DAVID FOSTER WALLACE: THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR AND THE BIRTH OF A DISCIPLINE

ADAM KELLY

Since the death of David Foster Wallace in September 2008 at the age of forty-six, his reputation as one the most significant writers of his era has become firmly established. The shock and sadness that greeted Wallace's suicide – evidenced by the array of memorial services, print obituaries, and online tributes in the final months of that year – were followed in 2009 by a mobilisation of readers, fans and critics to revisit his work, and to begin to consider Wallace's legacy for U.S. and world literature. The Spring saw the establishment of a course on Wallace's collected fiction and non-fiction at Pomona College, taught by his colleague Kathleen Fitzpatrick, a venture that has since been repeated at institutions elsewhere, including Trinity College Dublin. In January, an intermedia first for Wallace's work occurred, with John Krasinski's film of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* debuting at the Sundance festival, and going on to a wider U.S. release later in the year. June saw the establishment of the "Infinite Summer" project, a thirteen-week online read-through of *Infinite Jest* that garnered attention in the mainstream media, and invited long-standing fans of Wallace to participate alongside readers new to his work. Also in June, it was reported in media outlets that two biographical books on Wallace were planned: David Lipsky's *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*, based on a set of 1996 interviews between Lipsky and Wallace, appeared in April 2010, while D. T. Max's as yet untitled biography of Wallace is scheduled for 2011. In July, the first academic conference on Wallace's work, "Consider David Foster Wallace" organised by David Hering, was held at the University of Liverpool; this was followed in November by "Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies," organised by Alex Engebretson and Judd Staley at the City University of New York. And 2009, *Infinite Jest*'s "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment," ended with a panel at the annual MLA conference in Philadelphia devoted to "The Legacy of David Foster Wallace."[1]

These latter events in academic settings follow a steady stream of scholarly interest in Wallace's work in the early years of this century. Indeed, with the critical reception of Wallace now into its third decade, it seems an opportune time to offer an initial map of the territory of what might be termed "Wallace Studies," the network of interest in David Foster Wallace's oeuvre that ranges through but also well beyond the traditional academic channels. The essay that follows is intended both for the general reader of Wallace who may be interested in a survey and analysis of the academic criticism his work has produced to date, and for professional scholars concerned with how Wallace criticism connects to wider trends in contemporary literary scholarship. I want to explore here some of the challenges and opportunities Wallace's writing offers to the reception and critical study of literature in the twenty-first century, and how these have been approached in the criticism already published and currently emerging. In doing so, I will examine what Wallace Studies looks like at present, what directions it may be taking in the

Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace: the Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline." *IJAS Online* 2 (2010): n. pag. Web. <http://ijas.iaas.ie/index.php/article-david-foster-wallace-the-death-of-the-author-and-the-birth-of-a-discipline/>.

immediate future, and what lessons might be learned for the academic study of literature more broadly.

It is necessary, however, to begin outside the academy, and to start by acknowledging that David Foster Wallace was the first major writer to live and die in the internet age. I mean this in the sense that Wallace's mature work coincided with the ascendance to global popularity of the worldwide web, and his growing reputation gained vital cultural traction owing to that brand new medium. 1996-97, the period directly following the publication of his second novel *Infinite Jest*, saw the real beginnings of this process, with the establishment of the listserv "Wallace-l," a text-based discussion group hosted on waste.org, and *The Howling Fantods*, a fansite maintained by Nick Maniatis which is still the key online resource for Wallace fans and scholars (see Bucher). The aforementioned "Infinite Summer" project can be viewed, then, as simply an updated and accessible version of a phenomenon that has been ongoing for over a decade, namely the communal online sharing of experiences and interpretations of Wallace's works. No other literary writer can be said to be the internet's own in quite the same way. The irony is that Wallace wrote about a world marked most conspicuously by television and, concomitantly, by visuality. The tortuous self-consciousness his fiction depicts is predominately concerned with the gaze, and the future media depicted in *Infinite Jest* and in the short stories of the later *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion* – videophones, teleputers, a televised "suffering channel" – project the extension of that gaze into every region of public and private life. The internet, by contrast, foregrounds modes of communication that allow for a level of anonymity and invisibility. And at the same time as it challenges TV on the one hand, the web is also, on the other, rapidly replacing print as the major information medium of the twenty-first century.

It follows from these technological shifts that the reception and formal study of Wallace's work is progressing in significantly different ways to that of earlier literary figures such as Joyce or Pynchon. Joyce offers perhaps the best comparison, because he is one of the preeminent artists of what Ted Striphas has recently termed "the late age of print," and was perhaps the central figure in the academic study of literature in the twentieth century. Despite regular attempts to make his high modernist classics readily accessible to the general reader (the most recent example of which is Declan Kiberd's 2009 study *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living*), the so-called Joyce industry has implicitly constructed a hierarchical model of reading, where the keys to understanding are presumed to be held by professional scholars, and entry into their ranks involves a process of initiation not only into Joyce's corpus of writing but also into the far lengthier corpus of writing about his work in journals and scholarly studies. Wallace criticism, on the other hand, has begun in a more democratic vein. The ease of publication which the internet allows has meant that the detailed close reading of Wallace's texts, traditionally the preserve of academic engagement, has in great part been carried out by skilful and committed non-professional readers, who publish their findings in the public domain of the web. In his paper delivered at the New York conference, Matt Bucher noted that "the rise of the Internet […] parallels the rise of the amateur," and pointed to new forms of critical cross-pollination in the study Wallace's work, for instance the role Wallace's internet fanbase has played as a resource for translators of his texts, and the fact that it was not a university scholar who discovered Wallace's first published story, but a non-academic fan, Ryan Niman, who searched the Amherst archives for the work he would then post online. Following in this vein, the Liverpool and New York conferences were attended by a number of non-academics with an interest in Wallace, greatly swelling the regular audience for such affairs (see Parker). Furthermore, the crossover appeal of Wallace's work has allowed Bucher's own non-academic publishing press, Sideshow

Media Group, to take on the publication of the first collection of critical essays on Wallace, *Consider David Foster Wallace*, scheduled to appear in August 2010.

Within the borders of academia itself, the internet has also allowed a wider array of scholars to enter debates, with a number of undergraduate and postgraduate theses available to read at *The Howling Fantods* and elsewhere. Such exposure for early academic work was impossible before the advent of the web, when official publication (and occasional PhD thesis dissemination) was the only avenue into wider scholarly debates. That such contributions can have an impact is shown by the inclusion of one bachelor's thesis, by Derek E. Wayne, as an important point of reference in an article written by Iannis Goerlandt for the scholarly journal *Critique* in 2006. This democratisation of interpretative reading within Wallace Studies will likely have consequences for the role of the professional critic interested in Wallace, necessitating an increased emphasis on those specialist skills in which such critics are trained. With Wallace a self-confessed "five draft man" ("Brief Interview"), and with his papers soon to be available at the Harry Ransom Centre in Texas, the posthumous study of his manuscripts will no doubt contribute to the current growth area of genetic criticism, a phenomenon that – like history of the book scholarship – can itself be seen as a reaction to the decline of the book and the rise of the internet as a challenge to intellectual property rights. Cultural studies will also find in Wallace an exemplary focus of study, as demonstrated by the panel at the New York conference devoted to Wallace's profile on the web and the online reactions to his suicide. A longer-standing specialism of the academic critic in the age of theory has been the placement of close reading at the service of wider theoretical, cultural, and political arguments, and Wallace's work is unlikely to significantly alter this paradigmatic approach. What is noteworthy about current scholarship on Wallace, however, is the often novel ways it has explored the relation of his fiction to contemporary literary theory. In order to see how this exploration has progressed, I will now survey the development of academic scholarship on Wallace from the early 1990s until his death.

Early critics understood Wallace's fiction primarily in terms of its emphasis on science and information systems and its intersections with American postmodernism. Lance Olsen's and James Rother's essays in the Summer 1993 issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction* combined insights on "pomo" fiction with, respectively, a discussion of Wittgenstein and of the "post-scientific wave." Tom LeClair's 1996 article on the "prodigious fiction" of Richard Powers, William Vollmann and Wallace continued this emphasis, building on LeClair's earlier work on the postmodern systems novel by reading the books of these three writers as "information systems, as long-running programs of data with a collaborative genesis" (14). N. Katherine Hayles adopted a related approach in her 1999 article, examining *Infinite Jest* as a scientifically-informed text that challenges "the conceptual foundations of the liberal subject" (675), an outgrowth of her interest in the discourse of posthumanism. But following this first wave of critical responses, Wallace's own articulation of his project soon began to have a large impact on the scholarship surrounding his work. The 1993 *RCF* issue contained an essay – "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" – that would in time become viewed as Wallace's artistic manifesto, published alongside an equally revealing interview between Wallace and Larry McCaffery. It is a truism that all great writers teach us how to read them, but in outlining his understanding of American postmodernist metafiction – Barth, Coover, Nabokov, Pynchon and a few other canonical patriarchs – and articulating that movement's ambivalent legacy for his own generation, Wallace carried out this task in a more hands-on manner than usual. These two pieces provided critics with the terms of Wallace's challenge to prevailing artistic assumptions – focused on the role of irony and metafictional self-reflexivity in contemporary writing – and would go on to greatly shape their readings. While LeClair, and Frank Cioffi in another early

article, made passing reference to the essay and interview, it was A. O. Scott, in a career-overview piece for the *New York Review of Books* in 2000, who first proclaimed their critical importance for understanding Wallace's work. Scott focuses on the culminating passage in "E Unibus Pluram" concerning the coming of a generation of "anti-rebels" who would "eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue" in favour of "single-entendre principles" and sincerity. And as many would after him, he wonders aloud at how the terms of this prescription might relate to the evidently ironic and self-reflexive methods of Wallace's own fiction.

By 2003, when the first two books on Wallace were published, the centrality of the essay-interview nexus had become established orthodoxy. In a 2001 article on Wallace and Hopkins, Timothy Jacobs had begun with an extensive outline of Wallace's aesthetic ideas, and Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace* and Stephen J. Burn's *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* did the same, both containing lengthy discussions of "E Unibus Pluram" in their opening chapters. Boswell, arguing for the crucial role of the essay "in unfolding the shape of Wallace's career" (9), presents a reading of it that attempts to resolve the apparent contradictions between Wallace's theories and his fiction. Employing a dialectical approach that has typified readings of Wallace (see also, for instance, Catherine Nichols's earlier argument that *Infinite Jest* "turns the carnivalesque against itself" [3]), Boswell contends that Wallace's work refuses an opposition between cynicism and naïveté, and argues that his ironising of irony – "to disclose what irony has been hiding" – results in "gooey sentiment" emerging as "the work's indirectly intended mode" (17). The year after Boswell's monograph appeared, Robert McLaughlin once again examined "E Unibus Pluram" in detail, and suggested that Wallace's project could be understood under the rubric of "post-postmodernism," a term that would be given further definition in Stephen Burn's 2008 monograph on Wallace, Powers and Jonathan Franzen, a book that in many ways connects the concerns of the first and second waves of Wallace scholarship. In a 2006 issue of *Critique*, another two articles opened by citing the arguments of the essay-interview. Mary K. Holland used those arguments to outline the limitations of Wallace's response to contemporary culture in *Infinite Jest*, and Iannis Goerlandt employed them as a springboard for his theorisation of irony in Wallace's novel. Throughout the decade, articles still occasionally appeared that did not lean heavily on Wallace's own aesthetic articulations (such as Mark Bresnan's exploration of play in *Infinite Jest*, Jacobs's essay on *Infinite Jest* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Jeffrey Karnicky's Deleuzian analysis of kinds of stasis in Wallace's fiction), but for the most part the essay-interview nexus became an inescapable point of departure, even when, as in Paul Giles's 2007 characterisation of Wallace's "sentimental posthumanism," the emphasis was placed on Wallace's technological insights in "E Unibus Pluram" rather than on his thoughts on irony or metafiction.

So if the second wave of Wallace scholarship, profoundly influenced by his essay-interview, might be said to begin with Scott's piece in 2000, then it can be seen as reaching its peak in 2009. In January, in a memorial tribute section of the journal *Modernism/Modernity*, established Wallace critics including Boswell, Burn and Steven Moore reiterated their sense of the author's work as a response to irony and to his literary forefathers, and Brendan Beirne carried out yet another reading of "E Unibus Pluram" as the central document for understanding Wallace. James Annesley's short review piece for the *Journal of American Studies* was also dominated by the articulations of the essay-interview, and later in the year Boswell restated his reading of Wallace's project in a lengthy entry for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Building on this critical consensus in an article for the first issue of the journal *The Point*, Jon Baskin placed Wallace's career firmly in its literary-historical context and crystallised the challenge he presented to the prevailing artistic conventions of his time. In addition, this article made fully evident what has been, from a literary-critical perspective, the most striking feature of Wallace Studies thus far:

namely the implicit agreement among so many critics with Wallace's professed premise that fiction should act as both "diagnosis and cure," that it should be viewed not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention. This widespread methodological consensus is what permits Holland, for example, or Catherine Toal in her examination of depression discourse, to assess *Infinite Jest*'s "success" or "failure" as a problem-solving matrix for wider culture. Baskin puts it this way:

> It is impossible to understand *Jest* – and Wallace's fiction more generally – without taking seriously Wallace's ambition to write a novel that would not only document but also respond to these kinds of pain. Modern art, he believed, too often treated pain as corresponding to some existential truth, converted it into an abstraction, or glared at it for amusement. Wallace's therapeutic art always treated pain as a symptom of distress, confusion and isolation.

In Baskin's account, moreover, it is not simply modern art, or postmodern metafiction, that is to blame for the malaise Wallace is addressing, but the very project of "theory" itself as a master discourse for reading literature and analysing culture. Baskin suggests that, for Wallace, the problem with the poststructuralist master-theorists was "their endorsement of a pattern of thought that tended to bend back on itself," the construction of "theories built on a search for causes and the exposition of symptoms [that] provide no medicine for a person in pain." What Baskin calls "the plague of irresponsible intellect" has taught readers the lesson that "the authentic contemporary subject, just like the real artist, sacrifices sincerity and fellow feeling for the deeper truths of abstraction, alienation and cynicism." Against this – and following the example of the only theoretical figure Baskin excepts from criticism, Wittgenstein – Wallace gives us a challenge that is also a therapy: "The novel for our times would compel its reader to confront the limitations of his intellectual commitments."

In Baskin's stark analysis, then, the challenge Wallace presents is psychological, ethical, and firmly post-theoretical. It is, we might summarise, a challenge to nothing less than Bacon's eminent thesis that "knowledge is power," understood as applying to any number of realms, from the health of the mind, to interpersonal relations, to political action. Viewed against this background, the papers on Wallace presented at the Liverpool and New York conferences in 2009 were conspicuous for the extent to which prevailing theoretical systems, and a wide variety of theorists, were engaged with as the major foil for Wallace's fiction. The attempt to move beyond what the New York organisers referred to as "the author's own articulation of his project as a response to irony" appeared also to mean, for the most part, moving beyond an examination of Wallace's relation to preceding literary figures. While one new name, Laurence Sterne, was added to the list of specifically literary influences (see Thomas), the majority of papers focused on Wallace's relation to philosophers and theorists, including George Berkeley, Gilles Deleuze, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, René Descartes, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, William James, Fredric Jameson, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, Paul Ricoeur, Richard Rorty, Gilbert Ryle, Jean Paul-Sartre and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Most noteworthy about these papers, moreover, was the way theorists and thinkers were not generally read as providing external explanations, as it were, for aspects of Wallace's texts. Rather, presenters demonstrated a marked tendency to utilise theory in a way that emphasised Wallace's own assimilation and response to it, with the often explicit assumption that Wallace was himself versed in all these figures and engaging in implicit dialogue with them in his fiction.

In literary-critical terms, this is a significant development. What became known as "literary theory," and eventually simply "theory" (see Culler), initially arose as a method of reading "against the grain," with the aim of exploring a text's unconscious (whether political,

psychological, gendered etc.). But as theory has moved from a position of peripheral challenge to one of conventional centrality in academic discourse, its relation to texts has become newly problematic, both because the epistemological claims of high theory have come under fire from a variety of sources, and because literary texts have begun to engage critically with their own relation to theoretical formulations. Literary critics such as Mark Currie, Mark McGurl and Daniel Punday have explored this problem in general terms, but Wallace critics have found it easier to negotiate because of the assumption of genius and encyclopaedic knowledge attached to their object of study. To take just one example from the 2009 conferences: Joshua Sperling prefaced his New York paper on Wallace and Heidegger with the claim that Wallace could be assumed to have read Heidegger's late essay "The Question Concerning Technology," and hence that essay provided a legitimate point of entry for Sperling's argument. Whereas the rise of theory was initially viewed as the conclusive destruction of intention, the final nail in the coffin of Barthes's dead author, here intention is birthed again to co-exist with theory, resulting in fresh forms of critical engagement. This shift, perhaps, goes some way to explaining the influence of Wallace's essay-interview. When theory was at its zenith in the academy, what a writer thought he or she was doing in their fiction was not a decisive factor for critics; but when major writers become willing to engage the discourses of theory itself – to speak the language of the critic, and challenge that language on its own turf – it is impossible not to take notice.

In many ways, then, these conference papers represented a more various and affirmative response than Baskin's to Wallace's own contention, made in his first published essay in 1988, that "the contemporary artist can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers – no matter how stratospheric – as divorced from his own concerns" ("Fictional Futures" 13). For Wallace, the impact of continental philosophy and theory – "such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man" (13) – on humanities teaching in the American university could not be ignored; the Romantic view of language as a mirror had given way to an acknowledgment of language's performative power, so that belief in unproblematic models of mimesis and reference had to be replaced by the recognition that "the relations between literary artist, literary language, and literary artifact are vastly more complex and powerful than has been realized hitherto" (14). Nevertheless, Baskin is right to place primary emphasis on Wallace's ethical challenge. Like David Markson in one of Wallace's literary models, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* ("The Empty Plenum"), Wallace's fiction highlights the performative effects of theory, consistently acknowledging the power of theoretical explanation at the same time as registering how that very power might itself present an ethical problem.

In confronting literary theory with its own assumptions and often unexpected results in this manner, Wallace's fiction tallies, moreover, with a concurrent shift in contemporary theory itself, away from a focus on epistemological questions and toward the consideration of ethical ones. In recent years, there has been a much-pronounced-upon "ethical turn" in academic literary criticism, with two main critical strands arising. The first, drawing its orientation from traditional Aristotelian moral theory, has focused on authors of social and psychological nuance, most usually realists of the nineteenth century, most notably Jane Austen and Henry James (see Booth; Nussbaum). The second strand, which attempts to incorporate the insights of poststructuralist theory into a reformulated ethics, prefers modernist and contemporary authors, figures such as Samuel Beckett and J. M. Coetzee, whose work foregrounds encounters of the narrative perspective with otherness, and the failures of language and cognition to fully incorporate alterity into discourses of power and dominance (see Attridge; Gibson; Russell Smith). No real place has yet been found within these two strands for a maximalist writer like

Wallace – Zadie Smith calls him "the opposite of an aphorist" (267) – whose language saturates its object of discussion rather than approaching it tentatively in the mode of a more reserved, minimalist author like Coetzee.

In a recent overview article on this emerging field, Dorothy Hale has contended that the separate ethical-critical strands described above are in fact united by a shared assumption that "the ethical value of literature lies in the felt encounter with alterity that it brings to the reader" (899). Hale argues that "the names poststructuralist theorists give to literary experience – names like 'estrangement,' 'defamiliarization,' and 'difficulty' – are, like Nussbaum's 'love,' an attempt to answer Foucauldian and Marxist subjective functionalism by offering an alternative theory of private interiority" (902). However, while private interiority may be celebrated as the primary affective ground for these literary-ethical approaches, Zadie Smith has suggested that such a reconstitution of interiority may not be enough for a contemporary ethics. In her essay in appreciation of Wallace, Smith remarks that

> *Brief Interviews* pitched itself as a counterweight to the narcotic qualities of contemporary life, and then went a step further. It questioned the Jamesian notion that fine awareness leads a priori to responsibility. It suggested that too much awareness – particularly self-awareness – has allowed us to be less responsible than ever. It was meant for readers of my generation, born under the star of four interlocking revolutions, undreamed of in James's philosophy: the ubiquity of television, the voraciousness of late capitalism, the triumph of therapeutic discourse, and philosophy's demotion into a branch of linguistics. (268)

While the "interlocking revolutions" Smith names here are not exactly undreamed of in the work of Beckett or Coetzee, Wallace registers them in a wholly different way to earlier writers. Paul Giles has captured this difference well in his claim that "the unusual aspect of Wallace's writing is the way he starts stylistically from the repetitive strains of popular culture and then works his way back through those systems of accumulation to explore specters of alterity" (332). This formulation hints at how a Wallace-inspired ethical criticism does not necessarily have to repeat Wallace's own reading of his intentions in the essay-interview; Giles says little in his article about irony, sincerity or "single-entendre principles." Instead, Giles makes clear Wallace's contrast with writers such as Saul Bellow, who "allow[s] his characters an estranged perspective on the degradations of commercial culture" (332), and John Updike: "Rather than beginning, like Updike, with familiar human perspectives and then trying (often uneasily) to make inferences about larger social and political contexts, Wallace starts with abstraction and then uses the human element to subvert rigid technocratic patterns" (333).

The contrast with Coetzee and Beckett is different but just as pronounced. These writers often foreground a narrative agency or point-of-view in the midst of dialogue or encounter with what is other (even if that "other" is the subject's own body), whereas Wallace's linguistic registers – especially in the period from *Infinite Jest* to *Oblivion* – regularly appear generated from non-human sources, externally determined and determining. In a complex but telling article that resonates with Giles's insights above, Dan Tysdal has argued that Wallace's method in many of his short stories involves close engagement with "a discursive, representational or social field." Each story does not simply take the chosen field as its subject matter, but also as "the arbiter of the text's particular constitution of spatial and temporal dimensions," while at the same time "working through [the field's] visibilities and repressions, testing its boundaries, seeking out and adumbrating its limits" (79). In other words, in many of Wallace's stories the language is drawn almost wholly from a pre-established discourse, with the characters in the story constituted (and often self-constituted) through the frame of that language, which language the reader then

encounters in the process of its deconstruction. Tysdal's example is "A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life," which engages the discursive field of literary minimalism, but a similar analysis could be made of "Forever Overhead" (the coming-of-age narrative), "The Depressed Person" (psychotherapy), "Mister Squishy" (advertising and focus groups), or even the earlier "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (metafiction). As a result, while Hale suggests that for contemporary ethical criticism of both the Aristotelian and poststructuralist variety "the reader's ethical experience of alterity begins with the encounter with literary character" (903), Wallace's stress on the importance of discursive fields offers something different. As Smith puts it: "if one is used to the consolation of 'character,' well then Wallace is truly a dead end. His stories simply don't investigate character; they don't intend to. Instead they're turned outwards, towards us. It's our character that's being investigated" (276).

Numerous critics have registered Smith's insight here in different ways, aiming to describe the innovative modes of reader-writer relations that Wallace's fiction invokes. Cioffi remarks that "*Infinite Jest* forces the reader to recognise the kind of behaviour she is engaged in" (170), while Jacobs suggests that Wallace's fiction evinces a "participatory aesthetic" ("American" 226). Boswell was one of the first to explore in detail Wallace's methods for eliciting this readerly participation, and in the Modernism/Modernity memorial issue he clarifies his earlier insights: "the world outside Wallace's books is always the reader's interior. […] And because these 'single entendre principles' are felt by the reader rather than articulated by the writer, they remain vital and alive" ("A Gesture" 8). Wallace's disruption of standard models of representation in order to provoke the agency of the reader was also a theme of many papers at the 2009 conferences. John Udelson, in New York, highlighted the way texts such as "The Planet Trillaphon" and *The Broom of the System* end in mid-sentence, allowing the reader to participate in the text's imaginative completion. In his keynote lecture at Liverpool, *Elegant Complexity* author Greg Carlisle likewise suggested that Wallace's "undefined-climax technique" allows him "to put the work of completing or making decisions about the narrative on each individual reader, perhaps giving them the perspective and practice for making decisions in their own lives" ("Consider"). Also at Liverpool, I argued that what I term Wallace's "New Sincerity" depends upon a kind of ethical undecidability in his work, which opens up a space for the reader to inhabit and challenges the investment in writerly mastery that characterises most modern and postmodern literature. And apposite here too is his fellow writer George Saunders's more informal description of Wallace – "He was a wake-up artist. […] he went around waking people up" – which chimes with how Wallace himself once described the job of the writer: "to wake the reader up to stuff that the reader's been aware of all the time" (qtd. in Lipsky 41).

It remains the task of the literary critic to show as precisely as possible (Wallace teaches us that absolute precision is necessarily impossible) how Wallace's radical method for waking readers up to agency operates in his texts, and how this technique is linked to his highly original style. To this end, Timothy Aubry has carried out an exemplary reading of "one prodigiously long sentence" in *Infinite Jest*, where the narrative recounts Don Gately's understanding of the process of recovery in AA (Aubry 210, *Infinite Jest* 350-51). Aubry shows how the determinism of the sentence's narrative thrust – leading in gradual stages from early recovery to a "mechanical form of obedience" – rubs up against its claims to allow for "expanded agency." This creates an opportunity for the reader, like the addict, to choose whether or not to embrace this "paradoxical logic whereby a surrender of volition leads to freedom": "Wallace's sentence encourages, through its overt registration of its own tensions, the reader's interpretative freedom, a freedom to doubt the validity of the final word 'free.'" Moreover, this occurs at the same time, according to Aubry, as the "temporal experience of reading" the sentence "mimics the arduous

experience of recovering in AA" (211). Hence, the complexity in such writing is not simply a way for Wallace to catch the attention of a certain kind of reader accustomed to reading long difficult novels (one interpretation of Wallace's style that Baskin suggests), and is not only a question of foregrounding the "Ethical Appeal" that Wallace himself contends the contemporary writer can and should make ("Authority" 77). It is also, as Smith claims, a way of investigating the reader's character, of putting the reader in the position of the addict ("don't compare, identify" is one of AA's slogans in *Infinite Jest*), and of letting the reader experience, through complicated structures of empathy, the modalities of choice involved.

Along with Giles's analysis of Wallace's narrative procedure, Tysdal's discussion of his engagement with discursive fields, and Elizabeth Freudenthal's recent explorations of issues of embodiment and identity in Wallace's texts, Aubry's method of close reading suggests the direction a third wave of Wallace scholarship might be heading in its engagement with Wallace's literary ethics. On the one hand, this critical work, in its reluctance to account for that ethics by reading Wallace's fiction as a straightforward allegory of his theoretical claims, overlaps with a growing awareness that Wallace's non-fiction need not simply be read in the shadow of his fiction. Wallace's philosophical output has begun to receive attention from trained philosophers (see Eckert; Turnbull), while critics have also begun to explore his journalism in the context of the history of that genre (see Ribbat; Roiland), and as a key to understanding Wallace's political concerns (see Jenner; Kelly, "Democracy"). On the other hand, this third-wave scholarship also offers a challenge to the assumptions that have come to typify the field of literary ethics more generally, and not only regarding the central importance of character. While otherness and difference have been the major watchwords in recent developments in literary ethics – Michael Eskin remarks, in another overview piece, that "one of the central tenets of current ethical criticism of all colors […] is the singular encounter between reader and text-as-other" (560) – Wallace's fiction shifts the emphasis to the issue of sameness, specifically highlighting "some sort of weird ambient sameness in different kinds of human relationships" (*Brief Interviews* 131-32). In emphasising this sameness, Wallace's ethics also attempts to disown the notion of writerly mastery; for Wallace, in "Octet" at least, being honest with the reader involves being

> more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us, instead of a Writer, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction as he coordinates the whole campaign from back at some gleaming abstract Olympian HQ. (136)

On this issue of the reader-writer relationship, so clearly central to Wallace's fiction – and fully aware that I am repeating the gesture I have most associated with Wallace Studies to date – I think it is worth giving Wallace himself the final words. When asked by Larry McCaffery about the blurring of boundaries between inner and outer in his early work, Wallace moved his answer in the direction of the kind of reader-writer interaction he imagined, one influenced by developments in scientific understanding that he felt literature had ignored to its detriment:

> Observing a quantum phenomenon's been proven to alter the phenomenon. Fiction likes to ignore this fact's implications. We still think in terms of a story 'changing' the reader's emotions, cerebrations, maybe even her life. We're not keen on the idea of a story sharing its valence with the reader. But the reader's own life 'outside' the story changes the story. You could argue that it affects only 'her reaction to the story' or 'her take on the story.' But these things are the story. This is the way Barthian and Derridean 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. ("An Interview" 141)

Participants in Wallace Studies – readers, fans, critics, scholars – may have wanted at first to resist the idea of Wallace's death, and would probably want to resist equally, if not more so, the idea that his texts are "dead." Nonetheless, Wallace's idea of language living through the reader, an idea he generously attributes to Derrida and Barth(es) but which takes on a special and original role in his own fiction, should help inspire readers and critics to play their part in continually reviving those texts. In other places, Wallace talked of fiction less as a scientific sharing of valence and more as a conversation, and many of Wallace's authorial personae want more than anything to have conversations, yet despair of ever finding the language to get outside themselves and reach out to the other. The role of the reader of Wallace will be to take up these conversations, and to honour the dialogic quality Wallace strove for by developing new dialogues with his work. It is fair to say, in conclusion, that Wallace Studies has begun in just this mode, and the conversations between the writer and his readers look set to be many, lengthy, and perhaps even infinite.

NOTES

1. To view the full schedules for the 2009 conferences on Wallace, see (as of 1 March 2010) http://footnotesconference.wordpress.com/2009/10/28/conference-schedule/ and the link at http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/news/conferences/liverpool-dfw-conference-reports.html.

WORKS CITED

Annesley, James. "David Foster Wallace." *Journal of American Studies* 43.1 (2009): 131-34.

Attridge, Derek. *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.

Aubry, Timothy. "Selfless Cravings: Addiction and Recovery in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest." *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*. Ed. Jay Prosser. London: Routledge, 2008. 206-19.

Baskin, Jon. "Death is Not the End: David Foster Wallace: His Legacy and his Critics." *The Point* 1 (2009): 33-45. Online access (n.pg). 1 March 2010. http://www.thepointmag.com/archive/death-is-not-the-end

Beirne, Brendan. "Can We Say What We Mean?" *Modernism/Modernity* 16.1 (2009): 18-24.

Booth, Wayne. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.

Boswell, Marshall. "David Foster Wallace." *Twenty-First-Century American Novelists*, Second Series. Ed. Wanda H. Giles and James R. Giles. Dictionary of Literary Biography 350. London: Gale, 2009. 352-65.

---. "A Gesture Toward Understanding David Foster Wallace." *Modernism/Modernity* 16.1 (2009): 7-9.

---. *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2003.

Bresnan, Mark. "The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Critique* 50.1 (2008): 51-68.

Bucher, Matt. "Fantods: David Foster Wallace, wallace-l, and Literary Fandom Online." Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies. CUNY Graduate Centre. 20 Nov. 2009. Online access. 1 March 2010. http://www.mattbucher.com/2009/11/24/fantods/

Burn, Stephen J. *David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest*: A Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum, 2003.

---. "*Infinite Jest* and the Twentieth Century: David Foster Wallace's Legacy." *Modernism/Modernity* 16.1 (2009): 12-18.

---. *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*. London: Continuum, 2008.

Carlisle, Greg. "Consider David Foster Wallace." Consider David Foster Wallace. University of Liverpool. 29 July 2009. Online access. 1 March 2010. http://www.sideshowmediagroup.com/?p=97#respond

---. *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's* Infinite Jest. Austin, TX: SSMG Press, 2007.

Cioffi, Frank Louis. "'An Anguish Become Thing': Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." Narrative 8.2 (2000): 161-81.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.

Currie, Mark. *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998.

Eckert, Maureen. "Where the Conversation Lapses…Understanding DFW's Philosophy Thesis." Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies. CUNY Graduate Centre. 20 Nov. 2009.

Eskin, Michael. "Introduction: The Double 'Turn' to Ethics and Literature?" *Poetics Today* 25.4 (2004): 557-72.

Freudenthal, Elizabeth. "Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectifiction and Identity in *Infinite Jest*." *New Literary History*. Forthcoming.

---. "David Foster Wallace, Embodiment, and Identity from the Outside In." Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies. CUNY Graduate Centre. 20 Nov. 2009.

Gibson, Andrew. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

Giles, Paul. "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace." *After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. Andrew Hoberek. Spec. issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007): 327-44.

Goerlandt, Iannis. "'Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away': Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." Critique 47.3 (2006): 309-28.

Hale, Dorothy J. "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century." *PMLA*124.3 (2009): 896-905.

Hayles, N. Katherine. "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*." *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 675-97.

Holland, Mary K. "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Critique* 47.3 (2006): 218-42.

Jacobs, Timothy. "American Touchstone: The Idea of Order in Gerard Manley Hopkins and David Foster Wallace." *Comparative Literature Studies* 38.3 (2001): 215–31.

---. "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49.3 (2007): 265-292.

Jenner, Paul. "Don't Compare, Identify: David Foster Wallace on John McCain." Consider David Foster Wallace. University of Liverpool. 29 July 2009.

Karnicky, Jeffrey. "Kinds of Stasis in David Foster Wallace." *Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture*. New York: Palgrave, 2007. 91-124.

Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." Consider David Foster Wallace. University of Liverpool. 29 July 2009.

---. "Democracy in America: David Foster Wallace's Political Essays." Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies. CUNY Graduate Centre. 20 Nov. 2009.

Kiberd, Declan. *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living.* London: Faber, 2009.
LeClair, Tom. "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace." *Critique* 38.1 (1996): 12-37.
Lipsky, David. *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*. New York: Broadway Books, 2010.
McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. London: Harvard UP, 2009.
McLaughlin, Robert. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *Symploke* 12.1-2 (2004): 53-68.
Moore, Steven. "In Memoriam David Foster Wallace." *Modernism/Modernity* 16.1 (2009): 1-3.
Nichols, Catherine. "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Critique* 43.1 (2001): 3-16.
Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.
Olsen, Lance. "Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 199-215.
Parker, Scott. "Notes from Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies." *Rain Taxi Online* (Winter 2009/2010). Online access. 1 March 2010. http://www.raintaxi.com/online/2009winter/footnotesDFW.shtml
Punday, Daniel. *Narrative After Deconstruction*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2003.
Ribbat, Christoph. "New Journalism, New New Journalism, DFW Journalism: Wallace and Reporting." Consider David Foster Wallace. University of Liverpool. 29 July 2009.
Roiland, Joshua. "Getting Away From It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion." *Literary Journalism Studies* 1.2 (2009): 89-105.
Rother, James. "Reading and Riding the Post-Scientific Wave: The Shorter Fiction of David Foster Wallace." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 216-34.
Saunders, George. Untitled Tribute. *Five Dials: Celebrating the Life of David Foster Wallace, 1962-2008*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009. 15.
Scott, A. O. "The Panic of Influence." *The New York Review of Books* 47.2 (10 Feb. 2000). Online access. 1 March 2010. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/232
Smith, Russell, ed. *Beckett and Ethics*. London: Continuum, 2008.
Smith, Zadie. "*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace." *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009. 257-300.
Sperling, Joshua. "Reading *Infinite Jest* through Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology.'" Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies. CUNY Graduate Centre. 20 Nov. 2009.
Striphas, Ted. *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009.
Thomas, Chris. "Infinite Jests: David Foster Wallace and Laurence Sterne." Consider David Foster Wallace. University of Liverpool. 29 July 2009.
Toal, Catherine. "Corrections: Contemporary American Melancholy." *Journal of European Studies* 33.3-4 (2003): 305-22.
Turnbull, Daniel. "*This is Water* and the Ethics of Attention: Wallace, Murdoch and Nussbaum." Consider David Foster Wallace. University of Liverpool. 29 July 2009.
Tysdal, Dan. "Inarticulation and the Figure of Enjoyment: Raymond Carver's Minimalism Meets David Foster Wallace's 'A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life.'" *Wascana Review* 38.1 (2005): 66-83.

Udelson, John. "Inconclusive Endings: DFW's Search for the Right Word(s): 'Planet Trillaphon,' *Broom*, and 'Good Old Neon.'" Footnotes: New Directions in David Foster Wallace Studies. CUNY Graduate Centre. 20 Nov. 2009.

Wallace, David Foster. "Authority and American Usage." *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*. London: Abacus, 2005. 66-127.

---. "Brief Interview with a Five Draft Man" (interview with Stacey Schmeidel). *Amherst* (Spring 1999). Online access. 1 March 2010. https://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/magazine/extra/node/66410

---. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1999.

---. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 151-94.

---. "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.2 (1990): 217-39.

---. "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 8.3 (1988). Available as pdf, pages numbered 1-27. Online access. 1 March 2010. www.theknowe.net/dfwfiles/pdfs/ffacy.pdf

---. *Infinite Jest*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1996.

---. "An Interview with David Foster Wallace" (with Larry McCaffery). *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 127-50.

---. *Oblivion: Stories*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2004.