

the
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— of —

**DAVID
FOSTER
WALLACE**

studies

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Guest Editors: Alice Bennett and Peter Sloane



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Abbreviations

Quotations from Wallace's (and Wallace-centric) books are cited using the abbreviations listed below:

- BOS* *The Broom of the System*
- GCH* *Girl with Curious Hair*
- IJ* *Infinite Jest*
- SFT* *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*
- BI* *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*
- EM* *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞*
- CL* *Consider the Lobster*
- OB* *Oblivion*
- TIW* *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*
- TPK* *The Pale King*
- BFN* *Both Flesh and Not*
- SR* *Signifying Rappers*
- CW* *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, Ed. Stephen J. Burn
- UND* *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell
- LEG* *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, Ed. Samuel Cohen
- CON* *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*,
Ed. David Hering
- LOV* *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*,
D.T. Max
- ALT* *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*, David Lipsky

PREFACE

Clare Hayes-Brady

WELCOME TO ISSUE 2 OF *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*. This special issue, guest edited by Alice Bennett and Peter Sloane, emerged from a conference on Wallace’s short fiction held in Bristol in 2015, and showcases some of the finest cutting-edge scholarship on Wallace’s shorter works. Wallace, as Bennett and Sloane argue in their introduction, is undeniably seen primarily as a novelist, and not as a short story writer, although his short fiction is arguably just as vital and audacious as his novels. It is certainly true that critical and cultural commentary has historically focused on the novels; indeed, it might be reasonable to suggest that Wallace has been seen not only as a novelist but more specifically as the author of a single work of major cultural importance. What would it mean to move the lens from *Infinite Jest*, and to focus on the short things rather than the “long thing”? To look at the infinitesimal rather than the infinite, which, as Wallace points out in *Everything and More*, is not wildly different in essence? By gathering the essays that follow, Bennett and Sloane work towards an answer to this question. They note, astutely, that recent scholarship on Wallace’s writing has begun to move away from *Jest* as the lodestar, and that archival work in particular has led to the collapse—or at least the blurring—of the boundaries between “novelist” and “short-story writer” that we may be tempted to apply. As we see again and again with Wallace, taxonomy is evasive; the

answer is not Either/Or, but Both/And. In the case of form, indeed, it seems that Wallace's Both/And-ness was often simultaneous, or at least continuous. As Bennett and Sloane note, and several of the essays develop, Wallace was necessarily bound by the practicalities of production, which include pitch, physical printing, marketing and so forth, all of which work to impose a taxonomy that may not add anything very much to the reading experience itself.

The essays in this volume, then, are united by theme, and cohere into a vibrant and challenging conversation about reading Wallace in light of this persistent liminality of form. Where Boswell contends that Wallace was a writer of long things because his first publication was a novel, we might equally argue that all of Wallace's longer works were failed shorter ones, or that the boundary between what constitutes short and what constitutes long, what is a collection, what is a cycle, and what is a novel, is often hard to distinguish. The essays that follow interrogate the claims we make about category, in ways applicable both to Wallace and to a broader discourse around production and taxonomy. The essays ask us to consider redrafting and editing as well as writing, collecting and curating as well as creating, marketing as well as making. Appropriately, the essays themselves range in form somewhat, with David Punter's joyous, playful opening essay veering delightfully between interrogation and mimicry, setting a challenging tone for the rest of the issue. Various engaging in close reading and constellation-making, the issue as a whole both articulates and troubles an image of Wallace as a key figure in the contemporary short story scene, drawing together quite disparate existing critical discourses and offering innovative interventions in the conversation. Bennett and Sloane offer a brief and persuasive overview of Wallace's place in the canon, allowing the essays themselves to work out of this context and into their individual focuses without ever becoming elliptical or solitary.

This is the first special issue of the journal, which we hope will be

one of many. Its unity of focus makes it a significant and very useful addition to the ever-growing body of scholarship in its own right, and we are proud to have it as part of the journal. The first issue was met with great acclaim and has informed rich and ongoing dialogues that will continue to echo in future issues, and our ambition is to continue to be at the center of Wallace scholarship as it flourishes. Issue 3 will be a general issue, returning to some of the conversations of the previous issues and drawing new lines of inquiry from scholars established and emerging. We are extremely proud of our collegial and supportive process of production, which we have managed to balance with the highest standards of peer review. In keeping with the Society's interdisciplinary focus and our determination to reach beyond the bounds of traditional academic forms, we are using the journal to showcase other forms of interpretation associated with Wallace. In my letter preceding Issue 1 I spoke of the hybrid identity of this journal and society, recognizing the longstanding collaboration between academic and non- or alt-academic readers. That hybridity is very much in evidence in this issue too, in the range and form of the essays and in the design and production of the journal. As with Issue 1, our cover art has been designed especially to complement the issue's theme and content, this time by the inimitable Chris Ayers. We hope that you enjoy this issue as much as we have enjoyed putting it together, and that it unlocks and guides as many conversations and debates as its predecessor.



WALLACE SHORT THINGS INTRODUCTION

Alice Bennett and Peter Sloane

AS MARSHALL BOSWELL OBSERVES in his introduction to the essays collected in *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing,”* “it is reasonable to wonder why critics and readers don’t regard Wallace as primarily a short story writer,”¹ since the balance of his story-collections-to-books ratio is comparable to peers who are categorized primarily as short story writers (Boswell’s example is Lorrie Moore, but we could also try this thought experiment in the hypothetical: how many novels might it take for George Saunders to start being dubbed a novelist?). It therefore takes some substantial effort to unthink Wallace as being primarily a novelist and to consider him as a writer of short fiction. This approach would involve not just identifying and taking seriously his ambitions for his work in the short form alongside those ambitions that he held for his long work, but also making some claims about his place within the history of short fiction. Writing at a time—after Carver, after Barthelme and Barth—when short fiction was resolving itself into something new and doing so in ways which were perhaps more acute in the short

1 Marshall Boswell, “Preface: David Foster Wallace and ‘The Long Thing,’” in *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing,”* ed. Marshall Boswell (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), vi.

form than in the novel, Wallace's short works should be considered as part of an attempt to remake short fiction with a purpose and ambition that is just as important as his groundbreaking influence on the contemporary novel. The essays in this special issue of *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* therefore attempt to identify the contributions that Wallace made to short fiction and to debates within the form, to tackle the complex and debated relationship between his long and short works, and to offer analysis of particular short works and story collections in the context of Wallace's achievements in short fiction.

Indeed, it was the publication of *The Long Thing* that provided the initial impetus for this project, inspiring the conference *David Foster Wallace and the Short Things* held at the University of Bristol, UK, in July 2015, from which many of the papers, augmented by Jeffrey Severs's and David Punter's contributions, are drawn. If that work operates from an implicit (if polemical/contentious) premise that Wallace's most natural and or accomplished writerly space is the novel (perhaps "of ideas", as Adam Kelly writes),² or because, as Boswell remarks, "Wallace thought of *himself* as primarily a novelist,"³ this day would test the grounds for seeing short fiction as equally important to Wallace, and Wallace to it. As Chris Power wrote in his 2015 survey for *The Guardian*, "besides *Infinite Jest* it is arguably his three story collections that represent the most important part of his work."⁴ The conference was well attended, seeing papers by established Wallace scholars such as Clare Hayes-Brady, David Hering, and Tim Groenland, alongside those of the next generation in Rob

2 Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas," in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"*, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3.

3 Boswell, vi.

4 Chris Power, "A brief survey of the short story: David Foster Wallace," *The Telegraph* 25th May 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/may/25/a-brief-survey-of-the-short-story-david-foster-wallace>.

Mayo, Dennis Kinlaw, Sigolene Vivier, and Elliott Morsia. The plenary was delivered by Stephen J. Burn, and the day was rounded off by a fascinating Skype Q&A with Wallace's enigmatic friend and co-MFA student JT Jackson. As seems to be the case with Wallace conferences and criticism more broadly, the atmosphere was congenial, collegiate, with a sense that each of the attendees, whether speaking, observing, or chairing, was participating equally in something meaningful ("a certain sort of interrogation," as it were), as there is with Wallace's increasingly contentious but ever-vital writing.

The papers and their subjects were disparate, as were their methodologies. Genetic criticism was a notably new and peculiarly opposite arrival, an approach facilitated, or at the very least made viable, by the Harry Ransom Center's acquisition of the David Foster Wallace archive in 2010. This event has arguably changed the landscape of Wallace Studies over the course of the past eight years. Groenland identifies the importance of the archive, commenting that "With the opening of this archive, Wallace scholars are thus beginning to confront questions that have already become key ones in the study of several canonical high modernist authors."⁵ For anyone uninitiated into the formal and thematic eclecticism of Wallace's oeuvre, the papers presented might have been about many and not a single author, even one so globally influenced (as Lucas Thompson has argued in *Global Wallace*) and influential (as Boswell argues in *The Wallace Effect*). However, if one key observation united these papers it was that Wallace's long things and short things were so tightly interwoven that distinguishing between them was at the very least challenging and, at worst, nonsensical. That said, attempting to define the boundaries between them forces one to focus, to pay attention as Alice has highlighted, not simply to the coextensivity of concerns, but to Wallace's trouble *with*, and troubling *of* genre and form—perhaps the hallmark

5 Tim Groenland, "'A Recipe for a Brick': *The Pale King* in Progress," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58.4 (2009), 365.

of a career-long wrestling match with innovation on the one hand, and much lauded sincerity (albeit “with a motive”) on the other.

The conference was conceived always with an eye towards subsequent collection and publication of essays, a kind of companion piece to *The Long Thing*. But, and perhaps surprisingly, there was not at first such an appetite for a collection of essays on the short fiction as there was for the long fiction, a feeling that seemed to be founded on the bias towards scholarship of the longer works (any database search for Wallace reveals an inordinate interest in *Infinite Jest*), supported by occasional reference to the shorter pieces, as if they were mere supplements (let’s leave Derrida as a trace, here) to, or rather rehearsals for the more accomplished and typical longer works seen as Wallace’s most natural form, with *IJ* the gravitational hub around which constellate the “other” works (the word “mere” is remarkably recurrent in discussions of short fiction, as Mayo notes in his essay). Maybe, though, this attention to the longer works is not inordinate, but justified by the impact that they have had not simply on the contemporary novel but its perceived function and its communicative potential as an art form in an era that witnessed the (highly exaggerated) “death of the novel”; Lorin Stein persuasively suggests that Wallace’s “masterpiece” has changed the “sounds and aim of American fiction,”⁶ ushering in a “third wave of modernism,” as Boswell has so influentially written.⁷

In the years between then and now, many of the contributors to the conference (including Alice) have published monographs devoted to or interested in Wallace: David Hering’s *Fiction and Form* is a masterful clinical project of reverse engineering, unpicking the sometimes hasty stitching between story/novel; in *The Unspeaking Failures of David Foster Wallace* Hayes-Brady both directly and indirectly addresses Wallace’s struggles to and to not conform, which

6 *CW*, 89.

7 *UND*, 1.

she figures as an aesthetics of failure; Alice's own "Focus, people!" in her monograph *Contemporary Fictions of Attention* draws out Wallace's career-long, even definitional fascination with both the (in)capacity for attention and the things we pay attention to; Groenland's *The Art of Editing* is the most recent addition, again focusing on the processes of composition, the formal mechanisms of selection and revision that lead to or enable subsequent formal classification. If early scholarship took for granted that each work was something like a whole, "complete" project, recent scholarship, taking the genetic turn, has opted rather to tease out the intersections, examining not so much or singly the published material, but the often-dissolved sutures between dissected limbs and organs, as well as aborted, migrated, transplanted, even amputated tissue. In fact, it was Wallace's failure to mold a coherent narrative from, to find the appropriate formal container for so many disparate parts of what has become *The Pale King* that instigated a new form of Wallace scholarship.

So, then, what arose from the conference and the works subsequently published is that Wallace was perhaps not a writer of short stories, or of creative non-fiction, or of novels, but rather that he wrote, and that those writings—loose ideational matrices aligned by mood, by feeling, by his preternatural gift for speculation and cultural analyses of the post-postmodern condition—were often crudely bound (with all of its connotations) as either short form or long form. Another variation, possibly, of Wallace's interest in what he calls, in *This is Water*, "the sub-surface unity of all things." There are moments in *Oblivion*, for example, that would sit as or more comfortably in *The Pale King* (painstakingly and illuminatingly identified by Hering), just as there are moments in *Infinite Jest* that would work equally well in *Oblivion*. In the broadest sense, then, the informing concepts of both *The Long Thing* and this special issue are flawed, and Wallace was simply a writer confined by the practicalities and realities of publishing: writing has to be issued in some form, and

scholarship must proceed from the material reality and the assumption that there are such things as discreet forms. Wallace scholarship, then, necessarily involves a careful negotiation of interstitial textual spaces and absences, the bonds as opposed to those things bonded.



What follows here are some words of justification for our decision to elevate the short works and an acknowledgement of the particular complications in doing so in Wallace's case. Our first contention is that Wallace's career reveals a uniquely strange relationship between short and long works. Part of Boswell's argument in favor of Wallace as most significantly a writer of long things comes from the initial publication of *Broom*, which was only then followed by his first short fiction collection. By this account, Wallace began his literary training with the hierarchy of forms wholly backwards: starting his career with a novel and then moving on to the supposed apprentice-pieces of short-story. Instead of dutifully churning out short fiction to be shared for workshop criticism, Wallace wrote *Broom* "in more or less total isolation."⁸ Moreover, by writing his novel as his apprentice piece, then attending the University of Arizona MFA program, and then subsequently subjecting the creative writing program's methods to acute critique in his short fiction, Wallace's early work turns the prevailing institutional practices and pedagogical norms of the MFA on their head. As Kasia Boddy has remarked, *Girl with Curious Hair* is a collection that should be read as "both an exemplary product of what Mark McGurl has dubbed the 'program era' . . . and as an interrogation of that era's modes and mores."⁹ If the creative writing program treats the short story as the site for a talent's nascent development, Wallace's equivalent embryonic progression happened

8 Boswell, vi.

9 Kasia Boddy, "A Fiction of Response: *Girl with Curious Hair* in Context," in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 23.

on the scale of the novel. One interpretation of this history, then, is that Wallace began as a novelist (and a conspicuously young one at that) and so the die was cast. The other, more intriguing way of interpreting the eccentric shape of Wallace's early career is to seriously undermine any simple reading of his short stories as practice pieces or developmental experiments. Why not read *Broom*—his “essentially shitty first book,”¹⁰ a novel that began as an attempt at a “jaunty thing. Kind of like a side—I figured it would be like a hundred-page thing”¹¹—as a failed short(er) thing?

On the other hand, Wallace also gave an account of his own birth as a writer that mildly contradicts the novel-first narrative of his career progression, yet does not do anything to resolve the weird relationship between his long and short works. The Larry McCaffery interview reminds us that the first literary work that, as Wallace phrased it, “rang his cherries” was a short story, not a novel.¹² As Wallace tells it in the interview, the Yeatsian “click of the well-made box” that characterized his pleasure in formal logic was something that he found for the first time elsewhere in reading short fiction, and subsequently found in his own writing in the short form too: “The first fictional clicks I encountered were in Donald Barthelme’s ‘The Balloon’ and in parts of the first story I ever wrote, which has been in my trunk since I finished it.”¹³ Writing and reading therefore began for Wallace in the short forms. Moreover, in the same interview (a portrait of the artist as a young analytic philosopher) Wallace goes on to identify this “click” as comparable to Joyce’s epiphany, that hallmark of the writer’s reworking of the short form for the twentieth century. Wallace presents short fiction’s closural, one-shot

10 *ALT*, 22.

11 *Ibid.*, 260.

12 David Foster Wallace in Larry McCaffery, “A Conversation with David Foster Wallace,” in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 no. 2 (1993): n.p.

13 David Foster Wallace in Larry McCaffery.

pleasures as something that he discovered on his own terms, outside the writing exercises and the institutionalized short story in the context of the creative writing program. There is therefore another way of telling the story of Wallace's early development as a writer as a progress from early work on the short story to later work on a novel, but which still offers an alternative to the institutionalized apprenticeship model associated with the short story in the context of the creative writing program.

During his career, Wallace would experiment not just with the short story as a standalone piece but with all kinds of literary objects that made conventional formal distinctions irrelevant or impossible. The ungainly, overgrown, quality of "Westward," for instance, is the consequence of the story overrunning the limits of its own form, as that novella written in the margins of a short work bursts through the bounds of the short story itself. The connected but incomplete series that is *Brief Interviews* both invokes and makes impossible the kaleidoscopic coherence of a short-story sequence. *Oblivion*—in which stories such as "The Soul is Not a Smithy" or "Incarnations of Burned Children" act as trailers for or off-cuts from the longer work in progress—might be better understood, as David Hering puts it, as part of "one huge linear 'discrete project' that shed or engendered other projects during its progress"¹⁴; a grand project bigger than just a novel or a group of stories, a thing even longer than a long thing. Conversely, "Incarnations of Burned Children," when lending its name to *The Burnt Children of America* (2003) and becoming the centerpiece of a formative collection that aimed to define a new generation of writers, demonstrates the potential of short forms to aggregate and anthologize in ways that long forms can't. Or consider *The Pale King* itself, a piece of writing that so thrums with longing for formal unity that it is transmitted clearly to any reader who asks,

14 David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 126.

with Luc Herman and Toon Staes, “Can *The Pale King* (Please) be a Novel?”¹⁵ but which is still not really quite a novel. In Wallace’s work, the relationship between the short work and the long work is an unusually complex one, marked by failures that are nonetheless generative and creative.

The contradictions that bedevil any account of Wallace’s short works register equivalent contradictions in the cultural status afforded to the short story form itself. As Andrew Levy has argued, the short story has been “simultaneously lauded and denigrated” because of two seemingly incompatible characterizations: first that the form is a “practice field” best suited for the exercise of “immature simplicity,” and second that the short story requires “greater discipline and skill than longer forms.”¹⁶ This contradiction also registers in the genre’s history: is the short story the unit in which genre writers can crank out multiple variations on the same pulp themes for magazine publication, or is it the site where Joyce and Woolf perfected the techniques of modernist experimentation before marching on to revolutionize the novel? The short story is too often seen as “the hermetically sealed device idealized by New Criticism,” Paul March-Russell suggests, but can be understood alternatively as a “contradictory and episodic form” that registers incompleteness and discontinuity.¹⁷ Short fiction therefore becomes a location where many of Wallace’s preoccupations (the institutions of literature, popular culture versus the avant-garde, difficulty, and the relationship between finishedness and failure) can find a natural expression by picking up debates that are already in progress within the form.

15 Luc Herman and Toon Staes, “Introduction: Can *The Pale King* (Please) be a Novel?” *English Studies* 95, no. 1 (2014): 1.

16 Andrew Levy, *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8-9.

17 Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 87.

Naturally, Wallace has begun to be included in overviews of the contemporary short story: Martin Scofield in the *Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* identifies Wallace as a writer whose very recent work (as of 2006) offered “a fresh and sometimes startling handling of the form”¹⁸; Paul March-Russell’s 2009 *The Short Story: An Introduction*, identifies him (with George Saunders and Robert Coover) with the aspect of the postmodern short story that engages most strongly with Baudrillardian simulation¹⁹; Kasia Boddy finds Wallace continuing to stage the short story’s “struggle between familiar discourse and itself” —as cliché, banality, or institutionalized language—which, in Wallace’s writing, registers as language that “overflows into the footnotes” as terms cannot contain the things they attempt to describe.²⁰ With this recognition of Wallace’s essential place in the canon of the short story comes the question of his contribution to the form, and it is that which these essays will aim to answer.



In the opening essay, David Punter playfully rehearses some of the narrative techniques and idiosyncrasies of *Oblivion*: themes and words surface, dissolve, only to re-emerge both de- and recontextualized in essay/collection. As Wallace skillfully deploys a series of strategies and subterfuges that simultaneously employ and undermine the idea of form, and more particularly of the short form, Punter argues, or perhaps more accurately insinuates, that Wallace explodes short fiction. In this essay, what becomes apparent is that *Oblivion* is not so much a collection, as a texture, unified not by theme alone, but by effect, by feeling.

18 Martin Scofield, *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 237.

19 Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 227.

20 Kasia Boddy, *The American Short Story Since 1950* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 147–9.

Jacob Hovind, working through Wallace's place in the history of the form, examines his use of one of short fiction's most typical features: the epiphany. Closely aligned with his move toward renewed communicative potential, Wallace's interest in insight depends upon sincerity. Hovind argues that Wallace must be considered as a "post-epiphanic" exponent of the short form; while working toward some sense of revelation, Wallace, typically, resisted simply adopting a technique that had lost much of its power, that had become "used up." However, Hovind suggests, Wallace still sought to both represent and to inspire in the reader something like a revelatory moment.

Rob Mayo's concerns have to do with categorization and with the process of editorial "deciderization." Writing on *Brief Interviews*, Mayo interrogates not only the idea of short form, but the many different forms that it either takes or is assumed to take. Taking issue with the suggestion that *BI* is a story cycle, as opposed to a "mere" collection, Mayo argues that the compositional process involved re-naming, re-organization, and the moving of stories between different nascent "micro-cycles." The essay raises broader questions than about the ways in which the short form itself is the product of troubled micro-forms. Pia Masiero takes a narratological path into *Brief Interviews*, identifying how techniques of focalization, deixis of person, and the representation of minds allow the stories to diagnose the "infected systemic loop" that distorts gendered communication. Through a stand-out reading of "Think," Masiero develops an argument about how Wallace's short forms encourage a fleeting entry into other minds and other bodies, "the possibility of wearing just for one moment the other's embodied perspective."

Tim Groenland, in "'Fragmentco Unltd': 'Cede' and *The Pale King*," explores the relationship between Wallace's long and short works through careful scrutiny of the unpublished fragment called "Cede," partly published as "Backbone" in *The New Yorker* and included in *The Pale King* in this reduced form. Groenland traces the

focus on ancient Rome in those sections of “Cede” *not* published in the short story or included by Michael Pietsch in *The Pale King* to demonstrate that they are part of an intricate thematic threading that runs across other sections of Wallace’s final novel.

In the final essay of this issue, Jeff Severs examines Wallace’s strategies for negotiating fictional endings. Readings from *Girl With Curious Hair* allow for a consideration of Wallace’s early short works as repeated attempts to “refine or improve upon his first novel’s ending,” Severs argues. Ranging across Wallace’s short works, Severs ultimately understands Wallace’s short stories as carefully crafted opportunities for falling silent.

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FOOTNOTES, FOOTSTEPS, GHOSTPRINTS

David Punter

[A. OF. *OBLIVION* (c 1245 in Godef.), ad. L. *oblivion-em* forgetfulness, state of being forgotten. F. vb.-stem *oblīv-*, found in inceptive deponent *oblīv-iscī* to forget; f. *ob-* (OB-I b) + **līv-*: cf. *līvēre* to be black and blue, *livid-us* black and blue, dark.] and what stands out here mostly (against, of course, this dark, darkened, black-and-blue background, this Caravaggio-like *chiaroscuro*), is the plethora of brackets – round brackets, square brackets, which signal relative amassings of information, while always within the strict boundaries of the Oxford English Dictionary, usually known as the OED (although to some publishers and proofreaders, operating according to their own arcane rules, as the O.E.D., and it’s far from clear which of these formulations sounds more like an illness, something to be scared of, perhaps even ashamed of, something that might either cause us to be black and blue) which always supplies us, naturally, with a wealth of *exempla* (many of them, as we now know, supplied by a conscientious and apparently unfailingly pleasant inmate of Broadmoor), among which I can only pick out a couple, arranged as they are in five categories: “The state or act of forgetting or having forgotten; forgetfulness”; “Forgetfulness as resulting from inattention or carelessness; heedlessness, disregard”; “Intentional overlooking, esp. of political

offences [and I am abbreviating somewhat here]"; and (and this is a little mysterious, because all three of the previous definitions have been subsumed under the OED's category) "1," and so the following definition figures as "2:" "The condition or condition of being forgotten," and then, as "3," the increasingly, perhaps even consummately, obscure "*attrib.*, as *oblivion point, power*," but I already see that I've overlooked a second (b.) meaning under heading 2, which is "A thing forgotten," but here the "b." is preceded by a sign which I have always been taught (when proofreading) to refer to as a dagger, but which for the moment I cannot find on my chart of symbols, even though it contains entire alphabets which are deeply foreign to me, and also even though it is in common usage in order to indicate the footnote that comes after the one signified with an asterisk, and footnotes are very important in the short fiction of David Foster Wallace, which at the moment hovers somewhat behind the surface texture of this essay, or writing, or whatever it turns out to be.



But to bring it more to the fore, so to speak, it may be necessary, in order to speak of it (DFW, or D.F.W.,'s short fiction, that is) to disregard certain protocols and instead to abandon oneself to paradox and aphorism, such as, for example, that DFW's short fiction is not short fiction, or that it troubles short fiction, or that it interrogates it, or puts brackets around it, or explodes it, but the trouble here is whether these things are in some sense mutually exclusive, or whether in fact all of these strange, estranging moves occur in parallel, as it were, or even in series as the reader moves through worlds which seem radically inconclusive (we never know how things "turn out," they are "infolded." just as for some people the real problem with death [as though there are unreal problems with death] is that we shan't get to know the end of the story, we shan't know whether we can recover from the biblical-sized inundation no doubt shortly to be

caused by the melting of icecaps, or whether money alone can really sustain a Premier League football team into the quasi-infinite future, or whether Victoria Beckham will ever smile) and yet, of course, always do “end” in some way, if indeed that is only, in an artificial way, so that a second “story” (or perhaps “event” might be a better word, especially in that specific sense of “event” which is shorn of the lust for conclusion, and here perhaps we are getting into the dangerous territory of the “singularity,” the physics of which probably elude me but which plays so large and puzzling a part in the fiction of M. John Harrison) can begin—or perhaps merely “take over”—the territory already laid out in the preceding story or event, such that we are led into the delusion of a mounting of Pelion on Ossa, an accumulation for which it might never be possible to give a single, tangy name—the “poetics of depression,” for example, or “fragments of a dissociated personality,” or “insider accounts of capitalist hysteria,” as though any such nomination could somehow (and literary critics try this all the time, you don’t need to tell me) summarise or even replace the stories, could stand in for them in the way in which the supplement comes to take over the body of the text, as we might even perhaps say partially occurs with the OED (or O.E.D.) beyond or before the purview of Rousseau or Derrida.



And yet it would be callow and perhaps absurdly conventional to mention that in DFW’s short fiction (and it is here that I have *Oblivion* particularly in mind, if such a thing is possible) all is uncertain, relative, because some things are far from uncertain, for example the dress codes of the endless interns who stalk the pages of “The Suffering Channel,” for here he (and I realize with some surprise that I was tempted to write “He” here, as though having forgotten, consigned to oblivion, the death of the author, which in the case of DFW takes on a special significance as to the manner and meaning of his death

[and probably I am influenced here by a recent visit to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, where the erudite and fascinating timeline of Van Gogh's life appears to end mysteriously with his release from confinement in a mental institution and makes no mention of the manner and meaning of his death, which is of course an event quite separate from that other separation, the severing of his ear, and instead occurred as a result of a gunshot wound to the stomach, and I am told that nobody has ever managed to be conclusive as to whether this wound was self-inflicted or as the result of an "act by another party," as the legal minds would say, although I would have thought it would have been pretty simple to note that (a) he did, or conversely (b) he did not have a gun in his hand when recently deceased] which while undoubtedly tragic and mysterious was in some way all too clearly foretold by the manner and meaning of his writing, if one can rely on such a tenuous connection) takes the gravest of care to mention the more obvious signs of being up-to-the-minute, with chains of retailers and specialist makers of shoes, skirts, and assorted sportswear weaving their way like threads through the otherwise quite different story centred on the possibility of a fully artistic turd, with all the attendant problems of intention and the supposed cultural knowledge (or lack thereof) of the producer of these turds in the shapes of landmarks and great, or at least significant, works of art, these interns (to revert to them for a moment) becoming the objects of a gaze which never quite gives in to the lure of the salacious, which can hardly be said to be true of the gaze, and quite possibly the actions, of the protagonist of the story itself called "Oblivion," whose problems with snoring (or with the perception, by himself and by an assortment of others, including his wife and a team of sleep experts, of said snoring) seem to be something of a cover story for an entirely different account of problematic and possibly criminal step-relations whose relevance to the apparently main line of the story goes forever unaddressed.



But looking back (and trying to ignore the alarm I feel when I see that my attempt at transcription from the OED [or O.E.D.] is far from accurate, since the font there used is vastly different from my habitually used TNR and almost certainly different again from any conceivable font according to which you will be reading this) and trying also to look away from some things I see when I find myself gazing at DFW in, as it were, the rear-view mirror, principally a scalded child whose state of distress and anguish (which may well be fatal, although DFW is largely moot on this point, and which in any case causes me to feel quite pale in contemplation [pale horse, pale rider, pale king] even while I know that what I am witnessing while trying to turn away from is a manifestation of a hidden wound of a kind not unfamiliar to psychoanalysis or indeed to short, or perhaps in some cases chronically foreshortened, fiction), I see that I have made at least two promises as yet unkept, one of them concerning footnotes (but this will have to wait for later, to be “parked” as they say in meetings these days when something unmanageable or simply baffling crops up, such as how to point out to an employee that his dress code is vastly unsuitable, or that not all interns will escape their conditions of unsalaried enslavement) and the other concerning what we might loosely call “examples of oblivion,” by which in this case I do not mean sleep or even its putatively attendant “snoring,” but rather, for example, “Make us drinke Lethe by your queint conceits; That for two daies oblivion smother grieffe,” which is attributed to Marston in his *Antonio’s Revenge* of 1602 and (even leaving aside the strange and lurid attraction of that word “queinte”) seems not to place much hope in the longevity of oblivion proffered even by the Lethean cup, or perhaps more interestingly, if surprisingly contemporaneously, a quotation from 1612 that refers to “a law that no man should be called in question nor questioned for things that were past ... called Amnesia, or law of oblivion,” which appears to refer to what we now refer to as a statute of limitations (although whether

our oblivious friend Randall should be allowed to escape justice in this way, which is only really a version of the justification we hear so often nowadays that “things were different in those days,” although in his case it seems pretty clear that the wench is not actually dead, unless you count the linguistic act of calling a woman a “wench” a violation in itself, which is probably beyond [a] present legal competence and [b] the [alternative] law of cultural change, is perhaps another of these “moot points”) but raises interesting questions as to whether we can call (or perhaps have called) amnesia a law, for if, as is so often said, ignorance of the law is no excuse, then how can the law respect a truer forgetting, even to the point of an absolute forgetfulness, which raises the whole question of responsibility for one’s own actions as depicted in the crazed teacher in the mysteriously titled “The Soul is Not a Smithy,” as though anybody significant had ever seriously said it was, unless we’re thinking here of Blake’s masterfully ambiguous use of the term “forge.”

The list I gave above (there’s no need to look back – it mentioned terms like troubling, interrogation, and brackets) can also be seen as a catalogue of more or less memorable failures, which can be broken down (by age and sex, as the old joke goes) into a set of failures by DFW’s “characters,” whatever that means (nobody in “Mister Squishy,” for example, appears fully to “meet their ends,” in one sense of that haunting phrase, whether it be the endless sufferers and genitors of office politics, the free climber trying to scale what may well be his own personal building, or, in the third of the interlaced plots, the inserter of deadly poison into an afternoon one-bite snack, a process that seems in the story to be oddly difficult considering the more or less vulnerable parameters of most confectionery); a set of failures that seem endemic to the process of representation itself, in that the attempt to do something, anything at all really, with the vast repertoire of thoughts, feelings, images to which we are subject (I prefer to put it that way, I am less interested in what we think than

in what thinks us, maybe even [although I hadn't thought of it, or it hadn't thought of me, until this moment] in what thinks, or has thought, DFW) is always doomed to failure, although that is to put it too grandiosely, and we might instead want to think in terms of shortfall, in terms of what we might have done had we not done what we have done – I'm not at all sure that this catalogue of failure is as yet complete, but I find myself thinking about "Good Old Neon," and about the fraud so convinced of his fraudulence that he might be defrauding us (whoever "us" might be, and as well as himself) about this said fraudulence, which might after all only be the normal condition of life, whatever that might be, and we probably shouldn't trust any mention of it for a second, and in particular we shouldn't trust anybody who says he's died because we've been here before with suffering bodies and the crucifixion and, although it may seem a long way away from any obvious intention (and I guess that's how we spend almost all our time anyway) this may bring us on to "The Suffering Channel," and I want to say a few words about that (although whether this constitutes a footnote, and should have an attendant asterisk or dagger, I'm not at all sure).



And the few words I want to say aren't about DFW at all, I suspect, they're about William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, and they're about apophenia (Gibson's novel concerns a clip of video material which keeps cropping up on the cultural landscape, and where it comes from, what its manner and meaning is and how it might affect perceptions of all those important things, like capitalism, personal relationships, and so forth) and apophenia is one of the truly interesting concepts, and one of the many things that's interesting about it is that when I turn back to the OED (or O.E.D.) in its multi-volume printed-book version, which I do in times of emergency or uncertainty (although on this occasion I don't have the supplementary

material to hand, so we can begin or continue a dialogue about my reliability on this and many other matters), and despite the vast array of mostly reliable resources available online, lo and behold (or not), it isn't there at all – and what also needs to be said, is crying out like a scalded child to be said because it's underlined in red (how sick can that be?) is that even my own computer does not, cannot recognise the term, which is surprising because I've been using it now for years, even trying to teach it to students, because “in this day and age” it's remarkably useful, and all it means, it isn't at all difficult or complicated, is seeing patterns when they aren't there, but maybe as I continue to think on about that it's the most difficult thought there is, because if we don't see patterns then the sense runs out, and it sometimes seems to me that this is what “Another Pioneer” is about, the attempt to see patterns, and whether those patterns are crazy or not, whether or not it makes sense to jump over the cracks in the pavement, or not to walk under a ladder because you can perfectly well see that a crane-weight is about to drop on your head, but I think that something of what the ghostprint of DFW is trying to say to us is that you can't go about making an easy distinction and saying, well, a lot of people believe this and it has quasi-objective veridity, so it must be so, whereas on the other hand this is just my world and so don't give it any credence, don't believe my bullshit, if only it were that simple, but it isn't, and I'm finding that this is bringing me on to “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,” and the complexity and cultural history of that title of DFW's are such that I'm not even going to think about it – and at root, a lot of the world, even things you think you're thinking about, is made up, or comprised, of things you don't want to think about, and that's even leaving aside things they won't let you think about, as Bob Dylan says (and I don't think he was the first), “they only let me see what they wanted me to see,” though why in that song Baltimore should be (or at least sound) that tragic is among the

very many things I have never found out, even when I used to have that tedious sign in my office saying, “The number of things I don’t know appears to have increased since yesterday.”

Or something like that, it must have been shorter or it would never have fitted into the frame, but you get the drift, and indeed there is a case for saying that many of the really interesting things we write (if there are any) derive more from our ignorance than from our knowledge (and I guess it wouldn’t be appropriate [as though this were some kind of wake or funeral service or something] to say too much about the thanatic source of our final ignorance, or to be reminded about the joke in which a woman in a bookshop [I don’t know why it’s a woman; it probably doesn’t have to be, but anyway this is the way I heard it, or think I did; or did I read it somewhere; or did somebody actually tell it to me?]) who turns to her friend and says, “Did Anne Frank write anything else?”) of what we imagine we’re writing about, because our imagination knows a lot more about the things that aren’t actually there than about those that are (or seem to be), and our hold on the things around us is less certain than we imagine, although we certainly hope that the big guy in “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” has a really good hold on his briefcase which is, of course, full of spiders, and it appears that he doesn’t just collect spiders out of a sense of benign arachnophilia (if there even is such a thing) or even for taxonomic reasons, what’s in there is a bad idea, or maybe even a host of bad ideas, even though he claims he keeps them to protect his good old mom, whose face has been ruined by cosmetic surgery and is now a permanent mask of terror, which isn’t the first or only time DFW refers to a face incapable of expression, a face of granite for example, or indeed to how a misinterpretation of such a face might make one even more terrified of, for example, the sounds that might ensue or proceed from that face, but in talking about that I’m moving, as it were, beyond oblivion, and we all have to have boundaries.



I see that I mentioned ghostprints above, and I've also mentioned footnotes, possibly in rather a tedious way, but I haven't yet mentioned footsteps, which is the third, and I guess intermediate term in the title of this essay, or whatever it is or turns out to be, because you can't know, can you, where your writing is going to end unless you're writing from a sense of real purpose or function, and oddly enough that category of writers who really know where they're going (and are thus the objects of unceasing envy from other writers, but don't usually seem to mind or care) probably includes Dickens (as an emblem, maybe, of writers of multi-part stories where each section has to have a beginning but, more importantly, a cliff-hanger in place of an ending [not entirely unlike Atwater's rented Cavalier stuck in the mud up to its wheel-rims, and how he gets out of that or out of Amber's vast embraces never becomes entirely clear, and neither for that matter does the fate of the Cavalier with its bent axle and unfortunate sounds coming from the engine—perhaps a difference engine, as I shall, I think, suggest below—if driven at any speed] but also as the living avatar of what we now seem to construe as his own driven character, driven, it would seem, at quite a speed, all those novels, all those children, all those mysterious night-time walks with Wilkie Collins) but also the writers of promotional material for afternoon one-bite snacks, such as the "Felonies!" in "Mister Squishy," who seem equally sure of their function; but these writers, Mister Dickens and Mister Squishy, they are making footsteps, certainly, or are they in fact following in footprints, such that originality is a silly sort of myth, and the tribal miracle child (as DFW seems to want us to suppose) is not an originality, a singularity, but rather an *exemplum*, something conjured up, miraculized, in order to flesh out a whole host of preceding stories, a myth corpus with which the intermediate narrator of the story, the gentleman with respectable short-cut hair,

as he repeats the story to his less civilized, possibly a little short in the brain department or then again merely hard of hearing (and it's interesting and challenging to think about how frequently the two get confused), companion seems astonishingly familiar, as though he were, or had been, an anthropologist in Papua New Guinea or somewhere similar, which sometimes, you might think, figures largely in the Western imagination as somewhere where a really well-heeled intern, graduated from Wellesley, might have been once on holiday or on a gap year and found some really interesting tribal daywear.



But failure (and I may now be beginning on a first footnote, even it isn't apparent in the text) does not seem to be the constant agenda in these stories, because we learn very near the end (in an "aside," what might actually even be considered to be a footnote were it not inserted in the text, but in a kind of "flashnote," which also appears to be the way in which we perceive the threat or reminder of incest, although whose incest with whom is a matter, quite literally, of discontent, and you wonder whether the content of these stories is precisely that, "discontent," a decanted content, such that when you're trying really hard, and at a reasonable time of day, and pretty much sober, to follow these intricate tracks, these intimate footsteps or footprints [I'm no longer precisely sure which is which], you often find yourself lost in a deep dark forest) that even these over-privileged ex-anorexic (is that possible? and even if it's possible, is it a word, which may be a different thing) interns might actually be on a ladder at the top of which lies that golden goal, a salary, although that appears problematic and even paradoxical (not in DFW, but in the society he's writing about, and with which he seems uncannily, troublingly familiar) since these interns are already as rich as Croesus, otherwise they wouldn't be able to spend their lives in hope (Hope being, of course, the name of the wife in "Oblivion" who

may or not have been subjected to abuse in her childhood and may or not be married to a man who is committing, or has committed, incest with her own daughter Audrey, who also appears to be not the only bearer of that name, as though these characters are treading in the footprints of others, and we have here quite a radical absence of “singularity,” such that things are not themselves but shadows or traces of themselves, as though they are etched remnants of bodies that have already been dissolved in the winds from nowhere, the irradiated winds that strip the flesh, or perhaps more commonly the pudenda of an intern astride a photocopying machine, suffering, perhaps, from anoxeroxia, a disease of the modern world not as yet entered into the drug register—but the point, maybe even the footnote, about failure, comes not from DFW, because I’m trying to insist, hopelessly, that DFW is in the background here, but from Bob Dylan and it’s that famous and hopeless line “There’s no success like failure, and failure’s no success at all,” which doesn’t look as though it means a great deal on the face of it, but when you think of the life of our favorite fraud in “Good Old Neon” then you might think that such an unwitting [or, some would say, witless] paradox carries a certain weight, a weight of such a kind that it might even comprehend suicide, except that we never really know whether that suicide happens [because of the end, or non-end, of the story, of course, but also because suicide isn’t a happening anyway, it’s a non-happening, it’s a “non”-end to the story, because not only do you not know what’s going to happen, you don’t know what’s happened anyway, and then you get a bit lost in this whole negativity thing, and the only way out is up), though exactly what this hope is for is less than clear, but then again I guess that’s the nature of hope.



And now, after having Dylan in my mind, and especially “Love Minus Zero/No Limit,” which is the song from which that line about

success and failure comes (and there are whole sections of websites devoted to discussing what that title means and why it matters, and so on, though it seems pretty obvious to me that it means roughly what it says, although the other question is how in hell it relates to anything obvious in the song, but I guess that's up to Dylan, and he doesn't need to explain, after all non-explanation is what a lot of his songs are about, and he wouldn't, he doesn't, like that approach that says, either directly or in effect, "Where do your ideas come from," though I guess he might raise a smile [not an easy thing for Dylan, I guess] at Terry Pratchett's one-time answer to that question which was "I have this little shop around the corner"), I find there are other songs or bits of songs floating around, for example the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't it be Nice," where the keyline is "Wouldn't it be nice to be together" and in DFW this might be a double thing, wouldn't it be nice to be together (with another person) and wouldn't it be nice to be together at all, to be one's own unified self, which is obviously only a fantasy held out on the far horizon for most of us (for all of us, if Lacan is to be believed, but he's dead) while we live in a land of substitutes for unity, but now it seems as though it's Dr Feelgood (Wilko Johnson, Lee Brilleaux, the Big Figure and their strange pals from Canvey Island) who has me in his thrall, as I sing quietly to myself (I hope it's quietly, I don't know whether Hope will go quietly) "Every night you look so mean, / Gazing at your TV screen, / I got lost inside a dream, / You brought me back, Irene, Irene," though I'm not certain I've got the punctuation right there (or whether you can ever get the punctuation right with song lyrics, it doesn't tend to figure in the live articulation, maybe it's dead matter, the residue of, for example, the amputated hand, the arm caught in the ice-clearer which figures so terribly large in the sub-story in "The Soul is not a Smithy," the "other" story the kid is imagining, making up, constructing while all hell is being unloosed around him) and imagine all this to be part of the endlessly developing, endlessly retreating

subtext of these stories, even though they are probably not at all about getting lost inside a dream, because that would cast far too passive and benign light over a world that (actually, not unlike the Dr Feelgood song) is always on the verge of fading into the dark.



And so but for the need to press urgently ahead (with all the force of a miracle child accelerating his tribe into the future, into a modernity which in the end appears self-defeating, as perhaps DFW's devices always do, proving to be, as it were, limitless and without end [in a manner often said to be redolent of the influence of Thomas Pynchon, the invisible man, although Pynchon's apophenia is more marked than DFW's, as well as being more attuned to problems conceived of as geopolitical, whereas these short stories—in *Oblivion*, I mean—drain these wider concerns through the repetitions of inner lives, the troubling and troubled ways in which our introspections expand until they threaten to burst the capacity of our minds to hold even a single thought in place for longer than a nanosecond] or at least without the sense of an ending, since here even, it seems, suicide is not an end, or at least not an end in itself, though perhaps, of course, in the act of reading we are always participating in an encounter beyond the end, the end of the story as already written, the end of a life now over, the end of a voice which paradoxically seems still to speak to us, perhaps from the very bridge abutment into which the electric-blue Corvette has crashed, although it appears that this crash will in some sense only occur after the end of the story [which is “Good Old Neon,” to be clear, although the significance of the title remains just beyond my grasp], but anyway, it is time to say something about “livid,” or at least I think it is, although a short postponement may be in order) I would have probably paused for another footnote, which would have referred us to Alasdair Gray's *Unlikely Stories, Mostly*, or perhaps more specifically to his remarkable

“Letters from an Eastern Empire,” or to Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” all of which are attempts to convey the other, the destruction and ruin of the other, or of the self under conditions of addiction and rapture (which I have explored more thoroughly, possibly exhaustively, in *Rapture: Literature, Secrecy, Addiction*), which could be seen as a scandal (addiction and rapture, I mean, probably not my book), rather like the scandal of Marx really, scandalizing the neighborhood, the “haunt,” and so here (in our condition of oblivion) we are haunted by unlikely stories, which play themselves out through us, no matter how we seek to comport ourselves.



[ad. F. *livide* or L. *lividus*, f. *livēre* to be livid.] Of a bluish leaden color; discolored as by a bruise; black and blue—it could be said this is something of a circular definition offered to us by the OED (or O.E.D.), and it restricts itself to the sheer physicality of the livid, making no mention (oh, how polite and reticent this great book can be) of the more frequent contemporary use of the term to denote a quality of anger, of fury, perhaps of raging against the constraints of the machine, and indeed it makes no mention of this usage either under the following headings of “lividity” or “lividness,” but surely we would need to be livid (rather than oblivious) about the condition of a fatally scalded child, as perhaps also about the procedures of a man threading a deadly poison into confectionery, although in this latter case it might be argued that some justification is offered by (a) the fatally tedious conditions under which he works, or (b) the mass hype practiced by advertising agencies and their research arms on a largely unsuspecting (or at least ineffectually suspicious) public, or (c) by some quirk or tremor in his own makeup (the makeup of the man who is probably Schmidt, that is) that might, singly or in parallel, make us pause before offering the livid colorings of condemnation to a text that is as blank about the process (the injection

of poison, I mean) as it is about the strange and apparently purposeless journey of the free climber whose progress constantly interjects itself into the story, much as the research shades (so-called because these interns have to wear dark goggles at all times because of the nature of the work they do) in “The Suffering Channel” whose eyes are perpetually red-rimmed despite the probability that all of them have probably also gone to Wellesley or Bryn Mawr and are just at the beginning of exciting careers that will take them to great heights, heights not dissimilar to the exhilaration of the free climber (not that DFW allows us to sense this exhilaration or joy), for he is resolutely on the “outside” of the climber’s consciousness, as he is outside (while inevitably being inside) the consciousness of many of his characters, an exception of course being the fraud in “Good Old Neon” whose consciousness, in all its layers of self-deception and duplicity (although perhaps these words are too simple to describe the mental contortions through which he puts himself [and also his analyst] in the course of the story), is given to us from all too intimate a position, a position indeed from which we find it difficult to escape, for here we have a man who thinks he has no self yet at the same time establishes his manipulative and exploitative selfhood with a vigour truly remarkable in one who regards his self as nothing more than a thing of eggshell (the natural phenomenon rather than the paint).



Even the Dogs is not by DFW, it’s a novel (a sort of novel) by Jon McGregor, and in it we are all haunting or haunted, or indeed both (even the dogs), because it is probable (with some traditional fiction it would not be necessary to offer these prolegomenas, these evasions, all these “probables,” but then those are the dear dead days beyond recall) that all the significant characters are dead before the story begins, which gives us no need to contemplate self-slaughter and its

manifold prohibitions (we have been there before, in an electric-blue Corvette), and that they are mere ghosts or shades (but emphatically not research shades, they have insufficient body for that) and what they are doing is hanging around the also dead (but in this case physical, inert, not ghostly at all but bloated by years of strong cider) body of the man, Robert, whom we might call their benefactor, except that that would be a peculiar way of describing him because (for some reason the woman with the terrified face, on the bus with her impossible son with his gloves and his case of spiders, recurs to me here, and I wish, like her fellow-passengers, that she would go away) the actual scenario of *Even the Dogs* concerns a loose group of junkies who have (in their lives, such as they were) been using Robert's flat for, as it were, their own purposes, in return for bringing him the water, or cider, of life which he requires in vast quantities every day (or did before he died, presumably now he's having to make do with the waters of oblivion in a purer form than two-litre plastic bottles) but now they are (further) reduced to hanging around the deathbed of their benefactor, or patron, or victim, whichever way you want to see it, unsure what to do (or perhaps what to write, how to write, how to "profess creative writing," which is not a thing any of these junkies personally attempt or have attempted, as far as we know, but it is something that DFW not only attempted but apparently achieved to the great and continuing satisfaction of his students, unlikely story though this might seem) because it may be that they are now seeing even themselves (and even the dogs) as outside the realms of the probable, which we might think also to be true of the uncannily doubled error in cosmetic surgery which has produced a mask of insane terror as the replacement of the face of the woman known only as Mother, despite being interestingly likened to Elsa Lanchester in her most (and possibly only) famous role, unaccompanied (perhaps fortunately, perhaps not) by any attendant feeling, and it might be that this is something that often occurred to DFW, namely a certain kind

of dissociation (one of so many kinds of dissociation) between the inner world and the outer life (although that isn't saying very much, as usual these attempts to summarize or provide a key to all [or at least some, or a couple of] mythologies slide off the subject, just as a story that seems to be about snoring and, we may grant, a dreadful marriage, slides off the gross [probable] realities of incest, an incest that has been repeated across the generations).



“On the radio: I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me,” runs a quote from Zadie Smith, and I can escape from its enclaves, from its sutures and strange bindings, be free as a bird, or I could if it weren't for this persistent body, with its needs, its irritations—I could be the real thing; I could be a ghost, there is no difference, there is the longed-for end of all difference, one of the many things fiction is is a difference engine (we've gone a long way from Zadie Smith here, all those last words, it seems, are mine, or at least, of course, their specific arrangements, we don't have personal control over words, over what comes out of our mouths, or finds itself on our screens, or escapes on a bus from our cases, any more than, if we were to be standing in a school classroom in front of a blackboard and apparently helping the kids with their understanding of the U. S. constitution and then discovering, though of course Mr Johnson, “originally of nearby Urbancrest” [DFW loves these irrelevant and indeed, *strictu sensu*, unintelligible details] never does “discover” because (a) he has gone mad, and (b) he has been shot by the police, not, we are assured by the narrator, because he poses any serious threat or menace to anybody in particular [or indeed in general] for how could he, with his head lying over on his shoulder and a piece of broken chalk in his hand, apparently totally immobilised by his own inner state or condition) that what we had in fact been writing on the blackboard was not the conventional explanation of

the wording of the constitution or any part thereof but rather various versions of the pregnant phrase “KILL THEM ALL” so many times that the board ends up as a blur of black and (mostly) white, to the consternation of most of the kids except the one who is asleep the whole time and the other one who is living such a vivid (and itself terrifying) fantasy life by looking out of, through or simply at the window that mere matters like a crazed teacher and a somewhat awesome message on the blackboard hold little power of intruding on his already dissociated inner life.

It appears to me on careful review and survey that I have now said something about each of the stories (or events) in *Oblivion*, although of course it is always possible that I have forgotten something, and at least as worrying is whether, or in what sense, or to what extent, what I have forgotten, or maybe left behind on the bus with the spiders about to be unleashed, is my self (as an emblem, of course, for anybody’s readerly self), which would be a difficult prospect indeed and might even constitute a final footnote (were I actually to have supplied any of my intended footnotes, which I see I have not, and it feels a little late now, it might be time for a Mister Squishy, although something tells me that the product was never brought to market) which would take us back (the footnote, that is, or of course in this case the absence of a footnote, or perhaps the footnote’s ghost, dagger, as it were, in hand) to fiction as a difference engine, except that here (either here in this essay, if that is what it is, or here in the sense of DFW’s *Oblivion*) the engine might be running without oil, or with its gearbox broken, and it’s a miracle, as I think I’ve said, that Atwater (in his mushroom colored [I’d have put a hyphen there, but not to worry] Robert Talbott raincoat) ever gets his hired Cavalier back to what we might loosely think of as civilization, as it is indeed that we can surface from DFW’s stories, with so many questions unanswered, so many trivialities cluttering our painful attempts to see a greater whole when in fact that very notion of a greater whole is a

trial and an illusion, an imposition on the minutiae which together might make up a life, or several lives, or indeed a death, if death, or the intimation of death, is to be the underlying intuition here, although this does return me to the thought, or image, or something like that, contained in (but also leaking from) the phrase “the soul is not a smithy” which on reflection seems to suggest that we cannot regard this world as, as it were, a vale of soul-making, or rather, we can if we like but if we do we are doomed to disappointment because the processes of education, if they exist at all (and as poor Mr Johnson discovers, or rather, as I have said, completely [as far as we know] completely fails to discover), are not as simple as this, they fail to run along ordinary tracks, and so when we find our lives (in a classroom, say, or in advertising agency, or in a TV production company, or, of course [it’s that image again] on a bus) apparently succumbing to routine then it is, it may be, that we look again through different eyes, we see a different (sometimes, but not always, apophenic) pattern and the world, or what we more or less consistently take to be the world, will never look exactly the same again.

**WALLACE'S
AMBIVALENCE
TOWARD INSIGHT:
THE EPIPHANY IN
"OCTET" AND "ADULT
WORLD" (I) AND (II)**

Jacob Hovind

IF ONE CONSENSUS HAS EMERGED from the recent surge of critical attention directed toward David Foster Wallace's work, it is the sense that his fiction is written always in the wake of, or in response to, some preceding school, attitude, or worldview. From "postirony" (Konstantinou) to "post-postmodernism" (McLaughlin and Scott), and from "post-metafiction" (Winningham) to "posthumanism" (Giles), the emergent narrative is that Wallace's literary project develops after the failures of metafictional experimentation's solipsistic dead end. But amid critical focus on these metafictional anxieties, and Wallace's attempts at moving forward into a new frontier for fiction, what is often lost are the other literary-historical trends informing Wallace's reimagining of fiction's purpose. Especially in his short fiction, Wallace writes in the wake of a fictional school that would seem to be metafiction's tonal and formal opposite, but one that has been equally instrumental in leading to his generation's solipsistic endgame. This school is often dismissed as "*New Yorker* stories,"

stories usually domestic in their setting, psychologically intimate in their thematics, and produced in spades in today's university writing workshops. And because of this type of story's nearly ubiquitous rhetoric of insight and revelation, indeed its dependence on insight in order for its formulas to even work, it is a mode of writing to which I will refer as "epiphanic." And so, amid the many "post[s]" we use to categorize Wallace's work, I argue that, especially regarding his intervention into the contemporary short story, "post-epiphanic" must be added to the list.

These epiphanic stories, the kind whose conventions were established by writers such as Wallace Stegner, John Updike, Jean Stafford, and John Cheever, and whose institutionalization was indeed largely performed by *The New Yorker*, are the type most frequently published by today's major short story writers ranging from Ann Beattie and Lorrie Moore, to Jhumpa Lahiri, David Gates, and Tobias Wolff. Whether slices-of-life, character sketches, or narratives of self-discovery, they follow the logic whereby the short story is understood as the ideal fictional vehicle for the revelation—for the characters as well as the readers—of some previously unseen or unknown truth. The short story writer Jim Shepard has described this type of story in which "the protagonists are whooshed along the little conveyor belts of their narratives to that defining moment of insight or clarification," arguing that the "implication is nearly always that this moment of insight removes one of the last major obstacles on the road to personal fulfillment."¹

The object of Shepard's polemical description is the assumption that the goal of fiction, its only use-value in a culture in therapeutic thrall to the ideal of self-actualization, is leading its readers on that road to "personal fulfillment," that "a book is useful precisely to the

1 Jim Shepard, "I Know Myself Real Well. That's the Problem," *Bringing the Devil to His Knees: The Craft of Fiction and the Writing Life*, ed. Charles Baxter and Peter Turchi (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 18.

extent that it conjures up for us a ratification of our own particular experience and can thereby be morphed into a self-help text.”² The means may be very far from metafictional self-referentiality and discursive irony, but the end of this type of epiphanic fiction ends up being the same, further feeding and confirming its readers’ lonesome solipsism in a culture whose constant invitations to passivity already successfully achieve that on their own. The languages available to fiction today, as Wallace remarks in an oft-cited interview from 1993, amount to so many versions of “the song of the prisoner who’s come to love his cage.”³ And our most commonly read type of story is, in Shepard’s diagnosis, no different in its effects from the navel-gazing progeny of Barth’s literature of exhaustion. What, these stories seem to ask of their readers, does this mean for you and for you alone? What does the character’s insight teach you about yourself? What, aside from self-knowledge, would be the point of fiction?

Against epiphany’s overuse in the contemporary short story landscape, as well as its logic of “personal fulfillment,” I broadly suggest that in his short fiction Wallace consistently seeks to shed the epiphany of the calcification and stagnation it’s come to have in short fiction, redeploying it as a radical site of connection between author and reader. In reimagining the epiphany concept as a space to interrogate his own readers’ capacity for feeling or emotional clarity, Wallace’s short fiction comes to challenge not only the solipsism often used to characterize postmodernism, but also the solipsism of the more popular domestic or psychological fiction in which the epiphany concept is most commonly employed. The two stories in which Wallace most clearly works through and reimagines the epiphanic mode are “Adult World” (Parts I and II) and “Octet,” both from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). In the former story, he diagnoses the epiphanic mode’s inherent solipsism, as employed as a

2 Ibid.,

3 *CW*, 49.

fictional device and as a psychological shorthand, while in the latter story, while employing his own metafictional strategies, he drastically reinvents the epiphany as an ethical and communicative phenomenon to free contemporary fiction from its solipsistic trap.

In an early essay from 1988, Wallace diagnoses “a certain numbing *sameness* about much contemporary young writing,”⁴ a sameness whose confluence with, and emergence from, consumer culture’s ironic distancing of meaningful emotion has reduced contemporary readers to passively existing only as “part of the great Audience.”⁵ This type of fiction, Wallace argues, has become firmly entrenched as the norm, due to the economic system of today’s “academic Creative Writing Programs.”⁶ And among this systematically homogeneous literature emerging from his generation of writers like products on an assembly line, Wallace identifies “three dreary camps:” “Neiman-Marcus Nihilism,” “Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a. Bad Carver,” and “Workshop Hermeticism.”⁷ The first of these camps can mainly be identified with the work of Bret Easton Ellis, the corrosiveness of whose cynical amorality Wallace will frequently diagnose as symptomatic of contemporary postmodern culture’s nihilistic solipsism. But it is the second and especially the third of these camps that most concern us here, and that indeed Wallace goes on to argue are most endemic in a literary landscape whose contours have been systematized by the Creative Writing Program’s machine-like proliferation. And both schools of writing, emerging from the Program as they do, are subject to the system Wallace identifies as the reduction of artistic practice to “an applied system of rules.”⁸ Creative writing is now

4 *BFN*, 39.

5 *Ibid.*, 46.

6 *Ibid.*, 55

7 *Ibid.*, 39-40.

8 *Ibid.*, 59.

an institutionalized field of study, no less teachable than chemistry, history, or even literary criticism, there must be an agreed-upon thing at the center of the pedagogical enterprise, a thing that may be both identified across many individual instances and then taught as the thing to be aimed for. And that stable thing's machinery, as a glance through any edition of the *Best American Short Stories* anthology from the past three or four decades will indicate, is largely dependent upon the working of the epiphany concept.

As Wallace describes the machinations of those stories belonging to the camp identified as "workshop hermeticism," they work so interchangeably by containing "no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past, without near-diagnostic physical description; no image undissolved into regulation Updikean metaphor; no overture without a dramatized scene to 'show' what's 'told'; no denouement prior to an epiphany whose approach can be charted by any Freitrag on any Macintosh."⁹ And even the "catatonic realism" he also identifies, can, in most of its most notable practitioners, be said to follow a similar model, just in a more muted key. And when all stories ascend toward that predictably climactic epiphany, they become so structurally similar that they end up little more than those "little conveyor belts" described by Shepard.¹⁰ Indeed, toward the end of "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989), the novel's Wallace stand-in Mark Nechtr tries to imagine an alternative kind of story to the one his metafictional professor practices. The story he envisions, unlike Professor Ambrose's self-reflexive exercises, "has the unnameable but stomach-punching quality of something real, a welcome relief from those dread watch-me-be-clever

9 Ibid., 40.

10 On the inherently teleological nature of the short story form, and for an implicit suggestion that the modern short story is thus one inevitably building toward epiphany, see Mary Louise Pratt, "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It," *Poetics* 10 (1981). "The moment of truth," she writes, "stands as a model for the short story the way the life stands as a model for the novel" (183).

pieces—or, even more dread, a fashionably modern minimal exercise, going through its weary motions as it slouches toward epiphany.”¹¹ Whether one chooses maximalist cleverness or minimalist epiphany-mongering, the deadening result, that lack of “something real,” remains the same. If truly meaningful fiction, as Wallace suggests to McCaffery, “locates and applies CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness,”¹² and if fiction’s great promise is to reveal our lingering capacity despite all our invitations to solipsism to still be able to make “genuine connections,”¹³ then the banal commonness of the epiphanic mode “perverts the giving, helps render what is supposed to be a revelation a transaction.”¹⁴ So what, then, would epiphany look like if it weren’t this perverted gift? What is its promise that has been so distorted by its plasticization on contemporary fiction’s “conveyor belts” described by Shepard?

The epiphany is, as its source in religious discourse indicates, an experience of revelation, as the word is derived from the Greek *epiphaneia*, which itself was adapted by the early Church fathers from the early *theophaneia*, meaning “a manifestation or appearance of some divine or superhuman being” (*OED*). And within the Christian tradition, the concept became linked to the revelation of Christ’s divinity—the presence of the sacred within the material—on the twelfth day of the Christmas feast. Joyce brought the concept into the realm of literary expression, implicitly in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and explicitly by name in that novel’s earlier version, *Stephen Hero* (written between 1904 and 1905, and published posthumously in 1944). But rather than reveal divinity, Joyce’s epiphany reveals instead a human life, captured in a single and instantaneous event

11 *GCH*, 359.

12 *CW*, 26.

13 *Ibid.*, 27.

14 *Ibid.*, 54.

or gesture. “The moment which I call epiphany,” his hero Stephen Dedalus proclaims, is when a person’s or a thing’s “soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance.”¹⁵ And this sense of epiphany as a the manifestation of a “soul” is famously employed in the fifteen stories comprising *Dubliners*, each of which builds up to a crystalline moment, frozen in time, in which a character sees his life and his self differently, or at least in which a character’s truth or “whatness” is made manifest for her readers even as she may be denied any such understanding of herself.¹⁶ Transposed from the religious context into the realm of secular literary language, the epiphany concept promises a kind of sanctification of the everyday, an experience once reserved solely for the divine brought down into the domestic realm.

Joyce’s inheritors in the Anglo-American tradition widely embraced this mode of meaning, specifically in short fiction, such that already by the middle of the twentieth century, as with writers like Updike and Cheever, the short story in English largely seems to comprise a landscape of epiphany overload. As Charles Baxter mordantly sums up the literary scene, in his polemical essay “Against Epiphanies:” “Suddenly, it seems, everyone is having insights. Everyone is proclaiming them and selling them. Possibly we have entered the Age of Insight. Everywhere there is a glut of epiphanies. Radiance rules.”¹⁷ Joyce’s quasi-religious promise for fiction, the revelation of a character’s “soul, its whatness” has become so quickly

15 James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Norfolk: New Directions, 1963), 213.

16 To my knowledge, the only critic who has explicitly explored the role Joyce’s legacy plays in Wallace’s fiction is David P. Rando, in “David Foster Wallace and Lovelessness.” On epiphanic structures in *Infinite Jest*, see Casey Michael Henry, in “‘Sudden Awakening to the Fact That the Mischief Is Irretrievably Done’: Epiphanic Structure in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*.”

17 Charles Baxter, “Against Epiphanies,” *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2008), 47.

transformed into the mass-produced “Suddenly I realized...”¹⁸ derided by Baxter. Characters in modern short fiction go looking for vestiges of radiance in a disenchanted modernity, but like the young protagonist of Updike’s “A & P” (1961), to cite just one widely anthologized example, learning “how hard the world was going to be *to me* hereafter,”¹⁹ they just end up finding themselves.

Wallace’s most explicit and rigorous attempt to call out the ultimate lack of meaningful revelation, the fact that nothing but more self is all that’s unveiled, is in the two parts of “Adult World.” The first part, written from its protagonist Jeni’s point of view, though with a cool and distanced third-person clinical detachment, announces from its opening line that it exists in a sort of parody of the sex-obsessed, ennui-inducing suburban landscapes of Updike or Cheever: “For the first three years, the young wife worried that their love-making together was somehow hard on his thingie.”²⁰ The mental space Jeni inhabits can be seen as a heightened version of the traditional ones of the epiphanic story—the traditionally intimate psychological orientation, self-aware enough to make epiphany’s ultimate enlightenment possible, is rendered here as obsessively tortured self-analysis. Jeni lives forever in her own head as she works to figure out just what the problem is in her sex life with her husband (notably never named), as, despite all her attempts to please him, “there was something about [their sex life] that she felt he did not quite like.”²¹ Whatever problem lies at the root of her marriage’s sexual disconnect must be “something about her,”²² as she worries obsessively about her own inability to provide pleasure: “she

18 Ibid., 51.

19 John Updike, “A & P,” in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1963), 136, emphasis mine.

20 *BI*, 161.

21 Ibid.,

22 Ibid.,

remembered to keep her eyes open and watched for the slight wince that may or may not (she realized only later, when she had some mature perspective) have actually been pleasure.”²³ Of course the joke, as the parenthetical aside indicates, is that Jeni is not at all wrong in assuming that her husband is not enjoying their sex life as much as his words of comfort indicate. There are ten such parenthetical asides throughout the narrative of the first part of “Adult World,” each of them hinting ever more explicitly toward some life-altering moment that will entirely transform Jeni’s sense of self, and her understanding of her husband, knowledge that “she realized only later, after she had had an epiphany and rapidly matured.”²⁴ When she begins to reflect on the fact that she could just ask her husband about his seeming disinterest in sex, not to mention the evident rawness of his penis: “[i]t simply felt impossible to do this. (The memory of this paralyzed feeling would astound her later in life, when she was a very different person.)”²⁵ Ultimately, what these asides hint at is the wholly transformative power of the epiphany to come, the one that will make Jeni “a very different person,” one who will presumably no longer be subject to the obsessive narcissism of the young wife, her attempts at caring for her husband only flimsy masks for her own intensely navel-gazing self-interest. Only after her epiphany will she be able to look back “on the towering self-absorption of her naiveté in those years” with “a mixture of contempt and compassion for the utter child she had been.”²⁶

This characterization of Jeni’s youthful solipsism, spending the first three years of marriage “alone and trapped in her worry,”²⁷ suggests that it’s not simply postmodern irony that’s led contemporary

23 Ibid., 162.

24 Ibid., 163.

25 Ibid., 168-9.

26 Ibid., 169.

27 Ibid., 172.

culture to its paralysis of self-absorption. We can recall Mark Nechtr in “Westward” characterizing the metafictional practices of his colleagues as “the act of a lonely solipsist’s self-love, a night-light on the black fifth wall of being a subject, a face in the crowd.”²⁸ But we should also remember that such atomized solipsism also characterizes, for Wallace, the tradition of the epiphanic story whose legacy we have been tracing, especially in the work of its most famed figure, Updike. In Wallace’s 1998 review of Updike’s late novel *Toward the End of Time*, Wallace lumps Updike together with Norman Mailer and Philip Roth as the “Great Male Narcissists who’ve dominated postwar American fiction.”²⁹ And what Wallace finds in Updike’s novel is the worldview, no less dangerous than that embodied by “Westward”’s apocalyptic reunion, and the apocalyptic strand running throughout metafiction as a whole, namely, that “when a solipsist dies, . . . everything goes with him.”³⁰ Updike’s novel is ostensibly about the end of the entire world, while its hero “is interested in cosmic apocalypse all and only because it serves as a grand metaphor for his own personal death.”³¹ If Wallace’s literary project from the start may be understood as a reaction against American fiction’s tendency to send itself into a “a kind of apocalyptically solipsistic fugue-state,”³² we must remember that it’s not just metafictional self-reflexivity that’s participating in this nihilistic path, and Jeni’s “towering self-absorption” proves no different. Hers is an apocalyptic absorption, however, created not by metafictional rejections of human reality, but by the ruthless self-interest of the whole school of domestic fiction that’s set the template for her story of intimate navel-gazing.

28 *GCH*, 332.

29 *CL*, 51.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*, 57.

32 Bradley Fest, “‘Then Out of the Rubble’: The Apocalypse in David Foster Wallace’s Early Fiction,” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2012), 294.

However, we cannot forget that Wallace, via those parenthetical asides mentioned above, consistently hints that amidst her obsessive focus on herself alone, at the cost of even understanding her husband as an autonomous agent able to exist beyond her own faults and failures, wants and desires, some epiphany is on the horizon that will wake Jeni up from her self-inflicted position as the center of her own experiential universe. Its promise to do so, Wallace suggests, is great, as his narration, without losing its clinical detachment, breaks from the story to actually offer a lesson in how the epiphany concept works: “In secular psychodevelopmental terms, an epiphany is a sudden, life-changing realization, often one that catalyzes a person’s emotional maturation. The person, in one blinding flash, ‘grows up,’ ‘comes of age.’ ‘Put[s] away childish things.’”³³ Wallace is equally attuned to the religious valence of the concept, occurring like the revelation of divinity “in one blinding flash,” and also to the psychological maturation implied by the concept’s transposition into literary discourse, the process whereby a character “comes of age.” His description captures the concept’s promise of the manifestation of something like God in the realm of human experience, akin to Joyce’s other-directed capacity for a self to be receptive to the “whatness” of another thing or person to leap up before us and disrupt our sense of self-rootedness, in a “sudden, life-changing realization.” But the failure of that promise emerges already when he connects it to the inherently self-serving “coming of age” turning-points in the lives of so many late-twentieth-century lonely suburbanites.

And indeed, within “Adult World,” Jeni’s promise of radical change is fulfilled, while at the same time, since Wallace is attuned to this fall from grace of the concept’s own promise, its efficacy becomes ironically undercut in the very same gesture. After offering the definition quoted above, Wallace immediately adds: “In reality, genuine epiphanies are extremely rare. . . . It is usually only in

33 *BI*, 176.

dramatic representations, religious iconography, and the ‘magical thinking’ of children that achievement of insight is compressed to a sudden blinding flash.”³⁴ On the one hand, epiphanies just don’t happen in real life the way they do in fiction; they’re conventional tropes that make for tidy character development, not to mention naturally satisfying ends for a short story form whose principles of condensation inherently elevate the import of its own endings. Real insight, in life as it is lived, comes slowly if at all, and it requires actual work rather than a revelation from above. But on the other hand, this reminder of epiphany’s unreality is then immediately followed by “Adult World” returning to its own narrative thread, in one of the slyest jokes to be found in all of Wallace’s short fiction: “What precipitated the young wife’s *sudden blinding epiphany* was her abandonment of mentation in favor of concrete and frantic action.”³⁵ The suddenness of fiction’s epiphanic flash, already suggested, leads not to growth, but only to the continued “magical thinking” of children or the naïve, and yet Jeni’s entrance into adulthood, and her abandonment of her crippling self-absorption, will now be precipitated by precisely such a flash, one whose “blinding” quality suddenly takes on a sinister double-meaning.

For when Jeni meets her ex-lover at a restaurant overlooking Adult World’s parking lot, in order to hear his version of her fears of her failure as a lover, the story makes an abrupt shift to its second part. Before the break, however, “Adult World” (I) ends with two images occurring simultaneously. The first of these is startling because it is the first in the story not from Jeni’s point of view or filtered through her consciousness, its focal anchor instead her lunch-time companion: her “former lover—who still loved her, Jeni Ann Orzolek of Marketing 204, and not his current fiancée, he realized

34 Ibid., 177.

35 Ibid., emphasis mine.

with the sickening wince of a mortal wound reopened.”³⁶ But while the unnamed lover is having his own awakening to his feelings for Jeni, her own gaze is directed toward the second concurrent image, the cars parked in front of the adult video store. Jeni’s gaze is epiphanic but also misdirected in the very same moment, blind to the possibility of human connection sitting right in front of her, while instead she “sees husband’s special vanity plate among vehicles in Adult World lot,”³⁷ the external object precipitating her epiphany. In a sudden blinding flash, the emotional blindness that’s characterized her throughout the story thus far receives not its corrective but only its further confirmation and even exacerbation.

Indeed, the actual epiphany resulting from seeing her husband’s car in the Adult World parking lot is also the moment when “Adult World” breaks off into its second part, one written not in the detached but still psychologically realist narration of the first part, but in the form of Wallace’s own highly schematic working notes. The epiphany, rather than a delicately transposed moment of psychological clarity, is instead rendered simply as: “J. undergoes sddn blndng realization that hsbnd is a Secret Compulsive Masturbator & that insomnia/yen is cover for secret trips to Adult World to purchase/view/masturbate self raw to XXX films & images & that suspicions of hsbnd’s ambivalence about ‘sexlife together’ have in fact been prescient intuitions.”³⁸ The irony here is vicious, as while Jeni herself is having the supposed “epiphany” that she has never truly understood her husband’s “inner deficits/psychic pain” nor even attempted to, her former lover is sitting across from her, “tears appearing in his eyes,”³⁹ confessing his continued love for her. This irony, Wallace’s notes indicate, foregrounds what he means to be the story’s

36 *Ibid.*, 182.

37 *Ibid.*, 183.

38 *Ibid.*, 183-4.

39 *Ibid.*, 184.

entire stated “Theme,” that of “further networks of misconnection, emotional asymmetry.”⁴⁰ And by story’s end, there seems to be no genuine attempt to move beyond these networks. For what Jeni ends up doing with her epiphany, seemingly other-directed toward her husband’s emotional life as it is, is not to disown her own solipsistic tendencies but rather:

Realizes/gradually accepts that hsbnd loves his secret loneliness & ‘interior deficits’ more than he loves [/is able to love] her; accepts her ‘unalterable powerlessness’ over hsbnd’s secret cmplsions . . . Realizes that true wellsprings of love, security, gratification must originate within self; and w/ this realization, J.O.R. joins rest of adult hmnn race, no longer ‘full of herself’/’immature’/’irrational’/’young.’⁴¹

And her ultimate embrace of her epiphanic maturity, then, takes the form of her own “exploring masturbation as a wellspring of personal pleasure,”⁴² a mutually onanistic pursuit of complete isolation, side by side, that allows her and her husband to become “now truly married, . . . one flesh, [a union that] afforded Jeni O. Roberts a cool, steady joy.”⁴³ “Joy” may be attained, but without anything meaningful to subtend it, literally emerging as a result of a life given over to the pleasures of willfully chosen onanism. Wallace’s vision of epiphany after decades of overuse, and the standardization and banalization resulting from its institutionalization in the culture of creative writing programs’ uniformity, is that what “is supposed to be a revelation” is reduced to a “transaction”⁴⁴ and an ultimately empty gesture. The epiphany’s force,

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 187.

42 Ibid., 188.

43 Ibid., 189.

44 *CW*, 54.

beyond its routineness, becomes cruelly empty, its conventionality foregrounded by Wallace's only being able to write it in the form of his own notes, as if it would be somehow ridiculous even to try to translate it into the language of ostensibly meaningful psychological fiction. Jeni's "sudden realization" just ends up revealing more of the self whose crushing aloneness sent her on a journey toward revelation in the first place.

Taken on its own, the second part of "Adult World" would seem to align Wallace with what Charles Baxter calls "anti-epiphanic writing," stories "usually at some pains to avoid the proclamation effect and the conclusiveness of vision or insight."⁴⁵ Baxter includes among the anti-epiphanic writers such figures as Raymond Carver and Lydia Davis, writers whose stories end not with insight, but rather with a calm waiting for insight always still on the horizon, a thing that could arrive but never does. But, based simply on the concept's prevalence throughout Wallace's writing, one suspects that this wholesale rejection of epiphany is no viable option for him, as he seems to write much of his work, especially the essays from his own voice, under the influence of a continued belief in epiphany's promise. He sees the possibility of some kind of nearly mystical revelation while considering the greatness of Roger Federer, and the unique feeling of corporeal ecstasy his playing generates in its spectators: "rather like certain kinds of rare, peak-type sensuous epiphanies . . . , great athletes seem to catalyze our awareness of how glorious it is to touch and perceive, move through space, interact with matter."⁴⁶ And Wallace finds this potential for the concept to push our understandings of the world beyond our mere selves when reflecting on the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, a writer whose worldview "is really a mystical insight, and a profound one," next to whose works' mysteries "the epiphanies of Joyce or redemptions

45 Baxter, 54.

46 *BFN*, 8.

of [Flannery] O'Connor seem pallid and crude."⁴⁷ And he also sees epiphanic force in his youthful fascination with mathematics, and his sense that this same fascination is the one that would drive his literary project as well, when he relates to McCaffery:

Wienieish or not, I was actually chasing a special sort of buzz, a special moment that comes sometimes. One teacher called these moments "mathematical experiences." What I didn't know then was that a mathematical experience was aesthetic in nature, an epiphany in Joyce's original sense . . . It really was an experience of what I think Yeats called "the click of a well-made box." Something like that. The word I always think of it as is "click."⁴⁸

And indeed, Wallace's use of "click" to describe this experience, when all falls into place, is certainly appropriate for the conventions connected to the epiphany concept in its literary usage in short fiction. They are, after all, those moments that can be described as "aha" ones, when the world, or at least one's own self, makes sense in a way that it had not before. But later in the same interview, Wallace suggests that this feeling is so much more than a more heightened sense of mere self on its own terms.

Wallace ends the interview by summing up his wish for a new kind of fiction that could "*give* the reader something,"⁴⁹ as opposed to the clinical distancing of metafiction, or epiphanic fiction's solipsistic reduction of art's function to what Shepard had called a "self-help text." The fiction writer today, Wallace suggests, must write "out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy,

47 *BFN*, 294.

48 *CW*, 34-5.

49 *Ibid.*, 50, emphasis Wallace's.

and *to ask the reader to feel something*.⁵⁰ For fiction to have meaning, it has to have a force, it has to achieve something as a real act of communicative connection, as opposed to merely entertaining, sentimentalizing, offering intellectual stimulation, or even becoming reduced to a banal exercise in moral instruction. And ultimately, this idea of an art that can create at least a moment of real feeling, feeling simply of *something*, in its reader “has to do with the click.”⁵¹ This “click” began as a “special” moment, “a special sort of buzz” aligned with the epiphany “in Joyce’s original sense,” by which Wallace presumably means the moment the “whatness” of a thing or a person leaps forth.⁵² But the same “click” becomes the gift to his readership that is the fiction writer’s greatest task. And this gift of creating true feeling becomes something more than feeling something merely for oneself, as earlier he explicitly calls out his creative writing program colleagues—those working within the epiphanic tradition—as failing to have found the “click.” He describes his time in the program as feeling like “the misunderstood eccentric blah blah blah blah surrounded by these guys who essentially want to write *New Yorker* stories.”⁵³ But amidst this disconnect, Wallace finds, “that place did help improve the integrity of my loyalty to the click,”⁵⁴ as if to suggest that what his epiphanic colleagues were failing to achieve, the “click” as the pursuit of creating an invitation to feel *something* could realize instead.

50 Ibid., emphasis mine.

51 Ibid., 51.

52 Incidentally, he describes “the first fictional clicks” he ever encountered as having occurred while reading one short story (Donald Barthelme’s “The Balloon”) and “in parts of the first story [he] ever wrote,” aligning this feeling from the start with short fiction as distinct from any other. Notably, he tells McCaffery, “I don’t much hear the click in Updike” (ibid., 35).

53 Ibid., 37.

54 Ibid.

Within Wallace's own short fiction, if "Adult World" documents the failure of the epiphanic mode to attain the click, "Octet" becomes the corrective to that failure. Since the Joycean legacy has become coopted by and employed in service of contemporary culture's near-constant invitations to solipsism and passivity, Wallace, rather than rejecting epiphany's possibility or draining the world of its possibility of insight, will instead reimagine what it can do and what it can look like. The story documents how epiphany's "click" can once again provide revelation of whatever it is whose possibility culture so easily hides today, what he describes to McCaffery as human life's "capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price."⁵⁵ What if, "Octet" asks, epiphany doesn't have to just illuminate more self, but may genuinely create an experience for its reader approaching the radiance and revelation of the concept's origins in religious discourse? Instead of Jeni's "sudden blinding flash,"⁵⁶ passively received and only revealing a newfound "joy" in a solipsism she learns to love, "Octet" suggests that in this world we inhabit, meaningful insight requires actual work. There must, the story is at pains to demonstrate, be some way in which self and other can find common ground, especially in a world that seems to work so hard to suggest that we can't. What "Octet" ultimately suggests is that there is a radically performative dimension to Wallace's short fiction, one bearing an ethical force. And the story becomes an urgent document of Wallace's own active work, instead of the traditional epiphany's passive receptivity, in order to get his reader to feel something, and to experience nothing short of a revelation, an epiphany in its most authentic sense. The story's revelation, then, becomes his daring to ask us, his readers, whether we are actually feeling something at all, a feeling he dares to ask us to find by actually connecting with him, as

55 *Ibid.*, 27.

56 *BI*, 177.

opposed to just reading him or his character.⁵⁷

The story is famously structured according to a pop quiz format, one notably borrowed from, and presumably in response to, Updike's own uncharacteristic use of the format in his story "Problems," first published in *The New Yorker* in 1975. In that earlier story, Updike creates six mathematical logic problems, each surrounding some aspect of A.'s emotional life after having left his wife, C., for his mistress, B., while still harboring perhaps a deeper attachment for the abandoned wife. An explicit problem is posed after each of the set-ups, with questions whose sense ranges from which of the women has he "most profoundly betrayed,"⁵⁸ to the sustainability of A.'s psychiatrist being so many miles from his laundromat, to economic matters of renovating houses whose inhabitants no longer reside in them. Each problem, by the last of these math puzzles, can ultimately be read as a variation on the theme of the story's central problem, one haunting much of Updike's thoroughly homogenous work: "Something feels wrong. What is it?"⁵⁹ That this story foregrounds this question as one of such existential magnitude, it is clear, would help explain why, in his review essay of 1998, Wallace found Updike's work uniform in its solipsistic interest, a work in whose worldview very little matters beyond the emotional terrain of Updike's conventionally upper-middle-class

57 Superficially, "Octet" would seem to bear little resemblance to the epiphanic tradition to which "Adult World" belongs, and would more clearly exist in the metafictional tradition in whose aftermath so much of Wallace's work resides. Recent sustained readings of the story, and its relationship to irony and metafiction, may be found in Konstantinou, Winningham, and Iain Williams, "(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's 'Octet,'" *Critique* 56 (2015): 299-314.

58 Updike, "Problems," in *Problems and Other Stories* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1981), 169. For another reworking of Updike's story, one belonging to that "anti-epiphanic" mode identified by Baxter, see Lydia Davis's "Problem," from her first collection, *Break It Down* (1986). In only eight terse sentences, she expands Updike's three variables to six, caught together in a tangled web of severed emotional connections and financial obligations whose very messiness precludes any clear solution.

59 *Ibid.*, 171.

male protagonists. And with this unspoken, but essentially interwoven, intertextual connection, it should also become clear that “Octet” also inhabits the epiphanic tradition for which Updike can be seen as a paragon, just as much as the story’s unconventional structure places it in conversation with Wallace’s metafictional inheritance as well.

And within the story’s experimental structure, pressing emotional and humanist concerns emerge despite the metafictional trappings, echoing the idea that Wallace continues to work within the postmodernist worldview he inherited while also challenging its assumptions and its textual interests from within. Of the planned eight pop quizzes, we are given only three, “Pop Quiz 4,” “Pop Quiz 6,” and “Pop Quiz 7,” along with a reworked version of the second, “Pop Quiz 6(A),” and an additional one—extra credit, perhaps—labelled “Pop Quiz 9,” the narrator’s reflection on the successes and failures of the eight quizzes ostensibly comprising the story, including those present, absent, or rewritten. In this last quiz, the narrator reveals that the version of the story we’re actually reading is an attempt “to demonstrate some sort of weird ambient *sameness* in different kinds of human relationships, some nameless but inescapable ‘*price*’ that all human beings are faced with having to pay at some point if they ever want truly ‘to be with’ another person instead of just using that person somehow.”⁶⁰ What, the pieces taken together ask, is the possibility for human relationships that are not dependent on exchange-value or objectification, or any other symptom of our general humanist malaise as postmodern subjects? For example, “Pop Quiz 7” outlines the conundrum facing a woman in the midst of a divorce, especially challenging as her wealthy husband is demanding custody with the ultimatum that the child will not receive his wealthy family’s trust fund unless custody is given over. “So the lady,” the vignette concludes, “walks away from the custody fight

60 *BI*, 155, emphasis Wallace’s.

and lets the man and his hardass family have custody of the baby so that the baby will still have the Trust Fund.”⁶¹ The situation is just as ambiguous and morally fraught as either of the preceding ones, each of them inviting their reader to reflect on their perhaps previously unexamined own moral values and assumptions about human behavior. But the concluding question seeking the answer to “Pop Quiz 7”’s problem is far more direct and to the point than that of the earlier two: “Is she a good mother?”⁶² The directness of this question essentially announces where the moral weight of “Octet” as a whole lies, and it is precisely on our, its readers, powers of belief. What this question asks is, are we capable of believing in a purely selfless act? If we answer that she is a good mother, we are capable of such belief, and if we answer that she is not, the selflessness of the mother’s act is not denied, but rather we would deny our own ability to believe in such selflessness as anything other than a fiction, a fable, or a cute metafictional exercise. Are we capable of believing in compassion and possibilities for human connection, or are we trapped in the same solipsistic trap as X, the character in the rewritten and expanded “Pop Quiz 6(A),” marked by “some horrific defect in his human makeup, some kind of hideous central ice where his heart’s nodes of empathy and basic other-directedness ought to be?”⁶³

The purpose of this test of our own empathy, and our ability to believe in other people, to even feel something for other people, is then directly stated in “Pop Quiz 9,” in which the narrator steps back as a fiction writer frustrated by his sense that the piece at hand fails to achieve what he envisioned for it:

How exactly the cycle’s short pieces are supposed to work is hard to describe. Maybe say they’re supposed to compose a certain sort of ‘*interrogation*’ of the person reading them,

61 Ibid., 135.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 138.

somehow – i.e. palpations, feelers into the interstices of her sense of something, etc.... though what that ‘something’ is remains maddeningly hard to pin down, even just for yourself as you’re working on the pieces.⁶⁴

He finds, to his discomfort, that the only way to convey the “something” about his reader the work is intended to interrogate is to step nakedly forward, without masks, insincerity, or irony, and certainly without conveying that his unmasking of himself is more of “the now-tired S.O.P. ‘meta’-stuff” with “the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what’s going on is artificial.”⁶⁵ And so all the narrator can do, even despite the risk of appearing trapped in the whirligig of irony and metafiction, is “to address the reader directly and ask her straight out whether she’s feeling anything like what you feel.”⁶⁶ This direct address of the reader proves to be the narrator’s greatest challenge, as any direct address, in our irony-saturated age, is “one of the very last few interpersonal taboos we have,”⁶⁷ and also further evidence of that “sameness in different kinds of human relationships” that the pieces as a whole are meant to demonstrate. What, the piece asks, would it look like today if we had any remaining possibility of actually being with people rather than just using them—using them to be liked, using them to validate our own sense of self, performing seemingly selfless gestures in order to convince ourselves of our own goodness.

The “price” the narrator finds that he’ll ultimately have to pay to truly be with another, in this case his reader, ends up being a quite simple one but one whose ramifications for our millennial sense of intersubjective economies are vast and not just a little disquieting:

64 Ibid., 145, emphasis Wallace’s.

65 Ibid., 147.

66 Ibid., 154.

67 Ibid.

“It’ll be real.”⁶⁸ And accepting the risk of turning himself, and his relationship to his reader, into something real, Wallace’s narrator ultimately finds that he’s able to offer his reader the greatest gift of all, despite the loss of mask and the distance and the comfort they bring, and despite even the potential to further distance the reader if the risk doesn’t pay off: “it is not at all clear . . . that coming out hat in hand near the end and trying to interrogate her directly is going *to induce any kind of revelation* of urgent sameness that’ll then somehow resonate back through the cycle’s pieces and make her see them in a different light.”⁶⁹ The goal, then, is to form an authentic human connection—which, alongside joy and charity, remember, Wallace had framed in his 1993 interview as one of fiction’s supreme goals insofar as it reignites what’s human in us. And this connection, an actual encounter as opposed to a transaction of any emotional, psychological, or material kind, proves for Wallace to be nothing short of fiction’s remaining possibility to “induce any kind of revelation,” or, we could say instead, *any kind of epiphany*.

The old gods may be dead or their influence dimmed, so any unveiling that revelation could achieve in our postmodern times is not of the divinity promised by the *epiphaneia* of the Church fathers. But at the same time it must be more than the revelation of mere self whose illumination is the goal of the fictions written in the inward-gazing epiphanic mode. So amidst all of his innovations in the realm of fiction, perhaps one of Wallace’s greatest is his recalibration of what epiphanic revelation can do, revealing to us, his readers, himself, not as a writer but as a person “down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us.”⁷⁰ Can we accept that revelation of a person, and our ability to be in a real relationship with that person? The greatest gift of “Octet,” in the end, is that it demands

68 Ibid., 157.

69 Ibid., 159, emphasis mine.

70 Ibid., 160.

of us simply: "So decide."⁷¹ Are we prepared for this epiphany's revelation, and are we ready to take on its new ethical force and challenge, risks and all? In committing ourselves to believing in Wallace's narrator's sincerity, as well as Wallace's, are we also prepared to commit ourselves to our own sincerity which would make such a commitment possible? If the epiphany works, and if we take on the demand of its challenge while also accepting its gift, then the answer must be a resounding yes. What's revealed by "Octet"'s epiphany is nothing short of our ability to accept another person's existence, and by extension, our own capacity to love. For Wallace, there's nothing greater that could be illuminated by fiction today.

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**“THE LIE IS THAT
IT’S ONE OR THE
OTHER”: EXTRACTING
“FOREVER OVERHEAD”
AND “CHURCH NOT
MADE WITH HANDS”
FROM THE SHORT
STORY CYCLE**

Rob Mayo

IN *UNDERSTANDING DAVID FOSTER WALLACE*, Marshall Boswell describes Wallace’s then-latest work, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, as a book that “has been carefully constructed so that it works better as a story cycle than [as] a mere collection of short pieces.”¹ Two critical assumptions are implicit here; firstly that *Brief Interviews* is indeed a “cycle,” distinct from the more common “collection”; and secondly that a “mere” collection is a lesser, inferior form. In this essay I wish to interrogate both of these assumptions and situate Boswell’s use of the term “cycle” within a broader critical dialogue on formal categorization. Having done so, I assess the extent to which Boswell’s identification of *Brief Interviews* as a cycle is accurate, or indeed helpful. While certain aspects of it are unmistakably consistent

1 *UND*, 182.

with the cycle form, I suggest that to consider the entire book as a “carefully constructed . . . story cycle” might be a critically limiting or even distorting approach. With this in mind, I offer a reading of two of the stories contained within *Brief Interviews*, “Forever Overhead” and “Church Not Made with Hands,” which imagines them apart from and external to the cycle and thereby offers a new context in which to place them. As the title of this essay suggests, my aim is not to supplant Boswell’s thesis with its antithesis, but to open Wallace’s work up to a greater variety of critical approaches than established understandings of the story cycle form may typically permit. To do so, I begin by considering the question: If we provisionally accept Boswell’s categorization of *Brief Interviews* and describe it as a “cycle” rather than as a “mere collection” of stories, what would we mean by this distinction?

**“[T]hat weird area between novel
and short story collection”: the short
story cycle(s)**

Boswell’s description of *Brief Interviews* as a book of short fiction which transcends the “mere collection” echoes many other critics who have written on the categorical range that falls between the short story collection and the novel. Malcolm Cowley, in his introduction to the 1960 edition of *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, states that it “lies midway between the novel proper and the mere collection of stories.”² Ian Reid agrees on this point, stating that “*Winesburg, Ohio* stands as an obvious paradigm of the modern short-story cycle. Its form is clearly between an episodic novel and a mere collection of discrete items.”³ Consciously or not, Boswell’s assessment of *Brief Interviews* displays (verbatim) the same hierarchical

2 Malcolm Cowley, “Introduction.” In Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Viking, 1960), 15.

3 Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London: Methuen, 1977), 47.

approach to the relationship between the critically-privileged story cycle and the dismissively considered collection. Boswell does not cite Cowley or Reid in his remarks, and his repetition of this phrase is probably coincidental. In their examination of Cowley's description of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris suggest that this consensus is wide-ranging, claiming that "any publisher will confirm that readers are more likely to buy novels than story collections."⁴ Dunn and Morris's preferred term for the story cycle, "composite novel," reflects the hybrid form's critical transcendence; "in the pigeon house of genre the novel occupies a lofty perch, and any generic label that emphasizes 'story' rather than 'novel' roosts at a lower level," and so in turn works such as *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Brief Interviews* may be imagined as aspiring towards the "lofty perch" of the novel in the minds of many critics and readers.⁵

In his examination of the short story cycle as a phenomenon in twentieth-century US fiction, Rolf Lundén attributes this preference of (composite) novels over (mere) short fiction to the "post-Kantian, Coleridgean ideal of esthetic organicism, so dominant in the nineteenth [century] and the first half of [the twentieth] century," as a result of which "unity, coherence, and closure have been privileged at the expense of discontinuity, fragmentation, and openness."⁶ Lundén's invocation of Coleridgean organicism—which holds that "[t]he form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form," and that in contrast "[t]he organic form . . . is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within"—raises the issue of authorial design.⁷ Such questions have typically been considered

4 Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 3, 5.

5 *Ibid.*, 5.

6 Rolf Lundén, *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 1999), 8.

7 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism* (London: Dent, 1960; repr. 1967), Vol. I, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, 198.

misguided in contemporary literary criticism, especially since Wimsatt and Beardsley's declaration in 1946 that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art."⁸ Their polemic, however, does not anticipate an author such as Wallace, whose aims and intentions are available via several interviews, nor a story such as "Octet," which is very much about the notion of stories "fit[ting] together in . . . organic context" and "connecting to form a unified . . . whole," and which has been interpreted by various critics as the "center" or "heart" of *Brief Interviews*.⁹

Wallace's interest in stories "fitting together" and "connecting" calls to mind Viktor Shklovsky's concept of "threading." In Shklovsky's assessment, novels and cycles are distinguished from short story collections by this device, wherein "one story motif succeeds another motif and is linked to it by the unity of the protagonist."¹⁰ Lundén adapts this, abandoning the necessity of a consistent protagonist, and suggests that various forms of short story cycle (or, in Lundén's preferred term, "composite") exist along a spectrum whose poles are the "unity, coherence, and closure" of the novel and the "discontinuity, fragmentation, and openness" of the short story collection. In order of decreasing unity/coherence, these four sub-categories of short story composite are: the cycle, which is "basically organized cyclically—where in the last story there is a final resolution and a return to a beginning" (examples include *The Golden Apples* by Eudora Welty and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* by Thornton Wilder); the sequence, in which there is a principle of sequential order;

8 W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54.3 (1946), 468.

9 *BI*, 125–6; *UND*, 187; David Coughlan, "'Sappy or no, it's true': Affect and Expression in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*," in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Philip Coleman (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2015), 163.

10 Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. by Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 68.

but without the cycle's "strong sense of unity and closure" (Lundén suggests Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* and *On The Line* by Harvey Swados as examples); the cluster, which exhibits "a fairly high degree of indeterminacy" and in which "the interconnections between the stories are not obvious, but will have to be constructed by the reader, often with a constricting result . . . discontinuity and fragmentation emerge as the by far more characteristic features" (e.g. *In Our Time* by Ernest Hemingway); and the novella, which (as distinct from the synonymous literary form which one might assign to "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way") features disparate stories held together by a framing device (the most famous example of this is *Winesburg, Ohio*, but Lundén also includes *Lost in the Funhouse* and *A Night at the Movies* in this category, by virtue of "extradiegetic devices" such as Barth's foreword and Coover's "simulated offering of a movie house").¹¹ Although arguably not as developed as Lundén's categorical framework, the theories of cycles offered by Reid and by Dunn and Morris are univocal on the importance of "threading" between stories, connections formed by "organizing principles" such as "characters, settings, [and] leitmotifs."¹²

Where, then, if it truly transcends the "mere" collection, might *Brief Interviews* be located on this spectrum? There is clearly no framing device to the stories, which take place in settings ranging from the "partially reclined deck chair" of "a Nobel Laureate" in "Death is Not the End" to "medieval California's fluorescent basin" in the mythological-parody mode of "Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko."¹³ Similarly, there is little sense of an internal chronology to the stories of *Brief Interviews*, let alone the narrative trajectory required of a cycle. If *Brief Interviews* can be made to fit into Lundén's spectrum, then its most viable classification is as a cluster. If this is

11 Lundén, *United*, 37–8.

12 Dunn and Morris, *Transition*, 13; Reid, *Short Story*, 47.

13 *BI*, 1, 200.

the case, then searching for connections among the stories in *Brief Interviews* may, according to Lundén's framework, have a "constricting result" on our interpretations of the text.

Even compared to *In Our Time*, Lundén's exemplum of the short story cluster, *Brief Interviews* may now appear to be particularly fragmented and heterogeneous; Hemingway's stories are not easily formed into a coherent and continuous narrative, but the recurring character Nick Adams certainly provides a more identifiable "thread" than the sole recurring character in *Brief Interviews*, Walter D. DeLasandro Jr., who appears in both "The Depressed Person" and the otherwise unrelated "Yet Another Example of Porousness of Certain Borders (VI)." Nevertheless, it is easy to see why both Boswell and David Coughlan interpret *Brief Interviews* as having been "planned as a whole, [with] parts [that] should be seen as interconnected."¹⁴ The most obvious claim that *Brief Interviews* may make to status as a cycle is the eponymous series, which lacks any connecting characters or settings but features consistent formal features such as the provision of a date and location at the beginning of each interview and the use of what Wallace describes as "a journalistic capital 'Q'" in place of the interviewer's (or interviewers') questions.¹⁵ In the same discussion Wallace says that the interviews are "conducted by a female," suggesting that the voice concealed by the "Q"s is the same one in each interview, and in a separate conversation with Lorin Stein he claims that "[s]omething bad happens to her over the course of the book."¹⁶ Within the text itself, however, there is no clear evidence that the interviewer in each episode is the same person, or

14 Coughlan, "Sappy," 162.

15 Michael Silverblatt and David Foster Wallace, "David Foster Wallace: *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*," KCRW "Bookworm" radio show episode, 12 August 1999. The section in which Wallace makes this remark begins at about three minutes <<http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/david-foster-wallace-5>>, accessed December 2017.

16 *CW*, 90; Silverblatt and Wallace, "Bookworm," 3:00.

even that the interviewer is a female person each time, denying any “threads” between interviews beyond the formal template for each. There are also two other story-sets in *Brief Interviews*: “The Devil is a Busy Man” and “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders.”¹⁷ Both the “Brief Interviews” and “Certain Borders” story sets are numbered in such a way as to suggest the existence of further stories in the same series; as Coughlan notes, *Brief Interviews* provides “only eighteen of at least seventy-two interviews,” and with similar reasoning one may infer the (implied) existence of at least twenty-one other “Certain Borders” stories.¹⁸

These story-sets may alternatively be considered as “microcycles,” which are clearly presented as being connected if only by shared titles. These, in addition to the meta-commentary on the cycle form in “Octet,” clearly signal that the idea of the short story cycle is important to this text, but do they qualify the entire book as a cycle? The collection is about the story cycle form, but this does not necessarily mean that it is a cycle itself. Rather than describing *Brief Interviews* as a “carefully constructed” short story cycle, I suggest instead that it is a collection which contains within it several microcycles, but which does not itself cohere into anything significantly distinct from the “mere” collection. At most a “cluster” (in Lundén’s terms), the book displays far more discontinuity and fragmentation than it does cyclical coherence, and this seems in keeping with the thematic content of the stories: the “total fiasco” of fragments which “don’t integrate” in “Octet”; the “severe emotional dissonance” caused by “psychosemantic miscodings” in “Datum Centurio”; and the abortive date which ends with both participants “dr[iving] home

17 I have omitted “Adult World (I)” and “Adult World (II)” from this list as, although they are treated as separate stories in the book’s index, they form a continuous narrative centering around the same protagonist, and “Adult World (II)” is a clear continuation of “Adult World (I)” with only a stylistic change occurring between the two.

18 Coughlan, “Sappy,” 162.

alone” in “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life,” to name just a few examples.¹⁹

In a 1999 interview with Michael Silverblatt, Wallace himself states that *Brief Interviews* “consists of short stuff that [he] had written . . . independently of anything else and then wanted to *collect*, and another part of the book is supposed to . . . dwell in that weird area between novel and short story collection.”²⁰ He does not specify which stories fall into which category, although it seems reasonable to imagine that he is referring to the story-sets when he refers to the “weird area” of the short story cycle. We do not have access to Wallace’s more detailed thoughts on which among these stories were composed with a cycle in mind and which were “merely” collected, which means that many of the stories in *Brief Interviews* occupy a critical “weird area”—they may be considered either as independent story-units or as components of a cycle (or cycles). This, I suggest, is potentially a far more fruitful critical approach than to consider the entire book as a cycle, and each story within it as being inextricably linked to the larger whole.

**“[T]ry[ing] to salvage the aesthetic
disaster”: reassessing *Brief
Interviews with Hideous Men***

With this in mind, I wish to demonstrate some of critical constrictions (or contortions, perhaps) engendered by the established approach to *Brief Interviews* as a short story cycle, and to scrutinize the story-sets which have encouraged this view. If, by way of demonstration, we were to consider *Brief Interviews* to transcend the form of the “mere” collection and to attain the “weird area” described by Wallace, then it would be on the basis primarily of the three microcycles and any perceived connections among them.

19 *BI*, 124.

20 Silverblatt and Wallace, “Bookworm,” 1:15. Emphasis mine.

The formal connections between the eponymous interviews are described above, and Boswell claims that the other two microcycles cohere around more than just the stories' shared titles; his reading of the book identifies in the "Devil" stories a common theme of "the difficulty . . . of pure and selfless giving" and argues that the "Certain Borders" stories "all depict situations in which levels of consciousness and/or representation begin to bleed into one another."²¹ While Boswell's summary of the "Devil" dyad is accurate and his interpretation of the "Certain Borders" series is certainly true for at least two of its stories, I suggest that his identification of "threading" is based more upon the story titles than it is upon clear and consistent thematic content.

As suggested above, Boswell is joined in this approach by David Coughlan, who begins his essay on *Brief Interviews* with a table of the stories and their original publication dates. The "interesting features" that Coughlan draws from this information are primarily the stories' shared titles, from which he draws the conclusion "that this collection was planned as a whole, and that its parts should be seen as interconnected."²² Coughlan's table unfortunately does not include details of the changes that occurred to some of the stories between their original publication and their later compilation in *Brief Interviews*, and this information undermines his conclusion. Had Coughlan included more details of the stories' original publications, beyond the publication year, one of the foremost "interesting features" which would have emerged is that one of the "Devil" stories was originally published under the title "Yet Another Instance of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XII)."²³ Also of

21 *UND*, 198.

22 Coughlan, "Sappy," 161–2.

23 David Foster Wallace, "Yet Another Instance of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XII)," *Esquire* (November 1998).

This information is available at the "Uncollected DFW" page on the Howling Fantods website, thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/uncollecteddfw.html.

note—although understandably omitted from both Coughlan’s and Boswell’s readings—is the existence of another “Certain Borders” story, first published in 1998 as “Yet Another Instance of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VIII),” which was omitted from *Brief Interviews* and eventually collected in *Oblivion: Stories* in 2004 as “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.”²⁴ Knowledge of this publication history demonstrates how late into the process of compiling *Brief Interviews* Wallace was amending the elements of the “Certain Borders” microcycle, and how—in Coleridge’s terms—these story-sets are “mechanical” and artificial rather than organic.²⁵

This insight into the composition of *Brief Interviews* naturally invites the question of why Wallace chose to rename his stories this way. Furthermore, it raises the question of how this renaming affects critical readings. It seems probable that Wallace may have initially composed some of these stories as standalone works and renamed one of the “Certain Borders” stories to “The Devil is a Busy Man” when he belatedly recognized that two distinct microcycles were emerging in his writing. The renaming of “Yet Another Instance of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XII)” to “The Devil is a Busy Man” supports this theory and Boswell’s reading, as the story clearly shares a thematic concern with “the difficulty . . . of pure and selfless giving” with the other “Devil” story, and does not appear to engage with the theme of “levels of consciousness and/or representation begin[ning] to bleed into one another” that Boswell identifies

24 David Foster Wallace, “Yet Another Instance of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VIII),” *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* 1 (1998). thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/uncollected-dfw.html.

25 It was not until 1999, the year of the book’s publication, that Wallace changed the word “Instance” to “Example,” when he published number VI (the DeLasandro divorce transcript) in (or, rather, on the spine of) *McSweeney’s*. David Foster Wallace, “Another Example of the Porousness of Various Borders (VI): Projected But Not Improbably Transcript of Author’s Parents’ Marriage’s End, 1971,” *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* 3 (1999). thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/uncollected-dfw.html.

in the “Certain Borders” series. The “Certain Borders” series itself, however, remains mutable and ill-defined. Boswell’s concept of the interplay between consciousness and representation as the defining theme of the series is apposite for number XI (in which the narrator’s fear of blindness causes him to awake in tears of sadness and to continue crying throughout the day, despite her/his knowledge in the dream that “crying will hurt [her/his] eyes somehow and make the blindness even worse”) and for number XXIV (in which the narrator’s twin brother’s “mimicry” of the narrator’s facial expressions as s/he gets her/his hair cut results in the narrator “no longer feeling [her/his] features’ movements so much as seeing them on that writhing white face”).²⁶ This same theme of complication is evident in “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,” which includes a short section on the narrator’s mother’s horrified facial reaction to her already-horrified (as the result of botched surgery) facial expression.²⁷ This theme is certainly not as central to “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” as it is to these two “Certain Borders” stories, but the possible reasons for omitting the story from *Brief Interviews* do not seem as clear and compelling as the thematic reason for the creation of the “Devil” series. Boswell’s proposed theme is furthermore absent from number VI (the DeLasandro breakup), and it is unclear why this story should have been included in the series. The categorization of the “Certain Borders” story set as a microcycle therefore does not seem to withstand critical scrutiny, and Boswell’s identification of a “threading” theme among the three stories in *Brief Interviews* may perhaps attest more to the influence of the stories’ titles and to the recurrence of the cycle as a theme within the book as a whole than it does to any actual shared theme.

My purpose here is not merely to quibble with Boswell’s and Coughlan’s readings, but to demonstrate the potential pitfalls when

26 *BI*, 29–30, 272–3.

27 *OB*, 182–9.

approaching a text as a short story cycle. The word “cycle” denotes repetition—the repeated format of the interview series and the repeated titles of the “Certain Borders” and “Devil” series in the case of *Brief Interviews*, or repeated protagonists, settings, or motifs in the case of more canonical cycles—but it also denotes enclosure. To declare a set of short stories to be a cycle may limit readings of those stories, for one critical assumption that the term denotes is the notion that any story that is part of a cycle can only be fully understood in the context of the entire cycle. This is not to say that potential “threads” between *Brief Interviews* and other texts by Wallace or by other authors have not been identified; David P. Rando, for example, isolates Brief Interview #20 from the other stories in the series and offers an illuminating comparison with “The Dead” by James Joyce, which is itself typically considered to be part of a cycle.²⁸ However, the thematization of short story cycles in “Octet” and the use of repeated titles in *Brief Interviews* seems elsewhere to have unduly influenced readings of the book, and this, I suggest, has resulted in some “threads” to Wallace’s other work being overlooked.

**“It all changes when you get back
down”: a closer look at “Forever
Overhead” and “Church Not Made
with Hands”**

Coughlan’s list of the stories’ original publication dates demonstrates that “Forever Overhead” and “Church Not Made with Hands” were first published significantly earlier than the other stories in the book and were presumably composed many years before as well. (All other stories were published between 1997 and 1999, at least six years after these two stories were published separately in 1991.) Although, as D. T. Max notes, “[p]ieces of [*Infinite Jest*] date

28 David P. Rando, “David Foster Wallace and Lovelessness,” in *Twentieth-Century Literature* 59.4 (2013), 575–95.

back to 1986,” 1991 may be considered a “breakthrough” year for Wallace’s work on the novel.²⁹ While Wallace was focused on the novel he published little short fiction, and with the exceptions of some excerpts of *Infinite Jest*, his fictional output between *Girl with Curious Hair* and *Infinite Jest* comprises in its entirety “Church Not Made with Hands,” “Forever Overhead,” and a to-date uncollected story, “Order and Flux in Northampton.” Max cites Wallace’s 1986 application to the Yaddo artists’ community as stating that he desired the opportunity to “try to determine just where and why the stories leave off and the novel begins.”³⁰ It is tempting to speculate, therefore, that some or all of these three stories may initially have been considered to be sections of *Infinite Jest* before Wallace decided (or his editor, Michael Pietsch, persuaded him) to jettison them from the novel and to publish them as standalone stories instead. It is certainly the case that “Church Not Made with Hands” was at one point considered to be part, or at least a prospective part, of the eventual novel, as it bore the subtitle “from *Infinite Jest*” when first published in 1991.³¹ This is particularly remarkable given how stylistically unlike *Infinite Jest* the story is, far more so than “Forever Overhead” and “Order and Flux in Northampton.” The story’s protagonist, a man known only as “Day,” is a taciturn art-therapy case worker, and is utterly unlike his namesake in *Infinite Jest*, the pompous and belligerent Ennet House resident, Geoffrey Day. It is difficult to imagine the two Days having ever been the same character, or how the impressionistic style of “Church Not Made with Hands” might have fit into the far more realist narrative of *Infinite Jest*, and it is unsurprising in hindsight that the story was eventually collected in *Brief Interviews* instead. Regardless of what the original connection between the two Days may have been, I suggest that there are further “threads” joining “Church Not

29 *LOV*, 59.

30 *Ibid.*

31 David Foster Wallace, “Church Not Made with Hands,” *Rampike* (1991), 62.

Made with Hands” and Wallace’s two other short stories published in 1991, to *Infinite Jest*.

The first thread that I wish to illuminate is one cited by Coughlan as evidence of *Brief Interviews*’ status as a short story cycle. As Mary K. Holland notes, the eponymous character’s therapist in “The Depressed Person” and Dr. Ndiawar in “Church Not Made with Hands” share the habit of forming shapes with their fingers while talking with other characters.³² Unrecognized by either Holland or Coughlan, though, is the fact that this motif also appears in *Infinite Jest*. As with the short stories, the character with whom this tic is associated in the novel is a psychotherapist: Enfield Tennis Academy’s inept counselor, Dr. Rusk, is said to characteristically “make a cage of her hands and look abstractly over the cage at you and take the last dependent clause of whatever you say and repeat it back to you with an interrogative lilt.”³³ “The Depressed Person” and “Church Not Made with Hands” are less explicit in their critiques of psychotherapy, but in juxtaposition with *Infinite Jest* the motif of hand-shapes emerges as a clear symbol of the failure of the psychoanalytic method and, more generally, of self-involvement. This latter interpretation is further suggested when Hal, rebuffing Pemulis’s requests for an urgent “mano-à-tête,” “mak[es] a cage of [his] hands and watch[es] the light through its shape.”³⁴ A second motif that connects “Church Not Made with Hands” to *Infinite Jest* is a “special talent” shared by Eric Yang (Day’s colleague in “Church Not Made with Hands”) and Hal Incandenza.³⁵ In a series of non sequitur interjections into the conversation between Day and Ndiawar, Yang

32 Mary K. Holland, “Mediated immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.” In *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Palgrave MacMillan; Basingstoke, 2013), 110.

33 *IJ*, 437.

34 *IJ*, 909.

35 *BI*, 167.

explains that “[he] rotate[s] three-dimensional objects. Mentally,” and that “[he] can see textures and imperfections and the play of light and shadow on the objects . . . too.”³⁶ Contrary to Yang’s description of this as a “a very private talent”, it is in fact shared by Hal Incandenza, who is said by one of his colleagues at Enfield Tennis Academy to be able to “scan [a] page, rotate it, fold the corner down and clean under his nails with it, all mentally.”³⁷

The most striking thread which connects “Church Not Made with Hands” to *Infinite Jest*, however, is one which holds the potential to bring multiple characters together instead of dividing them into solipsistic existences. Wallace’s most obvious and well-discussed literary forebears are the postmodernists, most particularly but not limited to John Barth, William Gaddis, and Don DeLillo. However, in *Infinite Jest* in particular there are resonances of some of the most canonical modernist authors. The convergence of disparate characters on the streets of Boston calls to mind the “Wandering Rocks” chapter of *Ulysses* by James Joyce, which may be considered a microcycle as it is comprised of nineteen short vignettes in which various characters reappear and interact as they encounter each other on their journeys through Dublin. Arguably even more pertinent is the example of *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, in which the two major characters, the eponymous Clarissa Dalloway and the traumatized Septimus Smith, never meet or directly interact, much like Hal and Don Gately in *Infinite Jest*. Early in Woolf’s novel Dalloway and Smith are shown to both witness a plane flying overhead, oblivious to each other’s presence as they observe the plane from different locations in London, a device which is echoed by the independent observation of the same mountain range by characters in “Forever Overhead” and “Church Not Made with Hands.” In *Infinite Jest*, Hal and Gately

36 *BI*, 169–70.

37 *BI*, 170; *IJI*, 97.

are both drawn into political conspiracy surrounding the eponymous film cartridge, which conspiracy primarily revolves around Marathe, the Quebecois separatist terrorist. Much of the exposition pertaining to this complex plotline is provided by Marathe and the US agent Hugh Steeply in a dialogue which takes place on a mountainside, a location which, like Woolf's plane, transcends the largely oblivious players below. As the sun sets the speakers' shadows stretch, and Marathe observes that "his head's shadow brought much of the suburb West Tucson to a premature dusk."³⁸

Clearly, the Tucson mountains are far removed from the eponymous town in "Order and Flux in Northampton," which is "located on the northern fringe of Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley on the eastern edge of the Berkshire Mountains."³⁹ The "thread" which connects *Infinite Jest* to "Church Not Made with Hands" and "Forever Overhead" is not merely the setting near American mountain ranges, but shadows cast by mountains. Like "Order and Flux in Northampton," "Church Not Made with Hands" is set within view of the Berkshire mountains, as demonstrated by the impressionistic description of Day's morning: "Day stands at a square window with a cup of something hot. A dead Cezanne does this August sunrise in any-angled smears of clouded red, a blue that darkles. A Berkshire's shadow retreats toward one blunt nipple: fire."⁴⁰ Although very little trace of the abstruse psychodrama of "Church Not Made with Hands" remains in *Infinite Jest*, there is a clear interest in each text with the changes in light and shadow that occur with the movement of the sun, particularly across a huge landmark such as the Berkshire or Tucson mountains. Although situated in different parts of the US, the introductions of Day and Marathe provide mirror images of

38 *IJ*, 88.

39 David Foster Wallace, "Order and Flux in Northampton," *Conjunctions* 17 (1991). www.conjunctions.com/print/article/david-foster-wallace-c17.

40 *BJ*, 165.

each other; as the shadow of the Berkshire mountains “retreat” as the sun rises, Marathe’s shadow is “enlarged and distended” by the setting sun.⁴¹ “Forever Overhead” depicts the same event as *Infinite Jest*, but from the perspective of one at the base of the mountain instead of atop it:

Around the deck of this old public pool on the Western edge of Tucson is a Cyclone fence the color of pewter . . . And past all this, reddened by a round slow September sun, are mountains, jagged, their tops’ sharp angles darkening in definition against a deep red tired light. Against the red their sharp connected tops form a spiked line, an EKG of a dying day.⁴²

If “Church Not Made with Hands” was once considered a prospective part of *Infinite Jest*, it is not difficult to imagine this scene being plunged into “a premature dusk” by the appearance of Marathe on the Tucson mountains, bearing an invisible yet powerful influence on the people below. The “column[s] of shadow” cast by the two men might, perhaps, form peaks on the “EKG” witnessed by the boy in “Forever Overhead.”⁴³

However, “Forever Overhead” and “Church Not Made with Hands” are more closely threaded to each other than they are to *Infinite Jest*, and it is understandable that Wallace chose to detach the latter (and, perhaps, the former) from the world of the Organized North American Nations and publish them several years later instead. The conventional and chronological narrative of “Forever Overhead” contrasts with the abstruse style and structure of “Church Not Made with Hands,” but their thematic content is remarkably similar; simplifying the plot details to the extreme,

41 *IJ*, 88.

42 *BI*, 5.

43 *IJ*, 89.

both stories are about the loss of childhood in a swimming pool. Of course, the loss of childhood is a theme which connects (or “threads”) a great amount of Wallace’s writing, from the opening chapter of *The Broom of the System*, in which the teenage Lenore Beadsman encounters the ingrained misogyny of US higher education, through Don Gately’s pain-addled memories of his traumatic childhood in *Infinite Jest* to the sections of *The Pale King* which depict the transformative childhood events which lead several characters towards the “monumental dullness” of working at the IRS.⁴⁴ However, there is also a particular thematic concern with height and falling in each of these stories. “Church Not Made with Hands” culminates with Day encountering a mentally disturbed old man (who, it transpires, was once Day’s teacher), and the scene abruptly takes a surreal turn into psychodrama. The field that Day and his colleagues stand in becomes a floating island, from which an enormous plant sprouts. The plant seems to transform into a monolithic church, with Day’s daughter Esther trapped in a “rose window” at the top, although in the “real world” of the story she has been hospitalized by her accident in the swimming pool and is not present in the field.⁴⁵ Day tries to reach her by swimming up through the air towards her, even though he can only “pantomime” the action of swimming, and it is implied that his inability to swim was a contributing factor in Esther’s hospitalization.⁴⁶ However, when he looks down towards the ground the entire phantasmic structure collapses, bringing Esther with it:

And again it is when he looks below him that he fails. Wanting only to see whence he’d risen. The merest second—less—it takes for it all to come down.

...

44 *TPK*, 84.

45 *BI*, 178

46 *BI*, 178.

Her fall takes time. Her body rotates slowly through the air,
trails a comet gauze.

...

There is the sound of impact at a great glass height: terrible,
multi-hued.⁴⁷

The conclusion of “Forever Overhead” isn’t nearly as climactic as this, but there is, again, the shared concern with height, perspective, and falling. The boy stands at the top of the diving board’s ladder, surveying the queued people beneath him and contemplating the way that the woman in front of him “disappears into a time that passes before she sounds. Like a stone down a well.”⁴⁸ “Forever Overhead” is typically not as obscure in its expression as the psychodrama of “Church Not Made with Hands” is, but its occasional use of poetic language which defies conventional syntax is evident again in the conclusion of the story: “The board will nod and you will go, and eyes of skin can cross blind into a cloud-blotched sky, punctured light emptying behind sharp stone that is forever. That is forever. Step into the skin and disappear.”⁴⁹

The poetic merging of eyes and the sky in this lyrical conclusion to the boy’s transformative moment is echoed in the conclusion of “Church Not Made with Hands,” perhaps again betraying a common inspiration or motivation to the two stories that is otherwise obscured by some of their stylistic differences:

The sky is an eye.

The dusk and the dawn are the blood that feeds the eye.

The night is the eye’s drawn lid.

Each day the lid again comes open, disclosing blood,
and the blue iris of a prone giant.⁵⁰

47 *BI*, 178-9.

48 *BI*, 10.

49 *BI*, 13.

50 *BI*, 179.

The more general theme of childhood may also connect these two stories to others in the *Brief Interviews*—most obviously “Suicide as a Sort of Present” and “On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand, the Acclaimed New Young Off-Broadway Playwright’s Father Begs a Boon”—but, like the eponymous interview series and the “Devil” stories, they seem more to form a smaller microcycle, or dyad, than to fit comfortably into an overarching and encapsulating short story cycle.



This essay has taken as its subject the critical consensus surrounding the formal categorization of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and has offered both the publication history and a close analysis of the stories “Forever Overhead” and “Church Not Made with Hands” in the service of testing the validity of this categorization. In doing so I have also aimed to offer a critical reappraisal of the value of the short story cycle in general. There are certainly texts that might more accurately be described as cycles than *Brief Interviews* may be; canonical examples include *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *Winesburg, Ohio*, neither of which resemble any of Wallace’s short story collections. It is clear, however, that the concept of the short story cycle—and specifically the notion that individual story-units might amount to more than the sum of their parts when “threaded” together into a cycle—was particularly important to Wallace while producing *Brief Interviews*, in contrast to his other two collections, *Girl with Curious Hair* and *Oblivion: Stories*, which seem to present themselves uncritically (or un-self-aggrandizingly) as “mere” collections, and to have been readily interpreted as such. While *Brief Interviews* itself may not qualify as a cycle as definitively as *Winesburg, Ohio* does (or even as much as contemporaneous works such as *Haunted* by Chuck Palahniuk and *Ghostwritten* by David Mitchell), Wallace evidently intended it to at least occupy a “weird area” between the conventional short

story collection and the critically-privileged cycle. While many of the book's stories function, as in conventional short fiction collections, as independent units, many others form microcycles, and the book might perhaps be most accurately described as a collection of both stories and cycles.

The examples of "Forever Overhead" and "Church Not Made with Hands" warrant particular critical attention as their publication history demonstrates that their composition was most likely independent of any ideas that Wallace may later have had about creating a short story cycle. More important than speculation on authorial motivation—however strongly suggested by the publication dates—are the facts of the "threads" connecting Wallace's texts. Such connections are essential to the creation of a short story cycle but, as I have demonstrated, these two earlier stories are more clearly "threaded" to *Infinite Jest* than they are to the other stories in *Brief Interviews*. Taken in combination with the publication dates, the connections between these stories and *Infinite Jest*—most particularly the shared motif of shadows caused by the motion of sunlight across mountain ranges—suggest clearly that these scenes may have been composed at similar times, or at least have been connected by a shared inspiration or motivation. Ultimately, however, these stories cannot be interpreted as being simply "one thing or the other." As the "Certain Borders" story set also demonstrates, the interpretive boundaries established by formal categorization of *Brief Interviews* as a self-contained "cycle" must be "porous"; the impermeable membrane suggested by the concept of a short fiction cycle cannot adequately contain the various "threads" which connect Wallace's short fiction to the rest of his work.

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**THE CASE OF
“THINK” IN *BRIEF
INTERVIEWS WITH
HIDEOUS MEN*:
IS DIALOGISM
POSSIBLE?**

Pia Masiero

“You do have a body, you know.”

David Foster Wallace, *TPK*

REFLECTING ON “BRIEF INTERVIEW #20,” Christoforos Diakoulakis reminds us that stories are the all too human way to preserve the possibility of love in spite of their being intrinsically other and doomed to fail: we invent and repeat stories that simply approximate what love is to make love possible.¹ I would add: we keep telling stories to communicate our hope for its existence beyond and away from the narcissistic and alienating quagmires that besiege our being in our present tense, postindustrial, world.

David Foster Wallace’s collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) can certainly be read as a reflection both on the relational (and linguistic) quagmires of female-male relationships and on the

1 *CON*, 153-155.

underlying hope that a truly dialogic intimacy between men and women might still be possible. What follows is an exploration of the ways in which David Foster Wallace, as a writer, reflects on both these quagmires and this hope in some pieces of his 1999 short story collection.

In his book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin wrote that “character interests Dostoevsky as a specific point of view on the world and on himself. As a semantic and evaluative position on himself and on the reality that surrounds him”:² this view of character, which goes beyond the notion of a container of a list of traits, may provide an interesting key to explore how Wallace’s formal and linguistic choices, most notably, the interplay of focalization and narrating instances and the employment of deixis, reveal his way of staging the semantic (and evaluative) skeleton of being in the postindustrial world he and his characters live in; the focus on these choices in what follows is not narratological for its own sake, but—hopefully—paves the way for a deeper understanding of readers’ experiencing Wallace’s text and their own being in the world.

Adam Kelly has described Wallace’s engagement with Bakhtin’s categories, providing an engaging reading of Wallace’s three novels as a dynamic negotiation of monologic and dialogic impulses. He convincingly demonstrated similarities with the Dostoevskian model and presented specificities, for example, Wallace’s adding “an extra element to the mix, which rests in the anticipatory anxiety his characters feel in addressing others.”³

I will propose a reading of some pieces of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* keeping in mind Kelly’s mapping, and looking at the formal choices that may foster dialogic situations. The short form is the perfect narrative context to explore how formal choices can sustain

2 Michael Bakhtin, *Dostoevskij. Poetica e stilistica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1963) 64, my translation.

3 Adam Kelly, “Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas,” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (2012): 270.

thematic issues. The staging of many instances of male-female relationships makes of Wallace's 1999 short story collection a perfect place to interrogate the conundrum of communication that characterizes these relationships. The short stories I set out to focus on in the pages that follow—"Think," "Pop Quiz 9" and "Brief Interview #20"—may be profitably read together as an interconnected exploration of the promises and traps inherent in pursuing dialogism, that is, as Kelly summarizes it, "the joint pursuit of truth."⁴

The short piece that opens *Brief Interviews* has been thoroughly analyzed by Stephen Burn who demonstrates it to be "a radically condensed rehearsal of Wallace's poetics."⁵ Wallace manages to pack in its seventy-nine words examples of his typical sentence, revolving around a calibration of alliteration, assonance, and rhythm, a nod to "the ethical implications of metafiction,"⁶ as well as a display of his interest "in the systems and mechanisms that enable and limit thought."⁷ Well beyond the numerical constraints Wallace was playing with in this short piece,⁸ the limiting systems that are staged here are rather clearly the cognitively lethal mechanisms that make the other a reflecting mirror of what we ourselves project on him/her. Mindreading is part and parcel of our cognitive set up; it is a fundamental capacity that governs our way of being in the world. We survive our environment employing intentional systems that allow us to attribute thoughts, beliefs and desires to the persons we are with. As "A Radically Condensed History" makes clear, this capacity has turned on its head because it has been colonized by our projections

4 Ibid., 269.

5 Stephen Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest. A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 14.

6 Ibid., 16.

7 Ibid., 19.

8 Stephen Burn demonstrates how the whole piece is a dance between the numbers 2 and 3 and the number 23 that comes from their union; 23 is the number of the paired chromosomes that make up the human genome. Ibid., 17-18.

of what's deemed socially pleasant and likeable about our looks and our behavior. The viciousness of the situation is captured by "the very same twist to their faces"⁹ which bespeaks the two protagonists' need for a connection gone awry and boomeranging back on both who arguably feel more sad and isolated than they were before meeting. The third character of the story, the person who introduced the two other characters in the first place, is not exempt from the same poisoning assumption that governs their behavior: what he actually feels is uncoupled from what he displays. The existential boomerang the story presents depends crucially on staging a contrived social self, a veritable façade, a mask, in the name of preserving "good relations at all times"¹⁰ simply because one never knows, or, we should say, because we do not happen to know much more than what media inculcates in our minds day in, day out. This is the environment nourishing our intentional stance. The lethal interiorizing of fake selves turns us into black mirrors—on the one hand, our selves are not transparent to others, on the other, what we see on the faces of the people we are with is our own blackened, that is, distorted, reflection. Authentic communication is notably absent here: monologic solipsism colors the exchange that does not show any sign of a dialogic relationship. The relational illness centered on what Adam Kelly calls "anticipatory anxiety"¹¹ here depicted is even more tragic once we consider that the anecdote is presented as articulating the entire story (history) of human development (life) in postindustrial times, namely, our recent past and present tense. Rather significantly, the prefatory and synecdoche-like quality of this piece is highlighted by its being positioned on page 0—the degree zero of writing. This is the reason why I dwell on this well-known opening piece as it suggests that what follows, most notably male-female relationships and, more generally,

9 *BI*, 0.

10 *Ibid.*, 0.

11 Kelly, "The Novel of Ideas," 270.

social interactions, cannot but be rooted in this default situation: not only can we not deny it, but its acceptance as a necessary premise of any further exploration of its implications must come before anything else can be said.

All this is not much of a novelty in Wallace's storyworlds, as they repeatedly present characters that demonstrate different stages of the same infective disease of giving others what we think they want from us. The short text I now turn to, "Think," can be read against the default relational setting presented in the opening piece as it provides a further reflection on the mirroring effects of projection with a hint at a possibly positive development emerging from within the fold of structural narrative choices. "Think," thus, does not simply present a situation that concerns a more advanced stage of a male-female relationship, but allows us to focus on the ways in which specific formal decisions both sustain and amplify Wallace's thematic concerns.



Considering the series or doublings that grant the collection its unique echo-chamber effect, "Think" comes after the first batch (out of four) of Brief Interviews and the first instance of "The Devil Is a Busy Man"; it can be read as a middle ground that paves the way to "Octet," which David Hering has shown to occupy a central, prominent position in the book with its "simultaneous use of *mise-en-abyme* . . . and self-effacing authorial presence [that] reflects and frames the other stories in the collection, with their paralysed protagonists, as part of an overarching undertaking in defiance of narcissism."¹² I would argue "Think" is a transitional piece that, with its ambiguously exhortative title, harks back to "A Radically Condensed History" and nods forward to the interpellations that constitute the rhetorical

¹² David Hering, *David Foster Wallace. Fiction and Form* (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 114.

skeleton of “Octet” and of the series of brief interviews we encounter along the collection. The verbal mood—an imperative—contains inherently an addresser and an addressee—someone who tells someone else to think. Fine as far as verbal morphology goes, but is it an order, a wish, a piece of advice or a suggestion? In a word, is it dialogic or monologic? Here in almost anecdotal form, we are guided to reflect on one of the main themes of the Brief Interviews: the disfigurement of a true communication between men and women due to an infected systemic loop well beyond individual misogynistic behaviors. The analysis of “Brief Interview #20” that follows the close reading of “Think” will expand on what emerges from it.

“Think” presents a man and a woman ready to cash in their reciprocal relational investments, so to speak. They are well past the (unsuccessful) first introduction staged in “A Condensed History,” but their sharing the namelessness of those two other characters gives them a tinge of representativeness in what may be taken to be the script about male-female relationships in postindustrial life. They share with their earlier fellow characters the same poisonous mindreading features.

“Her brassiere’s snaps are in front. His own forehead snaps clear.”¹³ The opening immediately establishes the situation in the present tense of what will very soon turn out to be an extramarital affair on the verge of happening: the two protagonists are alone in a bedroom already at a certain stage of undressing. The same word, “snap,” creates a binary, a double-focus on what can be seen—her brassiere and his forehead—and what that surface may reveal and hide. In a few lines, in fact, we are told that his forehead snaps clear because of “a type of revelation . . . why she’d begged off the mall, the meaning of certain comments, looks, distended moments over the weekend he’d thought were his vanity, imagination.”¹⁴ This

13 *BI*, 72.

14 *Ibid.*, 72

revelation concerns the confirmation of what the male protagonist had taken to be just hopeful over-interpreting. The short story, thus, opens activating the semantic cluster associated with snapping open, unconfined, clear. Nakedness and clarity are here presented as suggesting a situation revolving around freedom of choice and unconstrained behavior. As this short piece confirms, this is not what Wallace considered the best situation one might be confronted with.

The binary that opens the short story points to the strength of “Think” and the reason it should be considered a crucial tile to map the problematic and fragile trajectory that goes from a solipsistic and monologic to a potential dialogic mode in the whole collection: “Think” presents a highly integrated instance of double internal focalization. This formal choice goes a long way in reframing experience as communicable, and thus moving toward dialogic possibilities. The piece, furthermore, presents an interesting handling of authorial presence.¹⁵

“Think” is made up of two long paragraphs followed by a short dialogue interspersed with brief reflections. As the adjective “own” (“his own forehead”) indicates, the piece opens privileging the male protagonist’s internal perspective: we are told what he sees, what he thinks of what he sees, what he imagines and, crucially, what he thinks about what his female partner does and what she allegedly thinks. The fact that we are perceiving the storyworld through his restricted focalizing perspective is reinforced by descriptive notations that are clearly anchored to his physical position: “in quick profile as she turns to close the door her breast is a half-globe at the bottom, a ski-jump curve above.”¹⁶ The scene, thus, reaches us as filtered not only through his vision, but through his mind (and mindreading) as

15 The piece could actually be interpreted as an authorial narrative shorn of all the paraphernalia typical of that narrative situation, but I hope to demonstrate in the pages that follow that the hypothesis of a double internal focalization makes much more narrative sense in the context of this short story collection.

16 *BI*, 72.

well. In the second line of the short story, we thus learn that “[h]e thinks to kneel. But he knows what she might think if he kneels.”¹⁷ The twice repeated verb of the title attracts our attention, at least for two reasons: first, it spells out the thought being thought—kneeling—that will turn out to be the single action around which the whole short story revolves; second, we cannot but register the fact that the two verbs refer only superficially to two different subjects (he thinks/she might think). This latter, on the one hand, returns us to the basic notion presented in “A Condensed History,” namely that our behaviors are gauged against what we think others will think. On the other hand, it stages microscopically the drama that is at the center of the Brief Interviews: female subjectivity is absorbed and appropriated by a male perspective. It could rightly be argued that this has nothing to do with the systematic and aggressive filtering that the interviews stage—after all, the one to be at least partially thwarted by this thought is the male protagonist himself. We should not, however, ignore the employment of the same authoritative verb—“to know”—in both situations. The knowledge invoked in both cases is, at best, stereotypical and is based on the dismissal of an individualized female response. We will return to the possible reasons for this allegedly monologic dynamic in the context of the analysis of “Brief Interview #20.” For the time being, suffice it to say that this thought is here presented as paralyzing: because of this projection, in fact, the male protagonist does not act upon this thought at once, and when he will eventually do it, kneeling will be presented as something that happens in spite of himself, rather than an actual decision: “It’s not even that he decides to kneel—he simply finds he feels weight against his knees.”¹⁸ It is worth stressing that when the actual kneeling takes place, it is immediately followed by another projective thought: “[h]is position might make her think

17 Ibid., 72.

18 Ibid., 73.

he wants her underwear off”¹⁹—a reminder that we are constantly alert to what our moves might produce in others (be it narcissism or paranoia or both).

After the (partially) paralyzing thought, we become more deeply immersed in the male protagonist’s mind while he processes the development of the situation. The scene unfolds in slow motion:²⁰ the protagonist is both present to what surrounds him and to how the present moment relates to his broader existential set up, for “He imagines his wife and son. Her breasts are unconfined now.”²¹ The juxtaposition of where he is in terms of defining relations and where he is now is a very precise representation of the jumble of coexisting materials that inhabit our brain in a given moment. This is part and parcel of Wallace’s constant dwelling on the infinity of thoughts that characterizes our mental activity (“Good Old Neon” is one of the most obvious examples that may come to mind). The description with which we are presented is accurate in terms of movements, positioning and factual details (“the sister with breasts by the bed has a level gaze and a slight smile,” “the bed’s comforter has a tulle hem”²²) but goes well beyond what is there. We should not forget that, given the choice of the internal focalization, both the factual details and the projected ones are presented as belonging in the deictic field of the focalizing character, that is to say, in the field that pertains to his individualized, embodied existence:

a slight smile, slight and smoky, media-taught . . . Her expression is from Page 18 of the Victoria’s Secret catalogue.

19 *Ibid.*, 73.

20 The time of the story spans such a short clock-time—from the moment at which he thinks to kneel to the moment in which he actually kneels and the situation thus takes an unexpected turn—that we might say that the time of the telling approximates the time of the story.

21 *BL.*, 73

22 *Ibid.*, 72.

She is, he thinks, the sort of woman who'd keep her heels on if he asked her to. Even if she'd never kept heels on before she'd give him a knowing, smoky smile. Page 18 . . . The languid half-turn and push of the door are tumid with some kind of significance, he realizes she's replaying a scene from some movie she loves.²³

Because of the perspective in place, the only statement we could safely make is that Page 18 of *Victoria's Secret* catalogue is in the male protagonist's mind: he recognizes it, as he recognizes the movie she is allegedly replaying.²⁴ Even if it is actually the case that she is modeling her looks and behavior on page 18 and a certain film, what we are presented with here is the focalizing character's own attribution of "some kind of significance" to what he sees and his attribution of that significance to her intentions. "Her expression is a combination of seductive and aroused with an overlay of slight amusement *meant to convey* sophistication, the loss of all illusions long ago."²⁵ The male protagonist is here applying what Daniel Dennett calls "the intentional stance": we attribute intentions to the behaviors (and looks) we see in others on the assumption that they apply the default contents of a given normative system²⁶ transparently (that is, rationally). Once we know the normative system of reference, in the case at hand, the shared exposition to TV and media in general,

23 *Ibid.*, 72-73.

24 For those who would rather go for the hypothesis of an authorial narrative situation, this quote presents a good point to make: how does he know she is replaying a scene "from some movie she loves"? I would argue that it would be possible to naturalize this piece of information rather easily. There are other possible examples I will not bring up so as to avoid what might be deemed narratological pedantry.

25 *BL*, 73, emphasis mine.

26 "Folk psychology, then, is idealized in that it produces its predictions and explanations by calculating in a normative system; it predicts what we will believe, desire, and do, by determining what we ought to believe, desire, and do." Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 52.

the intentions we attribute conform to what is deemed true and normal in that context. We may say that they are *both* “media-taught,” that they have been exposed to the same influence that has clearly infiltrated their way of behaving and reading reality. This reading would not be difficult to defend considering how Wallace’s macrotext makes repeatedly clear the pervasiveness of different media in postindustrial life. And yet, we do not actually know whether Page 18 belongs in a gesture of mere projection or actual recognition, because, once we are offered the female character’s own focalized perspective she is deep in making sense of her partner’s. The formal choice of a double internal focalization has the collateral effect of redressing monovocality and (male) appropriation; it does so by blurring distinctions and problematizing stereotypes.

The short story shifts to the female perspective in the moment in which the male character kneels: “When he clasps his hands in front of his chest it’s now clear he is kneeling to pray. There can now be no mistaking what he’s doing. His color is very high.”²⁷ The shift is signaled by a descriptive focus on the male protagonist as object of her gaze and on her interpreting what she sees. The continuity of the two perspectives is nicely conveyed by the repetition of the adjective “clear,” which had opened the short story giving access, there, to his interiority, here, to hers. It is interesting to notice how there clarity was associated with snapping open, here with clasping closed, that is to say, the unconstrained possibilities adumbrated at the beginning of the piece are here channeled into a (rather unexpected) outcome/action. Furthermore, the continuity is enhanced by the same sort of self-reflexive awareness about herself that we have seen in the man: “She stands confused. Her awareness of her own nudity becomes

27 Ibid., 73. In Wallace’s macrotext and here as well, attributions of focalizing perspectives are not easy to make. The decision, as is always the case, is ultimately based on what makes more (textual) sense.

a different kind of awareness.”²⁸ Now that the situation has unexpectedly changed, what kind of (media-taught) interpretation for her nudity is available? Significantly, she soon conjures up someone else’s evaluating gaze on herself: “She’s now aware of just how she’s standing, how silly it might look through a window.”²⁹ Away from the script of cherished movies and well-known catalogue pages, she imagines being seen by someone looking through the window; the gaze she imagines catches her confused and thus silly—that is, not confident of playing a recognizable, sophisticated role. To be precise: the other’s gaze has to be invented, because the male’s gaze is not available—“[h]is eyes never leave the middle-distance between the ceiling and themselves.”³⁰ This curious situation reveals the viciousness of the circle of a social validation we both need and are afraid of. And yet, instead of going along the usual way, that is, “retreat into intense self-conscious enquiry,”³¹ which is the antechamber of isolation, regression and involution, “Think” stages a different ending that opens up a possibility of an individual response. Significantly this happens when unrestrained possibilities have been ruled out with his clasping his hands: “She could try, for just a moment, to imagine what is happening in his head. A bathroom scale barely peeking out from below the foot of the bed, beneath the gauzy hem of the comforter. Even for an instant, to try putting herself in his place.”³²

This moment in the short story is very intense and notable for at least two important reasons well beyond the fact that it may be taken to represent an instance of what Patrick Colm Hogan calls

28 Ibid., 73.

29 Ibid., 73.

30 Ibid., 73.

31 Hering, *Fiction and Form*, 95.

32 *BI*, 73.

“allocentric emotion”:³³ first, the comment on the bathroom scale attracts our attention to the materiality of objects that are omnipresent in our lives with their mere unreflective thingness, opaque and lyric at the same time. Their omnipresent, mere existing is highlighted by a grammatically absolute sentence without a governing verb. Here we are facing something highly significant as far as Wallace’s aesthetics is concerned. The sentence is the first one to appear after the female character has entertained the idea of imagining what is happening in her partner’s head. This amounts to say that beginning with objects that are inherently related to a bodily positioning is what may do the trick of entering someone else’s head. Not only are head and body presented as connected and interdependent in a very profound way, but the body is given some sort of priority, the way through which the head may be accessed. Significantly, the experiential alignment she is here attempting starts from the detail of the hem of the comforter. As we have seen, this detail had already been presented from within the male protagonist’s focalizing perspective; its repetition here is a way to signal the semantic content of a character’s individuality (along Bakhtin’s view) that has to be conjured up to succeed in entering someone else’s head. It could be argued that the detail of the hem is unlikely to belong to the male protagonist’s semantic positioning in the first place, but bespeaks authorial presence. This may be actually the case, but the specific contexts in which the detail is repeated—first what the male protagonist imagines and thinks and then what the female protagonist thinks he imagines and thinks—warrant our reading it as belonging to his internal landscape. I hasten to add, nonetheless, that the possible authorial attribution would be perfectly in keeping with the narratologically dialogic skeleton of this short piece.

33 Allocentric emotion is defined as “imagining some other person’s experience as such.” Patrick Colm Hogan, *What Literature Teaches Us about Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 284.

The objects foregrounded by the grammatically absolute sentence, furthermore, attract our attention to Wallace's typical narrative trajectory that starts with what is visibly and visually there to move into possible philosophical issues. Among the many possible objects that could have peeked out from below the foot of the bed, the female protagonist who is trying to tune in in her partner's head sees a bathroom scale. After Jeffrey Severs's thought-provoking book, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*, such a choice cannot go unnoticed: the bathroom scale, thus, is not simply a plausible object that the female protagonist looks at because she imagines it to be in the male protagonist's visual field, but an authorial reminder of the ever-present need to find a balance "in a world of excess and entropy."³⁴ The scale conjures up the need for a weighting that has ethical implications: "the 'inbent' body trying to balance, to find its feet, to feel and be aware (but not debilitatingly aware) of its weight, is the pervasive subject of Wallace's phenomenological work."³⁵ These descriptive details, thus, are not only triggered by the effort to align with a given perspective, but are inhabited by an already shared, intersubjective presence. The bathroom scale, both ordinary and heavy with symbolical implications, points to the absoluteness of the thingness of things and to their always being loaded with our observing and thinking presence.

The second reason why this textual moment is so notable concerns the fact that the wording of the sentence—"She could try, for just a moment, to imagine what is happening in his head . . . Even for an instant, to try putting herself in his place"—collapses "in his head" with "in his place": I suggest reading the latter not simply in metaphorical terms. The imaginative foray is turned into an embodied experience, much more productive in terms of empathetic

34 Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 2.

35 *Ibid.*, 8.

alignment. The possibility of a real communication passes through accepting to enter someone else's perspective not abstractly but experientially; that is to say, accepting a change in one's deictic field, the spatio-temporal coordinates every act of utterance and every act of thinking originates from—where we are in the present tense of our being in the world.³⁶ The situation becomes imaginable once it becomes particularized: the very possibility of individuation and of understanding the subjectivity that belongs in that individuation “has as its condition of possibility a particular mode of inhabiting the world as a bodily being.”³⁷ The shift in focalization in such a short piece and the necessity to signal it through the rearrangement of physical objects according to the new perspectival center alerts us to a rather obvious (and yet often overlooked) fact: narratological categories such as focalization and vocalization are far from being abstract ways to speak about how stories are structured. These categories may have been treated by (classical) narratologists as disembodied, but mistakenly so. They, in fact, do not make much sense if they are not thought in bodily terms; they may certainly be treated more broadly and metaphorically, but only insofar as they are first understood as pertaining to a living body that inherently belongs in a precise time and space that linguists call the deictic center. The abstracting critical drift these categories have long suffered (or, it could actually be argued, have been born with) should not blind us to their

36 “I will argue that linguistic expressions like ‘here’ and ‘there,’ ‘this’ and ‘that,’ and ‘I, you, we, they’ are part of a single field that I will call the deictic field. As I use the term, the deictic field is composed of (1) the positions of communicative agents relative to the participant frameworks they occupy . . . (2) the positions occupied by objects of reference, and (3) the multiple dimensions whereby the former have access to the latter.” William F. Hanks, “Explorations in the Deictic Field,” *Current Anthropology* 46:2 (April 2005): 193.

37 Thomas Csordas, “Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology,” in *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, ed. Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 144.

quintessentially corporeal component.³⁸

Away from sophistication, the female protagonist of “Think” enters the “real time”³⁹ of her own deictic field in the moment in which she imagines the possibility of considering the world from within the place (and consequently the head) of her partner. Her nakedness at this point is not transformed by someone else’s (media) nakedness, and becomes open to an as yet unscripted interaction. “The question she asks makes his forehead pucker as he winces. She has crossed her arms. It’s a three-word question.”⁴⁰ She needs to ask a question, the most obvious way to learn about someone else’s thoughts and feelings away from stereotyped projections, and to protect her (by now) true nakedness by crossing her arms.⁴¹ A possible candidate for this question has already being hinted at in the moment in which the male protagonist conjures up a scene concerning a different man (“his legs might slightly tremble when she asks what he thinks”),⁴² but “what do you think?” is not a three-word question. It, furthermore, does not match perfectly with the two answers, or

38 These few lines may trigger an association with Daniel Punday’s project concerning what he calls “corporeal narratology”; I certainly share his concern on the necessity to inject narratological discourse with a more thorough attention to the body. I nonetheless think that it is not so much a matter of investigating “the ways in which the body is defined and positioned in relation to other bodies and other objects within the narrative and hence becomes meaningful to the narrative” but rather of conceiving the body as the parameter against which we gauge both the elements and the aspects of a given storyworld and our readerly engagement with them. Daniel Punday, “A Corporeal Narratology?,” *Style* 34.2 (Summer 2000): 229.

39 The expression “real time” is significantly used in the short story in contrast with the crystallized time of photography—“It’s the sort of expression that looks devastating in a photograph but becomes awkward when it’s maintained over real time.” *BI*, 73.

40 *Ibid.*, 73.

41 The notation comes twice. First from within her focalizing perspective—“she crosses her arms”—the second in the quoted sentence, probably originating in the authorial voice, that recapitulates the situation—“she has crossed her arms.”

42 *BI*, 72.

rather, the twice repeated answer we get to hear—“It’s not what you think” and “It’s not what you think I’m afraid of.”⁴³

Once we consider the collection as a whole, the absent question proleptically may be seen as pointing to one of the most notable features of the series of interviews, the omnipresent “Q” to mark a question that is not available for the reader; this similarity notwithstanding, it is worth stressing how authorial presence is played with differently here. The massive display of monovocality in the context of the “Brief Interviews” is the result of the (authorial) editing work the interviews have gone through: rather obviously the questions were asked, but have been then expunged by the text. There, the systematic suppression of the questions the interviewees are asked may be read as the formal correlative of the main theme of the series: in postindustrial America, male-female relationships are mined by narcissistic solipsism that distorts what should be eminently dialogical into a self-referentially resounding echo-chamber. Here, the authorial presence becomes, for a moment, audible and overt, in a gesture that certainly bespeaks authorial control, but is more nuanced and definitely less intrusive than the editorial cuts in the “Brief Interviews.” In the specific figural context of “Think,” in which the text may be attributed to one or the other character’s internal focalization, or to the authorial presence as well, the sentence “It’s a three-word question” signals an unambiguous authorial input that is conjugated in terms of an invitation to the reader to put in her own share of work. The comment about the length of the question cannot but be, in fact, reader-oriented as, rather obviously, at the diegetic level, both characters know the question being asked. The sentence, thus, has two correlated effects: on the one hand, it creates a space for the reader joining the other potentially metaleptic sentence in the short story that spells out the only instance of a

43 Ibid., 73.

first-person plural pronoun,⁴⁴ on the other, it is a subtle invitation for the reader to participate in the making-sense process that is engaging the female protagonist. Now that the reader and the authorial presence have been textually conjured up, everything is ready for the powerful closing sentence: “And what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way.”⁴⁵ The closing lines are more easily connected to the male protagonist who has just spoken; and yet, the two interrelated focalizations warrant for the possibility of attributing the closing lines to both characters. The double internal focalization, thus, here becomes *doubly* internal, because this “what-if” scenario may well belong in the man and the woman’s thinking. The twice repeated “just” makes clear this is no stable, all-encompassing solution, but simply a glimpse of a possible transcendent position. Transcendent because it bypasses mirrors and media-taught mindreading and because it presupposes, for the tiny time-span “Think” covers, a vertical (and not merely horizontal) interpellation/supplication. It is worth stressing the fact that from the moment in which he kneels, the man gazes “intently upward”; significantly, this detail, as we have already seen, is repeated later on—“his eyes never leave the middle distance between the ceiling and themselves.”⁴⁶ The gaze is directed elsewhere, away from its objectifying potential. The possible implication of assuming the same position, sharing the same deictic field, just for a moment, “just like this” is to share the same gaze, for once neither internally directed nor caught in mirror-like deadly projections. This implies a reciprocity, a consonance, which, at least potentially, would be a way out, or beyond the mediated reality that has entrapped them in systemically

44 “We see these things a dozen times a day in entertainment but imagine we ourselves, our own imaginations, are mad.” Well in keeping with the general attributive ambiguity of the entire piece, the “we” can easily be naturalized as belonging to the male character’s perspective. *BI*, 72.

45 *Ibid.*, 74.

46 *Ibid.*, 73.

mediated projections. This as far as the diegetic level goes; and yet, considering the presence of the author and the reader have just been textually conjured up, the ending, which embraces both focalizing perspectives, may represent the tangible manifestation of a dialogic possibility across diegetic boundaries.

Once we read this closing sentence as involving both intradiegetic and extradiegetic participants in this literary communicative act, it would be easy to argue that the intrinsically dialogic imperative mood of the title might concern the reader as well. The title “Think” could thus be read alongside “evaluate” and “so decide,”⁴⁷ the verbs of explicit direct address to the reader that close “Pop Quiz 6(A)” and “Pop Quiz 9.”

“Pop Quiz 9” and “Brief Interview #20” can profitably be read following in the (formal) steps “Think” has put to intriguing fictional use. Set against the mild porousness of “Think,” the overtly metafictional (and mimetically disruptive) strategy at play in “Pop Quiz 9” might be reinterpreted as a metaleptical transgression that aims at reinforcing mimetic effects: in collapsing the metafictional with the confessional, “Pop Quiz 9” presents a fiction that is not (in Searlean terms) non-referential, but a veritable experiential arena that touches upon our embodied way of being in the world.

Even under the most charitable interpretation, it’s going to look desperate. Possibly pathetic. At any rate it’s *not* going to make you look wise or secure or accomplished or any of the things readers usually want to pretend they believe the literary artist who wrote what they’re reading is when they sit down to try to escape the insoluble flux of themselves and enter a world of prearranged meaning. Rather it’s going to make you look fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure about whether to trust even your most fundamental intuitions about urgency and sameness

47 Ibid., 145, 160.

and whether other people deep inside experience things in anything like the same way you do . . . 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. So decide.⁴⁸

This is the well-known ending of “Pop Quiz 9,” the closing piece of “Octet.” This paragraph happens to be at the center of the book, at page 160.5 or better, *almost* at its center.⁴⁹ David Coughlan maintains that the incompleteness of “Octet,” its “partial quality . . . is particularly worrying because of its central position, midway through the collection” as “this suggests that there is something wrong at the heart of the collection, which is exactly about heart and love.”⁵⁰ I would rather specify that on the one hand, the failed octet mirrors a diagnosis (the “something wrong . . . about heart and love” Coughlan speaks of) and on the other, this final paragraph presents the possibility of a cure staging the inherent sameness of writer and reader as the blueprint of the sameness of all human beings. We can easily find echoes of “It is not what you think”⁵¹ here as well. The writer strives to demonstrate that he is not what the reader thinks he is.

48 *Ibid.*, 159-160, emphasis in original.

49 As Severs reminds us, “the numbering of anything in Wallace’s work is never an innocent or mechanical endeavor” (140). 160.5 would be the center of the book if it started normally with page 1. As we have seen, *Brief Interviews* begins at page 0, thus adding one page to the book which totals 362 pages. I would suggest that this numerical detail has to be read alongside the extended military metaphor here at work: a profound and secure dialogic sharing is as yet to be reached and has to be fought for.

50 David Coughlan, “‘Sappy or no, it’s true’: Affect and Expression in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*” in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Philip Coleman (Ipswich: Salem Press, 2015), 162-163.

51 *BI*, 73.

The emotional shift here required is twofold: on the one hand, a shift away from what the writer admits in note number 23 that he himself when wearing the reader's shoes expects the writer to be, that is, in control, on the other, a shift away from projecting himself as the reader to imagine what this latter likes.⁵² The shift, thus, goes beyond mind-reading into the need that necessitates mind-reading in the first place: the urge to feel on the same emotional page with another significant other. In the (almost) exact midpoint of the book, we return to the basic metaphor of the ground that Jeffrey Severs has amply demonstrated to be central to Wallace's mathematical poetics. "The mud of the trench" is where lived life happens, the world of "the insoluble flux" of human beings: the writer in spite of being—at times, but not in the case at hand—able to create worlds of "prearranged meaning" that he coordinates effortlessly from up high belongs in the same embodied and down to the ground non-Platonic world of readers.

"Pop Quiz 9" ends by subverting the idea that had launched it: the writer becomes the reader who had been invited to be the writer in the first place. The tentative idea of the female protagonist of "Think" to "try, just for one moment, to imagine what is happening"⁵³ in her partner's head becomes here a full-fledged oscillation of role-taking (or, maybe, role-sharing): the oscillation takes the linguistic form of a pronominal dance, which allows for a deictic (and thus existential) shift.

Let's take a step back. "Pop Quiz 9" begins straight to the point: "You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer." This incipit deploys thoroughly the referential doubleness inherent in second-person fiction (you=the protagonist/you=the reader) and undermines the

52 "There are right and fruitful ways to try to 'empathize' with the reader, but having to try to imagine yourself as the reader is not one of them, in fact it's perilously close to the dreaded trap of trying to anticipate whether the reader will 'like' something you're working on" *BI*, 152.

53 *Ibid.*, 73.

clear-cut dichotomy of discourse/story conflating the intradiegetic level to which the narrating-I belongs (who appears especially in the footnotes) with the extradiegetic level where the reader is. This amounts to a metaleptic transgression that may result in disorienting and—hopefully—re-orienting readers’ habits and frames of expectations. Disorientation and reorientation is the blueprint of what happens (at least potentially) in “Think” and in all textual contexts that explore dialogism. Specifically, the reader, along with imagining being a writer, has to imagine having a reader in mind (that is to say, imagining his/her actual self as a virtual self). The role-playing the narrator proposes implies a reversal in which the writer’s other (the reader) has to speculate about his own otherness from within another subject position. What begins with what may be deemed a rather abstract and intellectual game becomes in the final paragraph something much more concrete that involves our embodied selves.

It is worth repeating the key sentence: “Rather it’s going to make you look fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure . . . more like a reader, in other words, down here quivering in the mud of the trench with the rest of us.”⁵⁴ The move from abstraction to concreteness passes through the spelling out of two deictics that belong in the deictic field of the reader—“here” and “us.” The porousness of boundaries in these lines is complete and is adumbrated in a sentence that is grammatically awkward: the here of the writer coincides with the here of the reader in spite of their occupying two distinct extradiegetic deictic fields because the writer himself is a reader, that is, someone quivering in the mud of the trench that is basically the same lived life. The presentness conveyed by the gerundial form stresses the essentiality (in its etymological sense) of this condition that is sealed by the plural proximal deictic “us,” which substitutes the binary logic writer-caught-in-his-writerly quandaries/reader-who-is-invited-to wear-his-shoes. This

54 Ibid., 160.

pronoun capitalizes on that “sameness” that has been one of the words which, together with “urgent” and its variants (24 occurrences in the text and 7 in the footnotes) and with “feel” and its variants (21 occurrences in the text and 8 in the footnotes), constitute the semantic skeleton of the piece and its thematic trajectory.

This pronominal dance is set against the metafictional quandary which, ever since the 1993 publication of “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” has been at the core of Wallace’s reflections on writing—and more specifically on the relationship between writer and reader. What Wallace is here trying to do, along the lines tested in “Think,” is to direct metafiction toward mimetic—that is embodied—effects, thanks to the activation of the readers’ peripersonal spaces. The peripersonal as opposed to the extrapersonal space is the area surrounding us comprising all the objects we can reach by extending our hands. In the trenches of our ordinary lives, our bodies are the measure upon which the very notion of space and the interrelated concept of intimacy (or lack of) is built. As Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia demonstrated, the activation of certain neurons “does not simply signal the position of the stimulus within a purely visual area . . . but reflects the evocation of a potential motor activity directed toward that stimulus capable of localizing it as *a possible action* independently from its actual performance.”⁵⁵ This means that it takes just an object entering imaginatively or actually our peripersonal space for us to be able to comprehend the emotional state of someone else experientially. A sharing at the visceral-motor level is the necessary condition for our empathetic involvement. Once the reader’s first-person singular alongside their deictic field is implicated, it becomes possible for them to imagine, experientially, from within a different subject position.

It could be rightly argued that here, in contrast with such short

55 Giacomo Rizzolatti, Corrado Sinigaglia, *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni a specchio*, (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2006), 65, emphasis in the text, my translation.

stories as “Forever Overhead,” the reader is not given much physicality to work with. This cannot actually be denied: this scarcity, so to speak, signals what happens when we move from an essentially self-centered meditation in which subject and object coincide (the case of “Forever Overhead”) to the cases in which other minds (and bodies) are present (“Think” and “Octet”). The potential perceptual alignment in “Think” and the employment of deictics that implicate the reader in “Octet” are the ways in which Wallace attempts to trigger an emotional involvement at different levels (character-character/character-reader/reader-writer). Embodiment cannot be reduced to point of view, but point of view is certainly the first necessary step to activate a re-framing of perception (and the consequent understanding of the world) along someone else’s embodied positioning. As Gallagher and Zahavi maintain, “the body shapes our primary way of being in the world”⁵⁶ and Wallace demonstrates his awareness of this in spite of his own heavily intellectual way of being in the world. The collapsing of head and place we have seen in “Think” bespeaks an attempt at an integration of thinking and feeling, the latter more easily approachable starting from the basic movement (both physical and cognitive) toward the other’s perceptual positioning.



The metafictional quandary the writer in/of “Pop Quiz 9” is stuck with is mirrored in the relational dilemma the male protagonist of “Brief Interview #20” faces. This interview opens with the protagonist stating the core of what he wants to speak about—in a nutshell, his falling in love because of his listening to a story—and the first response of the silenced interviewer we can guess starting from the protagonist’s reaction: “Let me explain. I’m aware of how

56 Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 137.

it might sound, believe me. I can explain.”⁵⁷ The telling, thus, is set against a perceived (and admitted) disbelief: because of the “hideousness” of which the male interviewee (by his own admission) has been the embodiment, the presentation of a different self the story he is telling wants to convey is difficult to sustain and difficult to believe. Metafictional manipulative fiction and hideousness in the terms the “Brief Interviews” series has built along the book loom large in the background of this final interview. I am insisting on this initial disbelief because—I would argue—it is the stumbling block on which the violent verbal aggression that closes the interview depends. As we will see, once the disbelief is perceived as going much deeper than the story told, it is taken to imply a refusal to acknowledge the very self that that story allegedly conveys.

The change that the male protagonist insists he has gone through pivots around the exposure to a telling that has the naked qualities that the writer of “Pop Quiz 9” would like to achieve: no second intentions, no irony, simply accounting for what has happened and what it feels (and felt) like in a sincere and direct way. The two storytelling situations are actually not comparable as the “Granola Cruncher” does not even seem to be aware of any other possible way to tell what she is telling, whereas the writer of “Pop Quiz 9” knows all too well a myriad of alternatives. The girl, most of all, does not seem to be interested in creating an effect, which is on the contrary at the very center of the writer’s thoughts. The male protagonist returns repeatedly to the quality of the Granola Cruncher’s account, presenting it as “without irony or any evident awareness”⁵⁸ of the triteness of the big words she is using, “oddly unposed,” “truly poseless” showing an “odd affectless sincerity” that leaves the

57 *BI*, 287.

58 *Ibid.*, 292–293.

listener “narratively alone”⁵⁹ because it is “rhetorically innocent.”⁶⁰ Even when she recounts the moment in which “her compassionate focus comprehended not just [the rapist’s] soul but the effect of the compassionate focus itself on that soul” she does not describe the introduction of this “element of self-consciousness . . . like some sort of diffraction or regress of self-consciousness and consciousness of self-consciousness” in “any but emotional terms,”⁶¹ that is to say, *not* in rhetorical, manipulative, terms. And yet I think it worth pursuing the parallel as we are here offered the effect of a telling the writer is striving for together with its problematization in the second narrative—which happens to be the only one we are exposed to.

Let me state this more precisely: we are told about that first extraordinary account and its effects—“interesting and captivating”;⁶² “it wasn’t suspense”⁶³—through a telling that struggles to achieve and mime that same pure sincerity and fails to succeed in its desired effects. The male protagonist’s telling repeatedly displays his efforts to induce an immersive reaction in her listener that might mirror his own immersion while listening. He knows that the chance of her changing her mind depends on him. The starting point for both is rather similar, at least as far as we can say following his commenting on Q’s reactions: they both treat their counterpart—the girl and the male interviewee—with a sort of disdain due to preformed judgements concerning their respective prototypical categories, a “post-Hippie, New Ager . . . or simply Cruncher”⁶⁴ and a manipulative misogynist hideous man, respectively. They both jump to conclusions starting from what they already know about the other. Crucial

59 *Ibid.*, 296, 297, 298.

60 *Ibid.*, 314.

61 *Ibid.*, 310–311.

62 *Ibid.*, 301.

63 *Ibid.*, 307.

64 *Ibid.*, 288.

to the assessment of the male's second telling is—once again—the pronoun “you” and the significant absence of the pronoun “we” to refer to the male interviewee and the female interviewer.⁶⁵ Given the format of this series, the interview, the presence of a “you” is rather obvious. Less obvious is the absence of any truly dialogic exchange as the “you” of the interviewer is consistently silenced. And yet, it is precisely thanks to this (rather problematic) absence that the stakes at play in a possibly sincere and authentic communication are laid bare.

As in the case of “Pop Quiz 9” there is more than one referent to the pronoun you. In this case, there are two diegetic yous—the one referring to the interviewer and the one the male protagonist employs to refer to himself as a specific instance of the generic “one” which, as we have already mentioned, may potentially become the reader’s “me.”

Even if the presence of the personal address referred to Q is constant in the whole piece, the intensity with which the “you” refers to the male protagonist himself reaches its acme when he describes the unlooked for effects the Granola Cruncher’s kind of telling has on him. The one who does the talking begins to change while he listens. It is worth stressing that when the girl was nothing more than an exemplary representative of her type, the man specifies: “the one-night proviso was due mostly to the grim unimaginability to *talk* with a New Age brigadier for more than one night.”⁶⁶ What the night turns him into, unexpectedly, is a listener (“It struck me, listening”)⁶⁷—the audience of a telling that has the powerful effect of offering him a different perspective on himself, a mirror on his behavior and

65 The only occurrences of a “us” concern the protagonist and the Granola Cruncher, with a unique exception: “There is nothing particularly wrong with this, as psychological needs go, but yet of course we should remember that a deep need for anything from other people makes us easy pickings” “Us” here stands for human beings in general. *Ibid.*, 292.

66 *Ibid.*, 289.

67 *Ibid.*, 296.

his beliefs. The passivity of the girl's kind of telling both induces and allows him to sustain his focus, to suspend his self-centeredness and de-center himself: "I was listening to her intently. It wasn't suspense"⁶⁸—that is to say, it wasn't simply a matter of plot, nor a matter of rhetorical manipulation. We might actually say that he becomes a reader sensitive to the magic of storytelling able to respond empathically and align himself with the feelings the teller tries to convey. From that de-centered alignment begins to dawn on him a new awareness well beyond the daffy-sounding beliefs and the terminology that should be handled with scare quotes concerning the Granola Cruncher, and into a possibility of rethinking and repositioning himself. The protagonist's alleged falling in love is steeped in a passive, readerly experience, a silencing of his ego, his authorial, so to speak, activities. This is the source of the change he is trying to explain: both Q and the reader are invited to entertain the possibility of this change past the fact that once he does the talking his controlling (authorial) stance is unequivocally back in place. It could actually be argued that the escalating aggression which we witness is the measure of his need to drive home what he has experienced, and that his resorting to a violent verbal attack are directly proportional to the strength of his newly formed belief about himself.

A closer look at the ending of this piece alongside the ending of "Pop Quiz 9" will show this dynamic in detail. Both pieces end abruptly: "Pop Quiz 9" well in keeping with the other parts of "Octet" ends with a "So decide." The imperative partially reinstates the writer in his commanding authorial position, but the conative sentence is somewhat softened by the adverbial "so," which condenses all the pains and efforts the writer has gone through. It is from the sharing of a perspectival stance—first, virtually, the writer's, then the reader's own inhabited by the writer too, that the reader is called to decide. The writer abdicates any further authorial activity. The final

68 Ibid., 307.

sharing of a common peripersonal zone represented by the deictics “here” and “us” may hopefully turn a possible fiasco into a moment of deep communion. The potential octet will not turn into an actual one, but the speculative process its final section has fostered may be a key to look through the human being who happens to be a writer and a reader too.

The abrupt close of “Brief Interview #20”—“End of story”—is much more problematic precisely because there is no apparent sharing of an embodied perspective. Instead of opening up onto the potential expression of the subjectivity of his interlocutor, the male protagonist shuts the communicative doors and denies any possible hearing of other points of view. If listening had provoked the possibility of loving, his failure to enter the same storytelling mode he has been the recipient of and reacting with an open aggression sheds a dark shadow on the kind of love he has experienced and the kind of change he is sure he has undergone. According to Mary K. Holland, “the interviewee belies his sincerity throughout: the response in which he documents his empathetic transformation also employs the same linguistic marks of objectifying women and posturing irony that he believes he has escaped.”⁶⁹

However, let me look closer at what may be at work here. The interplay of subjective and objective positions the male protagonist inhabits creates a sort of schizophrenia. His telling (which makes of him a writer) is about his experience as a listener. His present audience fails to display the kind of listening he is trying to account for, or at least, fails to send signals that could be interpreted in this way. The male protagonist keeps reading her reactions (we do not know if there are words or just non-verbal expressions) as not responsive but

69 Mary Holland. “Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men” in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 121.

antagonistically stereotyped.⁷⁰ Given he repeatedly associates the quality of his listening to the qualities of the Granola Cruncher's telling he cannot but put the blame on himself, which he is narcissistically only partially able to do: "Am I describing this right? Can you . . . I'm not putting it right. I can't make you feel what I felt."⁷¹ The interviewee clearly cannot transcend the language his masculinity is steeped into precisely as the "unfortunate writer" of "Pop Quiz 9" cannot escape his authorial moves, but this does not imply they cannot but fail. It is up to the reader to decide whether an inkling of a different story (and identity) can be detected within the folds of narcissism and the inescapable employment of language.

For accounts to be mutually satisfactory, deictic existential centers must be respected. We depend on reciprocity; the verbal abuse that ends this interview is the male protagonist's enraged reaction at his inability to turn her initial disbelief into the acceptance at least of a possibility, and at Q's remaining untouched by what he says, by what he thinks he has discovered about himself.

The paragraphs that precede the final violent outburst touch the peak of the male protagonist's effort to convey his discovery ("I felt as though there had been far more genuine emotion and connection in that anti-rape she suffered than in any of the so-called lovemaking I had spent my time pursuing") and Q's not showing any sign of change ("just as I am watching you forming judgements based on the opening of things I'm describing that then prevent you from hearing the rest of what I try to describe").⁷² Clare Hayes-Brady has suggested "as the narrative progresses, the narrator begins to lose control: on the one hand, he begins to respond more directly and

70 Just one example among the many possible: "your indignation and distaste complete, I'm sure . . . I can tell by your expression what *you* think of brutal candor." *BI*, 292.

71 *Ibid.*, 316.

72 *Ibid.*, 312.

emotionally to Q's unseen questions . . . on the other hand, the Granola Cruncher . . . begins to *reappropriate* her story by infiltrating his voice."⁷³ Interestingly, and quite in keeping with what we have seen in "Think" microscopically, there is a long descriptive passage that details a list of things—"the toile skirt, hair that nearly reached the blanket, the blanket dark green with yellow filigree and a kind of nauseous purple fringe, a linen singlet and vest of false buckskin"⁷⁴—here as well: the mere materiality of objects anchors the speaker to a precise physical positioning, a deictic center which may be, potentially, the access to an existential positioning. "[A]m I describing this right? can you—" asks the man, a suspended question looking for the decentering and subsequent re-centering the female protagonist in "Think" has been capable of starting precisely from the objects he sees around his partner. "Imagine being able to console someone as he weeps over what he's doing to you as you console him. Is that wonderful, or sick? Have you ever heard of *the couvade*? . . . I realized I had never loved anyone. Isn't that trite? Like a canned line? Do you see how open I'm being with you here?"⁷⁵ The invitation is to imagine, to accept a somewhere else, from which a different perspective may be entertained, a perspective that is heavily embodied as the reference to the *couvade*, a term which suggests a what-if scenario, makes clear.⁷⁶ Openness is conjured up here, as nakedness

73 Clare Hayes-Brady, "' . . .': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace" in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 143, emphasis in original.

74 *BL*, 313.

75 *Ibid.*, 313

76 *Couvade*, by extension, refers to a father, who, on the birth of a child, "performs acts or simulates states natural or proper to the mother, or abstains for a time from certain foods or actions, as if he were physically affected by the birth." *Oxford English Dictionary* online (n.p.). "Couvade, n.1." OED Online, September 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43300>, (Accessed September 17, 2019)

both physical and metaphorical was present both in “Pop Quiz 9” and “Think”: the same urgency to try and connect beyond and away from narcissistic linguistic traps well aware that we cannot do away with language and narratives *tout court*.

Narratives are our main conveyors of what we think we are, or the selves we aspire to be: when our stories, especially the stories that we entrust with profound, essential significance about ourselves, are not believed, we cannot but defend them; it is not simply a matter of confirming the truth component of our story, but of defending our sense of who we are and, in the specific case of “Brief Interview #20,” the person we think we have become. Agreeing to a story, in this respect, amounts to accepting a self-definition; contesting it is much more destabilizing than it might seem. Significantly, the verbal abuse that closes the interview takes the form of a stereotypically offensive naming of the female other who has allegedly failed to accept the version of himself the interviewee proposes. I am not simply referring to the narrative of the self that has fallen in love, but much more relevantly, the narrative of the self that has fallen in love after realizing the basic similarity between the murderous rapist and himself. The crucial issue here, which goes a long way in demonstrating the terminal disease infecting male-female relationships in postindustrial society, is that for once he has found a woman who has not entered in the systemic vicious circle of stereotypes, expectations and projections:⁷⁷ a dead-end interaction unable to shed predetermined opinions that end up feeding the male worst self. The authorial silencing of the female voice is not merely the umpteenth misogynist objectification of the woman, but the formal correlative of the relational quandary that forces males to play the hideous role

77 The systemic component of male-female relationships emerges more thoroughly in John Krasinski’s film adaptation of Wallace’s book. See Pia Masiero, “Systemic Phantasmagorias. David Foster Wallace’s and John Krasinski’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*” in *American Phantasmagoria. Modes of Representation in US Culture* ed. by Rosella Mamoli Zorzi and Simone Francescato (Venezia: Supernova, 2017).

they are expected to play. The men's hideousness is the result of a systemic poisoning context, a default reaction that returns to a script that needs the acceptance of a possible difference to be undone. The road that "Think" had hinted at, namely, the possibility of wearing just for one moment the other's embodied perspective, is not taken. The narration of the self he cannot let go of is confronting the disquieting discovery of his hideousness without being accused of being hideous (and thus having to react and defend himself); he needs to defend an insight, a possibility about himself, from any deconstructive move that would return his experience to the manipulative and insincere loop. This is the same possibility the writer of "Pop Quiz 9" needs to salvage against all (metafictional) odds. As the offensive aggression makes clear, the hideousness keeps being there, but a revelatory looking through seems to be possible.

What if?

It is not simply a matter of self-insight, but a matter of trying to share that insight that is surprising in destabilizing ways as it is not the result of wearing someone else's shoes so as to manipulate their reaction, but the unexpected consequence of finding oneself beyond the poisonous game characterizing our post-industrial lives into the what if the shared positioning adumbrated in "Think" proposes.

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“THE FRAGMENT”: “CEDE,” ANCIENT ROME, AND *THE PALE KING*

Tim Groenland

IN THE YEARS FOLLOWING THE opening of Wallace’s archive, we have begun to gain a clearer picture of the complex processes of composition underlying and linking the various projects on which he worked during the final decade of his life. One result of this has been to illustrate the fact that many of the short fictions in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Oblivion* originated, as David Hering has shown, as part of the “long thing” that Wallace worked on throughout this period, complicating the distinctions between these works and suggesting that they might productively be read as arising from a closely-connected set of concerns.¹ In this essay, I examine an incomplete draft from the archives of *The Pale King* named “Cede,” a narrative partially set in Ancient Rome that exists in several versions and whose setting, Ancient Rome, marks it out as a distinctive and self-contained part of his oeuvre. Wallace clearly saw the section as being intimately connected with the concerns of his third novel, however, making repeated attempts to incorporate it alongside (and

¹ David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 126–27.

into) other drafts. In what follows, I first describe the piece, parts of which remain unpublished, reading it for what it reveals about the author's developing concerns and narrative methods. I then go on to present an analysis of "Cede" as part of *The Pale King*, considering how its form and development reflect Wallace's failure to structure his novel to his satisfaction and showing how the piece's Roman setting brings to the fore—and, crucially, connects—themes such as fatherhood, religion, and civic failure.²

"Fragmentco Unltd": The Development of "Cede"

As Hering has shown in his meticulous account of Wallace's late fiction, the origins of *The Pale King's* §36, in which we encounter the child whose aim is to kiss every part of his own body (and who I will refer to throughout this essay for clarity as the "contortionist boy"), lie in a short narrative that was first drafted in 1997 and later reworked in two further iterations circa 2001 and 2006-2007.³ In its first iteration, the narrative—which takes the form of 17 numbered paragraphs—alternates between the story of this contortionist boy and an elliptical series of vignettes set in Ancient Rome during the first and second century. My focus throughout this reading will be on the strand of the story that takes place in Ancient Rome, as this has not yet been addressed in Wallace criticism. *The New Yorker* fiction editor Deborah Triesman reports that the author sent her a version of the "contortionist boy" story in April 1999 for possible inclusion in the magazine's "20 Under 40" fiction issue but that this was rejected in favour of what she describes as a "more polished piece"

2 A version of this essay appears in *The Art of Editing: Raymond Carver and David Foster Wallace* (Bloomsbury Academic, February 2019).

3 Hering, *Fiction and Form*, 129.

from the (then-forthcoming) *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.⁴ Wallace presented the story in a way that self-consciously highlighted his awareness of its status as work in development: on the letter that accompanied the draft, he referred to the story as “the Fragment” and listed his return address as “Fragmentco Unltd,” a seemingly self-deprecating move that highlighted what he saw, even at this early stage of his work on the follow-up to *Infinite Jest*, as his own failure to assemble these narrative pieces into a coherent whole.⁵ He subsequently read a version of the piece at a Lannan Foundation reading in December 2000. Drafts from 2001 show this narrative interspersed with the long monologue by Chris Fogle (who was, at that point, named Robbie Van Note): in the lengthy draft numbered as 124 in Michael Pietsch’s “Index of Documents for *The Pale King*,”⁶ for example, Fogle’s monologue is broken up repeatedly by shorter fragments of the stories of the contortionist boy as well as the Roman narrative. Wallace appears to have returned to each of these

4 “B.I. #40” was published in the magazine’s “20 Under 40” issue in June 1999 as “Asset.”

5 Deborah Triesman, “Afterword to Chapter 36, *The Pale King*,” in *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, by David Foster Wallace, ebook file (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014).

6 This spreadsheet was created by Pietsch to keep track of the considerable mass of material he worked through in his editing of *The Pale King*, and can be found in the archival materials relating to the novel in the Wallace Papers. Drafts in this section of the Wallace Papers (namely, containers 36 to 41) are filed in the order in which they appear in the index. Although it is possible to view descriptions in the index of all of the drafts used by Pietsch in his assembly of the novel, not all of the drafts themselves have been printed. The Index lists 474 items but the printed material in the containers only runs to 328, meaning that 146 drafts from Wallace’s desktop computer, laptop, and some disks are not yet present in the printed collection (although some of these may be duplicates of already printed material). When I visited the archive in 2013, these drafts were not yet available for viewing in electronic form. The Ransom Center has recently begun providing access to born digital materials via an onsite laptop; archivists at the Center have confirmed that these additional drafts are likely to be made available to scholars in due course (Grace Hansen and Abigail Adams, “Pale King Materials.” 5th October 2017. Email).

narratives intermittently, adding and occasionally subtracting material (apparently revising—or at least, judging by the “last saved” dates on digital files, saving—the scene in 1997, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2006 and 2007). The Lannan Foundation reading omitted the portions of the narrative set in Ancient Rome; however, drafts make it clear that he continued to work on the chronologically earlier narrative after this point.⁷ The sections concerning the contortionist boy and his father (with interpolations relating to the lives of mystics and religious martyrs) would develop substantially and be published posthumously by *The New Yorker*, in an excerpt which had developed since the reading.⁸ The fact that Wallace worked on “Cede” through several iterations, therefore, and that (as Hering has shown) he repeatedly failed to satisfactorily incorporate it into the narrative of *The Pale King*, means that it could be considered in one sense as one of the small number of “short things” he produced in his final decade.⁹ The portions of the narrative considered here occupy an

7 In *The Work of Revision*, Hannah Sullivan considers the two versions of the section publicly available prior to the publication of *The Pale King* (the piece Wallace read at the Lannan foundation reading and its posthumous publication as “Backbone” in the *New Yorker* in 2011) in order to demonstrate that the changes made during Wallace’s digital processes of revision are, for the most part, less “complex, belated, [and] laborious” than the sort made by Modernist writers working on paper (Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 256–65. However, the textual history of the piece does not support her claim that it was revised at only a local level and that “there is no great hermeneutic difference between any of the versions,” since these revisions are structural ones with the potential to radically alter the reading experience. Sullivan admits to not having seen the novel’s drafts; however, she also erroneously claims, after quoting Pietsch’s introduction to *The Pale King*, that the editor had been “reading and commenting” on Wallace’s novel-in-progress “since the beginning,” although Pietsch clearly explains that the contrary is true (Sullivan, 262; Michael Pietsch, “Editor’s Note”, in *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel*. New York: Little, Brown, 2011, viii; Hering, *Fiction and Form*, 11, 165.)

8 David Foster Wallace, “Backbone,” *The New Yorker*, 7 March 2011. Veronica Scott Esposito, “Is This What The Pale King Should Have Looked Like?,” Conversational Reading, 4 March 2011.

9 Hering, *Fiction and Form*, 137.

unusual position in the publication history of Wallace's posthumous work, then; they were neither assimilated into a completed piece of short fiction by their author, nor included in the generous selection of draft materials from the final "long thing" by its editor.

The form of the 1997 "Cede," with its discrete fragments broken up by line breaks, lends the narrative a cryptic and detached feel. The narrative strand begins with a short fragment describing the "Pontic flights," a historical phenomenon invented by Wallace: it describes how mass starvation in A.D. 108-110 causes the "neozo-roastrian herdsmen of extreme eastern Pontus" (a region bordering the Black Sea in the north of Turkey) to become so paper-thin—"like dry dander, or sheets of fine Nile parchment"—that their bodies become capable of "windborne flight." The herdsmen attempt to fly to Antioch (in the south of modern-day Turkey) to appeal to Pliny the Younger (whose administration has caused starvation in Asia Minor) for aid, but when they pass over the "lavish Plinian orchards of Antioch" they cannot resist pausing to eat the fruit from the trees. The section ends by describing how the "simple Pontic aeronauts" descend from the sky, "hover[ing] above the bowed trees and gorg[ing] frantically upon the fruit," whereupon they are felled by gravity and "set upon by the proconsul's Molossian hounds" and "devoured."¹⁰ We are told no more about these aeronauts, whose fate combines allusions to Biblical temptation and Icarian tragedy. However, we may note the way in which their fate reflects the obsession with "groundedness" that Jeffrey Severs, in *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books*, finds throughout Wallace's work, and observe that the metaphor of parchment so light it floats into the air represents something close to an image of unbalanced books.¹¹ The

10 David Foster Wallace, Wallace Papers, Series IV, The Pale King, Containers 36 to 41. Harry Ransom Center Archive, University of Texas at Austin, n.d., 40.2.

11 Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 52.

aeronauts' plight also demonstrates the literalization and embodiment of philosophical ideas that several critics have identified as one of Wallace's main inheritances from Kafka; the aeronauts, who ingest so little they are carried off in the wind, might be seen in this respect as a counterpoint to *The Broom of the System's* all-consuming Norman Bombardini.¹²

The next section of this timeline, numbered 4 in the 1997 draft and lasting half a page, takes place roughly 45 years earlier and is linked to the previous section by an opening that tells the story of the Molossian hounds, a historically real breed (related to today's mastiffs) used as war dogs in the ancient world.¹³ These hounds are ruthless creatures "bred . . . for aggression" and used for several functions, most notably the persecution of Christians for the Emperor's pleasure. The Emperor is soon identified as Nero, and we are told that, "attended always by Poppaea Sabina," he watches the slaughter in the passive and solipsistic manner characteristic of many of Wallace's spectators, peering through "a Nubian emerald through which distant events appeared almost to be taking place in his cyan-coloured lap." The final paragraph of the section suggests the political and moral stakes of the narrative, linking emperor, dogs, and state together in one political enterprise: "It was under Nero that care and training of the Circi's Molossian Hounds came to be considered an art vital to the Imperial interests of Rome herself."

The hounds' training is carried out by Corinthian trainers hand-picked by Poppaea: the narrator informs us that "it was whispered that she consorted with the most impressive" of these in the Roman tunnels. The two subsequent sections in this draft focus on the family of one particular trainer: in the one-paragraph section numbered

12 Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 12, 19; Severs, 96; Lucas Thompson, *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

13 Caroline Coile, *Encyclopedia of Dog Breeds*, 2nd Ed. (Hauppauge, N.Y.: London: Barron's, 2005, 136).

14, we are introduced to “Cedo, only child of the hounds’ last and greatest *exercitor summum*” (which translates roughly as “head trainer”). This section alludes to the Great Fire of Rome of A.D. 64, an event which led Nero to commence “antiquity’s first truly serious pogrom, the much-referenced Christian Persecutions” and hence to triple the quantity of hounds employed in the Circus. Poppaea favoured the trainer and had his family “installed in sumptuous training facilities in the cuniculum of the Circus Maximus only months before the fire”; Cedo, it is tantalisingly mentioned, “played a part” in these Persecutions. In the final part of the narrative written in 1997 (a one-page section numbered 16) we are given details of the trainer’s brutal methods. The hounds are kept in a perpetual state of near-starvation and fury for use in the circus, being subjected to extreme confinement in “tiny pens” (also described, in a phrase redolent of descriptions of solipsism in other Wallace texts, as “self-sized cages”). The boy, we are told, has been forbidden by the trainer’s wife to take part in the training of the dogs, hinting at an impending familial conflict.

Returning to the narrative in 2001, Wallace developed this hint in several sections that were no longer numbered and now interleaved with what would become Fogle’s monologue. In the first development, the narrator informs us that the boy—whose name Wallace amends (in handwritten corrections to a typescript draft) to “Cedes” and, in one case, to “Ceinus”—has “betrayed both training and law” by “developing attachments” to a handful of the dogs, and that he goes so far as to surreptitiously feed them leftover scraps (or, indeed, fragments) of food. A separate fragment on the following page describes the mother’s knowledge, withheld from her husband, that the boy’s heart has been “pierced and captured” by these hounds, as well as the detail that she is “a *sub rosa* Christian, converted by the 13th/14th parts of an epistle delivered by the Tarsian Saul.” She weeps not only for the boy and for the martyred Christians, but also

for her husband, “whose nightly consorts with Poppaea were known by all, it seemed, save the wacked-out Nero himself” and bears her suffering “inside”; a handwritten addition to this final word adds “after the fashion of mothers from Mary and Hera on down . . .” framing the mother’s suffering as a trans-historical example of maternal martyrdom.

In what appears to be the final piece of this narrative that Wallace wrote, the narrator continues to hint at the impending consequences of the fact that “the child saw fit secretly to feed the circus’ hounds in their pens.” The animals’ carefully-calibrated training regime, which requires them to be kept in “a delicate state of starvation” that maintains their extreme hunger as well as the strength needed to attack, is being thrown disastrously off kilter by the boy’s actions, since a badly-trained hound might “attack slaves, sand, other hounds,” or simply “lope in crazed circles.” Nevertheless, the boy continues to enter the pens in the pre-dawn darkness, while the slaves who are guarding the animals still sleep, to dispense “mercy.” The section ends by noting that “Two of these slaves were in the employ of Poppaea Sabina, who by A.D. 64 was now Poppaea Augusta, Nero having murdered his wife—rather mother—and son. To the mobs’ displeasure.”

“A new kind of Rome”:

“Cede” as *exemplum*

“Cede” shows Wallace not only making a rare foray into pre-1960s historical fiction, but setting the action in a temporally distant yet historically specific environment that is unique in his oeuvre. The narrative voice, with some notable exceptions (“the wacked-out Nero”) eschews the slang and comic elaboration of Wallace’s novels and nonfiction; the dry and sometimes pedantically formal register, which ostentatiously alludes to historical sources (“Pliny’s *censeri* estimated that four of every five Pontics perished”), anticipates the

quasi-anthropological framing of “Another Pioneer,” a story that of course ends with “a great rapacious fire” destroying the village in which it is set.¹⁴ The narrative is not brought to any obvious point of closure or climax in any of these drafts and is fragmentary in all of its iterations. It is unclear whether “Cede” should also be taken as the name of the contortionist boy, since the stories appear alongside each other and the nature of their relationship is enigmatic. The latest drafts bearing the name “Cede” are dated to July and August of 2007, and neither are accessible to scholars at present. The latter is a one-page draft whose index entry reads “SS number, Cede (DW2),” indicating that Wallace may have intended the contortionist boy as the childhood iteration of David Francis Wallace, the “older, high-value GS-13” examiner whose identity becomes confused with that of the David Wallace-narrator upon arrival at the Peoria REC.¹⁵ Hering shows that Wallace considered juxtaposing the draft with—and incorporating the characters into—other narratives at several other points in *The Pale King*’s composition, such as those that would become “Good Old Neon” and “Incarnations of Burned Children.”¹⁶

The date of the first draft (1997) places the piece not just in the early stages of composition for *The Pale King*, but also in the period in which Wallace was writing and assembling *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. We can surmise that Wallace either considered the piece insufficiently complete for inclusion in (or aesthetically incompatible with) that collection, or (as Hering implies) felt it important enough to his third novel to keep it in reserve. The narrative technique, though, is in some respects akin to that of the fragmented “Church Not Made With Hands” and the numbered sections of “Adult World (II),” while the extreme compression of its sections is of a piece with

14 *OB*, 140.

15 *TPK*, 415.

16 Hering, *Fiction and Form*, 132–33.

the “weird little 1-pagers” Wallace described himself as producing during these years.¹⁷ These sections also display a clear interest in menacing and brutal characters. While we are told explicitly that the head trainer of the dogs is “no sadist” (his task of shaping the hounds into “instruments of the will of Rome” is motivated instead by a quasi-artistic “will to perfection”), his methods—which include confinement, daily beatings, and starvation—are reminiscent of the violence threatened and sometimes enacted by several of the collection’s hideous male solipsists. The infamously cruel and dissolute Nero is also clearly a powerful presence here, and the story takes place in the shadow of the massacres that the emperor sets in motion following the Great Fire.

The narrator does not dwell on the fire’s importance or provide historical context for Nero’s reign. The reader, though, is likely to supply the later interpretation of the fire as a crucial step towards the rise of Christianity (with the persecution and martyrdom of the Christians laying the seeds for the subsequent spread of the faith) and the modern understanding of the emperor as a legendary tyrant whose misrule presaged a series of civil wars.¹⁸ Nero has, in the words of one historian, traditionally been seen “as the very embodiment of the extravagance, debauchery and corruption that for many have come to symbolise Ancient Rome”; subsequent to the fire, he devalued the Roman currency for the first time in its history,¹⁹ a fact that seems especially significant in light of recent readings that focus on the relationship between economic and social value in Wallace’s

17 *LOV*, 235.

18 Donna Hurley, “Biographies of Nero,” in *A Companion to the Neronian Age*, ed. Emma Buckley and Martin Dinter (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 29.

19 D.C.A. Shotter, *Nero*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 1; 163–97; Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Coins and Currency: An Historical Encyclopedia* (McFarland, 2007), 379.

work.²⁰ Wallace's approach to history here also points forwards to his later framing of the narrative of "The Suffering Channel" in relation to 9/11. Severs notes the way that story depends upon the "dramatic irony of 9/11," while Konstantinou suggests that it "out-source[s] narrative to history" by mapping the "absent plot" of historical knowledge onto the fictive world of the story.²¹ The narrative mechanism in "Cede" is not identical—in this case, the cataclysmic public event is named more explicitly, and the strategy is complicated by the fact that the Ancient Rome plot forms only half of the narrative. However, the reader's knowledge not just of the Great Fire but of the historical significance of the years in which the narrative takes place as well as of the world-historical events to come—the rise of religion and the collapse of empire—is superimposed upon the descriptions of the characters in a way that places a distinctive pressure upon the small-scale events and interactions.

The explicit depiction of Ancient Rome should also cause us to be more attentive to the many Roman references scattered throughout Wallace's work. Many of these take the form of allusions, both im- and explicit, to the root meanings of Latinate words. Severs detects numerous examples of etymological play in the author's work, including references to Latin words and concepts in character names.²² Wallace also frequently incorporated Latin terms into his writing, often in the form of maxims or legal idioms, with the most celebrated being his appropriation (and, as Severs shows, deliberately

20 Richard Godden and Michael Szalay detect in *The Pale King* symbolic representations of the removal of the gold standard by Nixon in 1971; Severs argues that Wallace's early stories take the crash of 1929 as a metaphor for "a general crash of the American psyche and language" ("The Bodies in the Bubble: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 [December 2014]: 1292–93; Severs, 67–68).

21 Severs, 162; Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 81.

22 Severs, 46-50, 112-115.

ungrammatical inversion) of the *E Pluribus Unum* found on the Great Seal of the United States.²³ *Brief Interviews* contains a story with a Latin title, “*Datum Centurio*,” which is structured around etymology; “Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar To Ecko,” which comically juxtaposes the values and vocabulary of the ancient world (often represented by Greek and Latin or Latinate terms) with contemporary pop culture; and “On His Deathbed,” whose father quotes St. Augustine’s phrase *securus judicat orbis terrarum*²⁴ (“the secure judgement of the whole world”).²⁵ Several of the essays Wallace wrote during these years also contain references in this vein, with “Authority and American Usage,” for example, including observations on the relationship between Latin and English grammar.²⁶ More revealing is “Big Red Son,” which Wallace wrote in early 1998, an essay that sustains a submerged comparison with the decadence of late-Imperial Rome that only surfaces explicitly in its opening pages. After introducing the reader to the overwhelming spectacle of Las Vegas, an “enormous machine for exchange” that he refers to as *Vegas Populi*, Wallace begins the next paragraph with a description of the venue for the Adult Video News Awards, the almost-too-conveniently-symbolic (albeit factually accurate) location of Caesars (*sic*) Palace:

23 Severs, 223–24. To take just a handful of examples from *Infinite Jest*, we might consider James Incandenza’s founding motto for the ETA (“TE OCCIDERE POSSUNT SED TE EDERE NON POSSUNT NEFAS EST”), the heading announcing the words “GAUDEAMUS IGITUR” (“let us celebrate”) that appears before several sections, Marathe’s explanation that the word “fanatic” comes from the Latin for “temple,” and the Latin legal term (“se offendendo”) that Tiny Ewell mangles in conversation with Gately. (Wallace, *Infinite Jest*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2006, 81, 107, 321, 343, 380, 814, 964.)

24 It should be noted that the first two of these stories had been published some years prior to the appearance of *Brief Interviews*: “*Datum Centurio*” was published as “Passion, Digitally” in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1996, while “Tri-Stan” appeared in *Grand Street* in 1993. “On His Deathbed” was published in 1999 in the inaugural issue of *Tin House*.

25 *BI*, 106–10, 200–217.

26 *CL*, 100–101.

The granddaddy. As big as 20 Wal-Marts end to end. Real marble and fake marble, carpeting you can pass out on without contusion, 130,000 square feet of casino alone. Domed ceilings, clerestories, barrel vaults. In Caesars Palace is America conceived as a new kind of Rome: conqueror of its own people. An empire of Self.²⁷

The explicit comparison here suggests a slow process of civic destruction and explicitly links Wallace's oft-discussed criticisms of the consumerist solipsism fostered by late capitalism with the decline of the Roman Empire. Towards the end of the essay, Wallace relates the fact that the intentionally vile and misogynistic movie *Miscreants* "keeps getting nominated in category after category" and adds, in typically sly moralising fashion, the (possibly fictional) detail that some of the presenters can be heard "audibly whispering what in the fuck the word is supposed to even mean."²⁸ As Wallace well knows (and his ideal dictionary-wielding reader is expected to find out),²⁹ the word "miscreant" originally derives from the Latin *credere* (to believe) and was used in the Middle Ages to signify a heretic or unbeliever, an etymology that links his presentation of the adult video industry with his later criticisms (in the Kenyon commencement address)³⁰ of the dangers of worshipping money and "your own

27 Ibid., 9–10.

28 Ibid., 45–46.

29 In a letter written to his Italian translator of *Infinite Jest* in 2000, Wallace writes that complex and technical terms deriving from Greek or Latin (such as "bradykinetic" and "bradyauxetic") are "meant almost to force the average reader to look up their meanings in the *OED* or some other resource" (Wallace, "Fax to Eduardo Nesi, 09 September 2000," Box 1, Bonnie Nadell Collection of David Foster Wallace. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.)

30 Judy Pearsall, ed., "Miscreant," *Oxford English Dictionary*, Tenth Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Wallace, "Commencement Speech". Kenyon College, 21 May 2005.

body and sexual allure.”³¹ To take one final example—albeit one that was written several years later—I will observe that “Consider the Lobster,” as well as offering more Latin etymology (in the form of an aside on the word “lobster”), proposes a question that asks the reader to link contemporary American consumerism with the decadent cruelty of the Nazis as well as the aforementioned Roman emperor: “Is it possible that future generations will regard our present agribusiness and eating practices in much the same way we now view Nero’s entertainments or Mengele’s experiments?”³²

Whereas many of Wallace’s Latin references might previously have been understood as offhand allusions to political and historical archetypes or as manifestations of his “SNOOTitude,”³³ the “Cede” section reveals a more sustained process of research and thought, with the author’s imagination repeatedly returning, across different years and literary genres, to the world and political sphere of Ancient Rome.

**“We cede more and more of our
autonomy”: Rome in *The Pale King***

As I have shown, “Cede” has clear overlaps with the thematic preoccupations and narrative methods elsewhere in Wallace’s short fiction and essays, particularly those of the late 1990s. In the remainder of this essay, I focus specifically on how this oblique and enigmatic “short thing” might cause us to recalibrate our understanding of *The Pale King*. Boswell has noted that “Wallace’s longer

31 As an aside, it is surprising to find, in light of the Roman references in the essay, that Wallace omitted the detail that *Miscreant* lost out in the Annual *Adult Video News* Award’s “Best Group Sex Scene” category to a feature entitled *Gluteus to the Maximus*.

32 *CL*, 237, 253.

33 *Ibid.*, 71.

work achieves its effect through accumulation and collage,³⁴ and the narrative method of Wallace's novels depends upon the interplay of scenes whose relation to each other is not always apparent on first reading. These sections certainly represent a significant part of what genetic critics would call the "genetic dossier" for *The Pale King*, and a closer examination repays critical interest by uncovering several links with other strands of the unfinished novel.³⁵

To begin with, the piece adds a singular new perspective to the overall "collage." The narrative strand set in Ancient Rome was presumably excluded by Pietsch because of its temporal distance from the main action of the novel and its lack of clear relevance to what the editor describes as the "central narrative," which follows "a clear chronology."³⁶ While its omission from the published novel is understandable, however, it could perhaps have been included in the "Previously Unpublished Scenes" included with the paperback version.³⁷ It also seems possible that Wallace was ambivalent about this section: as previously noted, he excluded it from his reading at the Lannan foundation in 2000 and omitted most of it from later drafts. However, one draft shows that Wallace included the two-and-a-half-page section on the "Pontic Flights" within the longer "contortionist boy" chapter as late as May 2007.³⁸ It is clear that this strand of the narrative was worked on through multiple drafts and

34 Marshall Boswell, "Introduction: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 368.

35 Dirk Van Hulle, *Modern Manuscripts: The Extended Mind and Creative Undoing from Darwin to Beckett and Beyond*, *Historicizing Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 11.

36 Pietsch, "Editor's Note," ix.

37 While there are at present no plans to publish the handful of relatively polished drafts that did not connect to what Pietsch describes as "the central line and themes," he writes: "I expect there will be a way of publishing those finished portions one day." (Pietsch, "David Foster Wallace interview." 14 August 2017. Email.)

38 Wallace, "Papers," 40.7.

revised repeatedly, arguably making it more complete at an individual level than other sections (§29, for example, exists in only a single handwritten draft). Hering argues for the significance of “Cede” on the grounds that Wallace seems to have regarded it as “essential to locking together several disparate sections” of the novel; the evident time and care expended on the narrative along with the failure to successfully accomplish this act of “locking together,” he suggests, make the piece “perhaps the most characteristic piece of writing in the whole process of writing the third novel.”³⁹

The inclusion of these sections in our conception of the novel would dramatically expand the work’s temporal and geographical range and allow for an exploration of the further development of themes in ostensibly distant but parallel narratives. Burn has noted the unusual treatment of time in *The Pale King*, discussing its simultaneous depiction of several time frames and excavating the “imaginative geography of Ancient Greek myth” underlying scenes set in the 1980s.⁴⁰ The sections set in Rome support this reading, since the ancient world is not just invoked here but depicted; Burn argues that the book works by arranging “rich metaphorical nodes” where meaning accumulates and one of these nodes may be the world of Ancient Rome itself.⁴¹ A comparative reading highlights the frequency with which Roman references recur in *The Pale King*. There are many examples of these, of which I will give just a few here: the Latin motto of the IRS, for example, “*alicui faciendum est*”; the “Roman numerals” organising the substitute lecturer’s main points in §22; the references to specific Roman figures such as Aurelius, which are sometimes more explicit in the draft material; and Sylvanshine’s

39 Hering, *Fiction and Form*, 129.

40 Stephen J. Burn, “‘A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness’: Closing Time in *The Pale King*,” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 382–85.

41 Burn, “‘A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness’: *The Pale King*,” in *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing”: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 150.

reflection, upon reaching Peoria, that it has been some time since he last saw any “Latin person.”⁴² Severs detects several such references, finding significance in the Latin word *pace* in Chris Acquistipace’s name, observing that Sylvanshine’s previous IRS posting was in “Rome, New York” (an address that unsubtly links the two empires’ capitals), and suggesting that the novel’s title itself alludes to the Latin word *palus*, deriving from “the staff or stave used for fighting in Ancient Rome.”⁴³ The frequent use of Latin words and phrases such as David Wallace’s dry comment “*Hiatus valde deflandus*” (which translates roughly as “a lack greatly to be deplored”) on the absence of an illustrative photo from his narrative is also striking. Obscure or technical Latinate words, such as the “temblor” or foretaste of the conversion that Fogle experiences in §22 and the “peplum” that his jacket resembles when buttoned, recur throughout.⁴⁴

These sections also shed new light on the “contortionist boy” section itself, which contains references to “Roman legal texts” as well as dense passages filled with Latinate medical terminology (399,

42 Wallace, 14, 18, 246, 226, 18, 49. In an earlier draft of Sylvanshine’s plane journey, the character muses that “According to Dr. Lehl, Aurelius recommends always returning to first principles” (Wallace, “Papers,” 39.7). Jorge Araya, it should be noted, interprets the last reference here as an example of the monocultural racial environment of the novel, suggesting that the word “Latin” rather than “Latino” serves to indicate the character’s cultural ignorance (Jorge Araya, “Why the Whiteness?: Race in *The Pale King*,” in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*. Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2015), 238. As Thompson has shown, Wallace sometimes used the term to refer to Latin American literature as well as to Latin America’s inhabitants (Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 51-88).

43 Severs, 202. 212. 223.

44 Wallace, 222, 236, 285. Drafts show that Wallace deliberately worked to submerge these references; on one typewritten draft, he circled the word “peplum” and wrote: “No! Too often!” (Wallace, “Papers,” 38.6).

401).⁴⁵ Again, the links between the world of Ancient Rome and the world of the contortionist boy are sometimes more explicit in the first extant version of the piece: here, one of the inspirational maxims that the boy's father has taped to the mirror of his medicine cabinet is Virgil's "Arma virumque cano."⁴⁶ This draft opens with a heading in capital letters, spaced over three lines, that reads:

AMERICANID REX
ADVENTURES IN ACHIEVEMENT
DOG, CREATUS, ACHIEVER

Below this appears the maxim "*Nam tue res agitur, paries proximus ardet*": a note at the end of the same draft that appears to be from Wallace to himself rather than to the reader states that the "Epigraph is Horace – 'no time to sleep with a fire next door.'"⁴⁷ Taken together, these suggest the invocation of Roman history to explore a preoccupation with a particularly American striving for success and to frame an address to an urgent contemporary situation. The brief, capitalized phrases in the heading are deliberately cryptic, and the relationship between their individual words opaque. The opening words of the heading punningly combine references to dogs (the *Canidae* family, the common dog name "Rex") with the announcement of an "American King": this presumably refers to the contortionist boy (the primary American character in the draft), and its second line

45 The boy forces himself to endure:

"[d]aily hours spent cross-legged and bowed, slowly and incrementally stretching the long vertical fasciae of his back and neck, the spinalis thoracis and levator scapulae, iliocostolaris lumborum all the way to the sacrum, and the interior thigh's dense and intransigent gracilis, pectineus, and adductor longus . . ." (Wallace, *TPK*, 399, 401)

46 Wallace, "Papers," 40.2.

47 The relevant section of the *Epistles* urges the reader to be steadfast and to recognise danger when a trusted friend is being slandered; an alternative translation is "You too are in danger when your neighbour's house is on fire" (Horace 1980, Book 1, xviii, line 84; J. R. Stone 2013, 65).

thereby immediately ironises the word “achievement,” since a reader (certainly, any Wallace reader) is likely to be wary of the solipsistic nature of the boy’s accomplishments. The phrase tantalises, though, with its hint that the hypertrophied, self-contained child might be linked to the “king” of the novel’s eventual title.⁴⁸ The draft also invites the question of whether Nero might, in fact, fit the title as well as any other character we have seen. Severs suggests that the Cretan King Minos is one analogue for the pale king of the title, reflecting the selfishness of the “kingly solipsists” of modern-day America who refuse to submit a fair tax return;⁴⁹ however, the diminished, degenerate and “wacked-out” emperor we glimpse in these sections may be a likelier monarch for the role. The word CREATUS, meanwhile, derived from the Latin verb *creo* (“to create”), recalls Hal Incandenza, who helpfully glosses it in the opening pages of *Infinite Jest* as he protests that he is not a “machine”: “I’m not just a creātus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function.”⁵⁰ Its appearance here surely refers to the dogs, who are literally bred for Rome’s increasingly depraved purposes.

James Lasdun’s 2011 review of *The Pale King* detected traces of W.H. Auden’s poem “The Fall of Rome,” with its “Agents of the Fisc” pursuing “tax-defaulters” and its disgruntled “unimportant

48 Hayes-Brady convincingly suggests Keats’ “La Belle Made Sans Merci” as the likeliest source for the novel’s title, but it is unclear whether the appellation designates any of its characters. The only clue in the published novel comes in a single reference to Glendenning’s predecessor (referred to simply as “the Pale King”) in §18, but this does not seem to have been developed elsewhere; I was unable to find a definitive explanation in the draft material (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 59–60; “Palely Loitering: On Not Finishing in *The Pale King*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018: 143–44; Wallace, *TPK*, 130).

49 Severs, 207.

50 *IJ*, 12.

clerk.”⁵¹ “Cede” supports the notion that Wallace was borrowing Auden’s poem’s method of juxtaposing the political problems and vices of ancient Rome with modern-day American professional life, as well as Severs’ assertion that the work “portrays the decline of a decadent American empire for lack of social cohesion—and, potentially, the refounding (the regrouping) of a better nation.”⁵² The section adds significantly to our understanding of the scope of the novel’s interrogation of the changing nature of civic values in contemporary US society. There is now a relative consensus around the notion that Wallace was concerned in his final work with tracking and interrogating the effects of neoliberal policies upon the civic sphere from the 1970s onwards.⁵³ Several of these readings have focused on the novel’s most obvious engagement with political thought, the discussion on “civics and selfishness” presented in §19, in which the civic achievements of the Founding Fathers are contrasted with the rise of corporations (a word which, as one of the men notes, comes from the Latin word for “body”) and the slow hollowing-out of the public sphere.⁵⁴ This rise-and-fall narrative, paralleling the history of Rome with the story of the US since its inception, is given added

51 James Lasdun, “Review of *The Pale King* by David Foster Wallace,” *The Guardian*, 16 April 2011; W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, Expanded Edition (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 188.

52 Severs, 212. The pun implicit in the boy’s name also contains a hint that Cede might represent the “seed” of this civic regrowth.

53 Boswell, “Preface: David Foster Wallace and ‘The Long Thing,’” in *David Foster Wallace and ‘The Long Thing’: Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 209–25.; Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas,” in *David Foster Wallace and ‘The Long Thing’: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014), 14–19; Ralph Clare, “The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*,” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (2012): 195–200.; Severs, 198–243; Mark West, “‘Observacion of These Articles’: Surveillance and the 1970s in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (8 September 2017): 1–12.

54 *TPK*, 140.

resonance by the extent to which the Founders' political ideas were informed by the legal and political structures of Ancient Rome: as Hannah Arendt has observed, the American revolutionaries drew heavily upon "Roman history and Roman political institutions" and were "conscious of emulating ancient virtue."⁵⁵ A comparison of "Cede" with this section uncovers clear thematic and linguistic links. One of the men in the stalled elevator, most likely Glendenning, opens the discussion by stating what he believes to be the central problem facing the modern-day United States: "As citizens we *cede* more and more of our autonomy, but if we the government take away the citizens' freedom to *cede* their autonomy we're now taking away their autonomy. It's a paradox. (my emphasis)"

He goes on, a few lines later, to predict "some sort of disaster" to be followed by a moment of crisis in which "we'll either wake up and retake our freedom or we'll fall apart utterly. Like Rome—conqueror of its own people."⁵⁶ The recurrence of the word "cede" here followed by an exact echo of the phrase from "Big Red Son" indicates that these references can be read as part of a larger argument that Wallace is constructing about freedom, power, and imperial decline. Rome under Nero conquers its own people in at least two senses: firstly, in the way that Nero (according to popular belief) deliberately set fire to the city in order to be able to rebuild it to his own liking, thus sacrificing its inhabitants to his own will to power; and secondly, in the brutal conquer and mass murder of the Christian portion of Rome's population, in which Roman military might was turned against defenceless citizens.⁵⁷

Both of these events are dramatized in *Quo Vadis*, the 1895 novel by Nobel Prize-winning Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz, a copy

55 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, ed. Jonathan Schell (New York; London: Penguin Books, 2006), 188–97.

56 *TPK*, 132–33.

57 Hurley, "Biographies of Nero," 31; Shotter, *Nero*, 60.

of which appears in Wallace's library and which he clearly used as a source text.⁵⁸ The novel is a somewhat didactic tale of Roman imperial decadence giving way to Christian spiritual renewal that nevertheless appears to have made an impression on Wallace, given his borrowing of the title for his introduction to the Spring 1996 *Review of Contemporary Fiction* issue that he guest-edited.⁵⁹ It dramatizes this process through an ongoing contrast between an ageing courtier named Petronius, who describes himself as a "merry-minded skeptic," and a young nobleman named Marcus Vinicius who is converted to Christianity as a result both of his love for a young princess held hostage by the Romans (who is herself, in secret, a committed Christian) and his growing realization of the "inescapable and degrading horror of his times."⁶⁰ The novel also depicts a degenerate Nero, and Wallace underlined two separate passages describing the emperor's overweight and degraded appearance;

58 Wallace's copy is a paperback edition of W.S. Kuniczak's translation, published in 2000. It is unclear when he read and annotated this; the date would allow us to conjecture that he used it as a source for his 2001 revision of the Rome material, although his use of the phrase in 1996 strongly suggests that he might also have read an earlier copy.

59 The novel's title is an abridgement of the words "*Quo vadis, Domine?*" which translate as "where are you going, Lord?". The words are uttered by Peter, who is fleeing Rome and (in a retelling of the Acts of Peter) encounters Christ on the way; Christ responds by saying "When you abandon my people . . . I must go to Rome to be crucified once more." Peter's companion echoes the question, and Peter, shamed by the accusation, announces that he is returning to Rome. (Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Quo Vadis*. New York, N.Y: Hippocrene Books, 2000, 554).

60 Sienkiewicz, *Quo Vadis*, 277, 241.

beside one of these, he wrote the words “Nero as grotesque.”⁶¹ Sienkiewicz’s Nero watches the bloody massacres of Christians, as does Wallace’s, through a “polished emerald.”⁶² Poppaea also appears as a villainously cruel character in *Quo Vadis*, and Wallace underlined a sentence in Sienkiewicz’s novel in which the Roman crowd disparagingly refers to her as a “street-walker.”⁶³ Wallace seems to have used the book as a source from which to harvest vocabulary as well as details on historical setting, circling and underling a number of Latin words and phrases throughout his copy. Many of these refer to details of the battles staged in the Circus and most do not appear in “Cede”; the word “peplum” used by Chris Fogle, though, appears on one of the pages annotated by Wallace.⁶⁴

Quo Vadis contains lengthy and vivid descriptions of battles in the circus arena in which Christians are thrown to the lions; one passage, beside which Wallace drew a vertical line, refers to animals who are “tamed by expert trainers,”⁶⁵ a detail which may have provided inspiration for the Roman narrative Wallace developed. A passage elsewhere is not marked by Wallace, but gives a description of the animals’ training that is very close to the one we find in “Cede”: “The keepers starved the animals for two days, teasing them by dragging slabs of bloody meat before their cages, goading them into

61 Wallace, for example, drew a vertical line next to the following passage: “His eyes seemed scrunched in suet. His image was corrupt, a whim-driven man overtaken by his own excesses; he was still young but was drowning in the rolls of his accumulated fat, was prone to quick illness, and was corroded by debauchery and slimy with spittle.” Sienkiewicz, 65. He underlined the first sentence in this passage, and may have drawn upon it elsewhere for a description of the IRS’s Compliance Training Officer, whose “face was the color of suet” *TPK*, 319.

62 *Ibid.*, 470.

63 *Ibid.*, 316.

64 *Ibid.*, 74.

65 *Ibid.*, 315.

a frenzy of hunger.”⁶⁶ On a page describing a “drunken orgy” Wallace wrote the words “Luxe, Decadence,” which could perhaps be a source for the idea of the “mass frenzied orgylike copulation” described in §48 by Glendenning; moments before he describes this, in fact, Glendenning utters a number of seemingly disconnected Latin phrases: “Loco weed. Parentis. Mens sano in corpus.”⁶⁷ Wallace also underlined sentences describing Vinicius, in which the word “achieve” suggests the contradictory valence sensed in the heading “ADVENTURES IN ACHIEVEMENT”:

Vinicius was a product of his civilization, born to command like every highborn Roman, and he would rather watch the world end and the city tumble into ruins than see himself fail to achieve what he set out to do.⁶⁸

Wallace clearly returned to *Quo Vadis* more than once: in a different coloured pen, he marked a passage in which Peter addresses the early Christians, speaking “as a father admonishing his children and teaching them how to live.”⁶⁹ Despite the different narrative strategies we see in *Quo Vadis* and Wallace’s work, the moral arc of the novel—which presents a movement from scepticism, decadent lethargy and spiritual exhaustion to renewed belief—is one that has resonance for both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*.

The trope of fatherhood is integral to the presentation of this renewal of belief, appearing clearly in “Cede” as well as in a number of other sections of the unfinished novel. We can find further intratextual links in §35, the section (later published as “The Compliance Branch” in *Harper’s* in February 2008) in which the narrator describes his fear of the “fierce infant” belonging to his Group

66 Ibid., 452.

67 Ibid., 75; *TPK*, 525–26.

68 Sienkiewicz, *Quo Vadis*, 102.

69 Ibid., 184.

Manager: this contains another linguistic echo of the Roman narrative as we learn that much of Gary Manshardt's office has been "ceded to the infant."⁷⁰ This infant, with its "pale face," "extreme pallor" and hair the colour of "old blood," is granted "full authority" at the scene's end by the narrator, who realises that he is "this tiny white frightening thing's to command, its instrument or tool."⁷¹ Pietsch placed this section immediately before the "contortionist boy" section of §36 and indeed both narratives portray powerful, enigmatic children whose self-control and authority appear to intimidate those around them. Taken together, they indicate a strand of *The Pale King* in which Wallace was investigating ideas of control and freedom in the context of fatherhood: all three children (Cede, the contortionist boy, the fierce infant) are presented in symbiotic yet oppositional relationships with their fathers. The fierce infant hanging in his papoose appears to be "riding [his father] like a mahout does an elephant";⁷² the contortionist boy's father appears to lack the self-possession and discipline of his son, but experiences a complementary problem of "backbone" and is also driven by his desires to psychologically "contort himself"; Cede, for his part, rebels against his father by extending "kindness" and "mercy" to the dogs under his care, an act for which, it is hinted, he will not be forgiven.⁷³ The inclusion in *The Pale King* of an additional parallel narrative describing the complex relations between a father and son would render the theme more visible in the work, providing another point of comparison with, for example, the fear of fatherhood expressed by Sylvanshine in §2 and Fogle's lengthy exploration of his father's life

70 *TPK*, 393.

71 *Ibid.*, 389–95.

72 Pietsch changed this word from "maheeb" after the recording of the audio book of *The Pale King*, which was recorded before the final stage of editing, possibly due to the word's obscurity (the OED contains only a definition for "mahout." (David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*. New York: Hachette Audio, 2011, 12.7.)

73 *Ibid.*, 389, 407; Wallace, "Papers," 39.6.

and legacy. The notion of paternity is repeatedly transposed onto the political sphere in the novel, and the discussion of the self-deceptive need for 1980s U.S. citizens to believe that “Daddy’s in control” points to the importance of paternal models throughout the work.⁷⁴

The Ancient Rome section also strongly evokes the history of early Christianity, with the brutal persecutions of Christians in the circus forming the background for the story’s narrative. Again it is clear that “Cede,” if included in *The Pale King*, would strengthen our apprehension of the theme in the work as a whole. Christianity (and, frequently, Catholicism in particular) is a recurring element in the textual world of the novel, and one which has only begun to attract critical attention in recent years.⁷⁵ Examples, once again, are multiple. Lane Dean’s crises of faith, in which he repeatedly turns to the Bible and to prayer in response to his despairing thoughts, provides one obvious illustration. Dean has a Christian bumper sticker depicting a fish (not to mention a girlfriend named “Sheri Fisher”); the symbol of the fish appears repeatedly in *Quo Vadis* to connect

74 *TPK*, 15, 150, 175–211.

75 While Max’s biography is relatively dismissive of Wallace’s interest in religion, several critics have demurred, pointing to specific religious (mostly Christian, and often specifically Catholic) references in the author’s writing, the numerous annotated books on religion and spirituality in his collection, and further biographical and archival evidence of his religious leanings. See Martin Brick, “A Postmodernist’s Progress: Thoughts on Spirituality Across the David Foster Wallace Canon,” *Christianity and Literature* 64, no. 1 (December 2014): 65–81; Maria Bustillos, “Philosophy, Self-Help, and the Death of David Wallace,” in *Gesturing toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014, 121–39; Adam S. Miller, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace*, New York: Bloomsbury; Michael J. O’Connell, “‘Your Temple Is Self and Sentiment’: David Foster Wallace’s Diagnostic Novels,” *Christianity & Literature* 64, no. 3 (1 June 2015): 266–92; Thompson, *Global Wallace*. O’Connell (2015) provides the most extensive analysis of Wallace’s response to Christian thought. Most recently, Matthew Mullins argues that the Christian practices of conversion, worship, and community are central to Wallace’s interest in “faith in faith itself” (“Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion”, in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018: 193.)

persecuted Christians throughout Rome. Fogle's monologue, as several critics have noted, abounds with religious references, and he repeatedly compares his conversion experience in the presence of the substitute Jesuit to the Christian conversion of his roommate's girlfriend.⁷⁶ Images of Christianity also occur in less obvious ways throughout the novel, often in passing—the word “cruciform,” for example, is used to refer to both the shape of a plane as well as to the rural towns around Peoria, we are told that the child Diablo paints Catholic murals on walls, and the Personnel aide describes an IRS training document as “the new Bible.”⁷⁷ The historical breadth of the novel's interest in Christianity is hinted at when Garrity refers to the “so-called *daemon meridianus*” that terrorised the early Catholic hermits of “third-century Egypt”; as Michael O'Connell observes, the problems faced by the examiners (boredom or “acedia”) as well as the appropriate response to these spiritual difficulties are both represented in ways that draw upon “traditions of Christian mysticism.”⁷⁸ Indeed, the connection between the experiences of the early Christians and the struggles of the modern-day characters in *The Pale King* are limned in symbolic and linguistic terms. The description of the Pontic “aeronauts,” with their airborne resemblance to “seraphic visitations,” evokes the flight of the plane on which Sylvanshine travels, and the reference to the “yaw” they experience in flight evokes the same word in the Sylvanshine chapter.⁷⁹ O'Connell notes that Drinion's supernatural ability to

76 *TPK*, 42–45, 222, 230, 275–276, 387, 543–544; O'Connell, “‘Your Temple Is Self and Sentiment,’” 286–87; West, “‘Observacion of These Articles,’” 5–10. Again, earlier drafts sometimes emphasise the Christian references in the narrative: in one of these, Fogle is “spinning the Christian's ball” on his finger while watching the TV show that prompts his epiphany, a phrase that Wallace perhaps felt represented an overly obvious piece of symbolism (Wallace, “Papers,” 38.6).

77 Wallace, *TPK*, 17, 334, 335, 368.

78 Wallace, 385; O'Connell, “‘Your Temple Is Self and Sentiment,’” 280–88. Severs also notes the monkish devotion of the tax examiners, whose work is figured as a “holy office” Severs, 207–8.

79 Wallace, “Papers,” 37.2; Wallace, *TPK*, 11.

levitate “connects him with the metaphysical abilities of the saints,” and the reference to the “Zoroastrian levitation” of the Pontic aeronauts makes this connection much more explicit.⁸⁰ Shortly after the narrator of §46 informs us that Drinion is hovering above his chair, he interrupts Meredith Rand to note that she was “‘raised in the Catholic faith,’ ” to which she responds “‘That’s not relevant.’ ”⁸¹ In the light of the presence of a narrative centred around key events in the development of Christianity, we can take this to be a clear piece of misdirection on Wallace’s part, and the pun on the word “raised” becomes more visible; it becomes clear, too, that the unfinished novel contains numerous ambiguous instances of failed or sabotaged attempts at flight.⁸²

The ideas linking these sections are also explored in narratives that have an unmistakably metafictional dimension. In the “contortionist boy” chapter, the word “art” appears (in inverted commas) in relation to the achievements of “professional contortionists” and quotations from Blake and Goethe bolster the father’s yearning for “personal achievement.”⁸³ In the draft of “Cede” in which these stories coexist, we are invited to draw a clear contrast between the psychologically weak father of the “contortionist boy” and Cede’s father, the head trainer who is utterly indifferent to the suffering undergone by the Molossian hounds as he shapes them into “instruments of the will of Rome”:

80 O’Connell, “‘Your Temple Is Self and Sentiment,’” 287; Wallace, “Papers,” 37.2.

81 *TPK*, 474.

82 The narrative of Fogle (whose name, as Tom Tracey has pointed out to me, suggests *vogel*, the German word for “bird”), suggests this trajectory at a more symbolic level. The IRS recruiting station in which he signs up to the Service shares its space with a US Air Force recruiting office, and the chapter ends with the recruiter offering him a smile that seems, as Severs notes, “ominous” (Wallace, 245; Severs, 200).

83 *TPK*, 399, 406–7.

His was the brutal, beautiful, technical detachment of the true artist. And in his own heart, the *exercitor summum* understood himself as a kind of god-like shaping creator, albeit one for whom there was in vulgar Greek no name.⁸⁴

There is a suggestion here of the austere sacrifice required of the artist—the reader may well surmise that the word missing from the Greek is “author”—as well as a more complicated parallel between the power of the artist and that of the state.⁸⁵ A contrapuntal relationship between the two stories is established, with a clear contrast between the two men as well as between both sets of fathers and sons. The grotesque, solipsistic dedication and “queer heartcraft” of the contortionist boy could be related to the refined cruelty of the head trainer, whose confinement of the dogs involves keeping them in cramped conditions whose dimensions force their bodies into contorted positions. The contortionist boy’s father, meanwhile, thinks of his son as being “*dutiful*” (italics in original) while suspecting himself of lacking “backbone,” and his dreams of “contorted suffocation” seem to be caused by his deficiency in the discipline needed to reach his goals; he also seems to be governed by social instincts—as indicated by his obsession with his “social standing”—unlike his hermetic, self-contained son.⁸⁶ Cede shows the dogs “mercy”: the word alludes to the beliefs of the Christians who are to be the

84 Wallace, 40.2.

85 The allusion to artistic discipline also, perhaps, echoes the aforementioned examples of religious struggle, and in similarly equivocal terms. In his analysis of *Oblivion*, Hering suggests that Wallace’s late work draws on Emil Cioran’s critique of Christian mysticism, with feats of saintly endurance figured as a kind of “self-aggrandizing suffering”; this form of “self-interested” sainthood, he observes, maps on to “certain models of authorship found in the fiction” (“*Oblivion*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018: 103-108.)

86 Wallace, 405–8.

animals' victims, and shows him to be oriented towards others.⁸⁷ We see here, perhaps, a concordance between Wallace's resistance to formal closure in his fiction and his exploration of authoritarian political systems. Hayes-Brady observes that "completion signifies . . . the failure of perfection" in Wallace's fiction, while Severs notes that "final reconciliations" are invariably depicted as being "potentially fascistic":⁸⁸ the highly ambiguous representation of the drive to perfection incarnated in the "brutal, beautiful" trainer (a "true artist") imagines artistic success in terms of despotism. The word "fascia" or its plural "fasciae" is used repeatedly in its biological sense throughout the narrative of the contortionist boy⁸⁹ and the word's political overtones—bearing in mind the boy's obsessive focus on a final goal and the existence of a parallel narrative portraying an authoritarian political system—are surely no coincidence.⁹⁰



In the foregoing, I have provided an initial account of the material in "Cede" and attempted to integrate it into our understanding of Wallace's work, particularly the complex and interconnected body of writing produced in and alongside the development of his final novel. There are necessary difficulties to this integration: we should acknowledge both the complexity of the ideas involved here and the impossibility of knowing how far Wallace had developed his

87 In one further intratextual link, we might note the echo this creates with Toni Ware's intense feeling of love for her dogs (which is described in two separate sections) and the anecdote of the dog tied to a chain that closes §14 (Wallace, *The Pale King*, 119, 153, 513).

88 Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 8; Severs, 8.

89 *TPK*, 397, 399, 400.

90 In Wallacean fashion, I can only venture a footnoted appeal here to the reader to acknowledge the obviousness of pointing out that these representations of infantile and degenerate leadership, broken social contracts, authoritarian forces, and religious persecution might all be seen as prescient forebodings of what American politics held in store for the decade following the author's death.

exploration of them. However, the material I have discussed here supports Hering's argument that the thematic and formal failures Wallace confronted in these drafts can be read as key ones in our understanding of his late work, and shows his portrayal of civic failure developing in tandem with a growing sense of his own failure to build his many narrative fragments into a coherent narrative. It is clear that Wallace used Ancient Rome as an imaginative space in which to bring together several recurring obsessions; the threats to American democracy posed by late twentieth-century political and economic developments, the tension between reason and faith that manifests in his fascination with holy men, and his own deeply self-reflexive search for new modes of expression. His inability to bring these sections to fruition, either as a "short thing" or as fully integrated parts of the final "long thing," makes them no less important in our understanding of his late work.

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“LISTEN”: WALLACE’S SHORT STORY ENDINGS AND THE ART OF FALLING SILENT

Jeffrey Severs

TO BEGIN, A FEW ENDINGS: “Then welcome.” “You are loved.” “So decide.” “Not another word.”¹ These representative last lines of Wallace short stories seem designed to arrest the reader with their brevity, catch her short, following as they often do gales of loquacious Wallace prose. In “Octet,” for example, “So decide” comes after a four-page paragraph with multiple footnotes and a 99-word previous sentence, all filled with self-conscious equivocation; and “Not another word” in “Good Old Neon” ends a last sentence that, illustrating the “inbent spiral” this self-silencing counteracts, covers 31 lines on the page.² “So decide,” like “You are loved,” is starkly set off as its own one-line paragraph. Many terse Wallace endings function as direct addresses to the reader, often an invitation or imperative to act, whether that be to speak or to make a judgement—part of

1 These are, in order, from “Here and There,” “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” GCH, 172 and 373; “Octet,” BI, 160; and “Good Old Neon,” OB, 181.

2 OB, 181.

Wallace's effort to make readers more active and show that "the fiction is changed by the reader as much as the reader is changed by the fiction," as Marshall Boswell was first to argue.³ Read in the formal abstract (a mode too often missing in Wallace criticism), all of the above last lines are three syllables or three words long (one is both). While these endings are not magical incantations, in this recurrence of threes I sense some trace of the constraints we might think more proper to poetry than prose, some trace of an attempt to lean on language's spell-casting power more than its explanatory force.⁴ What is that spell? As a useful contrast to the mysterious power of these trios, when Wallace republished "A Radically Condensed History of Post-Industrial Life" in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, he made the three-word ending phrase, "now did one," appear three times (the original story, published in *Ploughshares* in 1998, simply ends, "One never knew, now did one").⁵ The revised ending becomes a refrain of self-consciousness, seemingly unending, the mechanical, calculating incantation of a solipsistic, self-echoing mind that does not listen for outside data. "Now did one" does not stop, whereas the above and many other of Wallace's last lines—"Lyndon?," "Say her name" (another three-word ending), "Hello"—not only mark an end but an other's beginning, a speaker's pause or diminution that

3 *UND*, 125.

4 Hopkins he praised for making up "his own set of formal constraints and then [blowing] everyone's footwear off from inside them," part of "why formal poetry's so much more interesting . . . than free verse," *CW*, 52. This admiration of formalism turns up as well in his scathing 2001 review of *The Best of the Prose Poem* (which also offers proof that he is a dedicated counter of words—see *BFN* 243-256). On Wallace and Hopkins see Timothy Jacobs, "American Touchstone: The Idea of Order in Gerard Manley Hopkins and David Foster Wallace," *Comparative Literature Studies* 38 (2001): 215-231.

5 "A Radically Condensed History . . ." appeared in *Ploughshares* (Spring 1998) and then, revised, in *BI*, on page 0.

emphasizes silence and listens for a response.⁶ The key first step for any listener is always to stop talking, to fall into silence.

Listening, we know, was an act that Wallace prized and found fascinating, worthy of repeated fictional examination. Shane Drinion, whose gravity-defying listening to Meredith Rand in *The Pale King* has drawn much critical interest, is an exemplar of listening's transcendent possibilities. Listening well at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in *Infinite Jest* is the only way to identify and thereby recover, and D.T. Max's biography contains several examples of Wallace's own apparently Drinionesque "listening skills" at AA and otherwise (a girlfriend "was astonished at the intense way Wallace listened").⁷ In this essay, though, I largely depart from the characterological and biographical planes and focus on the more abstract and formal ways in which Wallace's texts themselves might be thought to "listen" to their reader, instilling a sense that their communication (and language use in general) is not entirely one-way, while also underscoring the paradoxical fact that Wallace's frequently anti-minimalist works would have the ultimate aim of portraying the cessation of speech. I investigate in particular ending moments when Wallace's texts—many of which "tr[y] to sound out loud, aural"—abruptly drop the verbosity that has defined them and fall into a metaphorical silence.⁸ In doing so I identify the power of the last few lines of many Wallace short stories to thematize and enact the silence that he knew was essential to any linguistic communication between two people, or between text and reader. There are also untold spiritual and meditative possibilities in the act of listening *to* silence itself. This essay, then, largely concerns the varying moral dramas Wallace creates around

6 These three endings are respectively from "Lyndon," GCH, 118; "Everything is Green," GCH, 230; and "Forever Overhead," BI, 16.

7 *LOV*, 181.

8 *David Foster Wallace: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (New York: Melville House, 2012), 41.

getting (or giving up) the last word. His short story collections—with their many opportunities to end, their often quite short routes to these endings, and their many intra-collection resonances—serve such dramas particularly well, better than his novels can.

While I ultimately give the most attention here to stories in *Girl With Curious Hair*, where silence seems most explicitly thematized, the fact that claiming the last word is a sign of moral impoverishment is most readily exemplified by the Hideous Men of Wallace's second collection, who never cede this ground. Every "Brief Interview" ends with a line from the interviewee, reinforcing the erasure or silencing of the female listener, "Q," that defines this distinctively monological interview format. Clare Hayes-Brady, emphasizing the gendering of verbosity and silence in Wallace, argues that "Q's silence challenges the reader to explore the relationship of feminine narrative agency to straightforward patriarchal discourses."⁹ While not an interviewee, the patriarchal Father of "On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand, the Acclaimed New Young Off-Broadway Playwright's Father Begs a Boon" connects to the Hideous Men by getting the last word in that story's play-like format. His words suggest that helplessness and terror undergird the dominating effort to have the final say, since no other voice seems to register to him as audible: in the story's last lines he wishes "[n]ot to die in this appalling silence. This charged and pregnant vacuum all around. . . . Such silence."¹⁰ This fear of a surrounding silence is textbook solipsism, the notion that no one besides oneself exists and that one occupies a vacuum (the depiction of which Wallace so admired in David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*). Another patriarch, James Incandenza, perhaps following the lead of a father whose 1960 monologue features no replies from

9 Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 176.

10 *BI*, 282.

his son, deludedly believes at the end of his life that his own son, Hal, has stopped speaking altogether and begun to “fall into the womb of solipsism”—the state that James himself would seem to be in.¹¹ Wallace’s short story endings, while they often embody this solipsistic trap, also depict for their careful reader many ways out of it, many ways of overcoming the sense that no one else’s voice exists. Solipsism may be a much-discussed topic in Wallace interpretation, but I add here attention to the recurrent role silence and endings play in both defining and resisting that state.

Since the earliest examinations of postmodern literature, silence has been taken as one of its dominant features. In her 1967 assessment of contemporary artforms, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” Susan Sontag documents how art’s turn away from transcendence and toward self-consciousness results in widespread engagement with silence: “A new element enters the individual artwork and becomes constitutive of it: the appeal (tacit or overt) for its own abolition.”¹² Offering one of the first influential definitions of the period, Ihab Hassan in the late 1960s and early 1970s designated postmodernism a literature of silence, embodying “an autistic consciousness, imperial in its isolation, avid for the void,” and possessing “a corresponding language, cunning in the arts of self-abolition.”¹³ These definitions of a literature of silence have been tremendously productive for interpretations of trauma, colonialism, the Holocaust, and many other subjects. But Wallace, as critics have no doubt come to expect, carves out territory distinct from this canonical postmodernism, most often emphasizing silence as a feature (potentially) of generative interpersonal dialogue, a sign of openness to an other. Putting in broader

11 *Ij*, 839.

12 Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969; rpt. 2013), 5.

13 Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 14.

terms a similar point about his resistance to negating forms, Hayes-Brady remarks, “The teleological imperative of postmodernism is to will its own decline, to question itself into silence, which is Wallace’s central problem with it.” In another context she calls Wallace “certainly a writer for whom silence is productive.”¹⁴ Jacques Derrida’s characterization of silence as constitutive of—rather than opposed to—language and signification also bears mention as another key influence on Wallace.¹⁵

Wallace’s work entertains but ultimately resists Derrida’s well-known critique of the metaphysics of presence, though, as Boswell argues, adding that in his takes on language and presence Wallace often “amends his Derrida with a healthy dose of Wittgenstein.”¹⁶ Indeed, in seeking an origin for Wallace’s repeated intertwining of endings and silence we ultimately must look to Wittgenstein, who, I suggest, serves Wallace as both philosophical and artistic inspiration. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ends with a famous line about silence: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”¹⁷ I cannot speak about (and so must pass over in relative silence?) the huge number of interpretations this mysterious ending has produced, but I would suggest we see Wallace, especially early in his career, finding in it primarily the inspiring work of a fellow artist, rather than a philosophical rule to be followed or argued with. Early

14 Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures*, 6, 8.

15 Writing about representations of Holocaust trauma, Magdalena Zolkos offers a pithy summary of Derrida’s complex ideas about silence: “The logocentric investment in the ‘metaphysics of presence’ of speech and the verbal sign, masks a desire for a ‘transcendental signifier’ (where orality is imagined as transcending the order of silence), which Derrida famously deconstructs by use of the notion of the ‘trace.’” See Magdalena Zolkos, “‘Un Petite Geste’: Affect and Silence in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*” in Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson, eds., *Traumatic Affect* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 73.

16 *UND*, 171.

17 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1974), 74.

in his career Don DeLillo remarked about his reading of “parts” of the *Tractatus*, “I have no formal training in mathematical logic and I couldn’t say a thing about the technical aspects of the book. I like the way he uses language. Even in translation, it’s very evocative . . . mysteriously simple and self-assured.”¹⁸ DeLillo has of course been a primary influence on Wallace, especially *End Zone*, the work DeLillo is discussing in this quotation. Whole other essays might be written on the particular ways even just the early DeLillo’s lines—“words broken into brute sound, a consequent silence of metallic texture,” “Everywhere it was possible to perceive varieties of silence” (both *End Zone*), “Now we’re acolytes of your silence” (*Great Jones Street*)—influenced Wallace’s own—“The room’s carbonated silence is now hostile,” Johnny Gentle’s “Live Silence” (both *Infinite Jest*), “This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do” (*The Pale King*).¹⁹ I simply suggest here that Wallace, particularly when thinking through endings, often treats the legacy of Wittgenstein in ways similar to DeLillo, subordinating a greater knowledge of “philosophical ideas” to making characters “alive and interesting” in fiction meant to be fundamentally about “human beings and inner experiences.”²⁰

Proof that Wallace saw the *Tractatus*’s silent ending as an important literary (and spiritual) model comes in his 1997 interview with Michael Silverblatt (always the shrewdest of his interviewers). Following up an exchange on how “present” his journalistic

18 Thomas DePietro, ed., *Conversations With Don DeLillo* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 10. For a detailed reading of the relationship between *End Zone* and Wittgenstein, see Michael LeMahieu, *Fictions of Fact and Value: The Erasure of Logical Positivism in American Literature, 1945-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6-14.

19 These six quotations are from, in order, DeLillo, *End Zone* (New York: Penguin, 1972; rpt. 1986), 3 and 191; DeLillo, *Great Jones Street* (New York: Penguin, 1973; rpt. 1994), 194; Wallace, *J*, 8 and 381-82; and Wallace, *TPK*, 87.

20 Ostap Karmodi, “‘A Frightening Time in America’: An Interview With David Foster Wallace,” *NYR Blog*, June 13, 2011, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2011/06/13/david-foster-wallace-russia-interview/>

persona is in the essays of *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, Wallace reveals that Wittgenstein's ending—a moment of self-effacement, a kind of disappearing act—is, for him, among the limit cases for endings.

Silverblatt: No, you're very present. And I guess what I'm talking about is a literature that implicitly takes to heart the Zen maxim, "Live as if you were already dead."
Wallace: Oh yeah. Well, you're talking about an effaced narrator where it's not a literary choice, but it's in fact a truth. And, except for very rare, transcendent pieces of fiction, I haven't seen that done anywhere except spiritual and religious literature. Or, you know, at the end of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. I mean, you're talking about the sort of thing that an absolute genius — I mean, a Mozart of living — comes up with after decades of effort. And . . . I'm comfortable saying I'm not there yet.²¹

Not there yet in life he may have been, but as he sought to write his own "transcendent pieces of fiction," Wallace had his endings draw together falls into silence with the insistently Buddhist implication that the "I" of a story is not alone, not unitary, and not primary—in-sisting, in the process, that experimental narrative ought to serve the renunciation of egos. "Good Old Neon" ends not only with a silencing "Not another word" but the belated revelation that the suicidal first-person narrator, Neal, has been a vehicle of displaced self-exploration for David Wallace, here rendered in third person, not first. Calm, silence, and a dismantled ego are meant to go together. "You are loved" at the end of "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," another story of tricky point-of-view, is importantly not "I love you"—the line displaces ego-first assertion into passive voice (thereby contrasting with the Granola-Cruncher's lover, whose "I

21 Wallace, "David Foster Wallace: *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*," interview by Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*, KCRW radio broadcast, May 15, 1997.

knew I loved. End of story” is a hideous, silencing story-ender).²² “Forever Overhead” chooses “you” over “I” for its intimate narration and, at its end, counsels the “you” and its reader to “[s]tep into the skin and disappear,” rather than fear being one nobody in a long line of humans.²³ These and other Wallace endings are guides not just to confronting the fate of mortality but, indeed, living outside the confines of the ego and, per Zen, as if you were already dead.

The *Tractatus*’s final claim about living in silence might also be seen as what the later Wittgenstein, in Wallace’s reading, rejected—and as embodying a pessimism about communion through communication that Wallace’s stories sought to move beyond. In his 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace argues that the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* saw users of language as fundamentally isolated, separated, “metaphysically and forever, from the external world.” Thus “the individual person with her language is trapped in here, with the world out there,” a fate Wallace reads as solipsistic. The Wittgenstein of the posthumous, pieced-together *Philosophical Investigations*, though, was “a real artist” (more proof that Wallace takes the philosopher as aesthetic model) who, recognizing the disaster of endorsing solipsism, mounts a “comprehensive and beautiful argument against” it: language “must always be a function of relationships between persons,” “dependent on human community.” Humans “are stuck in here, in language, even if we’re at least all in here together.”²⁴ This movement from one Wittgenstein to another, from isolation and solipsism to relationship and community, results, I argue in my concluding close readings, in two different types of ending silence in the short stories of *Girl*—as well as two attitudes toward the audible nature of silence and its meditative possibilities.

I focus here on *Girl* in part because it remains Wallace’s most

22 *BI*, 318.

23 *Ibid.*, 16.

24 *CW*, 44.

under-studied work but primarily because it follows immediately upon—and in some ways acts as a variegated redemption of—what he saw as the failed blankness and silence of his first major ending, in *The Broom of the System*. Wallace's first novel ends with Rick Vigorous being mysteriously silenced and a blank space where (we presume) the word "word" should be: "You can trust me," RV says, watching her hand. 'I'm a man of my.'²⁵ The young Wallace might have had *Gravity's Rainbow's* nuclear-bomb ending ("Now everybody—")²⁶ in mind, and Bradley J. Fest has argued that the blank indicates an actual apocalypse for *Broom*, in which Norman Bombardini has "in fact apocalyptically become the universe" and eaten the world, including Rick and the other characters.²⁷ Wallace later said he regretted many aspects of *Broom*, including its "shitty and dissatisfying ending."²⁸ Editor Gerald Howard "didn't want the book to end there," with Rick's blank, but Wallace wrote a long letter to Howard defending this and other philosophical aspects of the novel.²⁹ Perhaps, then, the other forms of silence and silent endings I identify here—especially in the stories of *Girl*, published in 1987–89, most in the immediate wake of *Broom*—are Wallace's attempts to refine or improve upon his first novel's ending, infusing with more nuanced meaning the blank space of the page that arrives at the end of even a conventional narrative, regardless of experimentation and philosophy.

Girl sets a Wallace standard for story endings that are often opaque and inimical to revelation. In the title story, Sick Puppy's

25 BOS, 467. Note that, though my quoted sentence ends with a period here, *Broom* contains no closing punctuation.

26 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 1973; rpt. 2006), 776.

27 Bradley J. Fest, "Then Out of the Rubble: David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction," in Marshall Boswell, ed. *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 92.

28 *ALT*, 35.

29 *Ibid.*, 35

“And here’s what I did” is exemplary of a move to adopt the language of seeming illumination but leave the reader in mystery or wondering about unnarrated events postdating a story’s end (what exactly did he do?).³⁰ “Which turned out to be the mistake,” Edilyn’s final sentence fragment in “My Appearance,” fits this mold as well.³¹ In a moment of pregnant silence that owes something to the end of that famous shaggy-dog story *The Crying of Lot 49* (“Alex raises his arms in greeting” is a strong echo of Pynchon’s auctioneer), “Little Expressionless Animals” concludes in a studio on the verge of taping: “Julie and the audience look at each other.”³² Julie’s TV experience seems to recapitulate the trauma of the “blank silent man” who left her and her brother, “a baby who is silence embodied,” by the side of the road, while also anticipating the ominous silence in which tennis players perform (behind glass) in scenes from *Infinite Jest*.³³

Girl is not a collection of linked stories, but many of its narratives, especially at their ends, set a Wallace template of failed communication, often within romantic couples (“Adult World” and “Oblivion” are two later examples). All attempts at communication falling into a solipsistic vacuum of silence and failed connection is a constant specter in *Girl*. “Here and There” is in effect the joint oral telling of a break-up by Bruce and his girlfriend, who use each other’s language but talk entirely past each other, as though their words are the record of isolated therapy sessions. A third voice, touting the whole as Bruce’s “fiction therapy,” is able to speak directly to Bruce, though, and this voice (the therapeutic storytelling itself?) has the doubled quote marks we would expect to be the outer container for nested voices in a narrative. Bruce and his girlfriend have single

30 *GCH*, 74.

31 *Ibid.*, 201.

32 *Ibid.*, 42.

33 *Ibid.*, 40.

quote marks, though (here is the paradox) their speeches come first in the story, and one realizes that, in this metafiction, both therapist voice and girlfriend are the solipsistic (written) projections of Bruce, the most voluminous talker, rather than (in the girlfriend's case) the fully voiced "subject" status the story is meant to create for her.³⁴ In a story all about making the other container for one's own thoughts, the therapist voice's ending "Then welcome," following Bruce finally confessing he is "afraid of absolutely everything there is," suggests that the story, as it has progressed, has become the outer container or safe haven that can therapeutically mitigate Bruce's solipsistic projection, the "defined structured space" promised near the beginning but, at that point, not yet created.³⁵ Fiction is at its best, as Wallace said so many times, when it welcomes us into a communal space that combats loneliness and solipsism.

"Everything is Green," so short a break-up story that it seems over before it can mitigate any solipsism, ends with the narrator attempting an epiphany and failing: Mayfly, his partner, "is looking outside, from where she is sitting, and I look at her, and there is something in me that can not close up, in that looking. Mayfly has a body. And she is my morning. Say her name."³⁶ This final trio of words seems a failed spell in several respects: coming at the end, it mocks the traditional beginning invocation of a (female) muse, and it is a command to speak but, in actuality, silence, not an address to Mayfly (notably, too, there are no quote marks around any of the dialogue in this story—everything might be silence). And is Mayfly her "real" name or merely

34 Ibid., 153. *Prosopopoeia*—the name of the Maine town to which Bruce retreats, but in poetry the granting of voice to an absent person or thing that is in reality silent—ironically underscores this theme of projecting voice onto his absent former beloved.

35 Ibid., 153. The dedicatee of the story, "K. Gödel," famous for theorizing the incompleteness of systems, alerts us to look for such a paradoxically open-ended structure. Ibid., 149.

36 Ibid., 230.

the narrator's pet name? The story—emphasizing, as in that ending passage, the distance between and separation of communicators and their individual perspectives—uses its uneducated, seemingly simple-minded couple to explore problems of language philosophy that Wallace insists are everyday issues, far from abstract (“John Billy” works in a similar mode). Saying names, and communicators sharing a common lexicon of names, is chief among these issues: if Wallace’s stories often explore Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*-ending silence, this one plays on the disagreement about colors that Wallace would later explicate through Wittgenstein in “Authority and American Usage.” There, in a footnote explaining that “THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A PRIVATE LANGUAGE,” Wallace dismantles the perspective of pot-induced “Cannabic Solipsism” that suggests that “it could be that what [one] pot-smoker experiences as green everyone else actually experiences as blue, and that what we ‘mean’ by the word *blue* is what he ‘means’ by *green*.”³⁷ The narrator of “Everything is Green,” where the terms of disagreement echo this classic case of solipsistic privacy, demonstrates the relationship-destroying potential of such thinking. He takes Mayfly’s hopeful metaphorical statement about a spring rain and insists on strict denotation: registering their estrangement but also a distance every communicator has wondered about, he says (again, to himself, not audibly), “The other trailers are not green and my card table out with puddles in lines . . . is not green,” and so on.³⁸ Thus does Wallace bring a seemingly abstract point about solipsistic definitions of language to dramatic life.

To close this analysis I want to focus on two other stories in *Girl* that operate together to flesh out the book’s overarching examination of the despair and hope around silence. “Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR” is, like “Everything is Green,” hardly ever studied by critics but one of Wallace’s more revealing stories on these themes.

37 *CQN*, 87.

38 *GCH*, 230.

The rider of a motorcycle (a vehicle for one), a “lone wolf . . . in life’s gray forest,” the Account Representative reads as the individual cut off from others—and, as the story’s allegory builds, innately solipsistic despite his best moral intentions. Unnamed, an everyman, he is, in essence, a “Representative” human being. But this story of two strangers suddenly plunged into a life-or-death situation has untraditional, impersonal means of rendering affect and exploring minds. The nearly empty, echoing parking garage itself is a symbol of the human head (mind and mouth) in its expressive capacity: “the Building’s very silence took on expression: they sensed, almost spinally, the slow release of great breath, a spatial sigh, a slight sly movement of huge lids cracked in wakened affinity with the emptiness,” the story’s first page notes.³⁹ The Building, always capitalized, reads like a person’s name, and indeed, with its breath, sighing, and eyelids, it is a personification in particular of the lonely, potentially solipsistic individual, his signifying sounds producing only (as the garage does) “echoes and echoes of echoes.”⁴⁰ The image is a precursor of Wallace’s continued attempts to write of heads and brains through the impersonal means of architecture: the Funhouse discotheque of “Westward,” with its door painted to resemble an “enormous cadaverous grin”;⁴¹ the MIT Union in *Infinite Jest*, built to resemble a human brain and skull and the locus for Madame Psychosis’s radio communications; and, as Stephen J. Burn demonstrates in one of his multiple readings of Wallace’s investments in neuroscience, the brain-like Peoria Regional Examination Center in *The Pale King*.⁴² “Luckily” is a short, early draft in Wallace’s quest not just to depict workaday office life but to lead readers

39 Ibid., 45.

40 Ibid., 46.

41 Ibid., 255.

42 Stephen J. Burn, “‘A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness’: *The Pale King*,” in Boswell, ed. *David Foster Wallace and “The Long Thing,”* 154-155. See as well Burn, “‘Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing’: *Infinite Jest* and the Science of Mind,” in Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn, eds., *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 59-86.

out of their own heads; it does so by imagining the mind and mouth's mechanisms from an alienating distance.

In its ending, a scene of desperate language dissolving into silence before it can reach any auditor, "Luckily" in effect merges the voice of the Account Representative with the underground garage's, raising once again the specter of human language dissolving into a silent surround:

"Help," the working Account Representative called, feeling the stir of a tinely remembered humid wind and pausing, again, to look behind him, past the Brougham's black hood and the carelessly dropped safety helmet beside the white cycle, at the Ramp that spiraled up out of sight toward a street, empty and bright, before the Building, empty and bright, dispossessed, autonomous and autonomic. Bent to what two lives required, below everything, he called for help again and again.⁴³

A deep irony in the title emerges here: with the parking structure swallowing his cries, is it lucky at all that the Account Representative knows the life-saving art, when it seems likely he will exhaust himself before help arrives? As with the retired nurse in *Infinite Jest* who "does nothing but scream 'Help!' for hours at a time" from her window, the Account Representative's cries will go unheeded and, in his case, unheard.⁴⁴ Yet this misfortune is essentially the human condition, a deep truth that lies, indeed, "below everything": like everyone else, the Account Representative is trapped inside a self, "autonomous" but unable to truly communicate outside it. And this is true despite his being heroic and not having the clear moral failings of the Father

43 *GCH*, 52. I suggest in " 'We've been inside what we wanted all along': David Foster Wallace's Immanent Structures" (in Brynna Swenson, ed., *Immanent Expressions: Literature and the Encounter with Immanence* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Press, 2017), 8-29) that Wallace often uses doors and other rhizomatic entrances and exits to meditate on paradoxes of selfhood and internality. The spiral ramp of "Luckily" is another such entrance.

44 *IJ*, 196.

of “On His Deathbed,” who thinks his words emanate into a vacuum. “Luckily” thus aligns with Wallace’s despairing reading of *Tractatus* solipsism I outlined earlier; but hope may arise in one other meaning for the Account Representative’s allegorical name: he is representative of fiction, too, or account-giving—which, according to Wallace, should give “CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite” general decline.⁴⁵ The Representative’s drama, like fiction therapy in “Here and There,” reveals a space for readers that is anti-solipsistic. Before the heart attack, about to make small talk, the Account Representative and Vice President “shared pain, though of course neither knew”—but readers know it and share in it.⁴⁶

“Westward,” the novella that concludes *Girl*, provides a more hopeful view of the silence humans encounter, as though Wallace intends at the book’s end to make a leap forward into communal optimism like Wittgenstein’s in the *Philosophical Investigations* (while also anticipating his own such leap in *Infinite Jest*). Like “Here and There,” “Westward” is a slow unraveling of the fears of its protagonist, here the student writer Mark Nechtr. In a scheme he and companions encounter at the Collision Airport, a man working for the advertising mogul J.D. Steelritter solicits the greatest fears of passersby, paying for their trouble with dollar bills that, with an embedded transmitter, will monitor their subsequent (fear-driven) purchases. A later passage reveals, “What Mark Nechtr fears most: solipsistic solipsism: silence.”⁴⁷ Mark, a writer, recognizes and examines many of the problems previous characters in the collection have obviously endured, and the successful story he writes will turn on the climactic line of “Westward” itself, “You are loved,” a salutary line recapitulating the “Then welcome” of “Here and There.” Before “Westward” reaches that point, though,

45 *CW*, 26.

46 *GCH*, 48.

47 *Ibid.*, 337.

it entertains various other resolutions of Mark's fear: Steelritter, for instance—whose advertising goals in general compete in the story's symbolic economy with the quests of literary fiction—uses his “solipsistic-delusion-fear research” to exploit the loneliness of individuality that underlies Mark's fear.⁴⁸

“Westward” shares with “Luckily” not just themes but an automotive setting, and at the end, as the group of travellers remains stuck in the mud and the wheel of DeHaven's car spins uselessly, Wallace offers the story's (and the collection's) final statement about silence, which here contains not just audible content but a hopeful “love song”:

Hold rapt for that impossible delay, that best interruption:
that moment in all radial time when something unseen
inside the blur of spokes seems to sputter, catch, and spin
against the spin, inside.

See this thing. See inside what spins without purchase.
Close your eye. Absolutely no salesmen will call. Relax. Lie
back. I want nothing from you. Lie back. Relax. Quality soil
washes right out. Lie back. Open. Face directions. Look. Listen.
Use ears I'd be proud to call our own. Listen to the silence
behind the engines' noise. Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it?
It's a love song.

For whom?

You are loved.⁴⁹

Looking more eastward than westward, this ending draws upon several aspects of the Buddhist self-effacement revealed in Wallace's conversation with Silverblatt, beyond the importance of “You” I have already noted: the spinning wheel of the car resembles the Buddhist wheel of *samsara*; “[c]lose your eye” suggests the third eye

48 Ibid., 308.

49 Ibid., 373.

of enlightened states; and the imperative of listening *to* the silence “behind” the world’s noise is one that meditation engages. But the Wittgenstein of communal connection is also here, not just the spiritual self-effacement Wallace saw in the ending silence of the *Tractatus*. The love song is bigger than just that between boyfriend and girlfriend: the uncanny head image of this passage is one in which humans share a collective set of ears—“Use ears I’d be proud to call our own”—and taps into the solacing thought Wallace has about the *Philosophical Investigations*, that we may be stuck “in language,” but “we’re at least all in here together.” In contrast to the implicitly droning and postmodern use of silence (and engine noise) in the work of the aspiring atonal composer DeHaven, this ending points to a soothing song, below everything.

Wallace worked the entire length of his career on the subject of silence. As some of my quotations above attest, silence is obsessed over throughout his last two novels, *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, and future studies of the theme in those books would be welcome. *Infinite Jest* features a maker of many silent films as well as characters who find enough silence to hear their heartbeat or the squeak of their head’s blood-flow. In both novels Wallace juxtaposes silence with a feature of everyday capitalist U.S. life that has been largely left out in my examination of his more narrowly drawn stories: a technologized noisiness, the state of constant distraction in contemporary life. In *The Pale King* especially Wallace was intent on seeing meditative possibilities in the silent work of accountants, the “silence . . . both sensuous and incongruous” that David Wallace finds upon entering the Immersives room.⁵⁰ Boredom has drawn most of the attention as Wallace’s highly unlikely novelistic subject, but the silence that produces and accompanies boredom is perhaps even more central to this work. The “Author’s Foreword” in §9 draws this issue into

50 *TPK*, 292.

the compositional present of 2005 by remarking that “surely something,” some avoidance of pain, “must lie behind not just Muzak in dull or tedious places anymore but now just actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets’ checkouts, airports’ gates, SUVs’ backseats. Walkmen, iPods, BlackBerries, cell phones that attach to your head.”⁵¹ When *The Pale King* was still unknown to readers, Wallace in a 2003 interview previewed such claims, saying, “We don’t want things to be quiet, ever, any more”—but his aim was to address that part of all readers that he knew was “hungry for silence,” to feed “the part of our selves that likes quiet, that can live in quiet, without any kind of stimulation.”⁵² From the earliest days of his career, the short story form, particularly its final page, as I have demonstrated here, was an ally for him in this aim, offering a chance to describe both the terror and insight of silence, to teach us how to stop talking and enter its embrace.

51 Ibid, 87.

52 Wallace, “David Foster Wallace on being alone, silence, reading, and our culture of instant gratification,” YouTube video, :34-2:08, posted by “Macintosh Windows,” Feb. 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9g-OaS50gbA>.

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**MARSHALL
BOSWELL – THE
WALLACE EFFECT:
DAVID FOSTER
WALLACE AND THE
CONTEMPORARY
LITERARY
IMAGINATION**

(London: Bloomsbury, 2019)

Alexander Moran

SIXTEEN YEARS AFTER THE PUBLICATION of his field-defining work *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), Marshall Boswell returns with another sterling monograph. Following Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace* (2017), this is the second volume in the Bloomsbury Academic series "David Foster Wallace Studies," edited by Stephen Burn. This book offers no new readings of Wallace's work or literary project; Boswell instead reaffirms his own "early explanation for Wallace's proposed new approach as a joining of cynicism of naiveté."¹

1 Marshall Boswell, *The Wallace Effect: David Foster Wallace and the Contemporary Literary Imagination* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 6.

Rather, his focus here is a phenomenon he terms “the Wallace Effect.” He defines this concept as “the mixture of envy, hagiography, and resentment that has come to mark Wallace’s presence in the contemporary literary imagination.”² In essence, he traces a ripple effect, whereby Wallace’s writing and biography has influenced how we understand literary history, the work of Wallace’s peers, and that Wallace continues to affect how writers approach their fiction now.

The book is split into two parts, and each essay is designed to stand alone. The first section, “Toward Wallace,” attempts to revise some of Wallace’s pronouncements about his literary forebears, and contextualize Wallace among his peers. The first chapter focuses on John Barth’s 1987 novel *The Tidewater Tales*, claiming that “Barth’s fiction of the late 1980s was already fulfilling many of the possibilities Wallace wanted to claim as his own,” and, fascinatingly, that “Wallace’s own writing of the period vividly betrays his familiarity with the novels his critique pointedly ignores.”³ Rather than criticize Wallace for “dishonesty,” he wishes “to give proper due to *Tidewater Tales* for correcting some of the excesses and errors of Barth’s own tradition and telegraphing a number of tropes and advances that Wallace would work very hard to claim as largely his own.”⁴ He argues that with *The Tidewater Tales* Barth consciously seeks to correct the misogyny of his earlier fiction, even if claims to his “feminist” credentials might be pushing it a bit too far.⁵ Nonetheless, the opening reading serves as an indication of what is to come, where Wallace’s pronouncements are challenged, contextualized, and another writer’s work is brought to the fore.

The second chapter explains how the Wallace Effect has somewhat cut Wallace “free from the contemporaries with which he was

2 Ibid., 1.

3 Ibid., 18.

4 Ibid., 21.

5 Ibid., 21.

originally associated.”⁶ Boswell argues that Richard Powers’ concept of “Crackpot realism,” developed in his 1988 novel *Prisoner’s Dilemma*, is markedly similar to “Wallace’s paradoxical idea” of linking cynicism and naiveté.⁷ Moreover, “Less widely appreciated is the fact that Powers sounded this call in 1988, whereas Wallace finally clarified his own set of ideas five years later, in 1993.”⁸ Convincingly pairing Powers’ ideas with pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty’s concept of the “liberal ironist” elucidated in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, this is perhaps the strongest essay in *The Wallace Effect*, and serves as a forceful rejoinder to what Boswell terms the “cult” that has formed around Wallace and his work.⁹

The second section, titled “The Wallace Effect,” continues to look at the importance of pragmatist philosophers to Wallace’s work, and “how several of Wallace’s contemporaries draw upon Wallace’s announced debt to [William] James’s work in ways that both affirm Wallace’s unique pragmatist strain and critique what they view as its, at times, homespun simplicity.”¹⁰ It is in this second section that he develops his analysis of the resentment felt towards the “Wallace Effect” as “both literary and . . . sexual,” and that male writers in particular “don’t just envy and resent Wallace’s literary prowess, they also perceive him, accurately or not, as a sexual threat.”¹¹ He begins with Eugenides’ *The Marriage Plot*, as he contends that this novel “provides an introduction of sorts to the key components of the Wallace Effect in its full flowering.”¹² He first establishes the clear ways the character Leonard Bankhead

6 Ibid., 39.

7 Ibid., 43.

8 Ibid., 38.

9 Ibid., 39.

10 Ibid., 57.

11 Ibid., 8.

12 Ibid., 62.

is a stand-in for Wallace, and that “By invoking Wallace’s presence so overtly, Eugenides transforms *The Marriage Plot* into an allegory for the contemporary post-postmodern novel and its relationship to the postmodern novels and post-structural work that preceded it.”¹³ Most interesting is the way he develops the Wallace Effect as an iteration of Eve Sedgwick’s theory of homosociality, as developed in her 1985 book *Between Men*, a concept that he further explores in many of the remaining chapters.

Chapter four persuasively argues that Clare Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* critiques the supposed turn away from irony that happened after 9/11, a critique that is “less about Wallace than about what Wallace has come to represent for his generation.”¹⁴ This compelling chapter explains how Messud’s novel, via the literary techniques of William James’ older brother, Henry, “refutes the simple either/or that pits irony against earnestness, cynicism against sentimentality.”¹⁵ One minor criticism of this essay is the analysis of Messud’s marriage to the critic James Wood, one of Wallace’s biggest detractors, feels tangential and unnecessary. Nevertheless, this is an excellent essay about an underexplored writer, and one that suggests Messud’s fiction is critically overlooked.

In the chapter on Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Freedom*, Boswell usefully goes through Franzen’s technique of using his fiction to settle scores, not only with Wallace’s suicide, but also with Ben Marcus. His reading largely mirrors the claims of his essay on *The Marriage Plot*: that Richard Katz is stand-in for Wallace, and his relationship with Walter Berglund is read through the lens of Sedgwick’s *Between Men*. Whilst not really developing his notion of the Wallace Effect beyond arguments he has already made, Boswell’s reading does serve as a welcome reminder that Franzen and Wallace had a deep

13 Ibid., 62.

14 Ibid., 86-87.

15 Ibid., 97.

effect on each other, something many critics overlook, or even wish to ignore.

The closing chapter begins by outlining Amy Hungerford's now infamous argument for not reading Wallace, and Boswell admits he "is left scratching his head" by Hungerford's pronouncements.¹⁶ He usefully points out a few historical errors in her reasoning; for instance, *Infinite Jest* was ignored by the "literary establishment," and his note on the winners of the big literary awards in 1996—Andrea Barrett's *Ship Fever*, Richard Ford's *Independence Day*, and Gina Berriault's *Women in Their Beds*—is revealing.¹⁷ While an informed critique is welcome, his dismissal of "literary blogs by women" does ironically embody the very "lit-bro" aesthetic he seeks to distance himself and Wallace from.¹⁸ In contrast to Hungerford's arguments, Lauren Groff's bestselling *Fates and Furies* is situated as a more nuanced version of the "resentment" seen in Eugenides and Franzen's work, and "that aura of resentment . . . encompasses larger questions about female creativity, white male privilege, and the mysterious, subterranean ways power manifests itself."¹⁹ Groff's character Lancelot "Lot-to" Satterwhite fills a similar role to Leonard Bankhead and Richard Katz, and, as with his reading of Messud's novel, Boswell sees Groff as a writer who "explodes" a dialectic, namely "the gendered essentialism that would assign high literary achievement to male writers and emotional, domestic drama solely to women."²⁰ While the connections between Groff and Wallace appear quite tenuous, this chapter cogently argues that rather than Hungerford's reasoned refusal to engage with Wallace, there is immense value in the way "Groff's novel, conversely, confronts that tradition on its own terms,

16 Ibid., 129.

17 Ibid., 130.

18 Ibid., 125.

19 Ibid., 132–133.

20 Ibid., 146.

sometimes in its own language, and incorporates it into a traditionally 'female' literary tradition of domestic fiction."²¹

While there are some odd claims about sex and gender and quite a few typos, this is a wonderful reference work for anyone looking into Wallace's relationship or effect on many writers. Moreover, the concluding remarks cite further iterations of the Wallace Effect, and just how much more work there is to do. Following Thompson's volume is no easy task, but this is an excellent addition to a series which now must be considered required reading for all Wallace scholars.

21 Ibid., 147.

**THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
DAVID FOSTER
WALLACE, EDITED BY
RALPH CLARE**

(Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Ándrea Laurencell Sheridan

THIS COLLECTION, EXPERTLY EDITED BY Ralph Clare, introduces an impressively broad array of topics in under 250 pages. It is comprised of short chapters which are separated into four sections—“Historical and Cultural Contexts,” “Early Works, Story Collections, and Nonfiction,” “The Major Novels,” and “Themes and Topics.” After a very useful chronology of Wallace’s life and publications—one which begins with his birth in 1962 and ends with the twentieth-anniversary edition publication of *Infinite Jest*—Clare’s introduction discusses how the tendency of scholars to adhere to Wallace’s own interpretation of his works often unintentionally leads to “the dreaded intentional fallacy.”¹ But, as Clare points out,

1 Ralph Clare, “Introduction: An Exquisite Corpus: Assembling a Wallace without Organs,” in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

“Taking into account an author’s intentions in regard to her work’s meaning—equating, to some degree, the corporeal with the corpus—could be critically illuminating if done with proper care and attention.”² We need balance, Clare says, “between appreciation of the author’s method and a rigorous analysis of the work.”³ The scholars in this text all offer something in that endeavor.

The collection’s first part, “Historical and Cultural Contexts,” is full of familiar names—Marshall Boswell, Andrew Hoberek, and Lee Konstantinou—however, that is not to say that they do not offer many new insights into Wallace’s work. Boswell’s essay, “Slacker Redemption: Wallace and Generation X,” points out that while often associated with Gen X, Wallace has simultaneously been excluded from being labeled as part of the “slacker” generation. Boswell’s essay seeks to “resituate Wallace in the culture from which he emerged and . . . to contextualize his work before *Infinite Jest* in relation to postmodern fiction and mainstream and alternative popular culture of the late 1980s and 1990s.”⁴ Hoberek’s chapter, “Wallace and American Literature,” offers connections between Wallace’s fiction and several literary traditions, most notably Walt Whitman, the Beat poets, and the encyclopedic narrative. Hoberek persuasively argues that Wallace’s violations of accepted structure are in a similar vein to Whitman’s “rejection of standard meter and rhyme schemes,”⁵ and “Kerouac’s own slangy digressiveness, of eschewing literary conventions for the purpose of cultivating a more intimate and authentic-sounding voice.”⁶ The section ends with Lee Konstantinou’s “Wallace’s ‘Bad’ Influence,” which explores the “[a]ppreciative

2 Ibid., 2.

3 Ibid., 2.

4 Marshall Boswell, “Slacker Redemption: Wallace and Generation X,” 20.

5 Andrew Hoberek, “Wallace and American Literature,” 43.

6 Ibid., 43.

allusions” that appear across culture to Wallace’s “life and work.”⁷ Konstantinou also explores Wallace’s “literary peers” who have “refused [his] style” but who incorporate him into their fiction in some way.⁸ He mentions the well-known—found in Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* and Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot*—as well as the lesser-discussed, like Wallace-as-Jules Jones in Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. The significant strength in this essay is that Konstantinou does not focus only on the positive representations of Wallace in culture and writing, and a strength of the collection as a whole is to push against the “Saint Dave” myth.

Part II focuses on the early works, collections, and nonfiction. The grouping here seems a bit haphazard, but the essays are all excellent nonetheless. Matthew Luter’s chapter, “*The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*” convincingly argues these two books “remain vital for readers interested in the roots” of Wallace’s “ambition, aesthetic, and ethical center.”⁹ In his chapter on *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Adam Kelly develops his argument from the work of Clare Hayes-Brady, Laura Mulvey, and others to posit that in *Brief Interviews* “Wallace wades into this contentious realm of feminist debate in a characteristically self-conscious manner.”¹⁰ Kelly’s “wading” is similarly self-conscious, and for good reason, and this approach leads him to an important but often-ignored point: “There is an inevitable darkness to the world of *Brief Interviews*, a world in which one sex can speak while the other remains silenced”;¹¹ and “until equality through difference of the sexes is finally achieved,” the book will continue to “provoke its readers—both male and female.”¹²

7 Lee Konstantinou, “Wallace’s ‘Bad’ Influence,” 49.

8 *Ibid.*, 55.

9 Matthew Luter, “*The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*,” 79.

10 Adam Kelly, “*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*,” 85.

11 *Ibid.*, 91.

12 *Ibid.*, 91.

In the next chapter, David Hering notes that *Oblivion* is a series of sometimes disparate stories, so to organize his reading, he divides the chapter into four sections. However, Hering finds the through-line of these stories—namely, disembodiment and consciousness—and his chapter culminates in his unusual yet fascinating discussion of “Good Old Neon.” He reads the crux of the story as “a model whereby suffering might be alleviated, and disembodied consciousnesses twinned, the better to escape from this nightmare.”¹³ Jeffrey Severs is then tasked with covering all of “Wallace’s Nonfiction” in only eleven pages. Somehow, Severs provides a quick yet complete overview of this much-loved part of Wallace’s work, and succinctly concludes that in his numerous essays, “Wallace speaks truths, punctuated by question marks.”¹⁴

The third section covers “The Major Novels” and has only two chapters: “*Infinite Jest*,” by Mary K. Holland, and “‘Palely Loitering’: On Not Finishing (in) *The Pale King*,” by Clare Hayes-Brady. Holland organizes her reading into four short sections in which she summarizes and challenges the huge amount of criticism Wallace’s most famous work has inspired. Hayes-Brady explores the Romantic connections in *The Pale King*. She discusses heroism, Keats, and posits that the novel “embed[s] itself firmly in old, old narratives of virtue, courage, and self-denial”¹⁵ while remaining in a “haunted, haunting, forever-incomplete state.”¹⁶

The final part, “Themes and Topics,” combines an eclectic group of readings. Robert L. McLaughlin attempts to define “Wallace’s Aesthetic,” and this essay is an excellent introduction to Wallace for any reader. Andrew Warren explores “Wallace and Politics,” pointing

13 David Hering, “*Oblivion*,” 109.

14 Jeffrey Severs, “Wallace’s Nonfiction,” 122.

15 Clare Hayes-Brady, “‘Palely Loitering’: On Not Finishing (in) *The Pale King*,” 154.

16 *Ibid.*, 154.

out the scenes in various texts that make political or even veiled political comments, but, like Wallace himself, never coming out and giving Wallace “a politics.”¹⁷ Matthew Mullins’s “Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion” offers many new insights into the oft-discussed relationship of Wallace and faith, and the connections he finds between Wallace’s writing and community are particularly strong: “Wallace’s faith is not concerned with a particular set of doctrines but with a generalized belief in something larger than oneself. The ‘something larger’ in this case is community itself.”¹⁸ Lucas Thompson’s essay, “Wallace and Race,” looks closely at Wallace’s troublesome relationship with race, and explores how “a consensus has slowly built up around Wallace’s flaws on this issue.”¹⁹ He posits why this conversation is so important: “As Wallace’s work continues to reach new audiences, comprised of more racially and ethnically diverse readers than he foresaw, it will be crucial to have an interpretive framework that can do justice to the complexity of racial representation throughout his work.”²⁰ This essay is a good start, but more scholars must continue to question and illuminate Wallace’s problematic portrayals of race. Jurrit Daalder develops the idea of “Wallace’s Geographic Metafiction,” and the role of the nostalgic, mythic Midwestern “heartland” where most of Wallace’s fiction is set. Joseph Tabbi’s “David (Foster) Wallace and the (World) System,” closes the volume with a provocative reading that argues that Wallace is a systems novelist whose fiction represents the impossibility of communication, rather than the usually accepted idea that Wallace’s fiction represents some sort of new communicative model for writers and readers.

This fantastic collection not only offers new approaches to Wallace’s writing, but challenges scholars to expand upon the rich variety

17 Andrew Warren, “Wallace and Politics,” 185.

18 Matthew Mullins, “Wallace, Spirituality, and Religion,” 200.

19 Lucas Thompson, “Wallace and Race,” 204.

20 *Ibid.*, 217.

of critical avenues discussed throughout this volume. Considering the comprehensiveness with which this volume attempts to introduce the field of Wallace Studies to both the new and experienced Wallace scholar alike, this volume is a phenomenal achievement.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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Rob Mayo completed his PhD on the conceptualisation and depiction of depression and other dysphoric conditions in Wallace's fiction at the University of Bristol in 2018. He is currently working on his first book on the subject, while also starting a new project on mental disorder and psychotherapy in science fiction texts from 1948 to the present day.

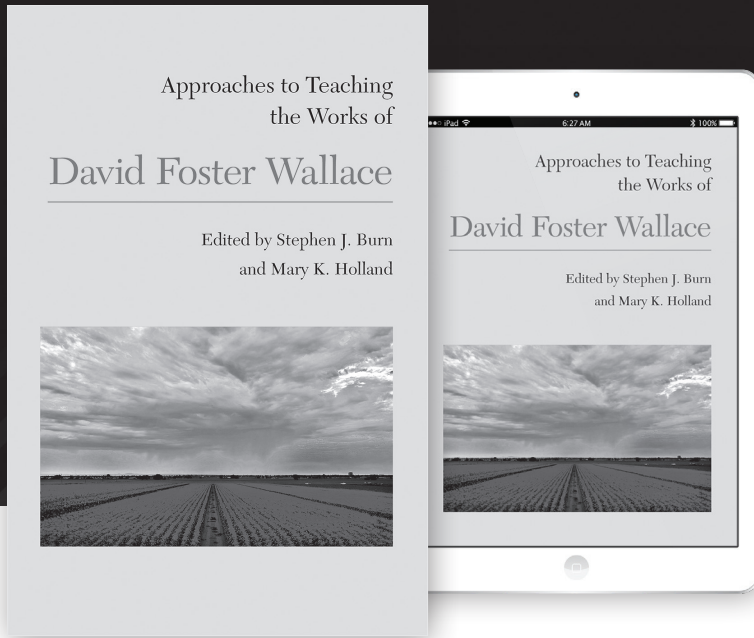
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