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# DAVID FOSTER WALLACE TO THE RESCUE

THE ACCLAIMED NOVELIST'S POSTMODERN CONSERVATISM

by James K. A. Smith

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Let's not speak of suicide. Let's not encourage the cottage industry bent on reducing David Foster Wallace to a literary Kurt Cobain, a romance of self-demise. This is a significant temptation for any posthumous reading of Wallace, whose writing is populated by suicides and addicts and clients of Therapy, Inc. In the wake of his death, it is all too tempting to read Wallace's fiction as autobiography, turning every addicted, suicidal character into an anachronistic self-portrait.

Let's not repeat traditionalist dismissals either. Granted, Wallace was a writer critics loved to hate. Indeed, if you take Dickens to represent the apogee of the novel, you're apt to be just a tad chagrined by the laborious self-consciousness of Wallace's prose and quickly tire of all the "meta" games.

Confronted with his free, indirect style that mimics the colloquialism of late modernity, James Wood sees narration that is "hideously ugly, and rather painful for more than a page or two." He buries the knife even deeper by seeing Wallace's "corrupted language" as just a mirror image of Updike's overwrought style (a stinging critique, since Wallace's critique of Updike was fundamentally *moral*). If Updike is "an example of aestheticism (the author gets in the way)," then Wallace is "an example of anti-aestheticism (the character is all): but both examples are really species of the same aestheticism, which is at bottom the strenuous display of *style*." In short, David Foster Wallace is what happens when the theory tail wags the fiction dog.

There are, however, many other ways to misunderstand David Foster Wallace. A common one is to confuse his postmodern playfulness and reflexivity with an amoral stance of cynicism or even nihilism, as Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly do in *All Things Shining*.

In the first biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, D. T. Max successfully avoids postmodern hagiography, conservative dismissal, and the charge of nihilism. He patiently documents that, far from being a nihilist, Wallace was a moralist of a particularly complicated sort. While certainly not *artistically* conservative, Wallace became convinced that the task of literature in late modernity is to counter the ironic nihilism with which he is mistakenly identified. He saw the novelist's role to be that of a fireman, not an arsonist. In the portrait of Wallace that emerges from this biography, Max identifies a strange beast slouching out of postmodern literature: a moral conservative. Indeed, in a recent interview about the book, Max has described the later Wallace as a "Burkean" cultural conservative. (How many MFA professors do you know who voted for Reagan?)

Heir to Barthelme and Pynchon, Wallace's earliest work was an extension of their so-called "postmodern" projects. (As Max tells us, "Barthelme was the first time he heard the 'click' in literature.") The trick was to write literature that exposed and undercut the very mechanisms of story-telling, like when nightly news programs started to conclude the broadcast by zooming out from the anchorman, letting us see the façade for what it was. The stories tend to be pretzeled with introspection.

So his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, which began its life as his undergraduate thesis at Amherst College, is a theory-laden story that wears its debts to Wittgenstein on its sleeve. His subsequent story collection, *Girl with Curious Hair*, includes a novella, written during his MFA residency at the University of Arizona, about a group of aspiring writers in an East Coast MFA program, who regularly pull back the curtain on the machinations of the MFA industry, all the while anxious about the influence of Barth and Barthelme, bent on killing the fathers. You get the idea.

"Dave" didn't really become David Foster Wallace until the surprising breakout hit that was *Infinite Jest*. An 1100-page non-linear, microscopic epic that includes a hundred pages of indispensable endnotes, it tells the story of a near-future North America remapped as the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.—yes, he plays such games). This spawns resistance movements like the Wheelchair Assassins, a Quebec separatist group, and allows Wallace to keep a political thread going in the story.

But in ways echoed in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, the state is overwhelmed by the corporation. In Wallace's novel, this is signaled by the very organization of time by corporate sponsorship. Chapters are marked by the consumer calendar: the Year of the Whopper, the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar, the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, etc. In this sense, Wallace continues the modernist project with a new intensity, taking a bead on the effects of consumerism with a specificity that is verboten in classic literature meant to be "timeless."

The effects of consumerism are part of a general mode of distraction that characterizes this world. It is embodied in the "Infinite Jest" within *Infinite Jest*: a fabled film that is so effective that viewers are debilitated by "the Entertainment," uninterested and unwilling to function as human beings. (The Wheelchair Assassins would love to get their hands on it for terrorist purposes.) The film was produced by James Incandenza Sr., whose family—wife Avril and sons Hal, Orin, and Mario—ties together the three central sites of the story: the environs of Tucson (where Wallace lived during his MFA program), Ennet House (a rehab center), and Enfield Tennis Academy, both just outside Boston (where Wallace enrolled in the Ph.D. program in philosophy at Harvard before leaving to enter rehab).

This is a novel you read with a constant grin: a comedic tale laden with a cleverness that is affecting or grating, depending on your predilections. (Justice Antonin Scalia is a fan of the book; go figure.) It's the sort of thing that our wink-and-nod hipster knowingness just loves. In this sense it shared something in common with the novel-as-cultural-anthropology that one sees in Tom Wolfe. *Infinite Jest* is an ethnography of our postmodern moment; it captures the

extent to which time and space are configured by the commercial, while also recognizing, in a Pascalian vein, that distractions and entertainment threaten to overwhelm anything else that seems to matter.

As Max rightly notes, while *Infinite Jest* was written well before the internet's predominance (it was published in 1996), its prescience was revealed later. "As the culture collapsed into the anecdote and sound bite, *Infinite Jest* was one of the few books that seemed to anticipate the change and even prepare the reader for it." Indeed, Max later notes: "Paradoxically, the Web made *Infinite Jest* an easier read."

*Infinite Jest* struck a chord with its accurate diagnosis of a generation; it especially resonated with mine: those in college in the mid-90s, who witnessed the birth of MTV in our youth and the expansion of the internet while in college. The narrator seems to sympathize with our sense of being trapped in self-consciousness and the malaise of endless opportunity, and to be beckoning from beyond it—maybe even inviting us, in halting, haphazard ways, to something else. Wallace could not show us our entrapment without suggesting a way out. In the drug-addled, despairing world of *Infinite Jest*, readers nonetheless sense something like love.

I'm not alone in this hypothesis. Jonathan Franzen, one of Wallace's closest friends, hazarded a similar thesis in a 2011 post-mortem essay, "[Farther Away](#)," in the *New Yorker*. Considering the role of love in Wallace's writing, he first notes its conspicuous absence from Wallace's fictional worlds: "Close loving relationships, which for most of us are a foundational source of meaning, have no standing in the Wallace fictional universe." And yet "the curious thing about David's fiction," he continues, "is how recognized and comforted, how *loved*, his most devoted readers feel when reading it." This, I submit, explains part of the surprising reception of *Infinite Jest*.

**B**ut I would ratchet this up a notch, too: It's not just that Wallace's readers feel loved because of his vulnerability and honesty. I think one could also argue that despite all of their addictions and hideous characteristics, Wallace also loved his characters. Indeed, I think this is precisely what distinguishes Wallace from Franzen. While Wallace and Franzen are often mentioned in the same (postmodern) breath, associated with hyper-self-consciousness, "meta"-izing fancies, and cynical distance, in fact they're very different. Franzen ended up settling for a straightforward narrative strategy, but his stories ooze with cynicism.

This first struck me while reading Franzen's novel *Freedom*. Though the book is a masterly work, the reader still has difficulty generating sympathy for any of the characters, and it struck me that this is because Franzen doesn't really care for them either. In contrast, while Wallace was every bit the po-mo formalist, indulging in all kinds of tricks and gimmicks, what emerges through that is not cynicism, but something quite different: a sensitivity and understanding for the messed-up worlds of his characters that might just be love.

Even as early as *Girl with Curious Hair*, the long story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" wrestles with the theme. The specter of John Barth looms over it, specifically the opening line of Barth's story "Lost in the Funhouse": "For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers." In Wallace's hands, this *For Whom?* becomes the existential spine of his story. "Is there a whispered worrisome something behind that rattling whined *For Whom?*," the narrator asks. The last lines of "Westward" suggest an answer:

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.

It was in just this sense that *Infinite Jest* was a turning point. While it still shared much of the literary acrobatics that characterized *The Broom of the System*, the project was no longer just a matter of sprawling intellectual fireworks bent on deflating the pretensions of literature. Nor was Wallace content to add to the catalogue of postmodern fiction that laid bare the flattened despair of late modernity. “*Infinite Jest* then didn’t just diagnose a malaise,” Max observes. “It proposed a treatment, answering a need that Wallace saw perhaps better than any other writer of his time.” He saw the need that a remedy accompany the diagnosis lest postmodern culture suffer all the more for its new self-consciousness.

What would become *Infinite Jest* was the product of a gestational period in which Wallace reformulated his goal: “American fiction was not in just an aesthetic crisis, but a moral one,” as Max explains, so the task for the novelist wasn’t just to figure out the next ingenious move for “the novel” while taking up ironic stances with respect to the world. Wallace was growing not only tired but also suspicious of irony, which “got dangerous when it became a habit.” In a letter from this period, Wallace cites Lewis Hyde on John Berryman: “Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy the cage.”

But what should replace cleverness and irony? Perhaps not surprisingly, a character in “Westward,” written during this period, is portrayed as “somebody being taught how but not why to write fiction.” Finding himself in a similar limbo, Wallace emerged with a new sense of the novelist’s responsibility and the moral task of the novel.

We can see this shift in his relationship to his peer novelist, Mark Leyner. Wallace had been taken with Leyner’s early novel, *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, not least because it mirrored some of his own games in *The Broom of the System*. “When Wallace first read the book, he had reveled in its aggressive, postrealist stance, its avant-pop insistence that the overwhelming incoherence of modern culture was a joyride for the brain.” In other words: Eat, drink, and be clever because tomorrow, *we shop*.

But in 1992, he met Leyner and asked, “Is it sufficient to entertain people as spectacularly as you have . . . or should there be a further moral purpose to your work?” Leyner said entertainment had its own moral value. As Max recounts, “Wallace clearly wasn’t satisfied with Leyner’s answer—to give addicts more of the drug wasn’t to cure them—but time was up.”

And Wallace’s patience with these games was expiring. “Suddenly,” says Max, “in his eyes, sincerity was a virtue and saying what you meant a calling. Nostalgia seemed to play a part, as well as discontent with the person he had grown up to be, the two intertwined. Wallace was signaling that cultural health lay in a return to the earnestness he’d grown up with.” Let us now praise Midwestern men.

What was congealing was the moral purpose of his fiction. In various venues in 1991 and 1992, the years that *Infinite Jest* was beginning to take shape, Wallace began to debut this new agenda. In one place—perhaps tweaking Barth once again—he would describe this as living under the “new administration of fun,” which meant, in Max’s summary, “no more irony and distance, commitment not speculation (a favorite word of his), *involvement*. And even, where possible, the hope of redemption.” As he told Larry McCaffery in a famous interview in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, even authors of fiction depicting the darkest of worldviews should “find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it,” to give “CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness.” In sum: Fiction, he says, tells us what it is to be a human being.

This didn't translate into any kind of traditionalism or reverting to a conventional style: The "play" of postmodernism is an entrée here, not a barrier. The reflexivity of the "meta" is a portal, not a hurdle, for a new sincerity. It's not a matter of sticking our heads in the sand, wishing away modern despair. This is instead a *second* naiveté in Paul Ricoeur's sense. But that didn't mean a reversion in style. So Max describes Wallace's predicament: "how to use an innovative writing style to carry out a conservative fictional purpose." Wallace wanted it both ways, the *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott argued: "pursuing the questionable tactic of writing cleverly to assert the superiority of sincerity in a world wedded to cleverness."

But Max helpfully documents the sort of conversion Wallace undergoes in his understanding of what fiction is *for*: "Wallace had always preferred certainty to unclarity, passion to incrementalism, and now he was a full-fledged apostle of sincerity."

He had no tolerance for the person he was and gave no quarter to writers whom he thought were like the writer he used to be. When Steve Moore wrote him to recommend a novel he was publishing, praising its "sardonic worldview perfect for the irony-filled nineties," Wallace shot back that this was "like saying 'a kerosen[e]-filled fire extinguisher perfect for the blazing housefire.'"

As I noted earlier, for Wallace, the novelist should be fireman, not arsonist. Hence a new sense of responsibility and sobriety emerges alongside the linguistic pyrotechnics that would always characterize his prose. This isn't an inherent contradiction, as if Wallace's moral vision for the novel never managed to change his nihilistic style. No, we need to resist the sense that an unconventional style is necessarily amoral. To the contrary, I think Wallace's unconventional prose intentionally achieves a kind of immediacy that is consistent with his sincerity. Unlike Updike's aestheticism, where style draws attention to itself, Wallace was looking for a form that was akin to the voice in our postmodern heads. And then he could speak to us directly, sincerely, with a moral vision.

It's not surprising, then, that Wallace saw parallels in the life and work of Dostoevsky. There's something autobiographical in his review of Joseph Frank's five-volume biography of Dostoevsky in the *Voice Literary Supplement*: "What seems most important is that Dostoevsky's near-death experience changed a typically vain and trendy young writer—a very talented writer, true, but still one whose basic concerns were for his own literary glory—into a person who believed deeply in moral/spiritual values." This was a marked contrast with most "American writers" who "were still content to describe an ironic culture when they should be showing the way out."

Max sees something similar in Wallace: not just a new sincerity, but a sense of moral responsibility behind *Infinite Jest*, offering "a generosity to the world" and a sense that the writer is "not entirely uninterested in our survival." It appears in the way Wallace describes the places in the novel, as well as "the fall of network advertising, the composition of tennis rackets, the Boston street names of controlled substances, and the history of videophony." The novel,

for all its putative difficulty, cares about the reader, and if it denies him or her a conventional ending, it doesn't do so out of malice; it does it out of concern, to provide a deeper palliative than realistic storytelling can, because, just as in Ennet House, you have to work to get better. The book is redemptive, as modern novels rarely are.

What's operative here is not just sincerity, as in, "As long as you're sincere . . ." No, there is a normativity at work here: an urgent conviction about what we need to be "a fucking human being." What else could we call such a conviction but "conservative"?



Building on the comparison of Dostoevsky and Wallace, Max notes another parallel between *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Infinite Jest*: “Both eschew stylish irony to make a single point: faith matters.” Some have faulted Max for not taking Wallace’s own religious seeking seriously. There is no doubt more to be said on this matter, but I’m not sure Max was really equipped to pick up on the hints and significance of Wallace’s religious experiences (which ranged from Roman Catholic catechesis to Mennonite worship to charismatic encounters, not to mention A.A.).

But at the very least we need to refuse the charge of nihilism leveled by Dreyfus and Kelly. Indeed, David Foster Wallace might be a shining example of those fugitive configurations of meaning in postmodernity that Charles Taylor explores in the final parts of *A Secular Age*. Granted, his writing—both fiction and nonfiction—documents a world of almost suffocating immanence, a flattened human universe where the escapes are boredom and distraction, not ecstasy and rapture. Hell is self-consciousness, and our late modern, TV-ized (now Twitter-ized) world only ramps up our self-awareness to an almost paralyzing degree. God is dead, but he’s replaced by everybody else. Everything is permitted, but everybody is watching. So most of the time the best “salvation” we can hope for is found in behaviors that numb us to this reality: drugs, sex, entertainments of various sorts.

And yet, contrary to the picture sketched by Dreyfus and Kelly, there is a persistent hint that Wallace is spooked, that his world is haunted. His characters are anything but satisfied with what late modern capitalism has to offer, and so we see regular glimpses of what Taylor calls the “nova effect”—new modes of being that try to forge a way through, even out of, the cross-pressured situation where immanence seems ready to implode upon itself.

Take, for example, the narrator of “Good Old Neon,” a stream-of-consciousness testimony allegedly generated in the flash before his suicide. The protagonist in “Good Old Neon” is prototypically David Foster Wallace-ish insofar as he is almost possessed by self-consciousness, doomed to self-awareness, beset by a sort of secularized guilt about being fraudulent—who hypothesizes that his concern with his own fraudulence arises from the root of being unable to love, and who now, in the nanoseconds before his self-inflicted death, is reflecting on how this self-consciousness “basically ruined all the best parts of everything.”

Only in certain insulated regions of secularism would it be so unthinkable that he might look for liberation—and a kind of exorcism—in religion. But this is not unthinkable to Wallace. Instead, we learn that this character did just that in his “holy roller phase,” spending time at a charismatic church in Naperville, Illinois, “to try to wake up spiritually instead of living in this fog of fraudulence.” He sees and praises the beauty of the devout, and *wants* to believe, but the ghosts of self-awareness won’t let him go (they are Legion), “the real truth here being how quickly I went from being someone who was there because he wanted to wake up and stop being a fraud to being somebody who was so anxious to impress the congregation with how devoted and active I was.” The brush with transcendence is not an escape, and certainly not a solution, but neither is it unthinkable. It’s no solution to such cross-pressure to simply rule out transcendence.

The hints of this almost become shouts in a posthumously published story, “All That.” In it, a precocious young boy is fascinated by the “magic” of a toy cement truck—a magic concocted merely by his parents saying so. In a Santa Claus-like fib, the parents tell the boy that the cement truck’s mixer moves, but only when he’s not looking. Impossible to confirm (since seeing it would stop it), the grown-up narrator looking back on this episode identifies the longing: “As an adult, I realize that the reason I spent so much time trying to ‘catch’ the drum rotating was that I wanted to verify that I could not. If I had ever been successful in outsmarting the magic, I would have been crushed.” One would expect then a story of rational maturation, of putting away childish things like magic, growing up and learning to no longer be duped. Wake up and smell the disenchantment.

But again, that's not the path Wallace's fiction takes. To the contrary, the grown narrator, looking at his younger self, sees in this episode "the origin of the religious feeling that has informed most of my adult life"—a fundamental attitude of "reverence." What passes for "atheism," he observes, is still a mode of worship, "a kind of anti-religious religion, which worships reason, skepticism, intellect, empirical proof, human autonomy, and self-determination."

But the narrator is not ready to convert to the gospel of immanence. To the contrary, "the fact that the most powerful and significant connections in our lives are (at the time) invisible to us seems to me a compelling argument for religious reverence rather than skeptical empiricism as a response to life's meaning." This too is haunted: by the sense that we're just making this up, that the religious is as fictive as his parents' attribution of magic to the cement mixer, that we can't trust our impulses or memories or inclinations to reverence. And yet this religious ghost can't be exorcised either.

Wallace's "conservatism" has a trajectory that can lead to just this cross-pressured place, haunted by transcendence, yet not quite able to believe. It is a familiar place: It is the place from which many have uttered the publican's prayer, "Lord I believe; help my unbelief."

In a memorial service for Wallace in New York, Zadie Smith remarked that when she taught his *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* to college kids, she made them read it alongside Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. "The two books seem like cousins to me," she said. "Both find black comedy in hideous men who feel themselves post-love, post-faith, post-everything. 'When people nowadays . . . will not stop at love,' wrote Kierkegaard, 'where is it that they are going? To worldly wisdom, petty calculation, to paltriness and misery? . . . Would it not be better to remain standing at faith, and for the one who stands there to take care not to fall?'"

In this context, she recalls that "the most impassioned book recommendation" Wallace ever gave her was *Catholics* by Brian Moore. While Max's biography might not be able to comprehend how that could be, his account of the ghosts that haunted Wallace does help us to understand Smith's corrective picture of him: "Anyone who thinks Dave is primarily an ironist should note that [book] choice. His is a serious kind of satire, if by satire we mean 'the indirect praise of good things.'"

Wallace's tragic, frustrated pilgrimage brought him to the conviction that there should be a moral to the story. If there is a moral to his own story as told in *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, it might be that transcendence continues to exert its pressure on contemporary fiction, piercing the confident boundaries of secularism. Sensing the paucity of postmodern irony might be the beginning of faith.

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