To Meet the Maker: The Influence of the Author in the Critical Reception of David Foster Wallace

David Lipsky. *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip With David Foster Wallace*. New York: Broadway Books, 2010. ISBN 978-0-307-59243-9

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Criticism often benefits from an author's silence. This "absence" sustains a forever flimsy ontology, suggests a service in need of provision, and ultimately helps to hide that "final signified" which so tyrannically restricts Roland Barthes' anarchic reader.[1] Alongside the "obscurity" of language, the author's "ob-scenity" is partly the non-act on which criticism depends, creating and ensuring the space into which its discourse comes. Of course there are degrees of silence. There are those authors who write essays, who write autobiographies, who seem determined to be their texts' first and final instance;[2] and there are those who are reclusive to the extreme, such as Thomas Pynchon, or those from whom we have no voice to hear, such as Shakespeare. But what happens when an author "speaks," and just as loudly as those texts he writes? We today still tend to hesitate to hear it, partly because that word "influence" has been most feared in recent years, partly because we are still a bit deterred by French theory. But while the author may be, in our humanist "cowardice," the "ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning," her imposition being the appeasing anthropomorphisation of the otherwise "arbitrary" sign,[3] she's also just as equally the figure by which we recognize

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the very presence of meaning's potential. What separates the words "One, and one, two, three" from Robert Creeley's poem "A Piece" is the sign of the poet's name which opens the text to the possibility of any meaning it might thereafter possess.[4]

But what can happen when he's more than just a signposting signature? James Joyce's infamous prodding of "the professors" doubtlessly did wonders for the reception of his work. Without the reviews he ghost-wrote, the supplementary schemas he supplied, the taunts with which he (mis)directed our attention toward his myriad riddles, the Joycean enterprise might not be what it is today or at least might have taken a little while longer to get there. Joyce knew his texts were difficult, but also felt they were important: so he raised his hand, interjected, got his friends to write "examinations" of his "work in progress." This kind of authorial speech indelibly helped his texts. But it is not always the case.

The recent publication of David Lipsky's "road trip" with David Foster Wallace, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, gives us another example of an author speaking. Alongside the inevitable release of the late author's archives to the University of Texas' Harry Ransom Centre, it also "speaks" to an ongoing and widespread fascination with the author as Author, especially in the case of David Foster Wallace, and especially – perhaps predictably – since his untimely and tragic suicide.[5] *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* is a strange sort of interview, more of a diary or even a Gaddis / Puig novel than a formal "sit-down." Lipsky seems to have intended it to possess a similar feel to one of Wallace's own fictions, full of "raw" and unedited transcripts of dialogue which stop mid-sentence when a tape runs out and start again a few minutes late in the middle of another – a kind of *cinema verite* style of documentary. While this can present frustrations, it does lend the book its own particular aesthetic which helps "drive" it along. And that is the thing about the book, it is almost naggingly interesting. One can almost flip it open at any page and be engaged by the endearing and effortlessly intelligent Wallace. Even banal topics like the most amount of television he ever watched – a question which, like many in the book, Lipsky really insists on receiving a coherent answer for – prove to be somehow almost frustratingly engaging, owing to Wallace's mastery of mixing domestic anecdotes with philosophical insight.

Lipsky's book is full of mainly biographical curiosities but also features Wallace waxing lyrical about his craft and literary discourse, such things as:

> The idea is that the book is structured as an entertainment that doesn't work. Because what entertainment ultimately leads to, I think, is the movie *Infinite Jest* … And the tension of the book is to try to make it at once extremely entertaining – and also sort of

> warped, and to sort of shake the reader awake about some of the things that are sinister in entertainment (79).

For anyone who has been following Wallace's career, however, most of this will already be overly familiar. Indeed, the influence of Wallace the Author has been anything but "absent." While Joyce's utterances may have helped his legacy, Wallace's "voice" has proved to be nothing but problematical for his critical reception.

Compared to his literary forebears Pynchon and Don DeLillo, Wallace was decidedly articulate about his project as a writer. In 1996 when he published the novel *Infinite Jest* which would make his initials a household name, the literary world was not necessarily unprepared for its impact. A 1993 edition of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* featured both an essay by and an interview with Wallace. In "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (the essay would later appear in his 1997 collection of essays *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* where it gained significantly wider readership), Wallace outlined his views on a pervasive culture of corrosive irony connected to the all-devouring mechanisms of postmodern television:

> I want to convince you that irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat. I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fictionists they post terrifically vexing problems.[6]

Likewise, postmodern fiction, in Wallace's diagnosis, had become victim to the same forces it traditionally rebelled against and was now hopeless to satirise a culture that has appropriated its revolutionist toolkit: "The fact is that for at least ten years now television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenising, and re-presenting the very cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative."[7] The essay's conclusion sees Wallace raising a "call to arms" for a new kind of sincere-but-still-self-aware humanist fiction seen as having the power to break free of this destructive culture stopping us garnering significant interpersonal experience. More on this later.

The purport of the essay and its critical imposition are interesting for many reasons, and indeed it presents one of the clearest elucidations of the "humdrum" social problems of late-capitalism in the U.S.A, but primarily the essay left an indelible impression on the way Wallace's fiction – both

past and future – was received and doubtlessly will be received for a long time to come. A lot of readers, both lay and professional, have used this essay, along with the Larry McCaffery interview from the same issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, as analogous to "cliff notes" for his oeuvre. As Adam Kelly writes, "for the most part the essay-interview nexus became an inescapable point of departure."[8] Not everyone falls into this trap of course, but even in the best essays the framework laid down in Wallace's extra-fictional utterances is a force which has to be at least negotiated, sometimes fought against, resisted, and in a few cases overcome. But it can never be ignored; one cannot proceed, it seems, without acknowledging the impact "he" has on his texts. While Timothy Jacobs conversely contends that within his fictions Wallace "imposes on himself a mandate of aesthetic restraint … that diminishes his presence as author and concomitantly 'speaks' to the reader's consciousness," [9] the fact that the first half of Jacob's essay is spent reciting the author's extra-fictional voice, and that elsewhere he produces interpretations neatly congruent with Wallace's intentions,[10] seems only to prove the point of Wallace's substantial authorial influence.

An excellent essay by Mary K. Holland confronts this issue directly. Holland contends that in the case of *Infinite Jest* "we cannot help but read this novel only in the context of the agenda that Wallace so clearly and passionately articulated shortly before its publication and by considering its success in implementing that agenda."[11] And Holland indeed attempts to subvert the voice of Wallace, showing how his extra-fictional remarks can pull the proverbial wool over his reader's eyes: "We come to David Foster Wallace's fiction through the lens of irony, a tricky, risky, even at times useless lens. We refract our reading in this way because Wallace instructs us to, which puts us and his fiction in a precarious position."[12] Holland believes Wallace's novel is ultimately a failure to break out of the very system it critiques, becoming victim to the same malaise of infantile narcissism it describes. For her, *Infinite Jest*, rather than being a text which conforms to its author's goals, is thus a great example of text breaking free of its author's grip, practicing its own recalcitrant autonomy.

Of course, like any great body of fiction, Wallace's definitely overspills the hopes he invested in it. While it cannot be said that he in any way wanted to restrict the reception of his work, attested to by his critical appraisal thus far there seems to be a considerable difficulty in not being "infected" by David Foster Wallace the "author." Basically, the question comes down to either a difficulty posed for the critic when an author is decidedly *not* silent; or, on the other hand, the effect of the author having to be heretically considered as a valid aspect of his *oeuvre* and of its effect and value

once again. One often wonders how the reception of Wallace's work would be different if, like Pynchon, he had remained silent about his hopes and dreams for fiction and the world, had not been determined as a personality with which his readers can interface. But still the question remains: why is he such a great presence to be navigated? Why do we find it more difficult than in other instances to extricate Wallace's work from his own remarks? Why do we want to read David Lipsky's book?

The turning towards Wallace's extra-fictional persona and commentary as a way into his work, or the difficulty in ignoring these things, could very simply be an implicit effect of the challenges his texts present. Most saliently *Infinite Jest* offers a host of formal difficulties: its circular temporality, the shifting and often ambiguous narrative perspectives, the copious length, the disruptive endnotes, the oblique explanations of the diegesis's political environment, the narrative ellipses. While – as Wallace states of course! – these are all elements designed to create a more active reader who is participant in the text's construction, having to work like a detective assembling clues and traces in order to construct a view of the narrative's totality,[13] most simply the book's disparate threads are helped to be drawn together by the ground Wallace paves for them with his articulated authorial program. The fact that it always tends to be read under the sign of it being "against irony" or "for sincerity" or some other similar permutation taken from "the horse's mouth" could most simply be because these remarks provide a useful rubric to organise the otherwise fragmentary work under, in the way that "paranoia" is a useful starting point for Pynchon studies. As Lipsky's book reveals, Wallace was indeed concerned that the complexly interwoven themes of the novel were "just not going to make *any* sense," that his readers were not, for example, "going to see *significant* relationships between … my relationship to television, and some of these people in the halfway house's relation to, say, heroin" (156). Hence, then, the "E Unibus Pluram" essay – a kind of nervous, pre-emptive explanation of the novel. The collection of stories which immediately followed *Infinite Jest*, 1999's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*,[14] presents more-so a host of thematic "discomforts," the intimate monologues that detail misogyny and narcissism leaving the reader perhaps a little uncertain as to where to situate Wallace's sympathies. Readers are likely to turn to his extra-fictional remarks and persona in order to approach the work through a framework which places his voice at a safe distance from those of his most difficult protagonists.

But the effect of Wallace the "person," with stated aims, desires, cares and qualms, also seems consistent with the nature of the authorial "program" he sought to achieve, which, according to Wallace again, essentially

involves the re-establishment of some kind of "real" in human interrelation.[15] Wallace's stated project crucially points to a belief in the quasi "self-help" potentials of fiction, which are not so different – in the set of responsibilities and potentials beholden to it – from those of therapy or political action. To take an example from "E Unibus Pluram":

> I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fictionists they pose terrifically vexing problems.[16]

There is little functional difference between the import of Wallace's essay and, for instance, a therapeutic or self-help discourse. Essentially the essay is structured as a diagnosis/prescription dialogue, with televisual irony being the "disease" which has "my generation by the throat," and sincerity and humanism being advised cures. What is interesting about Wallace's example is the way fiction fits into the picture. The "terrifically vexing problems" encountered by writers are the same problems which are throwing the everyday citizens into such existential "despair and stasis," and a problem whose responsibility it is, at least in some way, fiction's job to aright. Fiction is not just bourgeois excess; it has social responsibility. Wallace's definition of "good art" is that which "locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness,"[17] and so one which acts as a quasi-medical practitioner come to resuscitate the breath of a suffocating humanity. And in the end the manifesto is pitched at fiction writers, at a hopeful bunch of saviours who

> might well emerge as some weird bunch of "anti-rebels," born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction.[18]

If fiction, for Wallace, has had the job in the past of providing "insights and guides to human value,"[19] it now has the power not just to lead and advise but to execute and embody by example, to "risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'How banal.' Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama."[20] All those little naiveties we are so fearful of.

It seems implicit then in this project of Wallace's with its "return of the repressed humanism" catchcries that there be the felt presence of a "fucking *human being*" standing behind the text.[21] And indeed this definitely seems the tacit relationship being formed with his readership, and perhaps

as he intended:

> there's a certain set of magical stuff that fiction can do for us. There's maybe thirteen things, of which who even knows which ones we can talk about. But one of them has to do with the sense of, the sense of *capturing*, capturing what the world feels like to us, in the sort of way that I think that a reader can tell 'Another sensibility like mine *exists*.' Someone else feels this way to someone else. So that the reader feels less lonely. (38)

A quick glance at a selection of reviews, essays and post-scripts of his life, even the mere existence of Lipsky's book, exhibit the almost hegemonic effect his influence as a "person" has over his readership. Indeed, David Foster Wallace the "human" seems just as interesting to us as his books and literary-cultural criticism. Perhaps one of the more illuminating examples for our purposes comes in an article by Michael Humphries from True/Slant magazine:

> Something more genuine is at work, at least for people beyond the literary circles concerned with Wallace before his death. The main element of his soaring afterlife is the quality of his thoughts. Wallace was a master talker–about his work, about literature in general, about life in general–it was his true populist genius. Gone were the complex forms of his fiction when he spoke. (His journalism was similar to his speaking.) What emerged in interviews and speeches was a human being who embodied the very thing that his irony-rich literary times disdained – sincerity … But underneath the digressions and bibliographies and OCD was a man with something to say that actually resonates with human beings interested in more than their 401K and lawn maintenance.[22]

Now when we are reading Wallace we are never just reading his work, we are always reading it through the man. The unquestioning ease with which all of Wallace's polemical vocabulary is here adopted is perhaps even a little disheartening. But it is little surprise really, if we will believe we are in the midst of an "ethical turn," that a project like Wallace's should find so much resonance. While many critical considerations of his work might not draw directly on the thematic vocabulary of the unavoidable essay/interview "launchpad," they almost all presuppose that Wallace's fiction is geared toward a homologous and coherent ethical purpose, that his work resonates most strongly in a kind of socio-empathic dimension. And the tacit effect of registering this ethical thrust, and perhaps the true implication of Wallace's cultural criticism, is that it gives a reader the (albeit largely fantasised) im-

pression that behind the words of a book lies someone that "cares" about the reader, about their "wellbeing" and happiness. It is probably a bad way to read someone's novel, but Wallace knows it can be comforting, can make the reader feel "less lonely" (38). So as not to be called at his bluff, then, in lamenting the loss of the "human" exchange in culture, art, and the everyday humdrum world Wallace must necessarily position himself – *or be positioned by the reader* – as a giver of human exchange and so a "person" available for readers to interact with, be inspired by, whatever this may be. He must stand at one end of that "communication between one human being and another," no matter how problematic and difficult this relationship is.[23]

Lipsky's book actually suggests that Wallace is quite anxious about this whole affair – at least as it applies to him generating a visible presence through media fame. While he wants to give the impression of himself being "there" at one end of the literary exchange, he definitely does not want to be presented as some kind of "Author-God"[24] or literary celebrity. At one point he describes the uncomfortable scenarios that arise when readers reify his textual presence *too* much, when they actually believe it is "him" speaking to them rather than the "author-function" of the text:

> Um, it was, there's an odd phenomenon where, I think, if you write stuff that's intimate and weird, weird people tend to feel they're intimate with you. You know? … I mean, you could sense that they expected you to say something else. To fall into the rhythm of an intimacy that they felt. And of course there *wasn't* that there. And that, that was *sad* and unsettling … But it's also a delusion, and it's kind of an invasive one. But then I realise that I set it up by doing just what I did, and so it all gets very … (274-5)

We most often see him uneasy with this kind of attention he is garnering after *Infinite Jest*'s publication, and in many ways this is what Lipsky's book is "about": how to strike a balance between the "effect" of human interface and his readers' desires for its literalisation. On the one hand the success of *Infinite Jest* gives Wallace the attention he devours, on the other hand it threatens to derail him: "I mean this has never helped *anybody*. Anybody's writing future. So I would be an *idiot*, you know, if I were not playing various psychic games and erecting defences" (187). He is a writer worried about being presented by the media as a celebrity, but also a writer who can't force himself to be quiet, to slip into obscurity – he has agreed to the interview, of course, as he constantly reminds us: "if I'm all that worried about being a whore, then why am I doing this?" (90). He is a writer desperate for praise, but also one who knows the dangers it presents to him: "I'm now so

scared of having the ambition … to be regarded well by other people. Just cause it's – it landed me in a suicide ward" (188). A writer who wants his readers to do the work, but one that worries that they might miss the point: "I was afraid people would think it was sloppy, poorly – that it would seem like a *mess*. Instead of an intentional, very careful mess" (92). Wallace cannot help but constantly equivocate, and this inner contrariness indeed permeates his fictional work too. That a character in *Infinite Jest* muses that "naivety is the last true terrible sin in the theology of millennial America" partway through a 1079 page novel is a case in point.[25]

As Wallace knows, to be readers without authors might be a very freeing thing but maybe also a very "lonely" sort of existence. And this is the rub of his work: if you are trying to make a living by interpreting his books, he can be your worst nightmare. He may have already interpreted them better than you can, or by having prepared the ground for their reception might always unknowingly seep through your pen. But if you just want to "read" them, to understand what invests them, from what concerns and world they are born, then he is your best friend. Without Wallace's remarks his texts would doubtlessly be different; still brilliant and as rich as they are, but *different* – perhaps not the socially transformative objects they are taken to be by many of his fans and critics. While *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* won't give the critically curious reader any of the answers they, like Lipsky, might be looking for, it is still an incredibly moving and candid glimpse into the mind of a troubled and brilliant writer. The reason a lot us will set out upon this "road trip" is to gain a better understanding of Wallace's fiction; the only thing it will reveal to us, however, is a person it is almost impossible not to be affected by. For better or worse, this is enough.

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NOTES

[1] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image-Music-Text*, trans Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 147.

[2] Consider, for instance, Leo Tolstoy's remarks in the "Appendix" to *War and Peace*: "I do not want readers of this book to see in it, or look for, what I did not wish, or was unable, to express, and I should like to direct their attention to what I wished to say …" (*War and Peace*, trans Louise Maude and Aylmer Maude (USA: Oxford University Press, 2010) 1309).

[3] Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, trans Robert Hurley, ed. James D. Faubion (United Kingdom: Penguin, 2000), 222.

[4] Robert Creeley, Words (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1967), 115.

[5] It also seems to beg Foucault’s question, as do all archives, of what “this curious unity which we designate as a work” actually is (“What is an Author,” 207).

[6] David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993), 171.

[7] Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram”, 173.

[8] Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace: the Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline” in *Irish Journal of American Studies Online*, June 2010, date of access: 20 December 2010, <http://www.ijasonline.com/Adam-Kelly.html>.

[9] Timothy Jacobs, “American Touchstone: The Idea of Order in Gerard Manley Hopkins and David Foster Wallace” in *Comparative Literature Studies* 38.3 (2001), 221.

[10] Timothy Jacobs, “Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” *The Explicator* 58.3 (2000), 173.

[11] Mary K Holland, “‘The Art’s Heart's Purpose’: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*” in *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47.3 (2006), 218.

[12] Holland, “The Art’s Heart’s Purpose”, 218.

[13] “I wanted to try to do something that was really *hard* and avant-garde, but that was fun enough too that it forced the reader to do the work that was required,” 31.

[14] David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 1999).

[15] It is not my intention here to validate the worth of Wallace’s potentially problematical assertions.

[16] Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram”, 171.

[17] Larry McCaffery, “An Interview with David Foster Wallace” in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993), 131.

[18] Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram", 193.

[19] Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram”, 189.

[20] Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram”, 193.

[21] McCaffery, “An Interview with David Foster Wallace”, 131.

[22] Michael Humphrey, “Why David Foster Wallace’s afterlife is going so well” in *True/Slant*, 5 April 5 2010, date of access: 10 April 2010, <http://trueslant.com/michaelhumphrey/2010/04/05/why-david-foster-wallaces-afterlife-is-going-so-well/>.

[23] David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus 1998), 144.

[24] Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, 146.

[25] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (USA: Back Bay Books, 1996), 694.