



In Memoriam David Foster Wallace

Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest and most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred my imagination is! My gorge rises at it.

In Memoriam David Foster Wallace

By Steven Moore

I knew him, Horatio. Not exactly a fellow of infinite jest—more Hamlet than Yorick, mild-mannered and self-deprecating rather than loud and merry—but an extremely decent human being, which made the shocking news of his suicide in September 2008 all the more painful. The greatest writer of his generation, yes, but I remember the gent who went easy on me the one time we played tennis together, gave much-needed advice on my orangutanic serve, and who politely asked to play full out before proceeding to blow me off the court.

His loss to contemporary fiction is devastating, because more successfully than anyone he demonstrated what the next stage after postmodernism might look like. Born in 1962, he came of age in the 1970s, the most ludicrous decade in the twentieth century except for the appearance in America of totemic postmodern masterpieces like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Gaddis's *J R*, Delany's *Dhalgren*, Coover's *Public Burning*, Barthelme's *Dead Father*, Barth's *LETTERS*, and Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*. How does an ambitious young author follow *that* parade?⁹ Certainly not by reviving Hemingwayesque understatement, as some writers in the 1980s did, and certainly not by merely imitating Pynchon et al. (Wallace was mortified when a reviewer of his first novel accused him of doing just that, because he had not even read any Pynchon at that point.) They had taken irony about as far as it could go—it was being co-opted by the culture at large anyway and was losing its bite—and these postmodernists pretty much exhausted the mine of classical literature, myth, and fables their

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It was with sadness, shock, and a profound sense of loss that the journal learnt of the suicide of **David Foster Wallace**. Through his friends and admirers, we here provide a tribute to one of the great voices of contemporary America.



- 2 modernist forebears had used to structure their work. Besides, they appealed mainly to highly educated readers and were representative of high culture, which in the 1980s was becoming as obsolete as spats and top hats. So for an aspiring writer like Wallace, *Quo vadis?* (as he asked in a special issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* I asked him to edit).

He could have written precious, experimental works published by small presses and enjoyed by a chosen few. For example, Janice Galloway's *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* (1989) is a brilliant dramatization of one of Wallace's signature themes (depression), but its experimental format limited its audience. With his background in mathematics he would have excelled at the rule-based fictions generated by the OuLiPo group, and in all likelihood could have produced something like Georges Perec's *Life A User's Manual* (1978). Wallace's brilliant solution was to craft shiny new fiction that would attract the big New York publishers, appeal to a wide range of readers, yet display the kind of intellectual rigor and formal innovation that should make the cognoscenti think.

Post-postmodernism could be as brainy as postmodernism but draw its materials from pop culture rather than (or in addition to) high culture. It could leave irony to older writers who still found it a potent weapon (Gaddis, Sorrentino) and revive the compassion readers once felt for characters in novels. It could explore a wider variety of formal approaches—short fictions made up of one half of an interview, a therapy session, a dictionary entry—in a wider variety of narrative voices. Wallace's two novels were literally forward-looking, both ostensibly set a dozen or so years in the future but dramatizing what we were likely to become if we continue living the way we do now. His superb nonfiction pieces built on the New Journalism of Wolfe and Thompson and added features from fiction and academic criticism. As Pound urged, he made it new.

His innovations and novelties were not mere showpieces but techniques applied to the somewhat old-fashioned purpose of making the reader *feel*. After postmodernists and their critics demolished the grand narratives that had sustained Western culture for thousands of years, Wallace perfectly captured the disorientation, ennui, and bone-deep sadness of a generation not so much "incredulous toward metanarratives" (as Lyotard put it) as unaware there had ever been such a thing. He did it in meticulously crafted language that echoed and parodied the new lexicon of post-postmodernism, a kind of slacker mandarin (as I put it in my review of *Infinite Jest*) made up of slang, fractured syntax, corporate-speak, advertising lingo, political blather, self-help bromides, and post-industrial tech-talk, as well as the barely literate mumblings of junkies, drunks, and the poor. The maniacal detail, the lexicographer's precision, the footnotes, the willingness to unfurl sentences to Proustian lengths—all this made him a lord of language who not only captured the way modern America *sounds* in all its cacophony better than any of his contemporaries, but whose stylistic versatility is the equal of anyone in literature—Joyce, Rabelais, whoever.

Unfortunately, this mastery of art and language was not enough to keep his personal demons at bay. Wallace wrote his suicide note a decade ago in the opening lines of one of his stories: "The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror."

Like Hamlet, he had a fatal tendency to overthink everything. Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince. 3

Steven Moore is the author and editor of several books and essays on contemporary literature. As former manager of the Review of Contemporary Fiction, he commissioned several essays from Wallace. See also his online essay, "The First Draft Version of Infinite Jest," at http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/tj_first.htm

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By Dave Eggers

Since Dave's passing I've been unable in any way to summarize his life. My sister took her own life eight years ago and I will say that I don't understand it any better now than I did then. So I hope to offer some comfort to all of you reading this collection of tributes by saying that if you haven't made peace with the way Dave Wallace left this world, you're not alone. And if it doesn't make sense now it may never make sense. But there is strange but enduring comfort, I think, in knowing a question has no answer.

In any case, we can brighten the corners of this dark house with our memories. So here are a few.

A few weeks ago, I was going through some old boxes in storage and in the thick of one I saw the corner of an envelope, postmarked 1998, with the return address Rural Route 2, Box 361, Bloomington, IL. I uncovered it more to reveal the name on this address was David F. Wallace. It was on one of those pre-printed return-address labels you get free in the mail. There were two little Christmas flowers in the corner.

I come from Illinois, and went to school in Champaign-Urbana, so it shouldn't have been so exotic to me, but this was the first time I'd seen "Rural Route" on any kind of address. It was fascinating then, thinking of this writer, already a giant back then in 1998, getting his mail at RR 2, Box 361. He must have kept that unimproveably prosaic address for 10 years. It seemed then and has always proven a testament to, for lack of a better word, Dave Wallace's unshakeable realness.

The envelope was empty, but I remember that inside had been a check he'd sent to *McSweeney's*. I had written to him before the magazine's first issue, asking for any unpublished material he might have, and he sent us not only a story, but a check, too. It was our first donation. I know he did this for many other small magazines, too—he sent them work even before they published their first issue, and he sent them money, too. He was a true and egalitarian booster of the printed word, on every scale.

I never did get to know Dave all that well. We were professional friends, you'd have to say, and most of our contact was through the U.S. postal service. Usually I would write to him asking for help or advice, and he would promptly provide, in 7-point-type, help and advice. It was only in the last few years that we exchanged a few emails. And after his passing I couldn't remember his email address. I wanted to reread anything he had written but he had one of those addresses that wasn't simple, like DaveWallace@pomona.com.

4 And just a few days ago, I was searching through my back email for an unrelated message, and I typed the letters “cap” in my search function. And I came upon the email address “ocapmycap@comcast.com.” I opened the email and realized it was from Dave Wallace.

His email was a perfect microcosm of everything we loved about the man. It begins like this:

“I am fighting with my dog as I write this. His teeth are in my knee. He just has these spells. Hang on ... OK that wasn’t pretty, but I won. Again.”

In the email, he was granting my high school students permission to reprint his beautiful commencement address at Kenyon College, he was insisting on receiving no payment for the rights, and he was looking forward to a week or so in Capri, where he would be making a rare appearance at a literary festival. “If you’ll be anywhere near Naples at the end of the month,” he wrote, “you should jet ski over or something.”

Back to the email address. People of our generation might know the reference in the email address best from *Dead Poets Society*. In that movie, a cherished and inspirational teacher has to leave his students unexpectedly but permanently. In protest of his premature departure, his students stand on their desks and yell “Oh Captain my captain!”

It’s the title of a poem by Walt Whitman. *O Captain! My Captain!* was written after the death of Abraham Lincoln, and though much of it is too morbid to reprint in this context, there are a few lines, cobbled together below, that seem appropriate to the place we find ourselves—missing David Wallace, another great man from Illinois, a man of great and abiding decency who taught many so much.

O CAPTAIN! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;

The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won ...

In Memoriam

By Kathleen Fitzpatrick

I spent several days after getting the news trying to process my grief over the loss of my colleague Dave Wallace, trying to imagine saying something even remotely significant about it. The phrase “words fail me” had never seemed quite so appropriate; the thing that I felt those days—and still feel—felt quite literally impossible to say.

But I wanted to try, if for no other reason than that I felt I owed it to him: so much of his life was devoted to trying to find ways to say the unsayable, to communicate a pain that simply cannot be communicated, to find a way inside something that won’t let you in, and to share what’s in there with the outside when the in-there won’t let you out.

Dave was, in multiple ways, my culture hero—the single person whose creative work meant more to me than any other. His writing, both the fiction and the essays, represented for me the first really successful attempt to meld the pyrotechnic postmodern gamesmanship that I adored with something more—something real, heartfelt, and vitally important—something, if you’ll forgive the truism, deeply human. This is what I was attempting to convey to the reporter from the *New York Times* who wrote the first obituary they published: that while his work got described as ironic, it never used irony as a self-protective gesture, a mode of maintaining a pose of disaffection or distance from genuine emotions. Rather, his writing was always brave enough to wallow in the muck of real human life, with all its ugliness and pain. And it’s that bravery that made his work stand out for me—while his work had all the stylistic panache and uproarious humor and analytical savvy of the best of postmodern fiction, it also taught me, in a way that the work of no other postmodernist ever could, something about what it is to live.

I developed an unbelievably sappy intellectual crush on Dave when I was working on my dissertation, the project that later turned into *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, when one of my friends handed me a copy of “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” Though I disagreed with (and still do) his reading of the Most Photographed Barn in America scene in *White Noise*, the essay struck me then, and still strikes me now, as being exactly right—that if there is a danger presented to contemporary novelists by television, it has nothing to do with the usual fears of couch-potatodome and the disappearance of the reading public. Instead, it’s the distance that some modes of television work to create between people and their emotions, a hip, knowing, safe ironic distance that allows us to watch and sneer at the same time. Dave understood this kind of distance to be corrosive to the project of fiction writing, and said at the close of that essay that

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of “anti-rebels,” born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction.¹

And this, for me, was the genius of Dave’s work—and the genius of his life at Pomona. His commitment to his students here was entirely composed of those single-entendre

- 6 values, a determination to really know them, to treat them as actual people whose struggles were every bit as real as his own. But he also had the respect for them that led him to refuse them the easy way out, to forbid any laziness in their expression, to force them to wrestle with their sentences with the same ferocity that he did.

Dave was my hero, and I had for six years the unimaginable privilege of working with him. In the English department's meeting, back in 2000, during which we first discussed our desires for the new endowed chair we'd been given, I tentatively floated the idea that the kind of writer I most wanted us to hire was someone like David Foster Wallace—someone in the midst of a formidable career, someone with a range of writing that would clearly translate into a range of teaching that would enrich the life of the department and the lives of our students.

Sometimes the universe hears your wishes, however briefly.

But during these six years, I never told Dave what his work meant to me, primarily out of the certainty that it would have pained him far more to hear it than not. As I wrote on my blog several years back, a significant percentage of my collegial relationship with Dave was founded on not-saying, on the polite fiction that, for instance, he didn't know I was teaching his work, and that I didn't know that he knew, a fiction necessary for both of us to avoid being mired in a kind of useless, paralytic self-consciousness.

I wish now that that hadn't been so, but it was. I wish we were going to get the chance to finish the conversation we'd started about *The Wire*. I wish that he were going to be able to help the department think through the transformations it'll be undergoing in the next few years. I wish that I were going to be able to work with many, many more students over the years who've been transformed by his classes. And I wish, utterly selfishly, that I were going to get the opportunity to read more of his work for the first time.

But I'm grateful for having had the privilege of those conversations, those students, that collegiality, and that work for as long as I did. And I've been grateful to see, over the weeks since, the enormity of the response to his death—the sheer number of lives that his work not only touched but changed. The evidence—as if it were needed—that the unflinching courage that meant so much to me meant that much to others as well.

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Note

1. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2 (Summer 1993), 192–93.

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A Gesture Toward Understanding David Foster Wallace

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By Marshall Boswell

The title of my book, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, was not my title. The title was preordained by the conventions of the University of South Carolina Press's Understanding Contemporary American Literature series, of which my book is a part. I do not presume to understand David Foster Wallace at all. I can only make gestures toward understanding his fiction, using the tools of literary interpretation as I have ineptly mastered them. A better, more precise title might be, "A Guarded and by No Means Complete Attempt to Understand and Interpret David Foster Wallace's Fiction to Date, with Particular Attention Paid to Positioning that Fiction Within the Context of Post-War Experimental Fiction of High Distinction," a title which, of course, sounds like an essay by David Foster Wallace, whom I never met. We did have a brief correspondence, however, which I cherish. As I approached the end of my book, I realized I still had some holes in my research, and so wrote him an embarrassed letter asking if he would be willing to answer a few questions regarding his biography and his work. Rather than write me back, Wallace returned my original letter with his answers included as handwritten footnotes scrawled in fat red felt-tip ink. At least once a year, a student of mine will pick up *Infinite Jest*, become utterly obsessed, and show up, sleep-deprived, in my office, looking less for guidance than for a fellow traveler in Wallace's intricate grottoes. My rule of thumb is that any student who makes it past page 550 in the novel gets to see the letter. The phrase "a sense of wonder" fairly describes what many of those students experience when they look at the gray piece of Rhodes College letterhead and take in the fact that the sloppy and utterly unprepossessing handwriting they're looking at belongs to the man who wrote the book that is indelibly transforming the way they view the world.

I originally planned to write no such letter. I did not want to bother David Foster Wallace with my book, because it wasn't about him at all. Years earlier I had written an obsessive dissertation on John Updike's "Rabbit" novels and, as I neared the final draft, my dissertation advisor urged me to write Updike directly to request an interview of no more than an hour or two, the transcript of which I would include as an appendix. I did as I was told, and Updike wrote me back an angry dismissal—"You must think I have nothing else to do" was the key phrase, as I recall—yet he also added something at the end of that note that has remained with me still. "In general," Updike concluded, "I think scholarly workers should treat me as if I were purely a research, and not an interview, subject." He's right, of course. For although Wallace was much more gracious in his reply to my even more tentative request for information from the author of the work I was studying, he was nevertheless equally reluctant to turn himself into the subject of my book. It's about the fiction, was the message he cagily tried to impart. The fiction is for *you* to read and make sense of. It's not about me at all.

In his moving eulogy to Wallace published in the 21 September 2008 edition of *The New York Times Book Review*, A. O. Scott eloquently describes Wallace's distinctive literary voice as "the voice in your own head." Scott is absolutely correct, of course, but in a very technical sense that bears exploring. As *Infinite Jest* reaches its shattering

- 8 conclusion, Don Gately is found mute and supine on his back, in tremendous pain, and heroically refusing any form of pharmacological relief. Soon, Gately's interior is visited by a spectral conversational "wraith" who listens to Gately's thoughts, occasionally pushes up his glasses, and replies back in a voice that is partly his own and partly Gately's. "The wraith," Wallace writes, "could empathize totally." What's more, the "wraith could move at the speed of quanta and be anywhere anytime and hear in symphonic toto the thoughts of animate men, but it couldn't ordinarily affect anybody or anything solid, and it could never speak right to anybody, a wraith had no out-loud voice of its own, and had to use somebody's like internal brain-voice if it wanted to try to communicate something, which was why thoughts and insights that were coming from some wraith always just sound like your own thoughts, from inside your own head, if a wraith's trying to interface with you." That's on page 831, if you missed it first time around. My point is that the wraith is, in many respects, the personification of Wallace's literary voice. It is a concrete analogue for Wallace's trace presence in his own texts. Not to be confused with Wallace the man. *Emphatically* not to be confused with Wallace the man.

In "Self-Reliance," Emerson declares, "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty." As is typical with his work, Wallace takes that Emersonian formulation and turns it on its head. For if our own thinking is indeed his work's primary target—and one should recall here Wallace's key artistic doppelgänger, the stalled writer and archery champion Mark Nechtr from "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" in *Girl with Curious Hair*—then the moral purpose of that work is to save us from our majestic alienation. What makes Wallace's fiction so important and formative in the ongoing sweep of postwar literary history is the extraordinarily resourceful and original way it goes about achieving this paradoxical end. As I point out at probably too much length in my book, it achieves this end by using postmodernist self-reflexivity and poststructuralist textuality against itself. If, as Wallace concedes, there is no way from the text to the world outside the text—that is, if the literary text is always already an alienated, self-referencing artifact—then what is required is a narrative method that will invoke certain cherished emotions—kindness, empathy, wonder, love—in such a way that they remain in the world, rather than in the text itself. And the world outside Wallace's books is always the reader's interior. Hence Wallace's work is not simply hyper-self-aware. It is also self-aware about its own self-awareness, and self-aware about *that* double self-awareness, etcetera etcetera ad infinitum. And as the layers of self-awareness replicate, what emerges as a by-product of this endlessly enfolding self-consciousness is precisely what the work refuses to subject to its own relentless intellectual analysis—namely, those "single entendre principles" he speaks of in "E Unibus Pluram," or what Hal Incandenza calls "goosey sentiment." And because these "single entendre principles" are *felt* by the reader rather than articulated by the writer, they remain vital and alive.

That residue feeling of empathetic connection is what the Wallace wraith in our heads offers us when we read his work. Nothing accidental about it, at all. As he told Larry McCaffery back in 1993, "This is the way Barthian and Derridean post-structuralism'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." I cannot begin to imagine the misery the real David Foster Wallace must have experienced when he took his life, but I know that puncture of pain I feel when I think of that misery is in many ways more acute because my own alienated self has been punctured, opened, and made more empathetic to the pain of others as a direct result of David Foster Wallace's texts coming to life through me, as a reader. That was true before 12 September 2008, and it is no less true now. If you don't believe me, put down this journal and go read something of his—a story, a cherished chunk of *Infinite Jest*, one of the essays. You'll see what I mean. The Wallace wraith is alive and well in those books, ready to push his glasses up his nose and listen to you read your own thoughts even as he speaks to you in your own voice. That is the buried treasure that lies at the innermost interior of Wallace's best work. It his selfless gift to us, his readers. The only thing that has changed is that the gift is now more precious than ever.

Marshall Boswell is the T. K. Young Professor of English at Rhodes College. He is the author of John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion (Missouri, 2001) and Understanding David Foster Wallace (South Carolina, 2003).

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Everything No More

By Michael North

Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞ is almost certainly the least read of David Foster Wallace's seven books. Though it seems to have sold well enough when it was published in 2003, the reviews, even those determined to be kind, were cruel, and it has not been discussed much in the articles and obituaries following his recent death. Nonetheless, *Everything and More* has an obvious claim on the attention of anyone interested in Wallace and his work, all the more so now that it has retrospectively become his last full-length book.

Everything and More was the second in a series that assigned contemporary writers, mostly novelists, to write about important scientific discoveries. The discovery in this case is apparently the transfinite mathematics of Georg Cantor, but the first 236 pages of this 319 page book are taken up with an elaborate history of mathematical analysis before Cantor, in which the lack of "a coherent theory of ∞ " is the central obstacle to be overcome.¹ Though Wallace lightheartedly accepts the label "pop science" for this work, which he insists on calling a "booklet" even though it is a dense and substantial book, he doesn't actually seem very comfortable with the compromises entailed by the genre. In fact, Wallace's own plight as an author without much authority leading a sub-competent audience is such an overt feature of this book that one is forced to wonder why he accepted the assignment.

10 One answer that Wallace offers himself is that he finds the math beautiful. By this he means that it is clear, precise, and bound by obvious rules, and in this he confesses that there is a certain kind of ethical interest behind his work. But transfinite math also has an obvious transcendental quality that raises this ethical interest very nearly to the point at which it would become religious. For Wallace, Cantor's heroism consists in bringing order and precision to the very largest and most unbounded of all abstractions, infinity, without reducing it one iota in size. Unlike Alain Badiou, who has based his expansive philosophical project on the axiomatic set theory that follows Cantor, Wallace does very little to apply this math to anything outside the world of numbers, and yet the relevance of it to his own work at least is obvious. *Everything and More* is really Wallace's second book about infinity and as such it seems to offer a very useful perspective on its predecessor, *Infinite Jest*, and thus on Wallace's place in the history of modern fiction.

The two books actually touch at a single point, the word "diagnate," which is used in *Infinite Jest* to describe the beauty of tennis.² Apparently Wallace's own coinage, "diagnate" gestures toward Cantor's diagonal method, an ingenious numerical proof by which he is able to show that there must be a set of numbers larger than that of the natural numbers and therefore uncountable. In one way, Cantor extends infinity itself by showing that there is always a larger number set, for any infinite set we might want to try. In another way, he makes it possible to deal with infinity, to work with it, as it were, to compute and compare what might otherwise seem unimaginably abstract quantities. For Wallace, as coincidentally for Badiou, Cantor's math helps to make infinity thinkable and thus to reduce the intellectual and ethical paralysis it can induce. That there are infinite points of view, for example, need not mean that assertion is impossible. That time and art both go on apparently forever does not necessarily mean that we have no choice but simply to suffer their variations. Insofar as it is a history of attempts to get a handle on infinity, *Everything and More* is more than just a belated philosophical introduction to *Infinite Jest*; it is also a heavyweight attack on the problems left by postmodernism, and a precise indication of where and how Wallace's concerns diverge from those of his predecessors.

Despite Wallace's vociferous insistence on the math itself, there is also a personal side to this jousting with infinity, one that seems more obvious now that Wallace's suicide has called into question the title of *Everything and More*. A fair number of the early pages of this book are devoted to the familiar topic of Zeno's paradoxes, those popular mindbenders that show, for instance, that it's impossible to cross the street because you must first cover half the distance, and then half of the remainder, and then half of that, and so on. The goal of mathematical analysis, in Wallace's account, is to conquer the mental paralysis caused by these paradoxes. The language itself often shows how much is at stake: the relation between Weierstrass's infinitesimals and Zeno's paradoxes is compared at one point to that between "chemo and cancer" (E, 144). In purely mathematical terms, Zeno represents a bad infinity, unbounded and thus overwhelming. In the somewhat larger terms that Wallace slips into his account from time to time, Zeno represents "the crevasse of self-reference" (E, 276), and it is significant how different his feelings are about the infinite regress that used to bring such joy to

experimental fiction. This opposition is based on principle and not on mere feeling, but it is also impossible to miss the feeling, because Wallace continually interrupts his account with personal asides, illustrative anecdotes, in which the paralysis caused by Zeno's paradoxes, that sense of infinite finitude, leads to an actual inability to cross the street, or even to get out of bed. Zeno's bad infinity, in other words, becomes a figure for depression.

In an extra-mathematical sense, then, *Everything and More* is about humankind's attempts to think its way out of the dead-end of introspective thought, which may be one reason why Cantor's mental illness is such a radioactive topic for Wallace that Cantor himself almost disappears from the book. In Wallace's account, the irony of that story is decisively separated from the triumphs of transfinite mathematics. Though Cantor dies in confinement, math itself "continues to get out of bed" (E, 305). And yet this irony is not really suppressed but returns at the level of style. Organizationally, *Everything and More* is quintessential Wallace, which is to say that it is digressive in the extreme. There are, of course, footnotes, 408 of them to be exact. In addition, there are numerous sections marked IYI, for If You're Interested. These are supposedly optional, but there are gradations, so that some are semi-IYI and some really necessary to the argument. There are also various interpolations, marked and titled as such, some emergency glossaries, and a number of minor "time-jumps" and "hiccups" that involve fast-forwarding or rewinding the narrative.

Part of what Wallace is trying to accomplish with all this paraphernalia is to gesture toward the actual complexity of matters that he cannot fully explain. The involutions, repetitions, digressions, qualifications, and so on that make up the text build up a stylistic figuration of infinity itself. In some sense, it seems there is a calculated paradox here, one also operative in some of Wallace's other prose writings, whereby the desire to be clear and precise generates a structure that is dizzying in its complexity. In Wallace's work, this paradox is not meant to carry the usual corrosive irony but rather to function as a real demonstration of how hard it is to work toward the truth. The organization demonstrates the sweat-inducing difficulty of making a finite text stretch over an infinite and infinitely variable reality.

Even so, it is hard to miss the resemblance between Wallace's ever-proliferating, endlessly self-qualifying style and the very paradoxes he has set out to confute. As a concept, infinity has a certain appeal to the Buzz Lightyear in all of us, an appeal that Wallace exploits in the title of his book, which suggests an extensiveness that always opens up another vista beyond itself. In its style, though, *Everything and More* shows how brutally that concept, or any concept for that matter, returns thought to its own first bases. What starts in the desire to transcend the personal limits of thought ends up tunneling deeper and deeper into them, simply because thought is the only mechanism that can work on itself. The infinity thus opened up is an intensive one, getting smaller and smaller, the endlessness of which looks a lot like stasis.

At its best, Wallace's work pursues the infinite in both directions, endlessly extending itself and endlessly tunneling into itself at the same time, and what it wants to show in this way is that the intensive infinity to be found within the process of introspection, of writing and reflection itself, is every bit as large as the one we imagine at

- 12 the ends of the cosmos. What makes rereading *Everything and More* at this point a sobering task is the hints it now seems to contain that for Wallace believing this was not enough, that the ability of mathematics to “get out of bed,” which is after all the ability of thought itself to get out of bed, did not help him in the end. At some point, for writers, for readers, for everybody, there isn’t any more anymore. It’s at this point, trying to balance infinite promise against the fact of finitude, that it becomes almost impossible to do the math.

Michael North teaches at UCLA. His new book is Machine-Age Comedy (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Notes

1. David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* (New York: Norton, 2003), 145. Henceforth abbreviated *E*.

2. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1996), 82.

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***Infinite Jest* and the Twentieth Century: David Foster Wallace’s Legacy**

By Stephen J. Burn

David Foster Wallace’s fiction is full of ghosts who have fallen out of time. In “Good Old Neon” (2004), a character returns from death to tell the reader how “I kill myself” and reveal “what happens immediately after a person dies.” The secret he reveals is that the “one-after-the-other temporal ordering” of life ceases after death.¹ In *Infinite Jest* (1996), the shade of another suicide stalks the novel’s dark night and explains that “death was just everything outside you getting really slow.”² The frequency with which ghosts haunt these books tells us something about Wallace’s belief in a temporal economy, and, in fact, the way time is trisected into past, present, and future provided one of Wallace’s great themes. Whatever counterfactuality characterizes the world of Wallace’s novels comes from the deflecting of *The Broom of the System* (1987) and *Infinite Jest*’s chronologies into the near future, but the larger architecture of the books—and the core of Wallace’s explorations—always hinged upon the continuity of time past into time future. Wallace’s ghosts represent the culmination of this exploration. The dead speak to us, these ghost-haunted novels insist. They continue to shape our thoughts and actions. As if fulfilling a grim prophecy, on 12 September, Wallace ended his journey through time and ensured that he would now only speak to us through his work from beyond the grave.

The body of work that Wallace leaves behind him is remarkably eclectic. Ranging from transfinite mathematics through radically concise short fiction to encyclopedic excess, his books bespeak both an intellectual restlessness and a versatility that is unmatched by any other living writer. Equally remarkable is the extent of his influence. Despite only publishing two novels, the imprint of Wallace’s fiction nevertheless circulates through the bloodstream of American fiction. As genealogies of the end of

postmodernism begin to be written, this influence is likely to rest upon his dialogue with self-referential postmodernism—especially as explored in his essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” and stories such as “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” and “Octet”—as well as upon the virtuoso performance of *Infinite Jest*. A 1079-page journey into the maelstrom of the modern self, *Infinite Jest* will continue to speak to readers because of the strength and invention of its sentences, because of its extravagant humor, and because of the secrets it keeps.

But in trying to estimate the significance of Wallace’s work, I would like to consider *Infinite Jest*’s importance in relation to its ancestor texts: the encyclopedic novels of modernism and postmodernism. Much of this investigation hinges on exploring affinities or highlighting Wallace’s technical innovations. But fundamentally, this is an effort to try to bring into focus the way that intertextual allusion represents a mode of communication in Wallace’s work. In June 1992, Wallace wrote to novelist Don DeLillo for the first time, telling him that “a lot of your voices and constructions . . . hang around in my head and get mixed up with other experiences and ideas and voices.” When Wallace didn’t deliberately excise DeLillo’s influence, he said the allusions represented “the sincerest form of compliment I’m capable of.”³ Despite the indelible originality of much of Wallace’s work, the way he encoded allusive “compliments” into his work is a critical element of the legacy he leaves to the encyclopedic novel.

Infinite Jest is a coordinate in late-twentieth-century literary history where encyclopedic modernism and postmodernism converge to look forward to what the novel calls the “‘post-post’-modern” (*IJ*, 142). The novel represents a culmination of reading and theorizing about contemporary fiction, and many of the signposts along that journey seem to have been written into Wallace’s work during the period. Throughout the first half of the 1990s, Wallace seemed to be drawn to the imaginative potential of revisiting modernism in general, and James Joyce’s work in particular. In his 1991 fiction, “Order and Flux in Northampton,” for instance, Wallace focused in part upon a doctoral candidate writing “an exhaustive study of Stephen Dedalus’s sublimated oedipal necrophilia vis à vis Mrs. D. in *Ulysses*.”⁴ Appropriately enough, the story features a “Reproduction Technician” (“Order,” 91), and as the plot incidents circle around the day before Bloomsday, the story reproduces *Ulysses*’s parallactic shifts and incorporates allusions to “Oxen of the Sun” before engineering a multiple climax modeled upon “Wandering Rocks.” The pattern of “Wandering Rocks”—where the movements of multiple characters within a limited geographic grid either intersect or come close to intersecting—also provides the template for *Infinite Jest*, though the novel’s architecture seems calculated to highlight multiple parallels to *Ulysses*.

As the title of *Infinite Jest* indicates, Wallace’s novel shares with *Ulysses* a desire to rework the outlines of *Hamlet*, and it also uses its scalar shifts to suggest larger mythical resonances to its action. Like Joyce’s punning “met him pike hoses,” Wallace’s character “Madame Psychosis” provides one of the hints that *Infinite Jest* should be read in terms of the mythic parallels it establishes, as characters unwittingly recast Greek myths or re-enact the festivals of the dead recorded by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890–1922). The movement between characters also suggests the Joycean example. For all its “Wandering Rocks”-style dispersion, *Infinite Jest* is essentially organized

- 14 around two overarching narratives that balance a youthful prodigy who has problematic relations with his father, opposite an older man who is less educated but more humane. In both books, the author begins by showcasing the prodigy but ultimately moves toward the older figure, leaving at the book's end the young man isolated in the loneliness of his own talent.

The engine of the novel, then, seems designed to pay homage to the Joycean template, and Wallace makes his heritage explicit—twice repeating Mulligan's famous compound “scrotum-tightening” (*IJ*, 112, 605); professing an interest in “telemachry” (*IJ*, 249); and setting a tall, sometime-alcoholic ghost named James to shape the words his characters use. These calculated parallels and allusions are part of Wallace's attempt to imprint his novelistic genealogy into his novel, but the affinities between Joyce and Wallace cannot be contained in a simple list of overlaps. The two connect on a deeper level in terms of their approach to language. Like Joyce, Wallace seemed to have had a prose range that could move elastically between different registers. On one level Wallace thrived on opportunities to pinpoint the sensuous immediacy of quotidian experience. In *Infinite Jest*, he takes evident delight in mimicking the sound of a Seven-Up can being opened (“SPFFFT”) and then gulped down by a greedy eleven-year old (“SHULGSHULGSPAHHH”) (*IJ*, 28). Yet, on another level, Wallace's prose consistently reaches toward poetic qualities, stressing its aural aspect. In “Order and Flux,” for instance, a list-like sentence alliteratively describes “the tender meat of red toes, the toes taking turns at self-harm, swelling, shining” (“Order,” 98). Elsewhere in the same story, he moves through a long series of o-sounds, before running together paired e's and a's: “the reverend foretold the world's cold and imminent end,” noting “among other portents: poor nutrition and its attendant moral and dental decay” (“Order,” 94). While critics have made much of Wallace's tentacular sentences and vertiginous vocabulary, the rhythmic pulse of his writing deserves wider appreciation as critics assess the total body of his work.

Allusions to Joyce are palpable in the later work, too. One of the questions rehearsed by *Oblivion's* “The Suffering Channel,” for instance, is effectively the question posed by Stephen as he outlines his esthetic theory near the end of *Portrait of the Artist*: “*Can excrement ... be a work of art? If not, why not?*”⁵ But the form of *Portrait* also points toward *Infinite Jest's* dialogue with postmodernism. Joyce's first novel famously begins in the third person and ends in the first person, a perspectival shift calculated to amplify Stephen's emerging status as an individual. *Infinite Jest* reverses this pattern. The novel's first word identifies a confident “I,” calmly mapping the world around the narrator, but by the time the reader reaches the end of the novel proper (excluding footnotes), the narrative is filtered through a disorientated third-person lens. As if this drift away from the discrete individual isn't clear enough, the final endnote of the novel reads simply “Talwin-NX—®Sanofi Winthrop U.S.” (*IJ*, 1079 n.388). Human agency is axed away as the novel remorselessly moves from the personal, to the impersonal, to the corporation.

Inverting Joyce, this trajectory recalls works such as William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955) and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), novels that trace the eclipse of the individual in a postmodern world. Yet Wallace seems to have been deeply ambiva-

lent about the bandwidth of the postmodern novel. He evidently revered DeLillo, and in 1992 planned to edit a special issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* on DeLillo that he hoped would include contributions by Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, Mark Leyner, William T. Vollmann, and Susan Daitch. Pynchon provoked more caution, and while Wallace admired *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* (1997), his estimate of *Vineland* (1990) was significantly less effusive. Without wanting to flatten the nuanced distinctions Wallace certainly made between different writers, at the core of his suspicion of postmodern fiction was his belief that—after metafictional techniques had been coopted by television—self-referring forms no longer served to remind the reader of a vital dialogue between author and reader. Instead, Wallace saw self-reflexivity as a mode of self-promotion that edged fiction toward solipsism. In “Octet” (1999), he emphasizes this point, arguing that the supposed honesty of the metafictional author who is “respectful enough of you as reader/audience” to acknowledge “that he’s back there pulling the strings” is in reality “an ‘honesty’ which personally you’ve always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that’s designed to get you to like him and approve of him.”⁶

These reservations about metafiction do not, of course, mean Wallace retreated to a naïve belief in language as a mirror of reality. Often he sought to employ metafictional techniques against themselves to break this narcissistic spiral. But the emphasis on fiction as a struggle to establish honest communication between reader and author that Wallace articulates in his critique of metafiction offers a good way to think about his allusive technique. William Gaddis—whose novels, *The Recognitions* and *A Frolic of His Own* (1994), were included on some of Wallace’s syllabi—is worth considering here.

Gaddis is a pivotal figure in the development of the encyclopedic novel across the twentieth century. Permeated by T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), his first novel, *The Recognitions*, forms a vital link between modernism and postmodernism, and, on a technical level, Wallace seems to have learned much from his example. Gaddis’s fiction—especially his later fiction—is crafted from a kind of collage of different texts and voices, and relies on the narrative energy of its dialogue to drive the book forward. Taking modernist impersonality to a new level, for long stretches this dialogue is presented without the usual signposts of the realist novel—the “he” and “she saids”—providing Gaddis with a wonderfully economic technique where speech rapidly implies the stage directions (gesture, spatial relations, dress) traditionally offered by a laborious narrator, as in this scene from *J R* (1975):

—Oh you frightened me! what are you doing there ...
 —I was just, just making a call I ...
 —But why are you making it hiding back there? and what, what on earth are you wearing ...⁷

This technique is relevant to *Infinite Jest* not just because Wallace regularly employs a similar approach to dialogue in his fiction. It is also significant because a variation Gaddis employs very rarely becomes central to Wallace’s dialogue. On just a handful of occasions in *The Recognitions*, Gaddis enters a blank line of dialogue to indicate the intrusion of something nonverbal—perhaps a look of incomprehension or distaste—into

- 16 the verbal exchange. Near the end of *The Recognitions*, for instance, Gaddis shows his diffident protagonist Wyatt (now called Stephan) in terse conversation with a forger:

—You're not a bum.
—...
—Stephan.
—What?⁸

In Gaddis's work this technique rarely appears in his novelistic toolkit. In Wallace's work it becomes much more central. Near the start of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace shows two of the Incandenza brothers in conversation:

"You're talking about since Himself passed away."
"..."
"See? You never say."
"I do too say. I just did."
"..."
"I just didn't happen to say what you wanted to hear, Booboo, is all."
"..."
"There's a difference." (*IJ*, 40–41)

Sometimes Wallace even dramatizes moments where a supposed dialogue ends not with words, but with an exchange of loaded looks. Later in the novel Wallace shows two characters talking at a halfway house for recovering addicts:

"Why are you even up, [you] don't have to work."
"..."
"..." (*IJ*, 533)⁹

On one level, the relative abundance of blank dialogue in Wallace's fiction is indicative of how much more likely his characters are—in comparison to most fictional figures—to respond physically to the verbal, or to look silently in disbelief at each other. Yet on a deeper level, this technique seems an extension and an amplification of his distrust of metafiction. If self-reflexivity abused the reader's trust in the service of a writer's self-indulgence, then Wallace's fiction tried to escape this solitary pleasure. The relationship between reader and writer is analogous to the relationship in dialogue between listener and speaker, and Wallace's dialogue strives to acknowledge and dramatize the role of the silent partner. It strives to empathetically register that through any monologue (or monograph) the listener/reader may be punctuating the performance with grimaces, puzzled looks, or smiles. In short, Wallace agonized over the writer's responsibility to effect something closer to a symbiotic relationship with the reader.

This provides another clue to Wallace's influence. These obsessive efforts to connect with the reader presumably helped shape Jonathan Franzen's essay, "Mr. Difficult" (2002). Wallace and Franzen were close friends who communicated and argued about fiction throughout the 1990s, and the distinction in Franzen's essay—between "sta-

tus” writers, who strove to create historically-important “Art” without concern for the reader, and “contract” writers who wanted to establish a pleasure-filled compact with the reader—reads like a somewhat more populist version of Wallace’s theorizing. But regardless of its impact on other writers, for Wallace, himself, this perhaps impossible struggle to inflect the imaginative space of a novel so that it establishes an authentic reciprocity between reader and writer turns out to be fundamentally connected to both the network of allusions and plot of *Infinite Jest*.

While early estimates of *Infinite Jest* criticized its length and erudition as an example of authorial self-indulgence—an excuse for Wallace to “show off his remarkable skills as a writer and empty the contents of his restless mind”—much of the tissue of allusion that lies over—and expands—Wallace’s prose is linked to his desire to make writing a dialogue.¹⁰ That is, instead of operating centripetally, pointing inward to the gifted writer, the allusions function centrifugally, pointing outward to the world around the book. It is impossible to catalogue comprehensively the full spectrum of the novel’s allusions here, but some of the dialogues instigated by the novel seem intensely personal, engaging, for instance, with the philosophical work of Wallace’s father. The America that *Infinite Jest* grew out of, Wallace told an interviewer, was one where “pleasure” had become “a value, a teleological end in itself.” In a culture that Wallace saw as increasingly defined by the hedonistic horizons of television, he questioned “to what end, this pleasure-giving?”¹¹ Yet in interrogating the ends that pleasure should lead to, Wallace engaged with philosophical questions that his father had mapped thirty years earlier. In “Pleasure as an End of Action” (1966), James D. Wallace’s argument intersects with numerous subjects that would be important to his son’s novel—including Platonic philosophy, and the thought-patterns fostered by addiction—and the core of the essay concerns a relationship that is also close to the heart of *Infinite Jest*: the relationship between freedom and desire. The elder Wallace’s essay considers the act of neglecting “one’s needs and obligations” in favor of pursuing pleasure for no end other than itself, as “paradigmatic of acting freely,” and, of course, the movie at the heart of the novel dramatizes exactly this situation.¹² The movie offers a pleasure so all-consuming that viewers lose “even basic survival-type will for anything other than more viewing” (*IJ*, 507), and the opportunity to watch the film is defended by Hugh Steeply in the novel as one of the “hazards of being free” (*IJ*, 320). But while the choice to watch or not to watch the movie seems to play out the father’s paradigm of free acts, a further paternal dimension is added to *Infinite Jest*’s investigation when Rémy Marathe counters Steeply’s conception of freedom by asking: “How to choose any but a child’s greedy choices if there is no loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose?” (*IJ*, 320).

While Wallace’s technique reaches outside the novel, the characters he dramatizes within *Infinite Jest* enact a parallel quest. In the first monologue spoken by one of his central characters, Hal Incandenza insists, “I read ... I study and read ... I do things like get in a taxi and say, ‘The library, and step on it’” (*IJ*, 12), and reading is an activity that an unusual number of his characters are involved in. But reading in Wallace’s books is rarely a solipsistic activity. Wallace used strategically-deployed allusions to show how reading returns the reader to the world, by showing how solitary reading

- 18 alters the way his characters behave socially. When one of the novel's tennis coaches, Gerhardt Schtitt, argues against linear approaches to sporting success by exclaiming, "straight ahead! Plow ahead! Go! This is myth ... they assume [in America] always the efficient way is to plow in straight" (*IJ*, 80), his pronouncement makes more sense if the reader catches the allusion to DeLillo's novel *End Zone* (1972). In this book about football and nuclear terror, one of DeLillo's coaches, Tweego, builds a philosophy around thinking "in one direction, straight ahead."¹³ Schtitt—like several other characters in *Infinite Jest*—seems to have read DeLillo's novel, and altered his beliefs on the basis of that reading.¹⁴ In a very similar fashion, when Hal's grandfather begins tennis coaching, his advice to a new player (Hal's father) is philosophical: "Son, you're a body, son. ... those thoughts in your mind are just the sound of your head revving, and head is still just body, Jim. ... Today, Lesson One out there, you become, for better or worse, Jim, a man. A player ... A machine in the ghost, to quote a phrase" (*IJ*, 159–60). As the mangled quote at the end of this lesson suggests, and as the insistence upon a physicalist explanation of consciousness confirms, Hal's grandfather has read Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949), where Ryle mocks Cartesian dualism as "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine."¹⁵ Wallace is dramatizing how reading once more is the foundation of action.

Wallace was arguably the most intellectually-gifted American writer of his generation—I can think of only Richard Powers as his equal in terms of raw neural talent—and his prose range was unparalleled. Yet despite his virtuosity, his work consistently and passionately argues for symbiotic connection, rather than self-involved self-promotion. The learning and scale of *Infinite Jest* offers an encyclopedic distillation of the twentieth century, but the book strives to use its erudite allusions to span outward from the novel—to trace Wallace's genealogy as a writer, to remind the reader of human connection, and to dramatize the way reading shapes behavior. Wallace's greatest bequest to the writers who come after him may lie in this systemic attempt to overcome the solipsism of metafiction. He reconceived the novel not as an isolated object, but as a node in a connectionist network, always striving to reach beyond itself.

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Notes

1. David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion* (London: Abacus, 2004), 143, 166.
2. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997 [1996]), 883. Henceforth abbreviated *IJ*.
3. David Foster Wallace, unpublished letter to Don DeLillo, 11 June 1992.
4. David Foster Wallace, "Order and Flux in Northampton," *Conjunctions* 17 (1991), 91. Henceforth abbreviated "Order."
5. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992 [1916]), 232.
6. David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Boston: Little, 1999), 125 n.2.
7. William Gaddis, *J R* (New York: Penguin, 1993 [1975]), 484.

8. William Gaddis, *The Recognitions* (New York: Penguin, 1993 [1955]), 798.
9. Cf. Gaddis, *The Recognitions*, 192.
10. Michiko Kakutani, "A Country Dying of Laughter. In 1079 Pages," in *New York Times* (13 February 1996), B2.
11. David Foster Wallace, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2 (1993), 129, 130.
12. James D. Wallace, "Pleasure as an End of Action," in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 3:4 (1966), 314.
13. Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (Boston: Houghton, 1972), 49.
14. I discuss the relationship between *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* in more detail in Stephen J. Burn, "The Machine-Language of the Muscles: Reading, Sport, and the Self in *Infinite Jest*," in *Upon Further Review: Essays on American Sports Literature*, eds. Michael Cocchiareale and Scott D. Emmert (Westport: Praeger-Greenwood, 2004), 41–50.
15. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000 [1949]), 17.

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Can We Say What We Mean?

By Brendan Beirne

Genius is not replicable. Inspiration, though, is contagious, and multiform—and even just to see, close up, power and aggression made vulnerable to beauty is to feel inspired and (in a fleeting, mortal way) reconciled.¹

One way to read the question posed in the title of this piece is as an elbow in the ribs to authors who would still indulge in postmodern metafictional hijinks at this date. Keith Cresser expressed the sentiment in his coda to the inaugural issue of the journal *n+1* averring that "it is time to say what you mean." In the wake of September 11, 2001, such pronouncements that irony had finally run its course were everywhere. But it also asks, "*can* we say what we mean?" Is such "straight talk" even possible? The difficulty, indeed the paradox, of saying what one means is delineated by the narrator of Wallace's story "Good Old Neon":

that many of the most important impressions and thoughts in a person's life are ones that flash through your head so fast that *fast* isn't even the right word, they seem totally different from or outside of the regular sequential clock time we all live by, and they have so little relation to the sort of linear, one-word-after-another-word English we all communicate with each other with that it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out the contents of one split-second's flash of thoughts and connection, etc.—and yet we all seem to go around trying to use English (or whatever language our native country happens to use, it goes without saying) to try to convey to other people what we're thinking and to find out what they're thinking, when in fact deep down everybody knows it's a charade and they're just going through the motions.²

I have always been intrigued by the divergent responses that David Foster Wallace has provoked in his readers. On the one hand, Wallace enjoyed a level of notoriety

20 that few authors ever achieve—*Infinite Jest* recruited a sizeable if somewhat irregular army of acolytes, his essay collections were commercially successful, and many of the foremost young authors of our day looked to him as a sort of *éminence grise*. Throw in a trio of appearances on Charlie Rose, and his status as a “Major American Author” would seem beyond dispute. And yet Wallace’s iconic status hasn’t quite translated into much serious engagement with his work. Twelve years after the publication of his monumental masterpiece, it is still relatively uncommon to find Wallace devotees within the academy, for instance. I suspect that this will change in the coming years, but it is worth asking why Wallace inspires the fervent allegiance of so many readers while earning exasperated shrugs from so many others.

In a recent appraisal, Madison Smartt Bell expresses the ambivalence that many feel toward Wallace’s fiction: “Everything he did was clearly brilliant, some of it was clearly charming, but some of it had an inhuman brilliance that may have cost him some readers It’s all electricity and not much blood.”²³ Bell follows the standard formula here: first, tip your hat to Wallace’s genius, then shake your head in regret that he didn’t use his preternatural gifts to elucidate matters of the human heart. While I think it takes a misreading of some proportion to produce the notion that Wallace writes like a bloodless automaton, it is a common one.

Debunking this view is a task for another day, though. The really staggering irony here is that Wallace levels this very charge against his own literary milieu time and again. One might even argue that it is Wallace’s central concern. Seeking an “explanation for our own lit’s thematic poverty,” he remarks that, “The big thing that makes Dostoevsky invaluable for American readers and writers is that he appears to possess degrees of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we—here, today—cannot or do not permit ourselves.”²⁴ This last phrase brings us back to the question posed in my title. Why is it, Wallace wants to know, that postmodern novelists seem largely indifferent to issues like love and loneliness, and tend only to approach them under the protective cloak of irony? And do their uses of recondite diction, fugal sentence structures, and metafictional plots betray an elitist disdain for the reader, sheer misanthropy, or both?

Wallace attempts an answer in his 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” a trenchant appraisal of the vexed interplay between technology and contemporary culture. The piece is something of a manifesto on why contemporary writers have become stuck in the rut of literary postmodernism, and how they might get out of it. At once engagingly precocious and deeply unnerving, “E Unibus Pluram” evinces an ambivalent disposition towards television akin to Sun-Tzu’s dictum that you should “Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer” (though Wallace would surely credit *The Godfather Part II* as the source of this koan-like conflation of paranoia and voyeurism). After an opening gambit that catalogues the alienating effects of television viewership (“Every lonely human I know watches way more than the average U.S. six hours per day”) and the easy but ultimately vacuous—because fake (or rather, self-consciously fake)—opportunities for “espial” which it affords fiction writers, Wallace admits his only slightly-abashed affection for the medium: “Existentialvoyeuristic conundra notwithstanding, there’s no denying the simple fact

that people in the U.S.A. watch so much television basically because it's fun. I know I watch for fun, most of the time"⁵ Except that television fun, Wallace observes, mostly consists of opportunities to "make fun"—of the stilted dialogue, the absurd premises, the predictable plots, and, most of all, the poor saps who are taken in by the dog and pony shows that make up standard prime time fare. Mere seeing is shouldered aside by seeing-through. Thus Wallace holds that today's televisual encounters are, from the start, implicated in a metafictional hermeneutic that is constitutive of our relationship to television rather than truly responsive to it.

... it may seem odd that so much of the pleasure my generation takes from television lies in making fun of it. But you have to remember that younger Americans grew up as much with people's disdain for TV as we did with TV itself It's fun, when a withered June Allyson comes on-screen for Depend Adult Undergarments and says "If you have a bladder-control problem, you're not alone," to hoot and shout back "Well chances are you're alone *quite a bit*, June!" ("EUP," 27)

Many viewers, especially those of us who take serious fiction seriously, are consoled by the notion that such jeering from the bleachers bespeaks a healthy, even redemptive mistrust of television. Yet it is precisely this disdain for television which allows us to rationalize endless hours in front of the screen watching insipid shows that we know are insipid. Our skepticism, we think, inoculates us from the contagions that infect more credulous viewers.⁶ Wallace insists that we let ourselves off the hook too easily when we believe in the efficacy of ironic distancing. Just when we think we are having fun with television, it turns out that television is having fun with us:

... television has become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it. It's not that charges of nonconnection have become untrue but that they've become deeply irrelevant. It's that any such connection has become otiose. Television used to point beyond itself. Those of us born in, say, the '60s were trained by television to look where it pointed, usually at versions of "real life" made prettier, sweeter, livelier by succumbing to a product or temptation. Today's mega-Audience is way better trained, and TV has discarded what's not needed. A dog, if you point at something, will look only at your finger. ("EUP," 33)

This kind of image is a Wallace staple; for example, "They're all the kind of men who look like they're smoking cigars even when they're not smoking cigars," and "The very best way to describe Scott Peterson's demeanor is that it looks like he's constantly posing for a photograph nobody is taking."⁷ The eerie humor resides in the oppositional relation between perceiving subject and aesthetic object that occurs when television inculcates both "the deep thesis that the most significant quality of truly alive persons is watchableness" ("EUP," 26) *and* that television is "a mirror." The ouroboric outcome of this "ontology of appearance" is the harrowing notion that "true actualization of self would ultimately consist in [our] becoming one of the images that are the *objects* of this great herd-like watching. That is, television's real pitch ... is that it's better to be inside the TV than to be outside, watching" ("EUP," 56).

22 The joke, of course, is on us. We are the dog, staring impassively at television's great wagging finger, unwilling or unable to look where it's pointing, in part because it's pointing right at us. By flattering our sense of ourselves as expert viewers, television creates a feedback loop in which solitary watchers congratulate themselves on detecting false notes in the programs they watch. The kind of discernment proper to a pawn shop clerk is elevated to the highest rank, with the result that "genuine human worth is not just identical with but *rooted in* the phenomenon of watching" ("EUP," 26). Wallace's argument gathers real force here, for his point is not that television is "bad for us"—though he does think that—it's that television's level of sophistication caught up to and then, for all practical purposes, surpassed that of its consumers sometime around 1985 has been altering our lived experience in fundamental ways ever since.

Weighing the value of war reportage, William T. Vollmann once remarked that, "Illumination is the first step toward alleviation."⁸ Wallace's big ethico-epistemological claim in this essay is that this truism may no longer hold water in our televisual age. He argues that the implicit link between knowledge and action, or to put it another way, the notion that intellectual understanding is conducive to the amelioration of real conditions, has been short-circuited by "TV's power to jettison connection and castrate protest" ("EUP," 35). "It was assumed," says Wallace, "that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom" ("EUP," 66–67). In *Infinite Jest*, this predicament manifests itself in the case of Ennet House resident Geoffrey Day, "a red-wine-and-Quaalude man Who taught something horseshit-sounding like social historicity or historical sociality at some jr. college"⁹ Day, whose name evokes the cold light of reason, cannot abide the logical inconsistencies and clichéd adages that undergird the Alcoholics Anonymous philosophy. Despite a sincere desire to get sober, he balks at full participation in his recovery program because it runs counter to his sense of himself as an autonomous, rational individual. Don Gately, the live-in counselor at Day's drying-out facility, responds to his exhortation to "show me the flaw in my reasoning" by diagnosing him with "*Analysis-Paralysis*" (*IJ*, n.90, 1002) and encouraging him to, in effect, *try* AA before he knocks it. Gately, himself a recovering drug addict, believes that "the clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do*. To try and live by instead of just say" (*IJ*, 273). As expected, this cajoling only incenses Day, who equates the temporary tabling of intellectualism with infantilization: "Oh lovely, Oh very nice. By all means don't *think* about the validity of what they're claiming your life hinges on. Oh do not ask what *is* it. Do not ask whether it's not insane. Simply open wide for the spoon" (*IJ*, n.90, 1002). The Prufrock reference, which Day knows is way over Gately's head, tells us who the real baby is. It also reprises one of Wallace's favorite conceits (elaborated most fully in the short story "Good Old Neon"), which posits an inverse relationship between verbal sophistication and emotional honesty. *Infinite Jest*'s most literate characters (Hal Incandenza, his mother Avril, and Geoffrey Day) are the ones least capable of expressing themselves with sincerity and hearing what others are saying. When Hal's brother Mario becomes concerned over Hal's increasingly distant behavior, he asks his mother, "How can you tell if somebody's sad?" Avril responds with, "A quick smile. 'You mean whether someone's sad'" (*IJ*, 763).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Wallace is much better at anatomizing our televisual culture than he is at telling us what to do about it. The analytical precision he brings to bear in identifying the corrosive effects of non-communal spectatorship shows signs of fatigue by the time he attempts to tell us what to do with ourselves “in the absence of any credible, noncommercial guides for living” (“EUP,” 79) or what contemporary novelists should do in the wake of postmodernism’s “irreverent rejection of ‘outmoded’ concepts like integrated plot or enduring character” (“EUP,” 80). Wallace surmises that

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “Oh how *banal*.” (“EUP,” 81)

This is all well and good, but having been convinced that irony has an iron grip on our culture, we are apt to expect that it is going to take more than prelapsarian wishes to pry it off. As it turns out, Wallace offers us different, more convincing answers to this question in his fiction.

Around the time the television was invented, John Dewey was grappling with many of the problems I have been considering here. He too worried about the pernicious effects of culture, and advocated “a kind of intellectual disrobing” not unlike Wallace’s entreaties for a sentimentalism that might replenish our collective spiritual well. But Dewey saw that there were limits to such disrobing:

We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our own time and place. But intelligent furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us. We cannot achieve recovery of primitive naivete. But there is attainable a cultivated naivete of eye, ear and thought, one that can be acquired only through the discipline of severe thought.⁹

In place of this “primitive naivete,” Dewey advocated a sort of mature, open awareness—a receptivity to light and shadow that might lead us down the road toward enlightenment. In the essay, “The Lost Individual,” he writes:

There is a prophetic aspect to all observation When a situation is as confused and divided within itself as is the present social estate, choice is implicated in observation Because acknowledgment in thought brings with it intelligent discrimination and choice, it is the first step out of confusion, the first step in forming those objects of significant allegiance out of which stable and efficacious individuality may grow.¹⁰

Everywhere in his stories, we find that David Foster Wallace is prodding us to consider not just the anomie of individual existence, but also the fellowship of our social bonds.

- 24 It is no mistake that Neal, the suicidal narrator of “Good Old Neon,” finds some solace at the Downer’s Grove Community Center. In Neal’s case these bonds are not enough, but in his frantic search for human connection, he unwittingly charts a new way out of the labyrinth. Or rather, he charts the labyrinth itself so fully, with such sensitivity, that he achieves a sublimity of consciousness which finally affords him the privilege of metempsychosis, the kind of “transcendence [through] absorption” (*IJ*, 12) that Hal Incandenza subscribes to in *Infinite Jest*.

In his last moments of consciousness, Neal is hurtling down Lily Cache road in a Corvette. He is on his way to kill himself by driving into a bridge abutment. As the end approaches, Neal begins addressing a “you” repeatedly. As a reader, I become confused as to who it is that is supposed to be driving the car. I am trying to figure out my relation to this narrator whose suffering I was pitying only a few minutes ago, who now, more Virgil than victim, seems to pity *me* because I continue to fear what I need not fear at all. I am still turning this question over in my mind when he asks me, the solitary reader, “What exactly do you think you are?”¹¹ But before I have an answer we are “clanging around in David Wallace 81’s head” as he flips through a high school yearbook, contemplating the suicide of a classmate, trying to imagine what sorts of pain or problems might have driven the guy to do it, this fair haired boy who seemed to have had it all.

RIP DFW

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Notes

1. David Foster Wallace, “PLAY: Federer as Religious Experience,” in the *New York Times* (20 August 2006).
2. David Foster Wallace, “Good Old Neon,” in *Oblivion* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004), 150-51.
3. Quoted by Joe Holley, *The Washington Post*, 15 September 2008.
4. David Foster Wallace, “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” in *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006), 271.
5. David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Plurum: Television and U.S. Fiction,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 22 and 27. Henceforth abbreviated “EUP.”
6. We should remember that, according to Wallace, this “thinking” is done only in retrospect, if at all. “TV’s greatest minute by minute appeal,” after all, “is that it engages without demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation” (“EUP,” 37).
7. David Foster Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 334 and 339.
8. William T. Vollmann, “The Art of Fiction No. 163,” interviewed by Madison Smartt Bell in *The Paris Review* 156 (Fall 2000).
9. Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown, 1996), 272. Henceforth abbreviated *IJ*.
10. John Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method,” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 276.
11. Dewey, “The Lost Individual,” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, 630.
12. Wallace, “Good Old Neon,” in *Oblivion*, 178.