Viewer Discretion

The trajectory of writer-worrier David Foster Wallace

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BOTH FLESH AND NOT BY DAVID FOSTER WALLACE NEW YORK: LITTLE, BROWN. 272 PAGES. $27.
EVERY LOVE STORY IS A GHOST STORY: A LIFE OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE BY D. T. MAX NEW YORK: VIKING. 368 PAGES. $28.

BOTH FLESH AND NOT is David Foster Wallace at his best and his worst, but the thing about Wallace's best was that it usually contained his worst: He was his most consequentially gracious when his tenderness and generosity were only barely outpacing his capacity to be a total dickhead. It's appropriate, then, that this final nonfiction collection should include the last great essays he wrote alongside at least a few pieces he declined to collect in a book not only once but *twice*, first in 1997's *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* and again in 2005's *Consider the Lobster*. These were, as it turns out, the sorts of pieces that made it rather difficult to like him. Wallace wanted to be liked but hated himself for it; that he wrote only to be liked was perhaps his greatest worry.

What does it mean—for art, for well-being—to write for approval? This question was at the center of Wallace's whole literary-anxiety complex: All of his pet worries were modes of wondering what, and *whom*, writing was for. When he wasn't worrying about the traps of self-consciousness, solipsism, and radical skepticism, he was worrying about irony, slickness, or seduction. He could probably be described as the great writer-worrier of his time, and he taught a generation of essayist-reporters—those who practice what John Jeremiah Sullivan called, in a slyly patricidal piece about *The Pale King* for *GQ*, "magazine writing"—what we ought to be worrying about. Disproportionate anxiety is what differentiates magazine writing from "magazine writing," consummate professionals such as David Grann and Katherine Boo from faux amateurs such as John Sullivan and Elif Batuman: Where the former just get on with the task at hand, the latter fret about how it's even possible to do so.

Until circa '97, with the publication of Wallace's *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, "magazine writers" learned their fretting from the group we have come to call the New Journalists. What the New Journalists fretted about was whether the traditional remove of journalism was adequate to the reality of 1960s America. Writerly legitimacy, they believed, was earned through participation, and in their participation they did for journalism what Byron did for poetry: They allowed reporters to imagine themselves as romantic heroes. Something was amiss in the America of Mailer's Pentagon and Didion's Haight, and if their writing was going to prove culturally relevant, it was not only going to have to reflect those problematic American realities but also—in content, tone, posture, lexicon—help us better imagine alternate futures. The only strict diagnostician among them was Tom Wolfe. His ironic stance—the flaccid contempt of pieces such as "Radical Chic"—was cheaply achieved and easily imitated, and went on to characterize a lot of post-Watergate "magazine writing."

Wallace, with his vague, exhortative call for a new rebel sincerity, announced a heraldry of new worries. What necessitated his return to unembarrassed, "single-entendre" principles was television, which had changed the nature of literary anxiety. Wallace's two manifestos on the subject—*BFaN*'s "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (first published in 1988) and the more seminal "E Unibus Pluram" (1993) from *ASFT*—are both nominally about fiction, but it was in his essays that he proved more direct and more articulate about what was at stake. TV's issues, he pointed out in these two essays, were legion: It preoccupied us with seeing and being seen, but presented us with impossibly unsweaty avatars of watchability. It encouraged passive spectatorship, but then invited us, with a wink, to think of our slack spectatorial selves as in on the joke. It encouraged the proliferation of easy irony—it made fun of itself for its lowest-common-denominator ways—and thus limited what further irony could possibly expose. A "magazine writer" concerned about being useful no longer went brow-furrowed about seeming staid or out of touch; now, Wallace said, she had to worry about how she might sincerely address an America trained by TV. Our essays needed to do more than wryly regale, as Wolfe did, and our writers had to give a shit about something more than likability.

By "E Unibus," Wallace had begun to figure out how this might work, how he might write in a way that was winning yet trustworthy yet critical. A piece like "Fictional Futures" is a fun and instructive addition to the Wallace corpus because he hasn't quite got the hang of it yet. He's still struggling to best represent and communicate his own struggle with all of this. "Think, for instance," writes twenty-six-year-old Wallace, "about the way prolonged exposure to broadcast drama makes each one of us at once more self-conscious and less reflective. . . . We, the audience, receive unconscious reinforcement of the thesis that the most significant feature of persons is *watchableness*, and that contemporary human worth is not just isomorphic with but rooted in the phenomenon of watching." Classic Wallace. But then: "Imagine a Berkleyan *esse-est-percipi* universe in which God is named Nielsen." Is it any wonder that this essay went previously uncollected? He's so concerned that he's going to end up reproducing TV's manipulative likability—he's so self-conscious about simply contributing to a culture of lazy entertainment—that he indulges his sense of antagonism. If he's not going to court the reader, he's going to hold him in contempt. And you're going to listen to him because his is the most colossal intelligence in town.

THIS, HOWEVER, DOESN'T SOLVE the problem; it inverts it. Of this Wallace is well aware, and it's the explicit subject of *BFaN*'s next long essay, "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*" (originally published in 1990). Markson's novel, which makes "heads throb heartlike," is a series of messages scrawled on scraps by a woman who suspects she might be the last living communicant. Wallace's argument involves unnecessarily complicated epistemological digressions, but his ultimate point is that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* illustrates what it would *feel like* to live in a world where we're stuck inside our own heads. Where we have only our own selves to evaluate the truth of our utterances. It would be lonely, is Wallace's point. From this place of epistemological insecurity and simple loneliness, the writer writes.

> The need to indite, inscribe—be its fulfillment exhilarating or palliative or, as is more usual, neither—springs from the doubly-bound panic felt by most persons who spend a lot of time up in their own personal heads. On one side—the side a philosopher'd call 'radically skeptical' or 'solipsistic'—there's the feeling that one's head is, in some sense, the whole world. . . . [But the need to write is] a necessary affirmation of an outside, some Exterior one's written record can not only communicate with but *inhabit*.

A key thing here, I think, is the pun on the word *indite*. It just means, um, "write." But Wallace wanted us to have to put down his funny, engaging essay to look it up. Wallace, particularly the early Wallace, had a hard time separating inditement from indictment. He's already told us that Markson's "diffracted system of allusions to everything from antiquity to Astroturf are a bitch to trace out," congratulating himself on having had the readerly discipline necessary to allow Markson's novel the status of art rather than mere entertainment. But he goes on to indict his readers on implicit charges of the laziness he's overcome, with brutally allusive asides such as "It doesn't mean that *WM* is just written 'in the margins of' the *Tractatus* the way *Candide* marginalizes *The Monadology* or *Nausea* simply 'dramatizes' Part Three of *L'Être et le néant*." One of Wallace's literary tics in the service of emotional urgency was to grab people by the lapels, and this is the sort of thing that makes one want to grab Wallace by his own lapels—though he's constantly reminding us that he's a lapellessly aw-shucks kind of guy—and ask him what kind of conversation this was supposed to be.

The theme of pretty much everything else good he wrote is that it's only in the struggle to overcome our petty desires—our need to write to be liked or to feel smart—that we stand any chance of real satisfaction.

Especially because he *knew* he often had a fucked-up relationship with his reader. In an oft-quoted interview Wallace gave to Larry McCaffery in 1993, he says that the real work of his writerly life has been to overcome the dilemma of self-consciousness, of a self caught between forlorn pandering and pedantic resentment. I quote at length because nobody's diagnosis compares to Wallace's self-diagnosis:

> But there's an unignorable line between demonstrating skill and charm to gain trust for the story vs. simple showing off. It can become an exercise in trying to get the reader to like and admire you instead of an exercise in creative art. I think TV promulgates the idea that good art is just art which makes people like and depend on the vehicle that brings them the art. This seems like a poisonous lesson for a would-be artist to grow up with. And one consequence is that if the artist is excessively dependent on simply being "liked," so that her true end isn't in the work but in a certain audience's good opinion, she is going to develop a terrific hostility to that audience, simply because she has given all her power away to them. It's the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction: "I don't really care what it is I say, I care only that you like it. But since your good opinion is the sole arbiter of my success and worth, you have tremendous power over me, and I fear you and hate you for it."

The story of Wallace's career was his ongoing attempt to escape this dynamic. Often this meant looking for some way out of the seclusion of the self-conscious head. But he was smart enough to know that that particular project was doomed.

STILL, HE TRIED. Some of his best essays were a variety of escapist fantasy: the attempt to describe what an unseductive, unself-conscious artistic practice might look like. On the one hand, there's a figure like David Lynch, one of Wallace's heroes, whom Wallace wrote about in a piece called "David Lynch Keeps His Head." Lynch "appears not to give much of a shit whether you like it or even *get* it." His films are innocently expressionistic, representative of "a self that communicates primarily itself" without worrying about how that communication is received. They're not self-consciously constructed but rather *unconsciously* driven. His art isn't caught up in referring "cutely to itself," like so much of the TV era's stillborn meta-gambits, but points to something "complexly real" beyond. Lynch's surreal sincerity was formative for Wallace, but the piece quietly constructs an argument about why Wallace would never himself want to resemble the auteur. The *Lost Highway* essay is as much about what makes single-entendre principles frightening as it is about what makes them rousing: Lynch's films are "presented with something like a child's ingenuous (and sociopathic) lack of self-consciousness." Wallace may have been tormented by self-consciousness, but he understood that to totally not give a shit, to leave sick impulses unmonitored, was to risk asociality and violence. (It's worth noting that the other great essay Wallace wrote about unabashedness was about porn.) Like Talese with Sinatra, Wallace never spoke to Lynch himself. He admits that he wasn't sure he wanted to.

But naive expressionism wasn't the only unself-conscious game in town. Tennis, for Wallace, was the thing that was fast and lizard-brained enough to circumvent self-awareness but also sufficiently rule-bound to check those violent expressionistic impulses. And it represented all of the fluid, instinctive motions Wallace feared were beyond his capability. He closes a withering 1994 review of Tracy Austin's ghostwritten memoir *Beyond Center*

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Court (collected in *CtL*) by saying that, in her position, he'd "get divided, paralyzed. As most ungreat athletes do. Freeze up, choke. Lose our focus. Become self-conscious. Cease to be wholly present in our wills and choices and movements. . . . How can they bypass the head and simply and superbly act?" As with the Lynch profile, though, the piece finds Wallace arguing himself out of this instinctive admiration. What made Tracy Austin a great athlete made her a terrible writer and raconteur: She was all reflex and no reflection. The last thing Wallace ever wanted to be was an automaton.

For Wallace, then, if being unself-conscious meant being regressive (Lynch) or mechanized (Austin), he couldn't duck the problems of self-consciousness; he had to work *within* them. This meant acknowledging that to act *as* a self, with all of its attendant desires, didn't necessitate acting *for* the self. The point of what remains his most widely enjoyed piece, the cruise-ship postcard called "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," is that the pursuit of private satisfaction only deepens our sense of insatiability. The theme of pretty much everything else good he wrote is that it's only in the struggle to overcome our petty desires—our need to write to be liked or to feel smart—that we stand any chance of real satisfaction.

IN THAT EVERYDAY STRUGGLE he did not always succeed. His worst reported efforts take as their subject the Tumescent Intelligence of David Foster Wallace. The most obvious examples in *Both Flesh and Not* are the haughtily allusive "Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open," with such lines as "The classico-Peloponnesian implications of *Nike* and of having all these kids running around with Nike wings on their foreheads like Lenten ash seem too obvious to spend much time belaboring," and the truly execrable "Back in New Fire," an encomium to AIDS, which closes by remonstrating with us for our sport-fucking ways: "AIDS's gift to us lies in its loud reminder that there's nothing casual about sex at all. This is a gift because human sexuality's power and meaning increase with our recognition of its seriousness." I.e., Reader, fuck thyself.

His best reported essays, however, make plain his struggle to acknowledge and subsume his own contempt and cunning in the project of writing *to* a reader rather than *at* a reader. Thus all of the devices of writerly self-deprecation: the announcement up front that he is a hired gun for entrenched magazine interests; the deployment of direct address, so often a plea for trust or an assurance that any given story is more nuanced and complicated than he has room for; and the high/low contrast of folksy posturing and intellectual rodomontade. He refused the role of the journalist as romantic hero. As he says in his 2000 profile of John McCain on the campaign trail—from *CtL*—he was "the least professional pencil" *Rolling Stone* could find. But Wallace knew these tics could be feints, just part of the bad old popularity contest. The central quandary of the McCain piece (a piece about the ultimate popularity contest) is that renunciation of the primacy of the self—"think about how *diametrically* opposed to your own self-interest" it was for McCain to choose to stay a prisoner of war—can easily be pressed into the self's services (while, say, running for president). His resolution is to suggest that McCain's ultimate credibility "now depends less on what is in his heart than on what might be in yours. Try to stay awake." The relationship between candidate and the audience is more important than the performance itself: The voter completes the politician. And the reader completes the writer.



David Foster Wallace on Charlie Rose, 2010.

Wallace, in other words, was at his best when he kept in mind that his work was *doing something for himself* as well as *doing something for the reader*.[1] Wallace copped to an Aristotelian teleology of art, viz. that beauty is only ever a by-product of the successful achievement of one's stated aim, one's "true end." This was another reason why his nonfiction so often succeeds where his fiction doesn't: A nonfiction inquiry has an obvious true end—go and report back what a cruise is like—that fiction rarely has. He writes in a piece about a visit to the Illinois State Fair, for example, that "the sheer *fact* of the land is to be celebrated here, its yields ogled and stock groomed and paraded, everything on decorative display." Beauty (grooming, decorative display) is spun off in the pursuit of purpose (cultivation, survival). What debases art, what turns art into the popularity contest of television or degenerate politics, is the circularity that ensues when one pursues beauty itself. That chase ends, or rather *never ends*, in that cruise-ship insatiability.

Beyond the hesitant valorization of reflex, tennis—especially for late Wallace—was a favorite example of something pursued for reasons other than beauty or entertainment: The point of a tennis match was not to be liked but to play tennis well. More important, tennis is impossible without the serves and returns of another human being. (Telling, Wallace's admission that the most affecting bits of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* are Kate's "funnysad descriptions of trying to play tennis without a partner.") It was in part this vision of tennis as partnership that led Wallace to the redemptive idea that the "end," in the Aristotelian sense, of his writing, the thing that made writing incidentally fun and beautiful and entertaining and likable, was the effort to communicate. And it wasn't just a general effort to communicate, but his *specific* effort to communicate his own fear that he could never successfully communicate. The appalling grotesquerie of the Illinois State Fair—fodder for a Bosch tableau—becomes an occasion for him to celebrate other people's sense of belonging. In his piece about September 11, his immediate cynicism alienates him from the simple horror and sorrow of his friends in Bloomington-Normal, where he was living in 2001. Work like this makes us experience the tension he felt all the time: how to be alone, how also to be together.

Both Flesh and Not's "The Nature of the Fun" (1998) has a great section where he describes this realization in terms of one of his other favorite metaphors, sex. When you first start to write, "you're writing almost wholly to get yourself off." When your work starts to get some attention, the masturbatory motive is supplanted by a seductive one: You start to need to feel liked. But if you can work through the fear and vanity that characterize art-as-seduction, the fun returns. "Under fun's new administration, writing fiction becomes a way to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don't want to see or let anyone else see, and this stuff usually turns out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all writers and readers share and respond to, feel."

The implicit trajectory is from masturbation to seduction to love. This is perhaps clearest in his best late essay, "Federer Both Flesh and Not," which opens the new volume and gives it its title. By the time of this piece (2006), romantic love has become his symbol of maturity, the ability to be up-front about one's own needs while attending to the needs of someone else. His opening describes how watch Federer—even on TV—elicits in the viewer "that bring spouses in from other rooms to see if you're OK," and he goes on to dilate upon the Swiss champion's "unusually steady and mature commitment to the girlfriend who travels with him." Unlike David Lynch, who constitutively didn't give a shit, Federer "doesn't pretend to care more than he does"—i.e., he cares, but exactly *the right amount*. What Wallace sees in Federer is a special kind of simultaneity, a simultaneity that describes Wallace's own manufactured coherence of entertainment and challenge, of likability and dickishness: "One's overall impression is that Roger Federer is either a very nice guy or a guy who's very good at dealing with the media—or (most likely) both." All of this culminates in the piece's personal final line: "Inspiration, though, is contagious, and multiform—and even just to see, close up, power and aggression made vulnerable to beauty is to feel inspired and (in a fleeting, mortal way) reconciled."

What a whole generation of "magazine writers" took from Wallace is the idea that perhaps their chief errand is to show that aggression can be made vulnerable to beauty. This is why, insofar as there's a prevailing aesthetic among the best young "magazine writers" of our time, it's the counterintuitively affirmative: What our nonfiction narrators do now is *perform the overcoming of contempt*. This holds for virtually all of John Jeremiah Sullivan, and for much of Wells Tower and Jake Silverstein and Tom Bissell. Wallace taught us all to write self-consuming artifacts. But in Wallace's wake it often seems as though the form persists without the struggle that shaped it. It took Wallace a long time to arrive at the understanding that "not all paradoxes have to be paralyzing," that a performance becomes genuine when its communiqués are received, but he consumed himself with that worry so that his successors didn't have to. Thus is a writer like Sullivan afforded the meta-ingenuousness he needs to close his Christian-rock piece, his essay collection *Pulphead*'s opener, with the line that the young Christians he's gotten to know "had put together what I did for a living—though, to their credit, they didn't seem to take this as a reasonable explanation for my being there."

It can feel like a relief to read Sullivan or Tower now; we're glad to have dispensed with the maximalist hand-wringing. When Wallace himself wrote with restful hands, however, it sounded wrong. It's batshit crazy that he's so fondly remembered for his Kenyon College commencement speech, which betrays none of his characteristic struggle. It's flat; it's platitudinous; it sounds like Rick Warren. No matter how many times he refers to the sweat dripping down his face, it never sounds as though he was really doing any work. Which allowed us to put our own tools down. To be immensely pleased. The jerky Wallace that makes so many appearances in *Both Flesh and Not* is there entirely absent, and when we can't connect to Wallace's struggle—his attempt to acknowledge and reconcile the parts of him that wanted to be alone with the parts of him that wanted to be together—we start to nod off. It was the exquisite tension that kept us so wonderfully awake. □

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[1] In D. T. Max's terrifically intelligent and (crucially) modest new biography, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, this self-analysis represents Wallace's great pivot. Max's persuasive read is that Wallace felt trapped by what he saw as the available literary responses to a manipulative culture: first, a metafiction that, in revealing the conditions of its own construction, replaced the aim of meaning with the aim of cleverness (Barth, Coover); second, a fashionably ironic nihilism that effetely deadpanned against an outdeadpannable milieu (McInerney, Ellis); third, a minimalism that tried to efface the emotional landscape of the self entirely, a bad-faith quietism (Carver's children, the "minimalist ordinaires"). His solution was a kind of "recovery fiction," the attempt to build a meaningful relationship with the reader with humility, grace, and a searching exposition of his own pain. Aside from this, and from acknowledging that Wallace's experience with depression left him humbled and more sensitive to the terror and the survival strategies of others, Max's bio does Wallace the great courtesy of treating as distinct his work and his mental health. The other great thing the bio does is show that Wallace's attachment to twelve-step recovery was pragmatic: "I don't know how recovery works, but it works." The point, though, isn't just that recovery worked. It's that Wallace was thrown up against something he couldn't even pretend to understand.

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