RALPH CLARE

Introduction: An Exquisite Corpus: Assembling a Wallace without Organs

"The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living."
W. H. Auden, "In Memoriam of William Butler Yeats"

For David Foster Wallace, good writing establishes a "living transaction between humans."[1] As Auden's elegy of Yeats reminds us, however, the words of the dead are not excluded from this transaction, for there exists, in a very special way, a kind of symbolic exchange between reader and writer that occurs beyond the grave. That words lodge in guts, that they change them and are changed there, is the very stuff of mutual recognition. Yet the way in which those words are received and interpreted or prepared and contextualized matters as well, especially if the author is no longer living. *Infinite Jest* (1996), for example, twice alludes to an absent scene in which Hal Incandenza and Don Gately dig up James Incandenza's body in search of the antidote to his "failed entertainment," a film so diabolically compelling that it causes permanent catatonia in its viewers, as if only the auteur's posthumously willed revision can offer an egress from the infinite regress of his art. What appears to be a satirical poke at conflating the author with his work (the dreaded intentional fallacy), however, is actually more ambivalent than it first seems, particularly since James will return in the novel as a wraith (a point to which this essay will itself return). Wallace appears to be suggesting that, even after actual, physical death, the author remains unavoidably symbolically invested in the work, revealing an underlying anxiety regarding a promised literary afterlife that may or may not await the deceased. A host of questions thus arises: Just what is the relationship between the author's body and the body of her work, between the corporeal and the corpus? How should one go about treating the body of an author's work after her death? Does it deserve the same kind of consideration as when the author was living? And what ought to be the ethical parameters in undertaking such a critical practice?

Nowhere are such questions more pertinent than when considering the life and work, the corpus, of Wallace, for whom the critical preparation for the author's hereafter was a concern that warranted frequent reflection.[2] For instance, in Wallace's damning review of Edwin Williamson's *Borges: A Life*, which he finds reductive for its "dishonest kind of psychological criticism," Wallace laments that the readers of such biographies will "usually be idealizers of that writer and perpetrators (consciously or not) of the intentional fallacy."[3] Yet Wallace's review of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoyevsky hails Frank's flouting of the intentional fallacy in part because of the biography's basis in historical and cultural fact and its tone of "maximum restraint and objectivity."[4] Evidently for Wallace, the road to critical hell was not paved with a proper and good use of the intentional fallacy. Taking into account an author's intentions in regard to her work's meaning – equating, to some degree, the corporeal with the corpus – could be critically illuminating if done with the proper care and attention. In turn, after Wallace's rapid rise to literary canonization, a conscientious assessment of his work must aim to strike a similar balance between an appreciation of the author's method and a rigorous analysis of the work.

Maximalist Restraint

To be sure, David Foster Wallace is one of the most important American writers of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Wallace's stunningly original work broke away from the often insular and claustrophobic world of 1980s literary minimalism, shunned the trendy pop culture–infused and arguably nihilistically inclined literature that marked the tail end of postmodernism, and suggested the ways in which the passé metafictional forms and linguistic play of postmodernists such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Donald Barthelme could be wedded with fuller characters and imbued with a meaningful, affective charge to create a unique kind of fiction. His was to be a fiction that would, like the novels he loved best, "make heads throb heartlike."[5] Perhaps most importantly, Wallace's fiction expressed a desire and yearning for the communicative and restorative function of literature. To that end, Wallace ultimately crafted a self-reflexive fiction that nevertheless prompted self-reflection by putting formal innovation at the service of connecting with and not distancing the reader. Wallace's innovative approaches to multiple genres of writing inspired an entire generation of writers who, directly and indirectly, have responded in some fashion to Wallace's literary interventions. Wallace's influence can be detected in the work of Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, George Saunders, Jennifer Egan, Junot Díaz, David Mitchell, Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Lethem, and Tao Lin, as

well as in the nonfiction writings and journalism of Leslie Jamison, John Jeremiah Sullivan, and Chuck Klosterman, among others.

Wallace's writing functioned as an important hinge between Generation X, which spanned the stagflated 1970s to the slackered 1990s and was perceived to be cynical and lethargic, and the Millennials, whose wired-era ambitions and optimistic outlook on life signaled a shifting generational ethos. Wallace has been embraced by members of Gen X largely because of his diagnosis of debilitating, cultural irony; his call for sincerity in a media-saturated, consumerist world; and his ability to reveal a core sadness that persisted in a post–Cold War would-be utopian America. As Wallace argues in his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram," contemporary televisual culture and postmodern fiction are indicative of "the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too successful rebel," whereas "the next real literary 'rebels' ... might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels ... who have the childish gall to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles."[6] *Infinite Jest*, which would herald Wallace's arrival into the literary big time, earnestly addressed Wallace's concerns of this time and crafted a fiction that diagnosed and, to debatable degrees of success, sought to ameliorate these ills through fiction. Alternately, the Millennial generation, in keeping with its penchant for connectedness, civic engagement, and positivity, has especially taken to Wallace's pronouncements that empathy, attention, and awareness are qualities that we should nurture in order to negotiate our data-infused, socially mediated world. In *This Is Water*, his 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech that would eventually be published, Wallace urges his audience to become "conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience."[7] His unfinished, posthumously published novel, *The Pale King* (2011), would explore these twinned themes of attention and awareness in a much more complex fashion. Rarely does a writer's work speak so directly and profoundly to multiple generations of readers.

At the same time that Wallace helped to revolutionize American literature, he was transforming the cultural and moral sensibility of America too, as his nonfiction pieces – often published in popular, mainstream magazines and later collected during his lifetime into the well-received *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997) and *Consider the Lobster* (2005) – reached an even wider audience than his fiction initially did. Wallace's work is thus notable for having been embraced both inside and outside of academia by professional (the critic, the scholar) and nonprofessional readers alike.[8] Indeed, there has arisen a robust worldwide group of scholars whose busy publishing has created a veritable Wallace industry. The first annual David Foster Wallace Conference hosted by Illinois State University, where Wallace once taught, was held in 2014, and there is now an International David

Foster Wallace Society that oversees *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*. Equally of note is the vibrant nonprofessional readership that maintains a strong Internet presence, typified by the longstanding Wallace-l listserv, The Howling Fantods website, and by 2009's Infinite Summer and 2016's Infinite Winter, two multiplatform (including blogs, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, etc.) international reading groups that read *Infinite Jest* "together." Here is proof that Wallace readers need little, if any, institutional prompting when it comes to forming networked communities, virtual and actual, dedicated to reading and understanding his work. It takes a singular kind of writer, and a singular body of work, to galvanize readers in such a way.

Yet Wallace is much more than a foundational figure of the post-postmodern era. Beyond its more immediate impact, Wallace's writing also participates in the *longue durée* of American literature and cultural criticism that directly and self-consciously reflects upon and questions American values and democratic ideals. In both his fiction and nonfiction one can detect the occasional horatorial echoes of Emerson and a philosophical indebtedness to William James that joins him with a tradition of writers and thinkers who suggest a distinct kind of pragmatic idealism that is thoroughly American.[9] At a time when American society and politics appears to be so divisive, Wallace's call to listen and be attentive to others and the world around us, and his ability to engage deeply and open-mindedly with pressing concerns about individual and shared American values, make his work more relevant than ever. The roots of Wallace's work run deep in the American psyche and thus his relevance to American literature and culture will be a lasting one.

Long after the Thrill

Wallace's corpus has also grown considerably in the decade since his death, and literary critics, editors, and readers have all the while been picking up the pieces by way of posthumous publications. These include Wallace's final, unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011), his Amherst College undergraduate philosophy honors thesis *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2011), his 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech *This Is Water* (2009), the anthology that is *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (2015), and an edition of previously uncollected essays, *Both Flesh and Not* (2012). Add to this the discovery of Wallace's first published story, the film adaptation of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (2009), D. T. Max's revealing biography *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* (2012), several books of single or multiple interviews, David Lipsky's book-length interview *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip* (2010), as well as its adaptation

into the controversial film, *The End of the Tour* (2015), and a forthcoming edition of Wallace's letters edited by Stephen J. Burn. Of major significance was the 2010 opening of the Wallace archive at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Austin, which allowed Wallace scholars and devotees the opportunity to scour over numerous drafts of Wallace's works, as well as his letters, notes, and the marginalia recorded in the books of his personal library. We might say, then, that since all of Wallace's work has now been exhumed, the real critical autopsy has begun.

With these publications, moreover, has come a wave of posthumous fame for a writer who was already well established and critically lauded. Tending to Wallace's corpus, therefore, must be undertaken with foresight and due diligence. For a writer's reputation in the Internet era is subject, more so than ever, to the whims of rapid media cycles in which memes, hot-takes, and instantaneous commentary trend today and are gone tomorrow. Wallace is a fascinating case study in this respect. Wallace has at times been subject to near deification, via the creation of what Christian Lorentzen calls the image of "Saint Wallace," which persists even after D. T. Max's biography clearly showed that, when at his worst, Wallace could be much like one of his own hideously drawn men.[10] One need only peruse the recommended-reading note taped to the Wallace shelf of many a bookstore to find an earnest and heartfelt quote from a young Wallace declaring what fiction is supposed to be about, thereby transforming it into a veritable back-cover blurb by Wallace about Wallace. As a result, Wallace's themes of empathy and attentiveness have too often been boiled down to pithy slogans that may generate lots of likes and followers in a short-form–social media and Twitter-saturated culture in which spectacle trumps substance, but the actual embodied readerly experience in grasping and understanding these themes, as some readers find, is another thing altogether.

Wallace's fiction, however, is quite often demanding of the reader, who Wallace felt had to "put her share of the linguistic work in" to get something back in return.[11] Such an aesthetic vision aspires to communicate openly with the reader, but the reader must actively engage with the text as well. Further, while Wallace believed that "a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain," he also stated that "true empathy's impossible."[12] There is a mix of hope and desperation pulsating through these twinned assertions, and they serve as a reminder that Wallace's corpus is at once as dense and complex as it is revealing and profound. For Wallace's supposedly "human centered" texts are often filled with inhuman characters, challenging linguistic playfulness, torturous stylistics, and densely packed, multilayered forms. Readers and critics would do well to appreciate how Wallace's corpus is seamless here, patchworked there,

oftentimes enlivening, sometimes deadening, and simultaneously both a wondrous and monstrous thing.

E Pluribus Wallace: One or Infinite Wallaces?

In kind, we should not forget the way in which different kinds of readers and institutions attempt to organize and create not *the* but *a* or at times *our* Wallace. David Hering warns that, "As the unitary persona 'David Foster Wallace' becomes ever more defined, and with it the implicit collapsing together of author and style, the possibility of the monologic text increases."[13] The images of Wallace the Genius, Wallace the Tragic, Wallace the Depressed, or Wallace the Saint are essentially one-dimensional, reductive, and often supersede the work itself. In other words, everybody wants a piece of Wallace, but would it really be so bad if all of Wallace's scholars and all of Wallace's readers couldn't put Wallace back together again? To this end, I desire a sort of Wallace-without-Organs as Deleuze and Guattari might conceive of it.[14] Wallace's readers and critics would then be taking part in a vast, shared project of becoming-Wallace, a Wallace in flux, a Wallace that we never fully know. It may seem somewhat strange to argue for a decentered notion of Wallace, a writer whose moral vision and earnestness were expressly tied to his notion of what it means to be human. Yet, at the same time, nobody understood better than Wallace the difficulty and sometimes pain of self-consciously trying to assemble a unified front, a public persona, Eliot's "face to meet the faces that you meet"[15] that contemporary society demands of us but that, if we reflect upon the attempt to do so, makes us realize that the heady, roiling mix of emotions, memories, images, desires, and dreams that we daily imprint with the impermanent stamp of what we call a "self" is anything but cohesive. Both the tragic ends of *Infinite Jest*'s Hal, trapped inside his own mind and unable to communicate, and of the narrator of "Good Old Neon," a suicide who believes himself a lifelong fraud, remind us of the dangers not only of falling prey to presenting an external self that we imagine others want to see but in believing that the internal self that is not fixed is somehow unreal or inauthentic. In turn, we ought not to embalm Wallace as what once was but instead point out that Wallace is still "becoming-Wallace." If in the process Wallace comes to contradict himself, then let it be of the Whitmanian variety, both generative and generous.

For the opening of the Ransom Center Archives has complicated, if not outright disproven, a Unified Wallace Theory. The archive now "supplements" Wallace's published work and has revealed Wallace's composition process to have often occurred piecemeal and over a long period of time in which different projects overlapped one another. Thus, the fact that *The Pale*

King is an unfinished novel should not be an occasion to lament what may have been but instead should remind us that the oeuvre of any writer is always unfinished and never truly complete, even when it appears so. Every oeuvre is really just an hors d'oeuvre.[16] *The Pale King*, portions of which, according to Wallace's editor Michael Pietsch, were left by Wallace for potential publication and arranged into book form by Pietsch with the help of Wallace's notes, suggests a final meta-authorial move by Wallace that lays bare the writing and drafting process as pure process. Wallace thereby calls attention to the writer–editor relationship, ultimately accepting it as one based on trust and mutual exchange – and one that takes place between the living and dead. All of this is to say that our notion of Wallace's writing has been complicated in intriguing ways. It is, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, more rhizomatic than arborescent and, like *The Pale King*, could be said to be a kind of assemblage as opposed to a proper book.[17]

It is no surprise, then, that the question of mapping Wallace's career and thematic development is a concern of recent studies, such as David Hering's *Fiction and Form*, which employs a "genetic 'map'" and abundant archival material in demonstrating how Wallace's composition process mirrored his concern with creating dialogic texts.[18] While these maps may not be as wild as a Wallace-without-Organs, each nevertheless reflects upon and traces new and compelling genealogies in and throughout the once-familiar Wallace narrative terrain that begins with the young, earnest anti-ironic and anti-cynical crusader and ends with the more mature, ethically and politically reflective Wallace. In *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, for example, Clare Hayes-Brady argues for the nonteleological character of Wallace's work by looking at its ideological and aesthetic "failures" that are, paradoxically, ultimately generative, productive, and make the work "coherently plural."[19] For Hayes-Brady, "Perhaps, ironically, the central feature of this coherence is the failure to cohere, characterized by a persistent, multifaceted and systemic resistance to conclusion."[20] Similarly, Jeffrey Severs's extraordinary *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* argues that the inability of Wallace's fiction to achieve "balanced states" does not preclude the balancing acts that they attempt to achieve in weighing neoliberalism's narrow prescription of value as tied solely to economic exchange against the value to be found in shared spaces of communicative transaction, where one might learn "what other forms of valuing (and thus loving) there are."[21] Severs's Wallace, the most thoroughly historicized Wallace to date, is thus "more attuned to the history of political economy than previous critics have noticed" and the seemingly radical thematic shifts in Wallace's later work actually "masks an ongoing value project."[22] And in *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature*, Lucas Thompson makes claim to "a revisionist

account of Wallace's work" by radically deterritorializing our notion of Wallace's writing and its national literary roots through a rigorous comparative examination of the rhizomatic influence of world literature on Wallace, including the French existentialists, nineteenth-century Russian writers, and twentieth-century Latin American authors, among others.[23] Wallace's corpus, it seems, is still evolving, still becoming, and in the hands of the conscientious critic, it is truly an *exquisite corpus*.[24]

Getting Yourself Organ-izized

The overall structure of this companion provides both a substantive introduction to Wallace's most important works and themes and enhances existing critical conversations about them, thus allowing different Wallaces to emerge. To this end, Part One considers Wallace's work in his immediate present, the longer literary past, and as it has resonated since his passing; Parts Two and Three present helpful overviews of his major and minor works, both the fiction and nonfiction; and Part Four offers several frameworks for understanding some of Wallace's most significant themes and concerns.

Part One begins with Marshall Boswell's essay "Wallace and Generation X," which provides a thorough cultural and historical grounding of Wallace's work by exploring his relationship to Generation X and its attitude toward pop culture, politics, and literature. Boswell traces the emergence and history of Gen X and reveals the ways in which Wallace's early work tapped into a zeitgeist detectable in both mainstream and so-called alternative culture that traded in irony and at times a near encyclopedic knowledge of pop-cultural references.

Significantly broadening the scope of inquiry, Andrew Hoberek's essay situates Wallace's work within a longer history and tradition of American literature. According to Hoberek, Wallace can be seen as one of a number of contemporary authors (such as Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, and Stephen King) who helped to renew the American romance tradition as famously defined by Richard Chase. Hoberek discovers, on the one hand, thematic resonances between Wallace's work and that of Willa Cather, Flannery O'Connor, Hawthorne, Melville, and Emerson. On the other, Hoberek finds echoes of Whitman and the Beats in *Infinite Jest*'s messy style and argues that the novel's excessive footnotes, digressions, and generic hybridity place the novel in the tradition of the encyclopedic narrative.

Closing this section is Lee Konstantinou's provocative exploration of what he calls Wallace's "bad influence," or the way in which Wallace's seductive public persona and literary style has effected a generation of writers, critics,

friends, and family who seek, in one way or another and whether they admire Wallace's work or reject it, to break free from Wallace's seemingly gravitational pull. Konstantinou explores literary reactions by Karen Green, Jonathan Franzen, Mary Karr, Jonathan Lethem, Jennifer Egan, and others, and charts the different ways in which they negotiate Wallace's influence. Indeed, Wallace's messy, maximalist style and uniquely crafted vernacular persona, Konstantinou shows, have given rise to a veritable contemporary subgenre in which the roman à clef becomes the roman à Wallace.

Part Two focuses on Wallace's story collections and nonfiction. It begins with Matthew Luter's essay on Wallace's earliest work, *Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*. Luter sees these texts as indicative of Wallace's struggle toward becoming a mature writer as Wallace incorporates ideas from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Thomas Pynchon in *Broom* and seeks to overcome and challenge the fiction of John Barth, Brett Easton Ellis, and others in *Girl*. Nevertheless, Luter argues that these works are not simply a rehearsal for the more mature work to come but complete works unto themselves.

Building upon feminist and gender readings of Wallace's work, Adam Kelly reads *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, with its catalogue of misogynistic and verbally dominating male characters, through the lens of French feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, whose psychoanalytic theories of a feminine logic and writing challenge male phallocentricism. Analyzing a number of stories, such as "B.I. #28," "Forever Overhead," "B.I. #20," and "Octet," Kelly deploys these theorists' concepts – including Kristeva's "abject" and Cixous's *feminine écriture* – to suggest how, although women are silenced in the collection, a feminine logic of writing often destructures the narrative, blurs boundaries and hierarchies, and calls attention to the relationship between (male) language and mastery.

David Hering's essay on Wallace's final story collection, *Oblivion*, explores the theme of "embodied suffering," both mental and physical, with reference to two direct philosophical influences on the collection, E. M. Cioran and Nietzsche. Drawing together Cioran's idea that "consciousness is nature's nightmare" with Nietzsche's notion of active forgetting, or "oblivion," Hering notes how "disembodied oblivion is positioned against a sense of embodied suffering" in stories such as "Mister Squishy," "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," "Another Pioneer," "The Suffering Channel," and "Oblivion." Despite such "scenarios of failed oblivion and self-aggrandizing suffering" that typify Wallace's most pessimistic book, Hering argues that "Good Old Neon" offers "a communicative model of shared consciousness" that suggests the possibility of transcending the self and the nightmare of consciousness.

Jeffrey Severs's overview of Wallace's major nonfiction focuses on the evolution from *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997) to

Consider the Lobster (2005) and the ways in which Wallace treated subjects such as aesthetics, consumerism, ethics, and politics in his reviews, essays, and journalism. Severs detects "Wallace's own fiction being mapped out in negative" in many of his early book reviews, provides close readings of Wallace's "tours of outlandish consumer spectacle" in "Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All" and "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," and argues that what Wallace called his "service essays" in *Consider*, such as "Consider the Lobster," "Host," and "Up, Simba," comprise a "late-career effort to place civic questions at the front of the reader's mind."

Part Three contains essays on Wallace's two major novels. First, Mary K. Holland, refusing to see *Infinite Jest* as the be-all-and-end-all of Wallace's oeuvre, argues that the novel is "at once pinnacle, pivot point, and through line." Holland finds *Infinite Jest*'s depiction of a media-saturated society, in which communication is hampered by irony and solipsism is the result, as continuing themes from Wallace's earlier work. Yet the novel also weds these themes to innovative formal and structural techniques, such as recursivity, fragmentation, open-endedness, the use of multiple points of view, an experimental authorial/narrative voice via the "wraith-narrator," and a penchant for encyclopedic narrative. Despite all of this, Holland nonetheless posits Wallace as a "radically" realist writer, who meant to reproduce the data-infused, chaotic milieu of contemporary life and what it feels like to live in it. Following Holland's situating of *Infinite Jest* as pivot and through line, Clare Hayes-Brady reads Wallace's unfinished, posthumous novel, *The Pale King* (2011), as a mature work that both continues and rejects the themes of his earlier work as it takes up the subjects of attention, boredom, and choice. Structuring her reading through John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," an influence on the novel, Hayes-Brady argues that Wallace presents a new-form of heroism for the contemporary age, one that "combines the figure of the Romantic hero with that of the ironic hero" and makes for a "reflective Romanticism."

The essays collected in Part Four address and respond to some of the most important and recurring topics in Wallace studies and augment existing critical conversations. Robert L. McLaughlin's essay opens the section with an outline of Wallace's expressly stated aesthetic principles to move beyond postmodern literature, cynicism, and culturally destructive irony and to replace it with a literature that would "relieve and redeem" instead. McLaughlin presents two of Wallace's most metafictional stories, "B.I. # 20" and "Octet," as well as the treatment of AA discourse in *Infinite Jest*, as cases in which Wallace aspires to create a sincere, communicative relationship between reader and author that nevertheless respond to the lessons of