David Foster Wallace: “That Distinctive Singular Stamp of Himself”

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A memory I’ll take with me to my grave:
In 1995, my wife Victoria Frenkel Harris and I accompanied our daughter on a flight to New York City where Kymberly was to audition for the New School’s recently established Actor’s Studio MFA program. Kymberly and our colleague David Foster Wallace had become close friends, so he decided to come too. David, who had just completed the final revision of *Infinite Jest*, brought the manually typed manuscript with him on the flight for personal delivery to his publisher. Our commuter flight to Chicago O’Hare out of the Central Illinois Regional Airport in Bloomington-Normal was full. Although David was not yet the immediately recognizable celebrity he was about to become, he stood out in a crowd nonetheless. He was, I’m pretty certain, the only guy on that flight wearing a do-rag. I like to speculate about some anonymous passenger on that plane, your average Normalite, say, perhaps making his biweekly commute to Chicago, who may still recall, if only vaguely, that tall unshaven guy in the seat across the aisle, wearing a bandana on his head, sitting next to an attractive young woman, and holding on his lap this huge box. What that anonymous passenger probably doesn’t realize to this day, and what none of us could have predicted at the time, is that that big box contained the finished manuscript of one of the few literary masterworks of our time. I am reminded of Auden’s poetic meditation on Breughel’s “Fall of Icarus,” how
we go on living our doggy lives, blissfully unaware of the miracles happening around us.

I chaired the Department of English at Illinois State University for fifteen years, and it was in that capacity that I appointed David to our faculty in 1993, a position he held for a decade. Of course, it was the pre-Infinite Jest David Foster Wallace we hired. But we were struck by the early genius evident in his first novel, The Broom of the System (1987), written as one of two Amherst undergraduate theses (the other was in philosophy), and his follow up short story collection Girl with Curious Hair (1989). He had also contributed three fine essays to Dalkey Archive Press’s The Review of Contemporary Fiction. We had just attracted Dalkey and RCF to our department the year before, where it joined American Book Review, the innovative fiction press FC2, and a few other presses and journals as part of a center we were developing that combined the creation, reception, and publishing of innovative literature (the center became the Unit for Contemporary Literature). David shared our excitement about the project. I’ll always cherish his inscription in my copy of Girl with Curious Hair: “For Charlie Harris, with gratitude and ever-more profound respect for the literature community you’re making possible here. I’m keen to have a chance to be part of it.”

Joining our faculty also made it possible for Wallace to return to his central Illinois roots. David Foster Wallace (1962–2008) was born in Ithaca, New York, where his father James Donald Wallace was completing a PhD in philosophy at Cornell. When David was still an infant, the elder Wallace moved his family to Philo, Illinois, wryly described by David as “a tiny collection of corn silos and war-era Levittown homes whose native residents did little but sell crop insurance and nitrogen fertilizer and herbicide and collect property taxes from the young academics at nearby Champaign–Urbana’s university, whose ranks swelled enough in the flush 1960s to make outlying non sequiturs like ‘farm and bedroom community’ lucid” (“Derivative Sport in Tornadlo Alley,” A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again). Among those young academics was James Wallace, who in 1962 began his distinguished career as a professor in the Philosophy Department at the University of Illinois. Sally Foster Wallace, David’s mother, earned a graduate degree in composition from UIUC before commencing a distinguished teaching career of her own at Champaign’s Parkland College.

Influenced by his parents’ intellectual pursuits, David developed what he called “a jones for mathematics,” writing an award winning thesis on technical philosophy at Amherst College, his father’s undergraduate alma mater, from which David graduated summa cum laude in 1985, and doing graduate work in that subject for a short time at Harvard, where he had been accepted into—and later abandoned—the PhD program in Philosophy. At Cornell, James Wallace had studied under Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein’s former student, a Nabokovian medal David bestows upon Lenore Beadsman’s great-grandmother.
in *Broom*. Although Wallace deals most explicitly with Wittgenstein in that novel, all of his fiction is influenced by the Wittgensteinian ideas that, as Wallace told Larry McCaffery in an early interview, “no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism” and that language “must always be a function of relationships between persons” (“An Interview”). From his mother, David developed a lifelong fascination with grammar and usage, writing a controversial review of Brian A. Garner’s *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (“Authority and American Usage,” *Consider the Lobster*), serving on the usage panel for *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th Edition, and keeping his mother’s widely adopted composition textbook, *Practically Painless English* (Prentice Hall, 1980, 1989), close at hand in his office for ready reference (occasionally, he’d phone his mother during a student conference and ask her to explain a grammar “rule” to the student).

In early adolescence, Wallace was a stellar athlete, excelling in citywide football (he played quarterback) and, especially, tennis. A self-described “near great” junior tennis player, Wallace enjoyed a regional ranking of seventeenth at the age of fourteen. Within a year, however, he had put organized sports aside to concentrate on academics, graduating from Urbana High School with straight A’s. In high school, early symptoms of the clinical depression he struggled with for the rest of his life emerged. During his sophomore year at Amherst, worsening symptoms forced Wallace to return home for a semester, where he was briefly admitted to a hospital, his first of several stays in mental hospitals, halfway houses, and rehab facilities over the next decade. By the time he joined our faculty in 1993, Wallace’s drug and alcohol problems were under control, as was his clinical depression, contained by the prescription medication Nardil.

By 2002, new administrators with different priorities had begun to dismantle the Unit for Contemporary Literature. So after fending off several feelers from other prestigious programs over the years, David decided to depart Illinois State for Claremont, California, where he became the first Roy E. Disney Professor of Creative Writing and Professor of English at Pomona College. Wallace spent the final years of his life in California, where he met and, in 2004, married the artist Karen Green. In June 2007, debilitating side effects forced him to suspend the use of Nardil, and he was plunged back into depression. Hospitalization and a dozen electroconvulsive treatments failed to relieve his symptoms. On September 12, 2008, his wife returned home from a brief errand to find Wallace hanging from a backyard patio rafter. He was only forty-six.

David’s decade at Illinois State University was his most productive period. Not only did he finish *Infinite Jest*, the work that will ensure his permanence, but he assembled his first essay collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (1997), and his second collection of short fiction, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), as well as completing his nonfiction book on mathematical infinity, *Everything and More* (2003). During this prolific period, Wallace also wrote many of the stories and essays later collected in *Oblivion* (2004) and
Consider the Lobster (2006), respectively, and he began his final novel, “The Pale King,” auditing advanced tax courses from ISU’s Accounting Department as part of his research (the unfinished novel, which Little, Brown will publish in 2011, is reportedly set in a branch of the Internal Revenue Department). He bought a modest home on the edge of town, adopted two dogs—Jeeves, from a local pound, and Werner, a stray, from the street—and threw himself enthusiastically into his new role as a college professor.

Despite the success of Wallace’s fiction and nonfiction workshops, he preferred other assignments, even volunteering to teach composition courses, a rare choice among senior professors. Not surprisingly, neither his classroom methods nor his course syllabi resembled anyone else’s. He began his graduate seminar in contemporary American fiction by admitting to the students that he had either not finished or, in some cases, even begun reading the assigned novels. “English 487 . . . is basically a contrived excuse/incentive to read several interesting, difficult U.S. novels,” he explains on his syllabus. “Class meetings are intended to function basically as the proceedings of a large, sophisticated, energetic reading group.” After warning that the course would require reading “an average of 250–300 pages of very dense, high-level fiction every week,” he entreats: “For heaven’s sake do not remain enrolled in this class if you’re not going to be in a position and/or mood to do this much close reading.” Determination of final grades—described in the syllabus as the only respect in which Wallace would be “the actual ‘instructor’ here”—includes the following criterion: “fidelity of attendance, alacrity of carriage, doing every m.f.ing shred of the reading. . . .” And in a final vintage touch, Wallace complains about the chronic inefficiency of local bookstores. The odd order of the reading assignments, he explains, “is due to the monumental shitheadedness of the I.S.U. Bookstore System’s mechanism for ordering and delivery. . . . Feel free to join me in being pissed, and to complain both to the English Department and to the management of our two bookstores.”

Although former students praise his teaching, what they remember most fondly are interactions that accentuate David’s signal personality. All remember that omnipresent bandana and the fact that David chewed tobacco while teaching, expectorating it discreetly, even delicately, into a cup he held in his hand. One student recalls the time that Wallace, who hated the fluorescent lighting in ISU classrooms, instructed his class to bring their own lamps to the next meeting. Most complied, only to find that the room lacked a sufficient number of plugs for the lamps, which, in any event, kept sliding off the slanted classroom desks. For the rest of the term, the class met at David’s home. Another student remembers that Wallace loaned her his pickup truck when he learned that she was having car trouble, then promptly forgot that he had done so. In a subsequent class meeting, David offhandedly mentioned that he had somehow misplaced the truck he had purchased with MacArthur “genius” grant money. At the end of the period, the student quietly returned David’s keys. A third student recollects
a visit from Wallace, accompanied by his two dogs, while the student was dogsitting in the country for another professor. Driving home on unlit rural roads, David accidentally hit a deer. After depositing his dogs at home, Wallace called the student and asked if he would meet him to help find the deer, which had disappeared in the high grass along the roadside. After a long search, they located the dying deer, its hind leg irreparably broken. Trying to hide his tears, Wallace said to the student, “Tonight I have been a bad human being.”

Wallace’s compassion for that suffering deer contains an important clue. For David, other-directed acts of unostentatious empathy were an ethical imperative. And that ethic enfolds into his aesthetic. Wallace’s fiction often charts the territory of the troubled, the addicted, the depressed. Yet he never surveys that territory as a tourist. These are inside narratives. Wallace never presents his distressed characters as grotesques, but always with understanding and empathy—with (can we say it without risking the appearance of easy sentimentality?) love. He knew with an insider’s knowledge that the end of the road for the clinically depressed is “this anhedonic Inability To Identify” with “any other living thing,” this powerlessness to escape the “closed circuit” of the self, this “hell for one” (Infinite Jest). Yet he makes us understand that the same excessive self-centeredness that can trigger an extreme situation for the clinically depressed, is, for the rest of us, as he told the Kenyon College class of ’05, our natural “default position.” We are all naturally egocentric, self-centeredness having been “hard-wired into our boards at birth.” The “way out,” to use the evocative concluding words of Infinite Jest, is to find the way out, to free ourselves from emotional solipsism by paying attention to things outside of us, by caring. As David explained to the Kenyon graduates in that characteristic mixture of the slangy and the profound, “The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day” (This Is Water).

Wallace well understood that incorporating such sentiments into fiction invites the derision of a cynical age. “Our intelligentsia,” he writes in an essay on Dostoevsky, “distrust strong belief, open conviction,” the straightforward presentation of which would provoke what Wallace calls “our own age’s truest vision of hell”: the “novelist would be […] laughed out of town” (“Joseph Franks’s Dostoevsky,” Lobster). Nonetheless, Wallace believed that “[r]eally good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something […]” (“An Interview”). He recognized that he couldn’t simply recycle the forthright moral earnestness of pre-Modernist novelists such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, whom he revered, without repudiating the last one hundred years of the novel’s history or his own intellectual milieu. As he told David Wiley in a 1997 interview:
My personal take is that [..] there’s a degree of self-consciousness culturally now that makes classic realistic stuff seem to me to be either very naive or very manipulative. And at least what I’m trying to do in my own stuff [..] involves trying to write fiction that works both ways. Because one of the things that we’ve learned is that what we imagined to be reality is more and more a linguistic enterprise [..].

[W]riters I admire [..] seem to me to be able to create compelling narratives that make you feel something for these characters and know them in a way that like you and I could never know each other—and at the same time not being in any way manipulative or old-fashioned or falsely naive about the way language can stretch that world in which they live. (http://www. thehowlingfantods.com/thesisteddywayne.htm)

Having it “both ways,” Wallace attempts in his fiction to recuperate what he calls “single-entendre principles,” principles which in his diagnosis have been undermined by postmodern irony, which, in turn, has been appropriated and commercialized by television, while at the same time employing defamiliarizing techniques associated with postmodernism to remind his readers that not only the book they are reading but, in certain fundamental ways, the world they inhabit are made out of language.

Wallace’s signature style is, of course, the style of *Infinite Jest*, whose encyclopedic form, long, syntactically-dense sentences, footnotes and other extra-textual paraphernalia (these also turn up in some of his essays), and comically exaggerated situations (The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment) are immediately recognizable. But Wallace mastered many styles. The following passage, for example, from the story “Forever Overhead” in *Brief Interviews*, could have been written by Updike:

The clouds are taking on color by the rim of the sky. The water is spangles off soft blue, five-o’clock warm, and the pool’s smell [..] connects with a chemical haze inside you, an interior dimness that bends light to its own ends, softens the difference between what leaves off and what begins.

Wallace vexed the definitional boundaries of whatever genre he tried his hand at, and he tried his hand at many. Consider his self-reflexive opening sentence to the special “Future of Fiction” issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* that he edited: “Hi. I’ve never really edited anything before, but I’m the one who’s edited this ‘Quo Vadis’ number of RCF” (Spring 1996). Later in the Introduction, Wallace confesses that he finds only about “three-quarters” of the dozen essays he commissioned for the issue “interesting.” Will culinary writing ever be the same after Wallace’s essay “Consider the Lobster,” originally commissioned by *Gourmet* magazine, challenged the gourmands who read that magazine to consider whether a boiled-alive lobster feels pain? (*Lobster*). Or travel writing, after his take on ocean cruises in the title essay of *A Supposedly
Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again? Everything he wrote, whether novels or short stories, essays or introductions, critical articles or reviews—right on down, as we have seen, to course syllabi—bears what Wallace, referring to Dostoevsky, calls “that distinctive singular stamp of himself” (“Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” Lobster).

But such subversions, however entertaining some may be, are deeply serious. Wallace’s fiction (and much of his nonfiction) resists what he calls “spectation,” that passive consumption he associates with the “classical Realist form” and commercial entertainment (“An Interview”). As he told McCaffery, “I think right now it’s important for art-fiction to antagonize the reader’s sense that what she experiences as she reads is mediated through a human consciousness, one with an agenda not necessarily coincident with her own. [...] It’s trying to prohibit the reader from forgetting that she’s receiving heavily mediated data, that this process is a relationship between the writer’s consciousness and her own, and that in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship, she’s going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work.”

Wallace’s insistence that reading is a transitive, intersubjective act owes much to his understanding of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations. Whereas the earlier Tractatus reduced language to “an infinitely small dense dot,” an “awful lonely proposition” since it leaves “the individual person with her language [...] trapped in here, with the world out there, and never the twain shall meet,” Philosophical Investigations “trashed everything [Wittgenstein] had been lauded for in the Tractatus” by arguing that “for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons. [...] He makes language dependent on human community” (“An Interview”). That understanding informs both Wallace’s aesthetic and his moral/ethical agenda.

Most of Wallace’s lost characters are trapped in a Tractatus-like state of emotional solipsism, their language entirely inner directed. A “component of” and “contributing factor to” the Depressed Person’s “terrible and unceasing emotional pain” is “the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain” (“The Depressed Person,” Brief Interviews). Like the Depressed Person, the narrators of such claustrophobic stories as “Good Old Neon,” “Oblivion,” and the series comprising “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,” as well as Infinite Jest’s Hal Incandenza and Kate Gompert, among others, struggle futilely to escape the narcissistic prison of the self because their language cannot denotatively “describe and assess such a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum” (“The Depressed Person”). Wittgenstein’s breakthrough realization was that instead of constructing models or pictures of reality that correspond precisely to a limited number of the world’s logically discrete facts, language means through its use. “[M]eaning,” as The Broom of the System’s Lenore Beadsman points out, “is nothing more or less than its function.” Moreover, meaning is determined not by the individual (Wittgenstein argued against the possibility of a “private language”), but dialogically, from within discursive communities.
Finally, “meaning as use” (*Broom*) makes it possible to consider “the coherent possibility of things like ethics, values, spirituality & responsibility,” the “things most important” to Wittgenstein—and to David Wallace—which the logically atomistic metaphysics of the *Tractatus* denied (“The Empty Plenum”).

For *Infinite Jest*’s Gately, Boston AA, “with its emphasis on the group,” provides a “communicative community” (“The Empty Plenum,” emphasis Wallace’s). Gately’s psychological survival depends upon his ability to learn the group’s language game, to “pray to a ‘God’ you believe only morons believe in,” not because he actually believes that the word *God* mimetically references some transcendental deity but because within the context of AA’s communal game the God-concept’s *use* offers a way out of his solipsistic hell. Similarly, the narrator of the fourth and final “Brief Interview” is rescued from a life of emotional and linguistic solitude by a young woman whose “prototypical [Granola] Cruncher morphology” and New Age “focused-soul-connection theology” he scorns (*Brief Interviews*). Her story about reaching out in love and empathy to a rapist serial-killer at a moment of extreme danger saves him. Like Gately’s attitude toward God, the hideous man believed that “terms like *love* and *soul* and *redeem* [...] could be used only with quotation marks, exhausted clichés.” Within the context of the story the young woman shares with him, however, such terms became meaningful. “I did not care whether [the story] was quote true,” the narrator concludes. “It would depend what you meant by true. I simply didn’t care. I was moved, changed—believe what you will.” By replacing the “solipsistic consequences of mathematical logic as language paradigm” (“Empty Plenum”) with a view of language as intersubjective and communal, Wallace created new possibilities for a redemptive, ethical postmodernism (or, perhaps, post-postmodernism).

John Barth once distinguished between writers who are merely talented and those who are consequential. David Foster Wallace is consequential. While a part of him enjoyed the fame *Infinite Jest* generated (a part, he once quipped, he didn’t let drive), he mostly distrusted that fame. He was acutely aware that his publisher’s marketing of this scathing satire of a market-driven entertainment state depended to a large extent on marketing *him*—on constructing and selling a persona that only tangentially resembled the man who wrote the book. As a result, he worried that his work, while purchased, would remain largely unread. The outpouring of grief and affection following Wallace’s untimely death, at the various memorial services held around the nation and in print and online, dispells that concern. David would have been immensely pleased. In 1993, a thirty-one-year-old David Foster Wallace said of his fiction: “Once I’m done with the thing, I’m basically dead, and probably the text’s dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but *through* the reader” (“An Interview”). What Wallace meant figuratively has become chillingly literal. The literary world still grieves the loss of that essential voice. Those of us who knew him share a more personal grief. But all of us can celebrate the words
he left behind, which will continue to live in and through readers as long as there is literature.

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to Victoria, David’s colleague, friend, and confidante, for many of the memories and insights included in this essay.
2. “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” (RCF, Fall 1988), “The Empty Plenum: David Markson’s Wittgenstein’s Mistress” (RCF, Summer 1990), and “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction” (RCF, Summer 1993), which had been rejected by Harper’s because it was considered too “academic.”
3. Wallace assigned two books each by Don DeLillo (The Names and Ratner’s Star), William Gaddis (A Frolic of His Own and JR), and Cormac McCarthy (Blood Meridian and Suttree), in addition to Omensetter’s Luck by William H. Gass.
4. The following reminiscences have been gleaned from tributes read by David’s former students at a memorial service sponsored by the Illinois State University English Department on November 1, 2008. These tributes, along with homages by former colleagues and several writers, have been published in a special memory book, complimentary copies of which are available for a modest contribution to the David Foster Wallace Memorial Fund at Illinois State University. For further information, contact Mary Crawford, Director of Development (merundu@ilstu.edu).
5. It “seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art,” Wallace told McCaffery, “lies somewhere in the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It’s got something to do with love” (“An Interview”).
6. “Immensely pleased” is the phrase concluding “E Unibus Pluram” and, I must confess, the source of an in-joke between David and me.

FURTHER READING


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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