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Author(s): ADAM KELLY

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DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DIALOGUE: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND THE NOVEL OF IDEAS

ADAM KELLY

If there do exist such things as novelists of ideas, then David Foster Wallace was surely one. On a basic level, Wallace's novels consistently show specific ideas wielding formative dramatic power in the minds of principal characters. In *The Broom of the System* (1987), Lenore Beadsman fears that she is no more than a linguistic construct; in *Infinite Jest* (1996), Don Gately commits to praying to a Higher Power of which he cannot conceive; in *The Pale King* (2011), Chris Fogle's life is changed by a series of insights into the nature of freedom. On a more profound level, the fictional worlds in which Wallace's characters exist have themselves been constructed through the author's close engagement with abstract ideas—logical, political, historical—that are made concrete in the linguistic registers and plot dynamics of his novels. It is this second mode of engagement with ideas that makes Wallace an unusual figure in the modern American literary tradition, at least as that tradition has often been characterized. Philip Rahv, in perhaps the most influential statement on this theme, chastised American authors in "The Cult of Experience in American Writing" (1940) for their "unique indifference...to ideas generally, to theories of value, to the wit of the speculative and problematical" (360). With Henry James as the chief culprit, modern American fiction, in Rahv's view, always prefers psychology to philosophy, and ideas are commonly portrayed by American writers in ways that make them wholly subservient to their dramatic role in the mind, sensibility, and experience of the character thinking them. While the first mode of Wallace's engagement with ideas described above could potentially conform to Rahv's characterization, the second could not. One of Wallace's innovations was therefore to return a central concern with

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ideas, and especially with abstract structures that transcend the individual, to "the art of the novel," in James's own much-cited phrase.[1]

Equally important is the fact that the particular sets of ideas that discursively structure Wallace's novels changed and developed over the course of his career. This is something thus far under-acknowledged in the published criticism on his fiction, which has tended either to treat an individual work—most often *Infinite Jest*—in isolation, or to reduce Wallace's ideas to a set of tenets drawn mainly from what I have referred to elsewhere as the "essay-interview nexus," namely Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" and his interview with Larry McCaffery, texts paired together in a 1993 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Kelly). This tendency among critics to prioritize Wallace's early-career statements on his artistic practice is certainly understandable, as Wallace was from the beginning a provocative literary critic and sociologist as well as an artist. In particular, his revisionist reading of American metafiction in those early critical statements would prove highly influential, making it henceforth difficult to regard the landscape of postwar US fiction and the phenomenon of literary postmodernism in ways that ignored Wallace's powerful reconstruction of the field. Equally, the critical focus on *Infinite Jest* makes eminent sense, so rich is that novel's engagement with contemporary culture and the literary tradition. But with the publication of his unfinished novel *The Pale King* in 2011, scholars of Wallace's fiction have been presented with a fairly comprehensive overview of his trajectory as an artist and novelist over the course of a two-decade career. And at the same time, the study of Wallace's work is reaching a point of critical mass at which it should no longer be necessary to argue for Wallace's place in the literary canon by attempting to encapsulate his various ideas with reference to a single key text or set of unchanging principles.

In this essay, I will examine Wallace's development as a writer with reference to the ideas that influence his novels. I will argue that those novels can be read in dialogue with one another, with each novel addressing conceptual questions remaining behind from the novel before. To make this broad task manageable, I will structure the essay around a comparison of three key scenes of dialogue within the novels themselves: the conversation between LaVache and Lenore Beadsman on an Amherst hill in *The Broom of the System*; the Rémy Marathe-Hugh Steeply dialogue atop an Arizona mountain in *Infinite Jest*; and the multi-character debate that takes place in an elevator in §19 of *The Pale King*. Considering these three examples together, the first thing to remark upon is the importance of physical elevation in those scenes in Wallace's novels that address wider thematic concerns through dialogue. It is as if such elevation allows the characters a survey of the territory, which in turn permits the consideration of more abstract or "elevated" ideas in each novel. But the other important characteristic of these scenes is precisely that they are dialogues, and I will begin with a treatment of this point. Wallace's heavy

reliance on scenes of dialogue between characters as a means of exploring structuring ideas was an aspect of his fiction that remained consistent, though not entirely unchanging, over the course of his writing career.

Dialogic Dialogue

In a mundane sense, of course, dialogue is a common aspect of almost all fiction, so there is nothing remarkable about the fact that Wallace makes substantial use of it. Nevertheless, there are noteworthy reasons for its extensive prominence in important strands of his novels. Passages of dialogue provide Wallace, for one thing, with potential relief from the dominance of his own distinctive narrative voice. Wallace's uncanny ear for American speech, speech usually presented in a slightly exaggerated yet recognizable manner in his dialogues, often allows him to undermine the habituation of his characteristic prose rhythms. That Wallace became increasingly concerned about the overbearing quality of his "self-consciously maximalist style" (50) of narration is suggested by D. T. Max, and it is an anxiety likewise indicated by Wallace's experimentation with pseudonyms in his post-*Infinite Jest* work, whether in submitting his story "Mister Squishy" to *McSweeney's* under the pen-name Elizabeth Klemm, or in inventing interlocutors in "Big Red Son" and publishing the essay "bi-pseudonymously" (as he puts it on the copyright page of *Consider the Lobster*). More importantly, by bringing a range of voices into his texts, Wallace can also make those texts a forum for competing ideas and can explore these ideas in a dialogic context. There are a number of influential models for this practice in literary and philosophical history: among those discussed to date in relation to Wallace are William Gaddis's unattributed dialogue, where a lack of contextual description forces the reader to imaginatively intervene in constructing a scene, and the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, who explores logic as a language game involving more than one voice.[2]

While acknowledging the importance of these influences, I want to highlight here the relevance to Wallace's work of two other models of dialogue—the Socratic and the Dostoevskian—with reference to their characterization in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin distinguishes between forms of speech that seek to embody prior truth and persuade others of the validity of that truth—Bakhtin calls this the rhetorical or monologic speech genre—and forms of speech that emphasize responsivity and open communication with others in the joint pursuit of truth—Bakhtin usually calls this dialogism.[3] "The dialogic means of seeking truth," as he puts it, "is counterposed to *official* monologism, which pretends to *possess a ready-made truth*" (110). Bakhtin clarifies the opposition between these two modes through a comparison between the early and late Socratic dialogues of Plato. The early dialogues are constructed on the assumption that "[t]ruth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is

born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (110). In Bakhtin's view, this conception of truth-seeking is organic to the genre of the dialogue itself, and Socrates is a participant in the process rather than a teacher. In the later dialogues, by contrast, Socrates has become the teacherly font of truth and wisdom, and "the monologism of the content begins to destroy the form of the Socratic dialogue" (110). These later dialogues correspond to Aristotelian ideas of rhetoric as logical persuasion, which shore up the monologic notion of truth as existing prior to the interaction between interlocutors.

This monologic conception of truth has been the dominant one since ancient times, underlying the worldviews of religion, philosophy, and modern science, but it does find itself challenged at particular moments in history. One such challenge comes with Dostoevsky's "polyphonic" novel, which Bakhtin calls "an entirely new type of artistic thinking" (3). Here written dialogue is used not only to portray the openness of truth-seeking between characters, but also to show how a character can challenge the truth embodied by the novel's author, thus remaining "ideologically authoritative and independent" (5), unpredictable and free in a radical way. This in turn has an impact on how ideas are negotiated in the novels, because "[t]he polyphonic project is incompatible with a mono-ideational framework of the ordinary sort" (78). What Bakhtin means by this is that ideas emerge in Dostoevsky's work in an organic process wherein the characters do not simply embody aspects of the author's own ideological beliefs, beliefs that exist apart from the work. Instead, Dostoevsky's characters are themselves involved in internal and external dialogues regarding ideas, which are never finalized into a single truth. "Dostoevsky was capable of *representing someone else's idea*, preserving its full capacity to signify as an idea," Bakhtin writes, "while at the same time also preserving a distance, neither confirming the idea nor merging it with his own expressed ideology" (85). But this happens only when characters are convincingly rendered as thinking, self-conscious beings: "the idea itself can preserve its power to mean, its full integrity as an idea, only when self-consciousness is the dominant in the artistic representation of the hero" (79). In order to preserve this process, self-consciousness in Dostoevsky is never unified or monologic, regardless of how inward-looking his characters can be. Instead, "[a] character's self-consciousness in Dostoevsky is thoroughly dialogized: in its every aspect it is turned outward, intensely addressing itself, another, a third person" (251).

At first blush, David Foster Wallace's fiction appears similar to this Dostoevskian model, with Wallace's characters shown to be prone to internal division and constantly engaged in dialogue with themselves and others. But Wallace adds an extra element to the mix, which rests in the anticipatory anxiety his characters feel in addressing others. Speakers in Wallace's fiction are often depicted as desperate for genuine dialogue, but find that their overwhelming need to predict the other's response in advance blocks the possibility of finding

the language to get outside themselves and truly reach out to the other. In the shadow of such anxiety of anticipation, the difficulty of generating reciprocal dialogue means that the stakes are heightened in those scenes in Wallace where two characters do exchange ideas through dialogue. When this process becomes genuinely dialogic in Bakhtin's sense—when truth appears to be generated "*between people*"—something important has occurred in Wallace's world: the means have become the ends. "It is fully understandable that at the center of Dostoevsky's artistic world must lie dialogue," writes Bakhtin, "and dialogue not as a means but as an end in itself" (252). This connects to Wallace's view, stated to McCaffery and repeated on many later occasions, that "what makes good fiction sort of magical" is the way the paradox involved in at once both affirming and denying the separate agendas of reader and writer can be mediated "by the fact that language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming, remedy-ing" ("An Interview" 137). As we know from his own essay on Dostoevsky, Wallace deeply admired the "morally passionate, passionately moral fiction" (*Consider* 274) produced by the Russian writer. The negotiation with ideas that happens in his own novels thus owes a debt to the techniques developed by Dostoevsky, and especially to the value the latter places on the redeeming event of dialogue itself.[4]

Broom Logic

Viewed in Bakhtinian terms, however, *The Broom of the System*, Wallace's debut novel, is characterized by an overwhelmingly monologic approach to dialogue. This is exemplified by the scenes between Rick Vigorous and Lenore Beadsman, where Rick's voice dominates through his lengthy storytelling and his repeated wish to absorb and possess Lenore according to a fixed ontology of self and other. Similarly, the scenes between Rick or Lenore and Dr. Curtis Jay are also monologic, in that Jay subsumes everything his patients tell him to an already formed hermeneutic theory of truth drawn from the writings of his fictional mentor Dr. Blentner. But what makes *The Broom of the System* monologic in a more fundamental sense is the way the novel is structured with reference to logic itself. This is a feature I will highlight by examining aspects of the scene of dialogue between Lenore and her brother LaVache that takes place on a hill in Amherst College. This scene is significant for a number of structural reasons: it is the final scene of the novel's middle chapter, the eleventh chapter of 21; it is the scene that brings to an end Part One of a two-part novel; and it is the scene in which the problems Lenore is experiencing regarding her identity are most clearly explained to her and to the reader. LaVache's explanation runs as follows:

> "[Gramma] Lenore has you believing, with your complicity, circumstantially speaking, that you're not really real, or that you're only real insofar as you're told about, so that to the extent that you're real you're controlled, and thus

> not in control, so that you're more like a sort of character than a person, really—and of course Lenore would say the two are the same, now, wouldn't she?" (*Broom* 249)

As convoluted as it may sound out of context, LaVache's explanation of this paradox arrives as a clarifying moment in the text for Lenore (and for the reader). Nevertheless it does not, and cannot, solve Lenore's problem, precisely because of the form it takes *as* an explanation. Lenore's reply makes this evident: "How about if we just spontaneously abort this line of conversation, Stoney, OK? Since, if I were maybe to ask you to help me out with respect to this evil-and-reality-as-opposed-to-telling problem, what you'd do is obviously just *tell* me something" (249). Telling is thus established as part of the problem that afflicts Lenore, rather than any kind of solution to it. Here we have, in fact, an early iteration of an idea that would in time become familiar to readers of Wallace, particularly through his discussion of irony in "E Unibus Pluram": it is mistaken to assume that diagnosis automatically leads to cure, that a revelation of imprisonment results in freedom (183).[5] LaVache seems to recognize the difficulty of this situation when he observes, "Well, now, seeing as you're *you*...I can't speak for you, but only for me, regardless of what I might say *about* you" (*Broom* 250).

This remark by LaVache certainly appears designed to provoke Lenore to exploratory dialogue as a necessary requirement for seeking truth, and in the major critical reading of the novel published to date, Marshall Boswell argues that this openness to dialogue also defines *The Broom of the System* more generally. According to Boswell, the novel counteracts the "hermetic, enclosed, and self-referencing fictional structures" that characterized earlier American metafiction, in favor of embodying "an open system of communication... between two equal and interactive participants, a dynamic carried over onto the novel's relationship with its own reader" (22). On this innovative model, "meaning is achieved through functional and constructive interaction with others rather than through the referential connecting of words to their objects" (34). Although Boswell's explicit point of reference for this new model is the later Wittgenstein—who claimed in *Philosophical Investigations* that when considering language we "must do away with all *explanations*" (qtd. in Boswell 25)—Boswell's description of Wallace's open system also resonates with a Bakhtinian account of dialogue, especially when one adds Bakhtin's rejection of Saussurian linguistics to his critique of monologic truth (see Morris 25-37).

However, as Boswell's own analyses of many strands of the novel in fact palpably demonstrate, Wallace's technique in *Broom* requires less a creative interaction with the reader as a dialogic other, than the reader simply being willing and able to work out what Wallace is consciously intending with each part of the novel's structure. In other words, readers have only to learn the rules of the (language) game and apply them. "[J]ust as no cipher can be carved in

stone," Boswell avers, "so can there never be one simple interpretation of a story" (39). Yet as Boswell himself shows, the allegorical level, or "second-order significance" (39), suggested by details in the novel is rarely ambiguous. The reason Boswell's reading of *The Broom of the System* is so thorough and convincing is that it demonstrates how curiously studied and clear-cut certain features of the novel are, how their meaning in the textual system can be virtually exhausted.[6] Despite what Boswell calls Wallace's "affirmation of communicative disorder" (59), these transparent features of the text display its affinities with modal logic, which according to Clare Hayes-Brady appealed initially to Wallace as "a way to refine ambiguity out of human communication" (24).[7] Such a position is, in Bakhtinian terms, a monologic one, and no point in the novel demonstrates this better than the final line, a piece of dialogue spoken by Rick Vigorous to Mindy Metalman: "'You can trust me,' R. V. says, watching her hand. 'I'm a man of my '" (*Broom* 467). Boswell's reading is that "[t]he novel ends with a blank space. The system remains open" (63). But I would argue instead that because there is no real ambiguity concerning the next word in the sentence, the reader's agency is in fact negated. There is thus a gesture toward an open system and a readerly dialogue, rather than an achievement of it. This desire to control meaning and the reader's agency is something that Wallace would fight against in later work—a battle made explicit in his writerly allegory "Octet," from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*—and it is this feature of *The Broom of the System*, I would suggest, that most encouraged Wallace later to dismiss the book as a failure. *Broom* is in the end what Wallace elsewhere calls an "INTERPRET-ME" fiction ("Empty Plenum" 218), and a monologic one, concerned to tell rather than co-create, unable to fully establish the open system it craves. Gramma Lenore may disappear in theory, but the monologic modality of truth that she represents remains firmly in place.

The dead end to which this kind of logical focus can lead is symbolized by an awkward structural feature of the novel, in which a year-date appears at the heading of every chapter, and yet all but two of these chapters are dated 1990. This insistence on constantly repeating the same year adds to the static quality of the narrative, so that history is not allowed truly to enter the story, and the novel retains a thoroughly presentist focus throughout. One side effect of this focus is that while it critiques the intellectual dead ends of postmodernist metafiction, as Boswell's reading makes clear, *The Broom of the System* risks participating in the end of history that pervades postmodernism understood on a wider cultural level. As Fredric Jameson has demonstrated most influentially in a postmodern context, truly dialectical thinking requires that the artist address his or her moment as part of a constantly shifting history, rather than as embodying an endless present.[8] One way to begin the dialectical process is to widen the context of inquiry—culturally, politically, and particularly historically—and this is what Wallace would increasingly do

as his career developed. Wallace once described *Broom* as "a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida" (Lipsky 35), and while he would never leave behind the core linguistic and philosophical questions that these two thinkers articulated—as testified to by his continued fondness for abstract moral dilemmas and double-bind structures in his fiction—neither would he fully embrace the ahistorical facets of their thought. Indeed, a critique of such ahistoricism emerges at one moment in the LaVache-Lenore dialogue, when LaVache tells Lenore that in constructing his famous antinomy of the man on a hill, Wittgenstein never considered the possibility of a helicopter dropping the man in place. "Technology does affect interpretation, after all," LaVache concludes (*Broom* 251), and this idea is also a central one in the dialogue to which I now turn, between Rémy Marathe and Hugh Steeply in *Infinite Jest*.

Infinite Politics

The primary thing to note about the Marathe-Steeply dialogue is that the terms that shape it are drawn not from the language game of logical philosophy, as in *Broom*, but rather from the discourse of political philosophy. Boswell has suggested the importance of William James's utilitarianism for reading this strand of the novel (135-36), but at least as significant is that on the level of ideas the debate can be understood as playing out the terms of Isaiah Berlin's famous 1958 lecture "Two Concepts of Liberty." In this lecture, Berlin distinguishes between negative liberty, which refers to the absence of external constraints on the individual agent, and positive liberty, where the agent possesses internal control and self-mastery in pursuit of his/her goals. An emphasis on negative liberty is associated with classic liberal and libertarian thinkers—Berlin cites Locke and Mill in England, and Constant and de Tocqueville in France (124)—for whom freedom from interference is valuable as an end in itself, and who argue that the state should allow the individual to pursue his or her own ends as long as these do not impinge upon the freedoms of others. In *Infinite Jest*, Hugh Steeply defends this position as paradigmatically American: "The United States: a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice. The individual's right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct. Defended with teeth and bared claws all through our history" (424). Rémy Marathe agrees with Steeply that such a defense of negative liberty defines the American mindset, but counters with a powerful argument for positive liberty, a tradition embodied by thinkers such as Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx. Here the individual's goals of self-realization and self-determination are assumed to require support from their connection to larger communal goals, goals that Marathe thinks have been lost in an American context. To make this point to Steeply, Marathe reiterates Berlin's distinction between "freedom from" (or negative liberty) and "freedom to" (or positive liberty):

> "Your freedom is the freedom-*from*: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is the meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress...But what of the freedom-*to*? Not just free-*from*. Not all compulsion comes from without. You pretend you do not see this. What of freedom-*to*. How for the person to freely choose? 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? How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose?" (320)

The Quebecois spy's sentiments here chime with certain views Wallace expressed in his nonfiction. In particular, Marathe's language of temples and worshipping—"All other of our you say *free* choices follow from this: what is our temple?" (107)—clearly resonates with positions set out in Wallace's Kenyon Commencement Address: "There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship." However, the advantage of the novel over the essay form, as Bakhtin would tell us, is that the novel provides a dialogic context in which both sides of the argument can be offered to the reader, without a clear authorial conclusion drawn. Steeply's defense of negative liberty throughout his debate with Marathe is certainly a strong one, and even though Wallace the philosopher or ethicist might not agree with the argument, Wallace the novelist gives it its full due. The classic precursor here is *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Dostoevsky renders Ivan Karamazov's argument for atheism so powerfully that the writer worried it could convince his readers of the nonexistence of God, even though Dostoevsky himself was a believer.[9] In *Infinite Jest*, the importance of giving Steeply's argument its fullest articulation is that the faults readers may find in it as a prescription for the present day only serve to place greater emphasis on the technologically altered world Wallace is depicting throughout the novel. Jonathan Franzen, in his recent essay on Wallace's suicide and the history of the novel, captures this altered world well: "as the novel has transformed the cultural environment, species of humanity have given way to a universal crowd of individuals whose most salient characteristic is their being identically entertained. This was the monocultural specter that David had envisioned and set out to resist in his epic *Infinite Jest*" (87). If Wallace and Franzen are right, then the earlier historical context in which Steeply's traditional liberal argument was developed, a context in which individuals were free to follow a plurality of goals, no longer applies.[10] If, as LaVache claims, "technology does affect interpretation," then in the monocultural America (or O.N.A.N.) of *Infinite Jest* it seems inarguable that, as Boswell puts it, "bloodless utilitarianism is a recipe for disaster" (136). By allowing the reader to engage afresh with a classic debate in the realm of political philosophy, Wallace throws into starker relief the challenges posed by the altered historical and technological America he depicts.

Yet while the ideas of political philosophy underpin the debate between Steeply and Marathe, the contrast between the US and Quebec that they embody and espouse remains vaguely cultural rather than specifically historical. *Infinite Jest* is clearly not a historical novel. It is set, like *The Broom of the System*, a few years into the future, and, as Stephen Burn has shown in his chronology of the novel, the only incident referred to before the tennis training of James Incandenza in 1960 is his father's career-ending knee injury in 1933 (Burn 91). There are few allusions to a real-world historical context in the novel, and even these mainly apply to Europe rather than America; Wallace writes, for instance, of Enfield tennis director Gerhardt Schtitt, "like most Europeans of his generation, [he has been] anchored from infancy to certain permanent values...Old World patriarchal stuff like honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit" (*Infinite* 82). These are values also espoused by Marathe, and he contrasts them with the utilitarianism of America, which he sees as coming back to bite the United States through the kind of unconscious death-wish that Jacques Derrida terms "autoimmunity." As Marathe points out: "This is a U.S.A. production, this Entertainment cartridge. Made by an American man in the U.S.A. The appetite for the appeal of it: this also is U.S.A. The U.S.A. drive for spectation, which your culture teaches" (318). But how has it come about that American culture teaches this drive for spectation, and espouses the utilitarianism that underlies it? Marathe and Steeply are both hazy on this point. Marathe remarks that "[s]omeone or some people among your own history sometime killed your U.S.A. nation already, Hugh. Someone who had authority, or should have had authority and did not exercise authority. I do not know" (319). Steeply is equally vague. "The American genius," he will only suggest, "is that someplace along the line back there in American history them realizing that each American seeking to pursue his maximum good results together in maximizing *everyone's* good" (424).

One important effect of this vagueness about American history in *Infinite Jest* is that the ideological differences on which Marathe and Steeply insist end up depending upon the policing of cultural borders that remain necessarily weak and permeable, open to contradiction by empirical historical realities. One such contradiction emerges when Steeply challenges Marathe's claim to cultural superiority by pointing out that it was in Canada rather than the US that the first experiments in stimulating pleasure sensors were undertaken. This led to a stampede of young people ready to sacrifice their autonomy for the chance to continually pull a lever and experience lethal bliss: "This was a totally Canadian show, this little neuroelectric adventure" (472). What this implies, in effect, is that the cultural distinctions that Marathe and Steeply have been setting out will have little bearing in the world of "The Entertainment," when pleasure unto death becomes a dystopian possibility attractive to all. But it also means that Wallace's project to write something distinctively American, as opposed to Western-industrial (the broader term he uses in the McCaffery

interview [128]), ends up requiring further elaboration. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace is happy to cite, through Steeply, what Greg Phipps refers to in his essay on the novel as "the sentimentalized narratives of the American ethos" (75). In *The Pale King*, by contrast, Wallace takes a more historicist approach to exploring these cultural narratives, putting into play ideas that also emerge in his later essays, ideas that are not only overtly political but also importantly historical.

Pale History

I am referring here primarily to §19 of *The Pale King*, in which a number of characters carry on a lengthy and unattributed dialogue that focuses on the issue of civic responsibility in the United States circa 1980. Upon close examination of the text, there appear to be four interlocutors involved in this elevator discussion: DeWitt Glendenning, Stuart Nichols, a man named Gaines, and a character simply named X. In addition, an "I said" also appears at one point, coming out of nowhere and not being referred to again (139). Although in his published fiction Wallace often introduced first-person narrators at unexpected moments—for example, in his long story "Mister Squishy" (14)—here the inclusion of the "I," as well as the character X, seem only to point to the unfinished nature of this particular chapter of *The Pale King*.[11] Nonetheless, an important observation can be made that the identity of the characters involved in this chapter—and whether they number three or four or five—is in many ways beside the point. If we compare this elevated dialogue to the ones in *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest* already discussed, we can see a movement increasingly away from the individual characteristics of those articulating the ideas and toward the broader significance of the ideas themselves. In *Broom*, we read the LaVache and Lenore dialogue with specific regard to how the logical ideas expressed in it apply to Lenore, who is the novel's main protagonist. In *Infinite Jest*, by contrast, Marathe and Steeply exist in the novel primarily so that they can undertake their conversation on the mountaintop overlooking Arizona. Their dialogue is a chorus for some of the major themes of the novel, yet Wallace still goes to some lengths to humanize both characters through providing them with personal history and motivation, and by focusing much of his prose on the evocation of their comic movements and the general atmosphere of the scene.

In the corresponding elevated scene in *The Pale King*, however, there is none of this, and the movement is away from the importance of individual psychology and toward the primacy of ideas themselves. This is a dialogue of fine distinctions and complex arguments, and Wallace refuses to obscure it unduly by importing personal characteristics and impressions from other areas of the novel. We are aware, for instance, that DeWitt Glendenning, who can be identified as the main speaker in the first half of §19, is a senior figure in the IRS, and is probably the most powerful individual in the conversation. Yet unlike Marathe, who dabbles in psychological games with Steeply, or Rick

Vigorous, for whom conversation with Lenore is an all-out exercise in power and dominance, Glendenning in this scene seems unconcerned to wield power over others. Instead, his interest is focused on what he and others are saying; he is dialogically responsive in Bakhtin's sense, and his tone is generally a humble one, admitting confusion about the accuracy and tightness of his arguments. Something similar can be said for Stuart Nichols, the other participant in the conversation who speaks at most length. The two remaining characters, Gaines and X, are more familiarly cynical, though intelligent types, milder versions of the kind of men we meet in *Brief Interviews*. Taken as a pair, they also provide something of the voice of the radical sixties as against Glendenning's republican conservatism, with Nichols's liberalism sitting somewhere in the middle.

As the unattributed quality of the dialogue suggests, however, Wallace is not particularly interested in dividing the positions of his characters into traditional liberal/conservative or left/right binaries. Moreover, a number of his late essays offer evidence that a damaging breakdown in dialogue between opposing ideological positions was the largest challenge that Wallace saw defining twenty-first-century US political culture.[12] In this regard, of course, things have gone from bad to worse since Wallace's death, as the debt ceiling crisis of 2011, to cite only one example, recently reminded US citizens. Against such a bleak background, §19 of *The Pale King* can be read as Wallace's depiction of what an informed and open conversation about American political and intellectual history might look like. In the context of the novel, the particular premise of the debate lies in Glendenning's remark that "attitudes about paying taxes seem like one of the places where a man's civic sense gets revealed in the starkest sorts of terms" (141). But taxation is really only a minor player here: Wallace's dialogue explores the development of American democratic society more generally, with particular reference to how things have changed since the upheavals of the 1960s. In a recent essay, Adam Kirsch opines that "[h]ostility to the 1960s has been a constant in [Wallace's] work," but this position does not give enough credit to the subtlety of Wallace's political reading of that period and its aftermath, a reading that reaches its culmination in this polyphonic section of *The Pale King*.

In discussing the content of the dialogue, I will make two main observations. The first is that Wallace here explores more deeply than in *Infinite Jest* the historical character of American society, by concentrating much of the debate on the period of the American Revolution, the aims of the Founding Fathers, and how well those aims still apply in the altered context of the late twentieth century. Once again he offers the reader two broadly contrasting views. In Glendenning's opinion, the founding fathers were heroes, whose sense of honor and moral fabric were unfortunately not matched by the generations who followed them. Their "enfranchisement of only wealthy landed educated males" was rationally motivated, according to Glendenning:

"They believed in rationality—they believed that persons of privilege, literacy, education, and moral sophistication would be able to emulate them, to make judicious and self-disciplined decisions for the good of the nation and not just advance their own interests" (134). X responds sarcastically to this: "It's certainly an imaginative and ingenious rationalization of racism and male chauvinism, that's for sure" (134). And how can the reader of *The Pale King*, sharing the post-Sixties air with X, disagree with him? How can that reader not, for example, join X in criticizing Thomas Jefferson for his hypocrisy in preaching equal human dignity while "boinking his slaves and having whole litters of mulatto children" (133)?[13] Yet the question Wallace seems to be exploring through this dialogue is what gets lost when such an easy cynicism about human motivation pervades our assessments of history. If the expressed ideals of the American founding fathers can be so easily dismissed on the grounds of their less than ideal behavior, then where are later generations to receive their moral education from? While fully acknowledging the difficulties with the proposition—by reminding us through X and Gaines that hypocrisy should rightfully suffer exposure and interrogation—Wallace is nonetheless allowing space here for a more generous evaluation of both the role of moral ideas in the course of history, and the personal flaws of those who espouse such ideas. One benefit of showing such generosity might lie in crossing the seeming chasm between liberal and conservative in present-day America. Even the terms themselves become problematized in Wallace's dialogue: as Glendenning tells X, when the latter dubs him a conservative, "There are all kinds of conservatives depending on what it is they want to conserve" (132).

For Wallace, the question of moral education has become all the more pressing because the 1960s has ushered in more than an increased social egalitarianism and a healthily skeptical attitude toward previously cherished values. While in *Infinite Jest* Wallace was concerned to ask how technological developments should alter our political commitments, in *The Pale King* it is the rise of the corporation that is front and center, placing historic ideas of citizenship under crushing pressure. Nichols, whose ideas become increasingly prominent in the final movement of the dialogue in §19, summarizes this strand when he remarks that "[p]olitics is about consensus, and the advertising legacy of the sixties is that consensus is repression" (147). This is an argument Wallace's readers have been familiar with since "E Unibus Pluram," but the analysis here is offered deeper roots within American intellectual history, so that the Sixties no longer represents some kind of origin point for American irony, as that decade did in Wallace's celebrated essay. Writing retrospectively from a point in the early twenty-first century, and in keeping with swathes of recent scholarship on the era of "neoliberal" capitalism, Wallace now places the key transitional moment to contemporary American society in and around 1980, as demonstrated by Glendenning's summary of Nichols's argument: "I think Stuart's tracing the move from the production-model of American

democracy to something more like a consumption-model, where corporate production depends on a team approach whereas being a customer is a solo venture. That we're turning into consuming citizens rather than producing citizens" (146). Wallace did not live long enough to witness the full onset of the credit crisis and "the great recession," but the economic and sociological ideas underpinning Glendenning's summary certainly contain the ring of truth in a post-2008 social climate.

My other main observation about the debate in §19 is that although he is clearly engaging with the discourse of political ideas, Wallace, through Glendenning, displays a palpable discomfort with understanding the problem only in narrow terms: "It's probably part of my naivete that I don't want to put the issue in political terms when it's probably irreducibly political" (136). Similarly, for Stuart Nichols, "it goes beyond politics, civics....It's almost more a matter of metaphysics" (142). This is vintage Wallace, of course: as a writer at home in virtually every discourse imaginable, he understood the specific resonances of each one, and utilized the novel as what Bakhtin would call a heteroglossic space in which those discourses could productively collide. There is therefore no bottom line in Wallace's novels, no master discourse, whether logic, culture, politics, or history: there are instead a plurality of ways to approach the problem Wallace is addressing. Yet this is not relativism either, not even a respectable Rortian version of relativism in which new vocabularies create new problems to solve. Rather, Wallace is genuinely addressing a single question by thinking it through a plurality of languages, discourses, and dialogues. That question is the one that haunted him for so much of his career: what has gone wrong with America? And in *The Pale King*, more than in any previous work, he was attempting to ask an even more ambitious question: what can we do to make it better?

Novel Ideas

In Bakhtin's account of Dostoevsky, the latter's originality as a novelist lies in the way "the idea really does become almost the hero of the work" (78). Yet to call Dostoevsky a novelist of ideas, or even a philosophical novelist, is simply a category error, according to Bakhtin: "For Dostoevsky, there are no ideas, no thoughts, no positions which belong to no one, which exist 'in themselves'" (31). That this latter quotation makes Dostoevsky sound like a candidate for Philip Rahv's critique of the experiential bias of the American novel perhaps demonstrates nothing so much as the uselessness of the category "novelist of ideas"; Rahv, after all, explicitly had in mind the Russian novel of the nineteenth century as a counterweight to the tradition of American realism embodied by Henry James. Nevertheless, when considering these questions Wallace presents us with a new and complex case; a deeply philosophical thinker, Wallace's ideas seem to exist both "in themselves" and in more embodied forms within both the dialogues his characters engage in and the

fictional worlds they inhabit. These fictional worlds became more and more embedded with culture, politics, and history as Wallace's career as a novelist developed, so that ideas increasingly appear as part of a dialectical process, both radically situated within the work and somehow seeming to govern it. In "The Meaning of a Literary Idea" (1949), Lionel Trilling contended that "[t]he question of the relation which should properly obtain between what we call creative literature and what we call ideas is a matter of insistent importance for modern criticism" (*Liberal* 281). While this statement may have looked out of date in the many decades between the publication of Trilling's essay and the century's end, Wallace's novels bring critics and readers back to its active contemplation. And this is not only a literary matter: Wallace's way of dealing with ideas through dialogue, both within his individual novels and in the relationship between them, accounts for more than his untimely originality as a novelist. It also suggests his wider importance for our twenty-first-century world, a world that now, more than ever, requires some fresh thinking.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

NOTES

[1] Rahv's position on American fiction is far from unusual. In the same year that "The Cult of Experience" was published, Lionel Trilling, in "Reality in America," defended Henry James as a novelist of ideas but still lamented the critical preference offered to Theodor Dreiser over James, a preference explained by American culture's "chronic belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality" (*Liberal* 10). And as late as 1981, in *Ideas and the Novel*, fellow New York intellectual Mary McCarthy was still mourning the absence of ideas from the American novel, and criticizing writers under the sway of James for suppressing their instinct to build fiction around abstract concerns. Summarizing this critical line in a recent essay, Mark McGurl broadens its scope from American fiction to classic realist fiction more generally: "All of the ideas in realist fiction on the Jamesian model are made subservient to the experience of thinking them. For all the intelligence exerted in their articulation, they are never valuable or interesting in and of themselves."

[2] Burn has discussed the influence of Gaddis's dialogue on Wallace, most notably the way Wallace takes a minor variation in Gaddis's fiction—in which a line of ellipses draws attention to the nonverbal reaction of an interlocutor—and exploits it "to acknowledge and dramatize the role of the silent partner" in the literary process (31). Wittgenstein's profound influence on Wallace, identified by the writer himself in his interview with McCaffery, has been the subject of a number of critical treatments, the fullest of which is found in Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, discussed below.

[3] While in his Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin is consistent in the terms he uses to discuss his conception of dialogue, across his broader career there are variations in terminology. For instance, Morson and Emerson find "at least three distinct senses" of the term "dialogue" in Bakhtin's work, with regard to only one of which the distinction between dialogic and monologic makes sense (130-31).

[4] In a footnote to his Dostoevsky essay, Wallace commends Joseph Frank's critique of Bakhtin's tendency to "downplay FMD's ideological involvement with his own characters" (*Consider* 269), while suggesting that Frank ignores the political constraints that Bakhtin faced in constructing his interpretation of Dostoevsky's works. In making this claim Wallace implies

that Bakhtin's conceptions of "polyphony" and "dialogic imagination" are simply necessary ideological covers rather than genuine descriptions of Dostoevsky's artistic procedures. I would contend that, in following Frank on this point, Wallace misinterprets Bakhtin's claims about Dostoevsky, and assumes that "ideological involvement with [one's] characters" is the same thing as privileging one character's truth over another's. As I will demonstrate below, Wallace does not repudiate ideological involvement with his characters, yet he still presents genuine debates in which the flaws of both sides of the argument bring to light important truths about the discursive and historical context in which the debate takes place. Furthermore, it is not consistent on the one hand to hold dialogue as a goal and as a means of truth-seeking—as Wallace explicitly does, and as Bakhtin argues Dostoevsky does—and on the other hand to subscribe to a single truth existing independently of the dialogic process (unless that truth lies in the value ascribed to dialogue itself). Another way to make this point is to say that Frank's exhaustive readings of the meaning of Dostoevsky's novels (readings that Wallace praises) cannot hold truly definitive status if the dialogic process that Wallace values is to retain any of its redemptive status in the act of reading.

[5] For an excellent treatment of the wider theoretical implications of Wallace's claim about diagnosis and cure, see Baskin.

[6] Thus Boswell's explanations of the purpose in the text of Gramma Lenore, of the Great Ohio Desert, of the Nabokovian/Updikean plotlines surrounding Rick Vigorous and Andy Lang, even of the violet color of Lenore's dress, are all entirely convincing, which makes for skillful literary criticism. Yet the very possibility of such telling explanations manages to contradict somewhat the idea that Wallace is trying to place open dialogue with the reader in the place of the elaborate authorial mastery he associates with the postmodern metafictionists.

[7] It is worth noting that while he was composing *Broom* Wallace was also writing a philosophy thesis on modal logic, now published as *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*.

[8] In important recent essays, Luther and Hering have offered evidence of Wallace's developing engagement—in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" and *Infinite Jest*, respectively—with Jamesonian ideas of cultural postmodernism, ideas that culminated in Jameson's landmark *Postmodernism* (1991). The work of these critics supports my suggestion that one aspect of Wallace's development as a writer was his willingness to address conceptual problems that remained unresolved in earlier work.

[9] For a list of further parallels between *Infinite Jest* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, see Jacobs.

[10] Not only that, but this monocultural specter—inextricable from a media context that Wallace elsewhere dubs "Total Noise" ("Deciderization" xiii)—can in fact be understood as a direct consequence of the historical predominance of negative liberty, of the fragmentation of the public sphere that results from citizens following their own ends without thought for the wider health of the community. I am grateful to Allard den Dulk for pointing this out to me.

[11] It is tempting to associate X in §19 with Shane Drinion, who is referred to as "Mr. X" in §46 of the novel (446). However, the characters of these two men seem entirely at odds with one another, which may indicate that the X in §19 was simply a placeholder for the name of a character as yet undecided by Wallace.

[12] See, for instance, "Authority and American Usage" and "Host" in *Consider the Lobster* and "Deciderization 2007—A Special Report."

[13] For a brief summary of the problems posed by Jefferson's "character" for the intellectual history of the early national period, see Hutchison 10.

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