily on without me. I'm not sure I could give you a steeple-fingered theoretical justification, but I strongly suspect a big part of real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny.

LM: It's this inside/outside motif you developed throughout *The Broom of the System*.

DFW: I guess maybe, though there it's developed in an awful clunky way. The popularity of *Broom* mystifies me. I can't say it's not nice to have people like it, but there's a lot of stuff in that novel I'd like to reel back in and do better. I was like twenty-two when I wrote the first draft of that thing. And I mean a *young* twenty-two. I still thought in terms of distinct problems and univocal solutions. But if you're going to try not just to depict the way a culture's bound and defined by mediated gratification and image, but somehow to redeem it, or at least fight a rearguard against it, then what you're going to be doing is paradoxical. You're at once allowing the reader to sort of escape self by achieving some sort of identification with another human psyche—the writer's, or some character's, etc.—and you're *also* trying to antagonize the reader's intuition that she is a self, that she is alone and going to die alone. You're trying somehow both to deny and affirm that the writer is over here with his agenda while the reader's over there with her agenda, distinct. This paradox is what makes good fiction sort of magical, I think. The

paradox can't be resolved, but it can somehow be mediated—"re-mediated," since this is probably where poststructuralism rears its head for me—by the fact that language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming, remedy-ing.

This makes serious fiction a rough and bumpy affair for everyone involved. Commercial entertainment, on the other hand, smooths everything over. Even the *Terminator* movies (which I revere), or something really nasty and sicko like the film version of *A Clockwork Orange*, is basically an anesthetic (and think for a second about the etymology of "anesthetic"; break the word up and think about it). Sure, *A Clockwork Orange* is a self-consciously sick, nasty film about the sickness and nastiness of the postindustrial condition, but if you look at it structurally, slo-mo and fast-mo and arty cinematography aside, it does what all commercial entertainment does: it proceeds more or less chronologically, and if its transitions are less cause-and-effect-based than most movies, it still kind of eases you from scene to scene in a way that drops you into certain kinds of easy cerebral rhythms. It admits of passive spectation. Encourages it. TV-type art's biggest hook is that it's figured out ways to *reward* passive spectation. A certain amount of the form-conscious stuff I write is trying—with whatever success—to do the opposite. It's supposed to be uneasy. For instance, using a lot of flash-cuts between scenes so that some of the narrative arrangement has got to be done by the reader, or interrupting flow with digressions and interpolations that the reader has to do the work of connecting to each other and to the narrative. It's nothing terribly sophisticated, and there has to be an accessible payoff for the reader if I don't want the reader to throw the book at the wall. But if it works right, the reader has to fight *through* the mediated voice presenting the material to you. The complete suppression of a narrative consciousness, with its own agenda, is why TV is such a powerful selling tool. This is McLuhan, right? "The medium is the message" and all that? But notice that TV's mediated message is *never* that the medium's the message.

LM: How is this insistence on mediation different from the kind of meta-strategies you yourself have attacked as preventing authors from being anything other than narcissistic or overly abstract or intellectual?

DFW: I guess I'd judge what I do by the same criterion I apply to the self-conscious elements you find in Vollmann's fiction: do they serve a purpose beyond themselves? Whether I can provide a payoff and communicate a function rather than just seem jumbled and prolix is the issue that'll decide whether the thing I'm working on now succeeds or not. But I think right

now it's important for art-fiction to antagonize the reader's sense that what she's experiencing as she reads is mediated through a human consciousness, one with an agenda not necessarily coincident with her own. For some reason I probably couldn't even explain, I've been convinced of this for years, that one distinctive thing about truly "low" or commercial art is this apparent suppression of a mediating consciousness and agenda. The example I think of first is the novella "Little Expressionless Animals" in *Girl with Curious Hair*. Readers I know sometimes remark on all the flash-cuts and the distortion of linearity in it and usually want to see it as mimicking TV's own pace and phosphenic flutter. But what it's really trying to do is just the *opposite* of TV—it's trying to prohibit the reader from forgetting that she's receiving heavily mediated data, that this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her own, and that in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship, she's going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work.

This might be my best response to your claim that my stuff's not "realistic." I'm not much interested in trying for classical, big-R Realism, not because there hasn't been great U.S. Realist fiction that'll be read and enjoyed forever, but because the big R's form has now been absorbed and suborned by commercial entertainment. The classical Realist form is soothing, familiar, and anesthetic; it drops us right into spectation. It doesn't set up the sort of expectations serious 1990s fiction ought to be setting up in readers.

LM: *The Broom of the System* already displays some of the formal tendencies found in the stories in *Girl with Curious Hair* and in your new work—that play with temporal structure and flash-cuts, for instance, for heightened rhetorical effects of various sorts, for defamiliarizing things. Would you say your approach to form/content issues has undergone any radical changes since you were a "young twenty-two"?

DFW: Assuming I understand what you mean by "form/content," the only way I can answer you is to talk about my own background. Oh boy, I get to make myself sound all fascinating and artistic and you'll have no way to check up. Return with us now to Deare Olde Amherst. For most of my college career I was a hard-core syntax wienie, a philosophy major with a specialization in math and logic. I was, to put it modestly, quite good at the stuff, mostly because I spent all my free time doing it. Wienieish or not, I was actually chasing a special sort of buzz, a special moment that comes sometimes. One teacher called these moments "mathematical experiences." What I didn't know then was that a mathematical experience was aesthetic

in nature, an epiphany in Joyce's original sense. These moments appeared in proof-completions, or maybe algorithms. Or like a gorgeously simple solution to a problem you suddenly see after filling half a notebook with gnarly attempted solutions. It was really an experience of what I think Yeats called "the click of a well-made box." Something like that. The word I always think of it as is "click."

Anyway, I was just awfully good at technical philosophy, and it was the first thing I'd ever been really good at, and so everybody, including me, anticipated I'd make it a career. But it sort of emptied out for me somewhere around age twenty. I just got tired of it, and panicked because I was suddenly not getting joy from the one thing I was clearly supposed to do because I was good at it and people liked me for being good at it. Not a fun time. I think I had kind of a mid-life crisis at twenty, which probably doesn't augur real well for my longevity.

So what I did, I went back home for a term, planning to play solitaire and stare out the window, whatever you do in a crisis. And all of a sudden I found myself writing fiction. My only real experience with fun writing had been on a campus magazine with Mark Costello, the guy I later wrote *Signifying Rappers* with. But I had had experience with chasing the click, from all the time spent with proofs. At some point in my reading and writing that fall I discovered the click existed in literature, too. It was real lucky that just when I stopped being able to get the click from math logic I started to be able to get it from fiction. The first fictional clicks I encountered were in Donald Barthelme's "The Balloon" and in parts of the first story I ever wrote, which has been in my trunk since I finished it. I don't know whether I have much natural talent going for me fiction-wise, but I know I can hear the click, when there's a click. In Don DeLillo's stuff, for example, almost line by line I can hear the click. It's maybe the only way to describe writers I love. I hear the click in most Nabokov. In Donne, Hopkins, Larkin. In Puig and Cortázar. Puig clicks like a fucking Geiger counter. And none of these people write prose as pretty as Updike, and yet I don't much hear the click in Updike.

But so here I am at like twenty-one and I don't know what to do. Do I go into math logic, which I'm good at and pretty much guaranteed an approved career in? Or do I try to keep on with this writing thing, this *artiste* thing? The idea of trying to be a "writer" repelled me, mostly because of all the foppish aesthetes I knew at school who went around in berets stroking their chins calling themselves writers. I have a terror of seeming like those guys, still. Even today, when people I don't know ask me what I do for a living, I

usually tell them I'm "in English" or I "work free-lance." I don't seem to be able to call myself a writer. And terms like "postmodernist" or "surrealist" send me straight to the bathroom, I've got to tell you.

LM: I spend time in toilet stalls myself. But I noticed you didn't take off down the hall when I said earlier that your work didn't seem "realistic." Do you really agree with that?

DFW: Well, it depends whether you're talking little-r realistic or big-R. If you mean is my stuff in the Howells/Wharton/Updike school of U.S. Realism, clearly not. But to me the whole binary of realistic vs. unrealistic fiction is a canonical distinction set up by people with a vested interest in the big-R tradition. A way to marginalize stuff that isn't soothing and conservative. Even the goofiest avant-garde agenda, if it's got integrity, is never, "Let's eschew all realism," but more, "Let's try to countenance and render real aspects of real experiences that have previously been excluded from art." The result often seems "unrealistic" to the big-R devotees because it's not a recognizable part of the "ordinary experience" they're used to countenancing. I guess my point is that "realistic" doesn't have a univocal definition. By the way, what did you mean a minute ago when you were talking about a writer "defamiliarizing" something?

LM: Placing something familiar in an unfamiliar context—say, setting it in the past or within some other structure that will re-expose it, allow readers to see the real essence of the thing that's usually taken for granted because it's buried underneath all the usual sludge that accompanies it.

DFW: I guess that's supposed to be deconstruction's original program, right? People have been under some sort of metaphysical anesthesia, so you dismantle the metaphysics' axioms and prejudices, show it in cross section and reveal the advantages of its abandonment. It's literally aggravating: you awaken them to the fact that they've been unconsciously imbibing some narcotic pharmakon since they were old enough to say Momma. There's many different ways to think about what I'm doing, but if I follow what you mean by "defamiliarization," I guess it's part of what getting the click right is for me. It might also be part of why I end up doing anywhere from five to eight total rewrites to finish something, which is why I'm never going to be a Vollmann or an Oates.

LM: Were your teachers strongly committed to the big-R tradition?

DFW: I took this workshop from Alan Lelchuk. He was a minor light in the

Jewish-American intellectual *Commentary* type thing, a disciple of Roth, I think. And Lelchuk thought that I was insane. Lelchuk thought that the stuff I was doing was pretentious, and wordy, and unnecessarily abstract. Nine times out of ten he was right, but every once in a while I would feel a click. But when I did the stuff that he wanted me to, I never heard the click (I'd do it the way I wanted, and because I wanted at least an A-, I would then transform it into the way he wanted it, which was straight, standard Updikean metaphor, Freytag's pyramid if you want). From undergraduates, that's okay. Anyway, this experience of beating my head against the wall has followed me all along.

LM: How do you mean?

DFW: I seem to like to put myself in positions where I get to be the rebel. So after going through this terrible experience in my undergrad workshop, I chose to repeat it by going a grad school where I would once again be the misunderstood eccentric blah blah blah surrounded by these guys who essentially want to write *New Yorker* stories. That's not exactly true—Ronnie Hansen was cool, and he was there, but only for my last semester. But most of these guys were real middle-of-the-roaders that I just wasn't going to fit in with. And yet I *chose* to go there. That place did help improve the integrity of my loyalty to the click. For instance, the first draft of "Little Expressionless Animals" was done like as a straight realistic story, except the hook was that it was set on *Jeopardy* . . . but it seemed lame. I didn't have the click when I got started and it never went anywhere. I remember an interviewer asking Thomas Flanagan, who writes only historical novels (*The Tenants of Time* and *The Year of the French*, etc.) why he only writes about the past, and Flanagan said because whenever he starts to write something set in the present, it just feels wrong to him. I could immediately understand what he meant; writing about the present didn't have the click for him. Particularly with short stories, before I actually get going with something, I'll try a couple of different ways until I start to get an idea that I'm going to be able to tell that it's going to have some sort of fidelity to the way it tastes in my mouth. I want to hear that click.

LM: You've mentioned the recent change about what writers can assume about their readers in terms of expectations and so on. Are there other ways the postmodern world has influenced or changed the role of serious writing today?

DFW: If you mean a postindustrial, mediated world, it's inverted one of

fiction's big historical functions, that of providing data on distant cultures and persons. The first real generalization of human experience that novels tried to accomplish. If you lived in Bumfuck, Iowa, a hundred years ago and had no idea what life was like in India, good old Kipling goes over and presents it to you. And of course the poststructural critics now have a field day on all the colonialist and phallocratic prejudices inherent in the idea that writers were *presenting* alien cultures instead of "*re-presenting*" them—jabbering natives and randy concubines and white man's burden, etc. Well, but fiction's presenting function for today's reader has *been* reversed: since the whole global village is now presented as familiar, electronically immediate—satellites, microwaves, intrepid PBS anthropologists, Paul Simon's Zulu back-ups—it's almost like we need fiction writers to restore strange things' ineluctable *strangeness*, to defamiliarize stuff, I guess you'd say.

LM: David Lynch's take on suburbia. Or Mark Leyner's take on his own daily life—

DFW: And Leyner's real good at it. For our generation, the entire world seems to present itself as "familiar," but since that's of course an illusion in terms of anything really important about people, maybe any "realistic" fiction's job is opposite what it used to be—no longer making the strange familiar but making the familiar *strange* again. It seems important to find ways of reminding ourselves that most "familiarity" is mediated and delusive.

LM: What you're describing strikes me as being basically different from the motivations underlying, say, the temporal dislocations you find in Faulkner or Joyce.

DFW: Faulkner and Joyce were attempting somehow to be mimetic and doing that meant they had to create these dislocations. Their idea was, well, *experience* is vastly more dislocated and fragmentary, scrambled, jumbled, you pick 'em, than most people think—certainly more so than novelists usually let on—and so they'll *show* you this. But I'd say that a whole lot of what I'm trying to do in my writing—and I don't know whether this is good or bad—is my desire to make something pretty. And for me, a lot of prettiness in written art has to do with sound and tempo—which is why I read a lot more poetry than I do fiction. I'm just very interested in rhythms—not just sentence rhythms but narrative rhythms that occur with certain repetitions or when you stop and go back. I know I'm not subtle at all about repeating things in certain works.

LM: Have you tried your hand at poetry?

DFW: I've written prose poems and some short pieces that are probably close to poetry, but none of them succeed very much and I don't feel much inclination to do poetry. To be honest with you, I don't think I'm talented enough to be a poet. You need such a clear mind to be a poet, an ability to compress and distill, to make the abstract concrete. The best I can do is try to make the concrete concrete. When I'm writing something and I get lost in my own thoughts and my own moods, I'm at sea. I do rip poetry off a lot, although a lot of times the way I'm doing this isn't obvious. This is one reason why dealing with copy editors is usually such a nightmare for me; they make these changes or suggestions and I go stet stet stet stet stet because a lot of times I'm trying to do with punctuation what poets are trying to do with line breaks. One of my few strengths as a writer is that I think I have a good ear for rhythm and for speech and speech rhythms. I can't render as well as somebody like Updike—I just don't *see* that well, with enough precision and accuracy—but I do hear real well and I can translate that.

LM: "Postmodernism" usually implies "an integration of pop and 'serious' culture." But a lot of the pop culture in the works of the younger writers I most admire these days—you, Leyner, Gibson, Vollmann, Eurudice, Daitch, et al.—seems to be introduced less to integrate high and low culture, or to valorize pop culture, than to place this stuff in a new context so we can be *liberated* from it. Wasn't that, for example, one of the things you were doing with *Jeopardy* in "Little Expressionless Animals"?

DFW: One new context is to take something almost narcotizingly banal—it's hard to think of anything more banal than a U.S. game show; in fact the banality's one of TV's great hooks, as the TV essay discusses—and try to reconfigure it in a way that reveals what a tense, strange, convoluted set of human interactions the final banal product is. The scrambled, flash-cut form I ended up using for the novella was probably unsubtle and clumsy, but the form clicked for me in a way it just hadn't when I'd done it straight.

LM: A lot of your works (including *Broom*) have to do with this breakdown of the boundaries between the real and "games," or the characters playing the game begin to confuse the game structure with reality's structure. Again, I suppose you can see this in "Little Expressionless Animals," where the real world outside *Jeopardy* is interacting with what's going on inside the game show—the boundaries between inner and outer are blurred.

DFW: And, too, in the novella what's going on on the show has repercussions for everybody's lives outside it. The valence is always distributive. It's interesting that most serious art, even avant-garde stuff that's in collusion with literary theory, still refuses to acknowledge this, while serious *science* butters its bread with the fact that the separation of subject/observer and object/experiment is impossible. Observing a quantum phenomenon's been proven to alter the phenomenon. Fiction likes to ignore this fact's implications. We still think in terms of a story "changing" the reader's emotions, cerebrations, maybe even her life. We're not keen on the idea of the story sharing its valence with the reader. But the reader's own life "outside" the story changes the story. You could argue that it affects only "her reaction to the story" or "her take on the story." But these things *are* the story. This is the way Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism's helped me the most as a fiction writer: once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but *through* the reader. The reader becomes God, for all textual purposes. I see your eyes glazing over, so I'll hush.

LM: Let's go back for just a moment to your sense of the limits of metafiction: in both your current *RCF* essay and in the novella "Westward" in *Girl with Curious Hair*, you imply that metafiction is a game that only reveals itself, or that can't share its valence with anything outside itself—like the daily world.

DFW: Well, but metafiction is more valuable than that. It helps reveal fiction as a mediated experience. Plus it reminds us that there's always a recursive component to utterance. This was important, because language's self-consciousness had always been there, but neither writers nor critics nor readers wanted to be reminded of it. But we ended up seeing why recursion's dangerous, and maybe why everybody wanted to keep linguistic self-consciousness out of the show. It gets empty and solipsistic real fast. It spirals in on itself. By the mid-seventies, I think, everything useful about the mode had been exhausted, and the crank-turners had descended. By the eighties it'd become a godawful trap. In "Westward" I got trapped one time just trying to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the illusions of the pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that came before it. It was a horror show. The stuff's a permanent migraine.

LM: Why is meta-metafiction a trap? Isn't that what you were doing in "Westward"?

DFW: That's a Rog. And maybe "Westward"'s only real value'll be showing the kind of pretentious loops you fall into now if you fuck around with recursion. My idea in "Westward" was to do with metafiction what Moore's poetry or like DeLillo's *Libra* had done with other mediated myths. I wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction's always been about, I wanted to get it over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans, whether the transaction was erotic or altruistic or sadistic. God, even talking about it makes me want to puke. The *pretension*. Twenty-five-year-olds should be locked away and denied ink and paper. Everything I wanted to do came out in the story, but it came out as just what it was: crude and naive and pretentious.

LM: Of course, even *The Broom of the System* can be seen as a metafiction, as a book about language and about the relationship between words and reality.

DFW: Think of *The Broom of the System* as the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who's just had this mid-life crisis that's moved him from coldly cerebral analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction and Austin-Wittgenstein-Derridean literary theory, which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6° calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct. This WASP's written a lot of straight humor, and loves gags, so he decides to write a coded autobio that's also a funny little poststructural gag: so you get Lenore, a character in a story who's terribly afraid that she's really nothing more than a character in a story. And, sufficiently hidden under the sex-change and the gags and theoretical allusions, I got to write my sensitive little self-obsessed bildungsroman. The biggest cackle I got when the book came out was the way all the reviews, whether they stomped up and down on the overall book or not, all praised the fact that at least here was a first novel that wasn't yet another sensitive little self-obsessed bildungsroman.

LM: Had you considered writing a more direct autobiographical novel? Why go to such lengths to hide yourself?

DFW: Because that's how hidden I was then.

LM: You wrote in one of your letters to me that you felt that the stuff that you're doing now is more obviously autobiographical. Could you talk a bit about how you meant that? Do you mean more autobiographical in a semi-literal way—that you're depicting events or people or situations in your new

writing that are based on actual ones in your own life? Or do you mean this more generally—that you’re writing closer to your own emotions or personality rather than projecting some other kind of perspective? I’m interested in how this might apply to something like “Forever Overhead,” whose emotional impact moved me more than the earlier stories in *Girl with Curious Hair*. Is “Overhead” an example of your writing more directly out of personal (or “autobiographical”) materials?

DFW: What was it about that story that moved you?

LM: There was something very convincing about the terror of this boy poised up there on the diving board, the people watching—something very primal in the way that Kafka is. Surreal but not abstract at all.

DFW: That incident really happened to me. I went up on a diving board, and I changed my mind at the top, but there were all these people behind me so there I was. I’ve always felt it’s a failed story, maybe because that memory, that moment of great fear, is intensely shameful to me. Talking about it like this is interesting, because I may be wrong when I think it’s a failed story. I wrote this essay for Houghton-Mifflin about how much I hate the story; I said it was a story about my going up on a diving board, a shameful incident and an incident involving public shame and two different kinds of terror. The problem I have with the story is that when I was writing it, the emotion I felt most keenly was shame—shame that this past shame was still so shameful for me, and that such a little incident would still be such a big deal. So the way I perceived the story was as an attempt to take a real incident and pump it up. I was going to exploit the classic idea of the double bind, make the kid going through puberty, have the diving board covered with skin so that the diving board becomes very heavily a symbol for initiation into adulthood. Welcome to the machine, you’ve got to dive off, all this kind of stuff.

LM: It also seemed like a metaphor about your own writing—finding yourself so exposed out there, everybody expecting something from you, that double bind . . .

DFW: Nah, that would be too self-pitying. It’s a weird story alright. I did the first draft of that story in college and it’s been through about twenty drafts over the course of about eight years, which is not usually how I do stuff. This is weird, you know—I want to redo this essay for Houghton-Mifflin because the way I perceive it is: here was a regular incident that originally had a real emotional quality about it but that now as an adult I wasn’t really able to own up to. I’m ashamed of the fact that the shame is still so important to

me, so what do I do? I perform certain standard literary moves. I pile in a lot of metaphors, I try to make the writing as pretty as I can, swinging for the fence on every single one. I load it with standard Hamlet-esque constructions of double binds. I do all this initiation-into-adulthood stuff. Basically, I try to frost it with so much literary meaning that what's *really* going on, which is the sham, of it gets buried. Since you responded the way you did, it might be that there's something plangent about the way all this frosting is ladled onto it so that the shame comes through anyway.

LM: Maybe your frosting didn't cover up the taste of the cake as much as you thought it would? That feeling certainly came through for me.

DFW: If there's a pathos about the story, it may be that the story's trying so hard to do something with an incident that is really so common, mundane. When I was writing it, there was this sense that nobody else had ever gone through this; then it occurred to me that when you think how many swimming pools there are. . . . Anyway, so here you've got a story that proceeds from an exactly opposite assumption from what I think a story ought to. Instead of writing a story that's seeking somehow to bind human beings and their experience—you know, my shame is your shame is our shame and thus we are redeemed, right?—I wound up writing something that wound up being, this is my shame and only mine, nobody else has it, and it's inherently repulsive; and so while I've got to get it out, I'm going to disguise it to make it as gratifying for you a literary exercise as I can. It sounds like what happened, though, was that maybe I failed to disguise it—but that this failure may be becomes its success. This is probably a good example of how and why authors are so often stupid about their own work. There's no way you can avoid the intentional fallacy about your own work. In terms of "Forever Overhead," I know, of course, that much of that story is an effort to hide, to distract you from this shameful event, and knowing this, I assume the story is a failure because it's really an evasion; but, of course, the way the reader sees it becomes entirely different. And if that's the case, asking a writer about what his program is, what his motivations and intentions are when he's writing, seems at best something like pulling the wings off a fly. I guess what gives me hope about this discussion we're having is realizing that it was my failure to hide what I wanted to hide that made the story succeed. God, what a ghastly enterprise to be in, though—and what an odd way to achieve success. I'm an exhibitionist who wants to hide, but is unsuccessful at hiding; therefore, somehow I succeed.

LM: Wittgenstein's work, especially the *Tractatus*, permeates *The Broom of the System* in all sorts of ways, both as content and in terms of the metaphors you employ. But in the later stages of his career, Wittgenstein concluded that language was unable to refer in the direct, referential way he'd argued it could in the *Tractatus*. Doesn't that mean language is a closed loop—there's no permeable membrane to allow the inside from getting through to the outside? And if that's the case, then isn't a book *only* a game? Or does the fact that it's a language game make it somehow different?

DFW: There's a kind of tragic fall Wittgenstein's obsessed with all the way from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1922 to the *Philosophical Investigations* in his last years. I mean a real Book-of-Genesis-type tragic fall. The loss of the whole external world. *The Tractatus's* picture theory of meaning presumes that the only possible relation between language and the world is denotative, referential. In order for language both to be meaningful and to have some connection to reality, words like *tree* and *house* have to be like little pictures, representations of real trees and houses. Mimesis. But nothing more. Which means we can know and speak of nothing more than little mimetic pictures. Which divides us, metaphysically and forever, from the external world. If you buy such a metaphysical schism, you're left with only two options. One is that the individual person with her language is trapped in here, with the world out there, and never the twain shall meet. Which, even if you think language's pictures really are mimetic, is an awful lonely proposition. And there's no iron guarantee the pictures truly *are* mimetic, which means you're looking at solipsism. One of the things that makes Wittgenstein a real artist to me is that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism. And so he trashed everything he'd been lauded for in the *Tractatus* and wrote the *Investigations*, which is the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made. Wittgenstein argues that for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons (that's why he spends so much time arguing against the possibility of a "private language"). So he makes language dependent on human community, but unfortunately we're still stuck with the idea that there is this world of referents out there that we can never really join or know because we're stuck in here, in language, even if we're at least all in here together. Oh yeah, the other original option. The other option is to expand the linguistic subject. Expand the self.

LM: Like Norman Bombardini in *Broom of the System*.

DFW: Yeah, Norman's gag is that he literalizes the option. He's going to forget the diet and keep eating until he grows to "infinite size" and eliminates loneliness that way. This was Wittgenstein's double bind: you can either treat language as an infinitely small dense dot, or you let it become the world—the exterior and everything in it. The former banishes you from the Garden. The latter seems more promising. If the world is itself a linguistic construct, there's nothing "outside" language for language to have to picture or refer to. This lets you avoid solipsism, but it leads right to the postmodern, poststructural dilemma of having to deny yourself an existence independent of language. Heidegger's the guy most people think got us into this bind, but when I was working on *Broom of the System* I saw Wittgenstein as the real architect of the postmodern trap. He died right on the edge of explicitly treating reality as linguistic instead of ontological. This eliminated solipsism, but not the horror. Because we're still stuck. The *Investigation's* line is that the fundamental problem of language is, quote, "I don't know my way about." If I were separate from language, if I could somehow detach from it and climb up and look down on it, get the lay of the land so to speak, I could study it "objectively," take it apart, deconstruct it, know its operations and boundaries and deficiencies. But that's not how things are. I'm *in* it. We're *in* language. Wittgenstein's not Heidegger, it's not that language *is* us, but we're still *in* it, inescapably, the same way we're in like Kant's space-time. Wittgenstein's conclusions seem completely sound to me, always have. And if there's one thing that consistently bugs me writing-wise, it's that I don't feel I really *do* know my way around inside language—I never seem to get the kind of clarity and concision I want.

LM: Ray Carver comes immediately to mind in terms of compression and clarity, and he's obviously someone who wound up having a huge influence on your generation.

DFW: Minimalism's just the other side of metafictional recursion. The basic problem's still the one of the mediating narrative consciousness. Both minimalism and metafiction try to resolve the problem in radical ways. Opposed, but both so extreme they end up empty. Recursive metafiction worships the narrative consciousness, makes *it* the subject of the text. Minimalism's even worse, emptier, because it's a fraud: it eschews not only self-reference but any narrative personality at all, tries to pretend there *is* no narrative consciousness in its text. This is so fucking American, man: either make something your God and cosmos and then worship it, or else kill it.

LM: But did Carver really do that? I'd say his narrative voice is nearly always insistently *there*, like Hemingway's was. You're never allowed to forget.

DFW: I was talking about minimalists, not Carver. Carver was an artist, not a minimalist. Even though he's supposedly the inventor of modern U.S. minimalism. "Schools" of fiction are for crank-turners. The founder of a movement is never part of the movement. Carver uses all the techniques and anti-styles that critics call "minimalist," but his case is like Joyce, or Nabokov, or early Barth and Coover—he's using formal innovation in the service of an original vision. Carver invented—or resurrected, if you want to cite Hemingway—the techniques of minimalism in the service of rendering a world he saw that nobody'd seen before. It's a grim world, exhausted and empty and full of mute, beaten people, but the minimalist techniques Carver employed were perfect for it; they created it. And minimalism for Carver wasn't some rigid aesthetic program he adhered to for its own sake. Carver's commitment was to his stories, each of them. And when minimalism didn't serve them, he blew it off. If he realized a story would be best served by expansion, not ablation, he'd expand, like he did to "The Bath," which he later turned into a vastly superior story. He just chased the click. But at some point his "minimalist" style caught on. A movement was born, proclaimed, promulgated by the critics. Now here come the crank-turners. What's especially dangerous about Carver's techniques is that they seem so easy to imitate. It doesn't seem like each word and line and draft has been bled over. That's part of his genius. It looks like you can write a minimalist piece without much bleeding. And you can. But not a good one.

LM: For various reasons, the sixties postmodernists were heavily influenced by other art forms—television, for instance, or the cinema or painting—but in particular their notions of form and structure were often influenced by jazz. Do you think that your generation of writers has been similarly influenced by rock music? For instance, you and Mark Costello collaborated on the first book-length study of rap (*Signifying Rappers*); would you say that your interest in rap has anything to do with your writerly concerns? There's a way in which I can relate your writing with rap's "postmodern" features, its approach to structure and social issues. Sampling. Recontextualizing.

DFW: About the only way music informs my work is in terms of rhythm; sometimes I associate certain narrators' and characters' voices with certain pieces of music. Rock music itself bores me, usually. The phenomenon of rock interests me, though, because its birth was part of the rise of mass popular media, which completely changed the ways the U.S. was unified and

split. The mass media unified the country geographically for pretty much the first time. Rock helped change the fundamental splits in the U.S. from geographical splits to generational ones. Very few people I talk to understand what “generation gap”’s implications really were. Kids loved rock partly because their parents didn’t, and obversely. In a mass-mediated nation, it’s no longer North vs. South. It’s under-thirty vs. over-thirty. I don’t think you can understand the sixties and Vietnam and love-ins and LSD and the whole era of patricidal rebellion that helped inspire early postmodern fiction’s whole “We’re-going-to-trash-your-BeaverCleaver-plasticized-GOP-image-of-life-in-America” attitude without understanding rock ‘n’ roll. Because rock was and is all about busting loose, exceeding limits, and limits are usually set by parents, ancestors, older authorities.

LM: But so far there aren’t many others who have written anything interesting about rock—Richard Meltzer, Peter Guralnik . . .

DFW: There’s some others. Lester Bangs. Todd Gitlin, who also does great TV essays. The thing that especially interested Mark and me about rap was the nasty spin it puts on the whole historical us-vs.-them aspect of post-modern pop. Anyway, what rock ‘n’ roll did for the multicolored young back in the fifties and sixties, rap seems to be doing for the young black urban community. It’s another attempt to break free of precedent and constraint. But there are contradictions in rap that seem perversely to show how, in an era where rebellion itself is a commodity used to sell other commodities, the whole idea of rebelling against white corporate culture is not only impossible but incoherent. Today you’ve got black rappers who make their reputation rapping about Kill the White Corporate Tools, and are then promptly signed by white-owned record corporations, and not only feel no shame about “selling out” but then release platinum albums about not only Killing White Tools but also about how wealthy the rappers now are after signing their record deal! You’ve got music here that both hates the white GOP values of the Reaganoid eighties and extols a gold-and-BMW materialism that makes Reagan look like a fucking Puritan. Violently racist and anti-Semitic black artists being co-opted by white-owned, often Jewish-owned record labels, and celebrating that fact in their art. The tensions are delicious. I can feel the spittle starting again just thinking about it.

LM: This is another example of the dilemma facing avant-garde wannabes today—the appropriation (and ensuing “taming”) of rebellion by the system people like Jameson are talking about.

DFW: I don't know much about Jameson. To me rap's the ultimate distillate of the U.S. eighties, but if you really step back and think not just about rap's politics but about white enthusiasm for it, things get grim. Rap's conscious response to the poverty and oppression of U.S. blacks is like some hideous parody of sixties black pride. We seem to be in an era when oppression and exploitation no longer bring a people together and solidify loyalties and help everyone rise above his individual concerns. Now the rap response is more like "You've always exploited us to get rich, so now goddamn it we're going to exploit ourselves and get rich." The irony, self-pity, self-hatred are now conscious, celebrated. This has to do with what we were talking about regarding "Westward" and postmodern recursion. If I have a real enemy, a patriarch for my patricide, it's probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon. Because, even though their self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes, were indispensable for their times, their aesthetic's absorption by U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else. The TV essay's really about how poisonous postmodern irony's become. You see it in David Letterman and Gary Shandling and rap. But you also see it in fucking Rush Limbaugh, who may well be the Antichrist. You see it in T. C. Boyle and Bill Vollmann and Lorrie Moore. It's pretty much all there is to see in your pal Mark Leyner. Leyner and Limbaugh are the nineties' twin towers of postmodern irony, hip cynicism, a hatred that winks and nudges you and pretends it's just kidding.

Irony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for. That's what made the early postmodernists great artists. The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets us up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicities. The virtuous always triumph? Ward Cleaver is the prototypical fifties father? *Sure*. Sarcasm, parody, absurdism, and irony are great ways to strip off stuff's mask and show' the unpleasant reality behind it. The problem is that once the rules for art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, *then* what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone. Once everybody knows that equality of opportunity is bunk and Mike Brady's bunk and Just Say No is bunk, now what do we do? All we seem to want to do is keep ridiculing the stuff. Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward

redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving. There's some great essay somewhere that has a line about irony being the song of the prisoner who's come to love his cage.

LM: Humbert Humbert, the rutting gorilla, painting the bars of his own cage with such elegance. In fact, Nabokov's example raises the issue of whether cynicism and irony are really a given. In *Pale Fire* and *Lolita*, there's an irony about these structures and inventions and so forth, but this reaction is deeply humanistic rather than being merely ironic. This seems true in Barthelme, for instance, or Stanley Elkin, Barth. Or Robert Coover. The other aspect has to do with the presentation of themselves or their consciousness. The beauty and the magnificence of human artistry isn't merely ironic.

DFW: But you're talking about the click, which is something that can't just be bequeathed from our postmodern ancestors to their descendants. No question that some of the early postmodernists and ironists and anarchists and absurdists did magnificent work, but you can't pass the click from one generation to another like a baton. The click's idiosyncratic, personal. The only stuff a writer can get from an artistic ancestor is a certain set of aesthetic values and beliefs, and maybe a set of formal techniques that might—just might—help the writer to chase his own click. The problem is that, however misprised it's been, what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. You've got to understand that this stuff has permeated the culture. It's become our language; we're so in it we don't even see that it's one perspective, one among many possible ways of seeing. Postmodern irony's become our environment.

LM: Mass culture is another very "real" part of that environment—rock music or television or sports, talk shows, game shows, whatever; that's the milieu you and I live in, I mean that's the world . . .

DFW: I'm always stumped when critics regard references to popular culture in serious fiction as some sort of avant-garde stratagem. In terms of the world I live in and try to write about, it's inescapable. Avoiding any reference to the pop would mean either being retrograde about what's "permissible" in serious art or else writing about some other world.

LM: You mentioned earlier that writing parts of *Broom of the System* felt like recreation for you—a relief from doing technical philosophy. Are you ever able to shift into that “recreational mode” of writing today? Is it still “play” for you?

DFW: It’s not play anymore in the sense of laughs and yucks and nonstop thrills. The stuff in *Broom* that’s informed by that sense of play ended up pretty forgettable, I think. And it doesn’t sustain the enterprise for very long. And I’ve found the really tricky discipline to writing is trying to play without getting overcome by insecurity or vanity or ego. Showing the reader that you’re smart or funny or talented or whatever, trying to be liked, integrity issues aside, this stuff just doesn’t have enough motivational calories in it to carry you over the long haul. You’ve got to discipline yourself to talk out of the part of you that loves the thing, loves what you’re working on. Maybe that just plain loves. (I think we might need woodwinds for this part, LM.) But sappy or no, it’s true. The last couple years have been pretty arid for me good-work-wise, but the one way I’ve progressed I think is I’ve gotten convinced that there’s something kind of timelessly vital and sacred about good writing. This thing doesn’t have that much to do with talent, even glittering talent like Leyner’s or serious talent like Daitch’s. Talent’s just an instrument. It’s like having a pen that works instead of one that doesn’t. I’m not saying I’m able to work consistently out of the premise, but it seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It’s got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved. I know this doesn’t sound hip at all. I don’t know. But it seems like one of the things really great fiction-writers do—from Carver to Chekhov to Flannery O’Connor, or like the Tolstoy of “The Death of Ivan Ilych” or the Pynchon of *Gravity’s Rainbow*—is *give* the reader something. The reader walks away from real art heavier than she came to it. Fuller. All the attention and engagement and work you need to get from the reader can’t be for your benefit; it’s got to be for hers. What’s poisonous about the cultural environment today is that it makes this so scary to try to carry out. Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naive or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something. To be willing to sort of die in order to move the reader, somehow. Even now I’m scared about how sappy this’ll look in print, saying this. And the effort actually to do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind

of courage I don't seem to have yet. I don't see that kind of courage in Mark Leyner or Emily Prager or Brett Ellis. I sometimes see flickers of it in Vollmann and Daitch and Nicholson Baker and Amy Homes and Jon Franzen. It's weird—it has to do with quality but not that much with sheer writing talent. It has to do with the click. I used to think the click came from, "Holy shit, have I ever just done something good." Now it seems more like the real click's more like, "Here's something good, and on one side I don't much matter, and on the other side the individual reader maybe doesn't much matter, but the thing's good because there's extractable value here for both me and the reader." Maybe it's as simple as trying to make the writing more generous and less ego-driven.

LM: Music genres like the blues or jazz or even rock seem to have their ebb and flow in terms of experimentalism, but in the end they all have to come back to the basic elements that comprise the genre, even if these are very simple (like the blues). The trajectory of Bruce Springsteen's career comes to mind. What interests fans of any genre is that they really know the formulas and the elements, so they also can respond to the constant, built-in metagames and intertextualities going on in all genre forms. In a way the responses are aesthetically sophisticated in the sense that it's the infinite variations-on-a-theme that interests them. I mean, how else can they read a million of these things (real genre fans are not stupid people necessarily)? My point is that people who really care about the forms—the serious writers and readers in fiction—don't want all the forms *broken*, they want variation that allows the essence to emerge in new ways. Blues fans could love Hendrix because he was still playing the blues. I think you're seeing a greater appreciation for fiction's rules and limits among postmodern writers of all generations. It's almost a relief to realize that all babies were *not* tossed out with the bathwater back in the sixties.

DFW: You're probably right about appreciating limits. The sixties' movement in poetry to radical free verse, in fiction to radically experimental recursive forms—their legacy to my generation of would-be artists is at least an incentive to ask very seriously where literary art's true relation to limits should be. We've seen that you can break any or all of the rules without getting laughed out of town, but we've also seen the toxicity that anarchy for its own sake can yield. It's often useful to dispense with standard formulas, of course, but it's just as often valuable and brave to see what can be done within a set of rules—which is why formal poetry's so much more interesting to me than free verse. Maybe our touchstone now should be

G. M. Hopkins, who made up his *own* set of formal constraints and then blew everyone's footwear off from inside them. There's something about free play within an ordered and disciplined structure that resonates for readers. And there's something about complete caprice and flux that's deadening.

LM: I suspect this is why so many of the older generation of postmodernists—Federman, Sukenick, Steve Katz, and others (maybe even Pynchon fits in here)—have recently written books that rely on more traditional forms. That's why it seems important right now for your generation to go back to traditional forms and reexamine and rework those structures and formulas. This is already happening with some of the best younger writers in Japan. You recognize that if you just say, "Fuck it, let's throw everything out!" there's nothing in the bathtub to make the effort worthwhile.

DFW: For me, the last few years of the postmodern era have seemed a bit like the way you feel when you're in high school and your parents go on a trip, and you throw a party. You get all your friends over and throw this wild disgusting fabulous party. For a while it's great, free and freeing, parental authority gone and overthrown, a cat's-away-let's-play Dionysian revel. But then time passes, and the party gets louder and louder, and you run out of drugs, and nobody's got any money for more drugs, and things get broken and spilled, and there's a cigarette burn on the couch, and you're the host and it's your house too, and you gradually start wishing your parents would come back and restore some fucking order in your house. It's not a perfect analogy, but the sense I get of my generation of writers and intellectuals or whatever is that it's 3:00 a.m. and the couch has several burn-holes and somebody's thrown up in the umbrella stand and we're wishing the revel would end. The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back—I mean, what's wrong with us? Are we total pussies? Is there something about authority and limits we actually *need*? And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever coming back—which means *we're* going to have to be the parents.